



The Concept of Hellenism: An Assessment of Keats' Poetry (A Critical Review)

Arif Mahammad Chaprasi

Research Scholar (Ph.D), Department of English

Seacom Skills University, Bolpur, West Bengal.

Abstract

'Hellenism' may be narrated as conformity to, imitation of, or devotion to the culture of ancient Greece. Since, Hellenism refers to the Greek art, customs, and culture particularly in regard to its influence, Keats is a Hellenist in the sense that he suffices to propagate Greek culture and ideal through his poetry and made an attempt to deploy mythological symbols & characters to communicate his expertise with his readers. This article heightens through mythological studies, Greek culture and art of Keats's Odes. His poetry, that is illuminated with meaning and a authentic Greek admiration, adoration and veneration of beauty, will ever be a landmark for the readers or newcomers. The aim of this paper will be to examine the theory of Hellenism and how Keats has employed this in his poetry to make it more rich and exuberant.

Keywords: Hellenism, Hellas, Mythology, Polytheism, Narcissus, Enceladus, Oceanus, Anthropomorphic, idiosyncratic.

'Hellenism' is the term used to describe the influence of Greek culture, thought, ideals, customs, art and language, especially after the time of Alexander the Great, on the people the Greek and Roman Empires conquered or interacted with. The Classical or Hellenic period often considered ancient Greece's golden age of Philosophy, art and literature was followed by the Hellenistic Age which began at the time of Alexander the Great's death (323 B.C) & ended with Roman's defeat of Egypt (30 B.C). Geographically, the Greeks during the Hellenistic age ruled a vast, geographic area that included Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. The word 'Hellenism' has been derived from the Greek word 'Ellinismos', and it has been used basically to describe the people of Greek Lineage or to describe as set of values for living.

Now-a-days, 'Hellenism' is sharply connected to Greece. In the ancient time Greeks were called 'Hellas' & 'Hellenic' was often associated with Greek culture, art and customs. It also observed that the term "Hellenistic" stems from the word 'Hellazein', which means to speak Greek or identify with the Greeks. In terms of literature, the writings of ancient Rome and Greece had long been knotted together under the commandment of 'classical studies'. Typically, Latin translation of Greek works served as the basis of such studies. But gradually a separation of Roman and Greek cultures began to occur, resulting in a new respect for Greek works as the models on which subsequent Roman literature was based. So gradually, interest & advantage of Greek literature was growing high as scholars in different ages sought to pursue the veracity of Homer & his works and Greek culture, art and ideas as well. So, it was very natural that these Hellenic or Greek culture had largely contributed to the world literature and civilization.

But it is more clear that during the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, in the aftermath of the 18th century's Neo-classicism, England became increasingly attached and enamored of Greece and particularly the Romantic poets mostly John Keats, P.B. Shelley and Lord Byron. But, it is also noted that, the word 'Hellenism' is connected mostly with John Keats, John Milton or Swinburne. But Keats, in no doubt, was the grand master among the poets dealing with 'Hellenism' for all era. He superimposed Greek myths in his poetry so dexterously and shrewdly that no other poet even in Greek surpassed him. Edward. B. Hungerford stresses that for Keats and Shelley, mythology became a 'new language' a 'new era' for pursuing and exploring religious and spiritual themes. They are also acknowledged by modern critics to be the best representatives of 'English Romantic Hellenism'.

William Wordsworth, as well, has been identified as a Romantic Hellenic as Douglas Bush describes him as 'the fountain head of 19th century poetry on mythological them-es". Bush identifies John Keats as the poet most influenced by Wordsworth; Levin recounts him as "the most Grecian of modern poets." Keats inspiration includes Grecian sculpture and art, as in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'(1820), as in 'Endymion'(1820). Pierce notes that poems such 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and 'Hyperion'(1820) are classy in the noblest sense of the word, as nobly Grecian as anything in our language. Actually he had established the 'Hellenic' style in English poetry and given extraordinary gravity to Greek culture and art. Keats, it is notified, as is well known, was not a classical scholar or it will be better to say a 'romantic poet', yet he has been famous for his Hellenism, a term which may be defined as a love of Greek art and culture especially, poetry ,music, painting, sculpture and architecture and way of life. Keats had an inborn love for Greek impetus their religion of joy. As a student he composed a prose translation of Virgil's work 'Aeneid', a little latter he read Homer's great epic ' Iliad 'and was thrilled by its beauty. His passion and excitement are expressed deeply in his sonnet 'On first looking in to Chapman's Homer'. Three books which Keats possessed as a student and enjoyed a lot deeply are: Took's 'Pantheon', Lempira's 'Classical Dictionary' and great Spence's 'Polymeric' which provided him with further insights into classical art and literature.

He once wrote to one of his friends that he never ceased to wonder at 'all that incarnate delight' of the Greek way of life. In fact, he was driven to the universe of Greek beauty because of he wanted to escape imaginatively from the harsh realities of his presents. It should be noted that 'Keats was a Greek' in mind and spirit because he could enter lovingly and imaginatively into the world of the ancients and classical myth as well and not because his knowledge of it was accurate and scholarly. His presentation of 'Hellas' is romantic and not realistic. As Keats' mind was impregnated with Greek literature and mythology, he habitually chooses Greek stories for his poetry like 'Endymion'(1818), 'Lamia'(1819),'Hyperion'(1818),'Ode to Psyche'(1819),'Ode on a Grecian urn', 'The Eve of St. Agnes'(1820) etc. 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is basically a monument of the poet's power of entering imaginatively into the another world. The theme, morals, essence of this literary work is directed by this classical touchstone. For 'Endymion' Keats has borrowed subjects from the Greek pagans. He had a strong affinity and most vital response for the outmoded polytheism of the Ancient Greek and Roman. So, it is noted that frank sensuousness, joys of life, mysterious message, eternal quarries of the pure phenomenon world are furnished in the verses of Keats. Thus Keats' poems naturally becomes Hellenic.

Moreover, there are a lot of allusions to Greek myth and legends as well which are not directly based on Greek themes. However, he frequently alludes to the Muses, Apollo, Narcissus, Endymion, Diana and a number of other classical Gods and Goddesses. For example, in 'Ode to Nightingale' there have many references to 'Dryads' ("that thou light winged Dryad of the trees"), 'Flora' ("tasting of Flora and country green") & 'Bacchus' ("not charioted by Bacchus and his pards"). In 'Ode on Melancholy' references are made to the river Lethe, goddess Proserpine and Psyche. These allusions are not mere conventional personifications as with other poets and there is a tone of enjoyment which shows that Greek Mythology had really taken possession of his mind.

Other poems of Keats that corroborate with the Greek myths are 'Lamia', 'Hyperion' and 'The Fall of Hyperion' which are regarded naturally as lengthy poems. As the very titles of these pieces evoke, these deal with and lull ancient Greek Mythology with painting of Keats' imagination. Among these, 'Lamia' again countersigns the revival of ancient paganism of Greeks. It presents the story of love of the serpent Goddess (Lamia) and human being (Lycius), and a purely classical touch is found here in this poem. In 'Hyperion' Keats employed a purely magical touch of Greek gods and goddesses like Saturn, Enceladus (god of war), Oceanus (god of sea), Hyperion (god of sun). The 'Ode to Psyche' is based on the legend related to the love of the Greek god Cupid and the goddess Psyche or the human soul. All these poems show how deeply Keats' imagination was steeped in the classical mythology and art of ancient Greece.

It may be observed that Keats became wonder at the sculptures of ancient Greece. And thus he expressed his emotional attitude in his numerous poetries. All these aspects are found in his wonderful sonnet "On seeing the English Marbles". In his other poems like 'Hyperion' and 'Ode on Indolence' Keats deals with the innocence, art, symmetry, simplicity, proportion of Greek art and sculpture. In this regard 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is probably the best poem depended on this aspect. Here Keats says that ever unchangeable art will show its mastery over the nature

or human being for decades. Actually, the ancient Greeks cultivated the ultimate devotion of beauty and joy of life. They were the true worshippers or lovers of beauty. As a result, Keats worships the Greek customs and rules and he also a genuine lover and a true worshipper of beauty. Beauty was such an aspect in Keats's poetry that it was the ultimate development of any human perfection. As he says:

Beauty is truth, truth Beauty—

That is all / ye know on earth, and all ye need to know

As Matthew Arnold points out the last three lines of the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', 'is as Greek as anything from Homer or Theocritus'. Similarly the stanza (4) of this Ode begins, 'Who are these coming to the sacrifice?' has been described as having 'the clear radiance of Greek style'.

It is also noted that the instinctive Hellenism lies in his sensuous, imaginative and passionate searching for the true essence of loveliness. For instance the first line of 'Endymion': 'A thing of beauty is a joy forever'. So it is clearly evident that all the happiness, joy and longing of his life was nothing but an eternal beauty which is an inseparable part of Greek. The spiritual longing of his life clearly highlights the Greek influence upon him. As his spiritual longing and passion are deeply expressed in 'Ode to Psyche':

Yes, I will be thy priest
and build a fane

In some untrodden region of my mind,
... shall murmur in the wind".

Keats also possesses enough passion for perfection of the Greeks. He employs the epigrammatic terseness and brevity of the Greeks. Phrases like 'drowsy', 'numbness', 'leaden-eyed despair', 'leaf-fringed legends', 'cold - pastoral', 'wakeful anguish of the soul' etc. bear enough testimony to this. The opening two lines of the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' have been described by Rossetti as the "pillars of Hercules of the human language".

It may be observed that personification of nature is a most striking feature of romantic poets. Keats also possessed the same trait. But surprisingly Keats's pleasure in the poem of nature led him to the very heart of Greek Mythology. [e.g.] In 'Endymion', Keats treats the moon as the Greek goddess coming down to kiss Endymion. He suggests the fiery sun as God Apollo. In this regard anthropomorphic terms are imaginative faculty connected with natural phenomenon. Again in 'Ode to Autumn' Autumn is found conspiring with maturing sun as a close bosom friend and Autumn is personified as reaper, gleaner, winnower and cider-pressure. Here Keats follows the Greek attitude by attributing shaping human qualities to God and semi-God. Hence a superb Hellenic touch has been traced here. Through the treatment of Greek myths and allusions to Greek characters, Keats creates a genuine Greek atmosphere in his poetry as he presents typically Greek objects, ceremonies, rentals and customs, shrines and altars, pipes, processions and sacrifices. As very beginning of 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' bears such testimony:

Of deities mortals, or of both
 In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
 ...what wild ecstasy?

However, Keats is thus a classicist because he has dealt with themes, subjects and situations related to ancient Greek mythology and literature. The whole universe of classical Greece has become more alive, animated and vivid in his poems. The perfection of form, the beauty of shape, the purity and preciseness of outline, a restraint and reserve associated with Greek are found in Keats's poetry. He was, no doubt, Greek in spirit but surely has the romantic exuberance. In his poetry we find a rare combination of classicism with romanticism. As Cazamian points out very clearly "Keats affects the rare union of classical discipline, guided by the examples and precepts of the ancients with the more intrinsically precious matter, which the artist finds in romanticism".

Howsoever, here Keats becomes the idiosyncratic figure in this field of literature. The most fertile and beautiful fact is that by this 'Greek temperament' of Keats, the whole English literature and world is fecundated and fulfilled by some incredible literary achievements from him and it is, of course, the excellent and perennial result of his Hellenism. To conclude, Keats is an unalloyed and authentic poet who possesses a passion for beauty. His art, his poetry is for the sake of poetry and nothing else. He is, in no doubt, envisaged as an 'English Greek' in all age.

References:

- Aske Martin. *Keats and Hellenism: An Essay*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985. Print.
- Bush, Douglas. *John Keats, His life and Writings*. The University of Michigan: Macmillan, 2008. Print.
- Colvin, Sidney. *John Keats: His Life and Poetry, His Friends, Critics and After Fame*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1917. Print.
- Ganai, Younus Mohd and Khursheed Ahmad Dar. "Use of Hellenism (Greek Notes) by John Keats." ICETETSM (2017) 1-4. Print.
- Gittings, Robert. *John Keats: The Living Year*. New Delhi: Rama Brothers, 1989. Print.
- Murry, John Middleton. *Studies in Keats*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930. Print.
- Pettet, E C. *The Poetry of John Keats*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1957. Print.
- Shank, Derek. *The Aesthetics of Romantic Hellenism*. The University of Western Ontario, London. 2015. Print.
- Stillinger, Jack, ed. *The Poem of John Keats*. London: Heinemann, 1978. Print.
- Vendeler, Helen. *The Odes of John Keats*. Harvard University: Belknap Press, 1983. Print.
- Ward, Aileen. *John Keats: The Making of a Poet*. Toronto: Collins Publishers, 1986. Print.