

A Study of Portrayal of Crisis of Character in the Poetry of William Wordsworth and Matthew Arnold

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ABSTRACT:

The aim of this article is to analyse the poetic feelings of Wordsworth and Matthew Arnold, as expressed in their poetry towards crisis of human character which has always been an undercurrent of their poetry in relation to Nature, Faith and Morality. This is a sincere attempt towards analyzing the crisis of human character as a result of modernity and materialism which echoes in the poetry of these two prominent poets. I have endeavored to make a comparative study on this particular feeling. Crisis of human character is not wholly a new thing to the present times, but it was never so grave ever before. It did exist in every period in the past but only in a moderate degree which was well presented by these poets. Now it has crossed its limits and has become unmanageable. This materialism has given birth to opportunism and selfishness. An awareness of this was felt necessary through this piece of writing.

Key Words: Nature, Faith, Morality, Character, Modernism, Materialism, Pragmatism

William Wordsworth was the most prominent Romantic poet of 19th century. He was greatly influenced by French philosopher Rousseau's call to 'return to Nature'. Later he was disillusioned by the violent side of the Revolution. His beautiful lyrics and sonnets reveal a mystical relationship between man and Nature. He is truly called as the high priest of Nature. He discovered joy, peace and spiritual satisfaction in the company of Nature. He celebrated simple life and rejected the artificial urban and materialistic life. He ran away from the city, he hates it, all noisy and horrible. He would rather have the blue sky and images of Nature. He was also a lover of Man, though his love of man developed at a later stage in his poetic career. It was the French revolution that made Wordsworth a poet of man. When man became indifferent to the Nature and her elevating influences then, according to Wordsworth, the miseries and misfortunes of mankind arise. He laments the loss of man's contact with nature due to modernity and materialism.

Matthew Arnold was a promising poet of Victorian period. His poems, *The Strayed reveler*, *Empedocles on Etna and other poems*, and *Dover Beach* were the turning point in his life. He became popular poet after he was elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford in 1857. Nature had no place in his poetry because he did not believe in Nature. In his poetry, faith occasionally appears and doubt is presented with great power. 'The theory of Evolution' by Darwin had lowered the people's faith in Bible and religion. There is a tone of melancholy in his poetry over the loss of faith in religion. He had celebrated the beauty of Nature and rustic life in his poem 'The Scholar Gipsy'.

These two great poets belonging to different periods of literary evolution have well depicted the character crisis of humanity with respect to Nature, faith and morality. Matthew Arnold even admired William Wordsworth so highly that Wordsworth's talents were greater than even William Shakespeare. It is wonder that Arnold's poetry shares many notable similarities with Wordsworth. These

two great poets exhibited comparatively simple topics, and themes, such as nature, faith and morality. Wordsworth in his poetry bemoans the loss of seemingly magical connection men have with Nature. Matthew Arnold is found melancholic over the negative effects of modernity on human morals and faith in religion. The modern crisis of character is well expressed in the poetry of these two prominent poets. They present that in craze for novelty men have got cut off from the past. Utter modernity has subordinated traditionalism, and everything that informed and inspired and sustained our life in the past is being systematically abandoned. Morality which was the mainstream of all we did is being sacrificed on the altar of utter pragmatism and modernism. We see a tone of sadness in Arnold's poetry towards loss of faith and morality. The feeling of sadness is aroused due to crisis of human character. He was sensible to the charm of life and calls the world 'a land of dream', but he feels that modernism has snatched joy, love, and peace from the world. For instance he wrote in Dover Beach:

*"Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! For the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain."*

Materialism has overpowered us and the spring of spiritualism is getting dried up. Earning and spending has become the be-all and end-all of our lives. We strive to draw satisfaction from the materialistic world and ignore what is hidden behind that. This materialism has made human utterly individualistic and mercenary. We fail to see the same spark of divinity that runs in Nature. As Wordsworth rightly said in his poem 'Tintern Abbey':

*"A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense of sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns'
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things."*

Wordsworth again in his fantastic view of world in 'The World Is Too Much with Us', bemoans the crisis of human character due to the decadent material cynicism of modern days. People are so concerned with the time and money that they see nothing in nature that is more beautiful and divine. People do not have time to enjoy the beautiful moon shining on the ocean and appreciate the blowing of cool breeze. Wordsworth found that men are absorbed in materialism and distancing themselves from Nature. He wrote:

*"The world is too much with us, late and soon
Getting and spending we lay waste our powers
Little we see in Nature that is ours
We have given our hearts away a sordid boon".*

Materialism has so petrified our sensitivity and sensibility that Nature no more holds any charm for us. 'The meanest flower that blows can give thoughts that lie too deep for tears'. This is no more the case now. The pursuit of wealth has occupied all our time and attention and energy and 'we have no time to stand and stare' at the beautiful objects of Nature which alone could give us permanent

and tranquility. This materialism has given birth to opportunism and selfishness. People would not hesitate to sacrifice all their human values and higher principles of their lives to garner benefits which serve none but themselves. The present crisis of character has also resulted in the loosening of hold of social and family relationships. We have become so selfish and individualistic that we do not care to know about the problems and sufferings even of our next door neighbours. Even amidst the burgeoning humanity we find ourselves lonely. Matthew Arnold in his poem 'To Marguerite' has put the same so succinctly in the following words:

*“Ay, in the sea of life enisled
Echoing strains between us thrown
Doting on the watery wild
We mortal millions live alone.”*

This has resulted in the drying up of all springs of social and national sense and of the spirit of altruism and fellow-feeling. We put self before the society and nation; all our dishonest deals and unethical transactions are of others. What a great crisis of character indeed! This crisis of character has other expressions also. Work is no more a worship to us; parasitism and idleness tend to be the hallmark of our living. We have lost all sense of discipline. We never tend to learn from Nature what Lucy once learnt and Nature promised to teach her to make “A lady of (her) own”. Wordsworth asserts in his 'The Tables Turned', Nature is the divine source to teach humane and moral values what thousand saints cannot teach:

*“One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good'
Then all the sages can.”*

This we can also see in Matthew Arnold's sonnet 'Quiet Work'. A detachment of poet from Nature has infused in him a sense of loss of morality which compelled the poet to pray Nature in the following words:

*“One lesson, Nature, let me learn of thee,
One lesson that in every wind is blown,
One lesson of two duties served in one,
Though the loud world proclaim their enmity,-“*

Man is but a product of his environment and his development follows the development of environment. Any degradation of the latter is bound to lead to the degradation of the former. Hence the present crisis of human character, devaluation of moral standards is most unpalatable and terribly agonizing. The human aspect of our life is being lost sight of. We are forced to relish animal living. These two poets very concerned about the crisis of character which has generated social tension and maladjustments. It has led to devaluation of culture and withering away of finer aspects of Nature, art, religion, literature and philosophy. The modernity and materialism has removed peace and tranquility away from our lives. We can only see 'darkness amid the many shapes of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir unprofitable, and the fever of the world'. And Nature is the only solution to restore our faith in humanity, as Wordsworth pronounced in 'Tintern Abbey':

*“Knowing that Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,
Through all the years of our life, to lead
From joy to joy: for she can inform
The mind that is within us, so impress
With quietness and beauty, and so feed
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,*

*Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
The dreary intercourse of daily life,
Shall ever prevail against us, or disturb
Our cheerful faith that all which we behold
Is full of blessings....”*

Nature is a blessing of god to human beings on earth. It feeds the mind with its beauty, quietness, and lofty thoughts. Nature takes us from joy to joy; it never betrays the heart that loved her. It safeguards us against evil tongues, rash judgments, selfish and unkind men which are the product of modernism and materialism. It restores faith in humanity. The crisis of character has also resulted in total disregard to truth, good and beauty or Satyam, Shivam and Sundaram. Our arts and philosophy and literature are now undervalued due to modern hurry and materialism. In these times it is futile to expect the emergence of poets like Homer, Shakespeare, Kalidas, Tulsidas or Surdas. Our interest in our holy scriptures is waning and cheap literature occupies most of our reading. The beauty and loveliness of Nature no more attracts us; intellectual beauty no more fascinates us. all this indeed constitutes a grave crisis of character which we sadly witness in our life and society in the modern times. The materialistic inclination of man has become a stunning menace to the very existence of our culture and civilization and to all that is true, good and beautiful in our life.

Conclusion :

Perhaps it is difficult to stop the crisis of character inflicted by utter modernity depicted in the poetry of these two great poets but humanity can be reinstalled, man can be brought close to Nature; love, kindness and hope can be restored. One should see good in world, share happiest moments with your fellow friends, focus on the good news stories, stories of kindness and virtuous, participate in voluntary charity, spend time helping the poor and less fortunate than you, take inspiration from the great personalities, encourage faith in your friend through your actions, participate in acts of kindness, be compassionate, listen to the stories of goodness. It is the time to realize that Nature existence is bound to human existence. We are part of this divine Nature and it is part of us. At present the best solution to restore our faith, morality and ethics is the introduction of value oriented syllabus in our education system. Religion should guide men towards the virtues of humanity. There is need to revive the cult of detachment and sacrifice, plain living and high thinking instead of that of mere acquisition and accumulation of wealth. Things are likely to improve to a fair degree if steps are taken to lay foundations of a just and egalitarian society.

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