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Full Length Research Paper

The Sustainability of Romantic Revival: Are the Green Poets Relevant Today?

Dr. Nilofar Akhtar

Professor and Head, Department of English, MB Government PG College, Haldwani (Nainital), Uttarakhand, India.

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Corresponding Author:

Nilofar Akhtar

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims at finding relevance and contemporaneity of the early nineteenth century green movement in the history of literature commonly known as the Romantic Revival. When Shelly, a quintessential nature poet, utters his disillusionment with the dreariness of the world around him, he certainly strikes a chord with the few who are equally disenchanted with the reckless reckoning of technology unsparingly used for a growth which is exploitative and ironically regressive for the progeny and the prospective generations, to say the least. Over a period of several decades now continents, countries, ethnic groups and societies are concerned on a collective, as well as, on an individual level that inclusive growth, and by inclusive growth they very well mean sustainable development that lasts till the very last creed of living beings exist on this planet, an inclusive development for all stake holders across countries, cultures and ethical entities. This paper aims at penetrating deeper into the idea of romanticism as a prologue to the more recent movement known as sustainable development and how the green poets set the tone for a growth which is sustainable, lasting and inclusive of all those who live, exist on this planet and are thereby, affected by the changing world scenario.

Introduction

Away, away from men and towns,

To the wild wood and the downs,

To the silent wilderness, where the soul need not repress its music. (Shelley)

When Shelly, a quintessential nature poet, utters his disillusionment with the dreariness of the world around him, he certainly strikes a chord with the few who are equally disenchanted with the reckless reckoning of technology unsparingly used for a growth which is exploitative and ironically regressive for the progeny and the prospective generations, to say the least. Over a period of several decades now continents, countries, ethnic groups and societies are concerned on a collective, as well as, on an individual level that inclusive growth, and by inclusive growth they very well mean sustainable development that lasts till the very last creed of living beings exist on this planet, an inclusive development for all stake holders across countries, cultures and ethical entities. This paper aims at penetrating deeper into the idea of romanticism as a prologue to the more recent movement known as sustainable development and how the green poets set the tone for a growth which is sustainable, lasting and inclusive of all those who live, exist on this planet and are thereby, affected by the changing world scenario. As it is inevitable, MH Abrams American critic and scholar of romanticism sees this change and substantiates his take on this changing scenario in his notable work *This Green earth: the Vision of Nature in the Romantic Poets*. He reiterates that the great chasm between man and Nature was set by the advancement of science and technology. Industrial revolution changed the world and changed it forever.

The green Poets were influenced by the pure and pristine nature which used to be and which was first used and then drastically misused and exploited in the name of human development and growth. The Green poets identified, mirrored and celebrated issues related to man and nature and also agonized over how the former was estranged, then, transformed and then, again, reintegrates him with the latter. Consequently, the romanticists, the green poets emphasized the individual and her potentials which she could exercise in tandem with nature. The downside of this escalating growth

spurt is many. Romanticism was a movement which initiated as a reaction against the town poetry of the fashionable eighteenth century and also dispelled the effects of development – dilemma as the disasters of development were manifold. At the nineteenth century when William Wordsworth gave the clarion call of ‘Return to Nature’, he never meant to be nature only. Nature, to him, was something which was all pervading and all-encompassing leaving no room for improvisation. Nature was a pristine and spiritual source for the regeneration and renewal of ‘all thinking things. To Wordsworth, Nature was also a source of getting away from all that was deemed as by product of heavy industrialization and expansion of towns at the cost of wild woods. During the era of enlightenment scientific and logical rationalization of nature had become the order of the day. All this was also representative of the growing materialistic pursuits of man and was very well reflected in various art forms as painting, music and performing arts. The concrete jungle was ever expanding giving way to industrial capitalism leading to the gap of culture, economy and society between people especially in and around London, the then epicenter of all that was cultured, cultivated and far removed from Nature’s vicinity. William Blake a noted romantic painter-poet talks of the oppression of life lived in an urban milieu post-industrialization in his poem London, published in songs of Experience in 1794.

*I wander thro’ each chartered street,
Near where the chartered Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.
In every cry of every man,
In every infan’t’s cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg’d manacles I hear.*

Critics do take this poem as a statement of protest against the ills of industrialization. And as cities became bigger and denser, issues of poverty, pollution and marginalization cropped up. These social issues created a breakthrough in the concept of an ideal society, which further dragged the village dweller away from nature and his roots which grounded him. Nature became an object, a natural resource as man became a human resource or rather a human machine-producing commodities and churning out products for consumption. Moral collapse also became inevitable. The romanticists were disenchanted by ‘the fever and fret’ of the physical world and desired an escape from the harsh scathing reality of the world changing at a fast pace. ‘back to nature’, said their leading poet, Wordsworth. Coleridge, Keats, Shelly, Byron followed. They saw the sublime in Nature. Their anthropomorphism brought a new way of looking into Nature and imbibe divinity into it. To William Wordsworth, a rainbow in the sky could teach the philosophy of life and inspire him to write such pragmatic lines like *the child is father of the man*:

*My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety(WW)*

Landscapes, dales, waterlilies, hills, streams, skies, nightingales, and skylarks became their spiritual calling and source of delight in this dull and dark world full of sufferings and imperfections particularly for those who are blissfully ignorant of the ways of the world and find themselves lacking the talent to pursue the capitalist-materialist society. For these writers and poets the very act of factories built on the bosom of the pure landscapes was a breach of trust, a violation of a covenant that nature had with Man. It was dispensable and undesirable. ‘The world is too much with us’, says an agonized Wordsworth.

*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; (WW)*

The poet laments the connection between Man and Nature as a result of industrialization and Man’s growing greed for materialistic pursuits. His desperation is apparent to the reader when the poet laments the loss of a pure innocent country-girl Lucy,” she dwelt among the untrodden ways” he exclaims with grief in his *Lyrical Ballads* published in 1798. The Green poets believed that Man and his suffering, thus caused can only be healed when he returns to Nature. He is oblivious of the fact that natural resources like land, water and wind which were first used and then overused for establishing factories yielding mass production will eventually create a void in his physical, emotional and spiritual world which could not even be reversed. He was an environmentalist even before the word came into vogue. The Cambridge Dictionary defines environment as “air, water and land in or on which people, animals and plants live”. The

Romanticists used the term Nature, instead, to define environment. The Green poets apparently knew that *'the future will either be green or not be at all'* (Bob Brown). The "Green Poetry" and the "Green Language" themselves are the stirring terms that emulate a new way of writing about Nature. John Claire, William Blake, William Wordsworth, Byron Shelley and Keats are relevant today more than ever as they gave a perspective on nature which was artistic, intellectual, evocative, inclusive and sustainable. The modern day term, 'environmentalism' takes its roots from 'romanticism' or the 'romantic revival' which it is often called and the romantics are today's 'environmentalists'. The mad rush for material acquisition were condemned by the romantics as these are denounced by the promoters of environmental cause and sustainable development, primarily concerning themselves with conserving the natural resources for posterity. The issues concerning environment degradation like the reckless consumption of energy, incessant waste production, climate change and bio-diversity issues and others can be dealt with, if humans understand they are the stake holders in the general degradation of landscape and the depletion of the flora and the fauna possessed on it. The romantic revival or back to nature had Nature as a medium to know the inside of everything that concerns human life, things within and beyond the cycle of nature.

The mid eighteenth-century romantic revival eyed upon the individual set-in harmony with Nature. Its path leads to an equal, more shared, less divided peaceful and prosperous world for its inhabitants. It nurtures the ideas of co-existence and pantheism, pantheism being the concept of spiritual oneness. The sustainable development goals set up by United Nations General Assembly are also aligned on the similar blueprint. Agenda 2030 goes for 'a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future'. The romanticists launched the same mission, though in an unauthorized manner. In a way, they gave impetus to conservation movement through their consistent elaboration and glorification of natural landscape, setting it mostly against the corrupt and polluted city life. They also had a knowledge of the scientific studies done in the field of Ecology and they attempted to put life into these not so familiar themes through giving space to them in their poetry. Aldo Leopold, an American author and an environmentalist of the twentieth century, *Sand Country Almanac* establishes a long-lost yet strong and profound bond between man and the land which he inhabits. He lived in 'wilderness' himself and came to realize this inseparable bond when he observed the impact of deforestation and construction on dense woods and its habitats. William Wordsworth realized this change, this alteration of human behavior when one of his popular characters, Michael sends his young son, his only child to London, the center for culture and civilization, with the prospect of making a better life for himself. Instead, the son falls upon bad company and gives into the greedy demands of town life, eventually gets shot down by the Police bringing much grief and disgrace to his octogenarian father, Michael. Wordsworth through this masterpiece already establishes his land ethics concerns much before Leopold brings it forth to light. The environs-social, natural and cultural mould the character inhabiting the environs, which eventually will affect the community's sustainability. Ethnic groups do attach their identity with the soil, they are rooted into, the land they are grounded upon. The romanticists believed that Nature can be an ideal teacher to Man if the latter understood it well. And, a poet who connects with the spirit of Nature is a prophet who not only can decipher the greater scheme of things but can also look into the core of things prospectively, and retrospectively. A romantic can see and feel into the meanest and the pettiest of things that barely exist in the common eyes. "To me, the meanest flower that blows can give thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears", says William Wordsworth in his grand ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood (WW).

It's time that humanity takes a lesson in Green language and returns to Nature, which is its only savior, an all pervasive presence which undeniably is attempting to teach a lesson or two to the ignorant and egoistic human creed which is busy erecting and building its giant concrete jungles punctuated densely with flouting skyscrapers , gigantic shopping malls and sooty industrial establishments. It is certainly a high time to commit to the cause of inclusivity and sustainability and bear the responsibility of making this earth future friendly. Let nature be the Prophet, the Guru, the Messenger and the Teacher.

*Come forth into the light of things!
Let Nature be thy Teacher. (*

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