

CHAPTER - VEyeless in Gaza and The Genius
and The Goddess

I

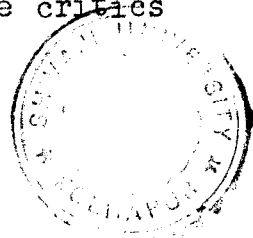
" Huxley's work as a whole has taken the form of a thinly disguised autobiographical sequence ", D.S.Savage says, "Its shape has been determined by its author's changing attitude to life, which has always found its corresponding intellectual expression." ¹ His early novels are a brilliant depiction of the post-war era of the 1920's in a satirical manner. For the 1920's was the age of transition - where old traditional values were out-of-date and people went on experimenting with new ones. The intellectuals suffered from uncertainty and scepticism while the common man tried to busy himself with the world in a spirit of cynicism and sensuality. In his work Huxley treats all these - both old and new - contemporary values one after another by making his characters embody each of them and through their fate he shows their barrenness. Thus his early novels are a sensational study of the post-war disillusionment and moral perplexities, but they do not present any positive value that can serve a

disenchanted and hopeless world. In Point Counter Point (1928) he advocates the Lawrentian idea of life-worship as he has been deeply impressed by Lawrence's philosophy of life. Thus, to some extent, this novel is an approach to positive values, but the solace he finds in Lawrence's ideas is a temporary one.

But in his later novels, Huxley emerges out of the cynical shades into the sunshine of spiritual wisdom. They are devoted to the spiritual quest for a unifying principle which can resolve the miseries and conflicts of human life at its various levels. The mystical approach of love and awareness, based on a faith in the divine ground, has a deep influence on all the literary and intellectual work of his later phase of writing. That is why, D.S.Savage says:

" Today, there confronts us, not the sardonic portrayer of futility, but the prophet and the philosopher of Enlightenment, or Liberation, through a species of mystical contemplation. And this prophet, or teacher, quite overshadows, if he has not finally eliminated, the artist."²

While making an estimate of Huxley as a novelist, in the same article, Savage has expressed his opinion that " Huxley's development follows not a spiral but an hour-glass pattern " (p.342). But there are some critics



who disagree with him and point out that there have been faint reflections of mysticism and repeated references to serenity of mind and quiet contemplation in Huxley's early novels also. Denis's feeling lonely in the company of the other guests at Crome, Gumbril's premonition of becoming a saint and Calamy's retreat in the mountains for meditation are the prophetic notes of mysticism that dominate Huxley's later work.

There is a particular intention in my devoting of a separate chapter for the study of Eyeless in Gaza and The Genius and the Goddess. These two novels, in comparison with the rest of Huxley's later work, are quite serious in their tone and nature. Eyeless in Gaza " contains Huxley's first complete endorsement of mysticism. In it he outlines the details of his mysticism which he was to elaborate in his subsequent works. It is in this book that he first advocates the achievements of a union with God." ³ The Genius and the Goddess also differs from the rest of Huxley's later novels and stands unique among them as it explores Huxley's changed attitude to the Lawrentian creed of life-worship. That is why, I have tried to make a separate study of these two novels in this chapter, with particular reference to women characters.

II

Eyeless in Gaza

Eyeless in Gaza, published in 1936, can be called the beginning of the later phase of Aldous Huxley. It is a sort of " conversion novel " (as Peter Bowering has called it), written " under the influence of Gerald Heard, whom he had first met in 1930. Dr. Miller, the first of Huxley's " men of good will ", was undoubtedly a portrait of Heard; while the events recorded in Anthony Beavis's journal relate directly to Heard and Huxley's activities in the Rev. H. R. L. Sheppard's peace movement....." ⁴

In order to dramatize the conversion theme, Huxley has shown Anthony Beavis, the central character in the novel, at different stages of his career. Hence the novel spans a period of over thirty years from the hero's boyhood to his middle age. There is a counter-point of four narratives describing different epochs of Anthony Beavis's life. The earliest part shows him as a school-boy at the turn of the century shortly after his mother's death; next, as an adolescent at Oxford in the years immediately preceding the first world war, when his irresponsibility leads to the death of his best friend. In the third stage we see him in London during

the late 1920's when his career is established; and finally between 1933 and 1935, when he comes to the crisis which makes him reject his previous life and seek a new one.

Though the novel includes four main narratives, they are not presented in a chronological order. The various episodes are woven together so that the novel shifts backwards and forwards in time; thus a scene from 1933 is followed immediately by one of 1902, an event from 1912 by one of 1926 and so on. In spite of this, there is a general forward movement in time throughout the novel as a whole. For the first half is devoted to the events of the years 1902 to 1926, while the latter half chiefly concentrates upon the events of the years 1927 to 1935, which include Anthony Beavis's diary. The separate narratives are, of course, related in a chronological order.

Huxley has used this method very carefully to bring about Anthony's conversion. In the very opening chapter we see him on his forty-second birthday, the day which is to change the whole course of his existence, in the company of Helen Ledwidge and a heap of snapshots that depict scenes from his early life and symbolize all the buried past Anthony would rather forget. Moreover, like Philip Quarles, he is the sceptic of a scientific

age, " the detached philosopher, the preoccupied man of science who doesn't see the things that to everyone else are obvious." ⁵ At the same time the chapter reveals him as a man who has no time for emotions or responsibilities as he cares only for his freedom and nothing else, and it is quite obvious from Helen's remarks about his love:

" It's a swindle really, a trick for getting people to like you on false pretences....

" You make them give you something for nothing." (p.8).

His attitude to Helen reflects his attitude to life; he wants his freedom at the cost of denying his responsibility to others. From this point the chapters unfold like the heap of snapshots and the images of Anthony's memory without chronology. The story of the growth of the hero from boyhood to his discovery in middle life that his imagined freedom is no freedom at all is presented through the episodes, the spots in time which signify his moral development; his conversion is only complete when he finally accepts responsibility for the past events which he has formerly denied. The return to the snapshots on his forty-second birthday, is thus the start of a process which eventually restores meaning to his life.

From his very childhood Anthony has an interest in mystical literature and it is quite obvious in the account of his thoughts at the time he enjoys a dinner alongwith his friends at Oxford :

" I am not my body, I am not my sensations, I am not even my mind; I am that I am. I 'om' that I 'om'. The sacred word OM represents Him. God is not limited by time. For the One is not absent from anything, and yet is separated from all things..... ." (p.89).

Though he believes in and intellectually accepts the metaphysical approach to different problems of life, he does not want to follow that path in his actual life. On the other hand, he falls a victim to hedonism. For he has acquired some standards from his father and uncle. Once he says :

" My uncle..... he doesn't even believe in God. I don't either." (p.50). The first challenge comes to them from the liberal Christianity of Mrs Foxe and her son, Brian. He is like a modern Hamlet, caught in a conflict between belief and action, between knowledge and experience and the problem of transforming one into another. He himself admits it on the first page of his journal :

" Like all other human beings, I know what I ought to do, but continue to do what I know I oughtn't to do." (p.12). The balance achieved by the company of Mrs Foxe and Brian is upset by his encounter with Mary Amberley in his adolescence, under whose guidance his cynicism is allowed full rein and who deprives him of all normal concepts of morality. It is she who makes him seduce Joan Thursley, Brian's beloved, as a result of which Brian commits suicide. In order to overcome his guilt, Anthony goes on indulging in cynicism, sex and social work. The period of twenty years passes away in this manner and on his forty-second birthday such events happen that change the pattern of his life and lead to his conversion at the hands of Dr. Miller. On that day, his attitude towards Helen, " Whom he had ignored, deliberately, as though she had no existence except in the context of pleasure " (p.102) is changed into pity and love. But it is too late as Helen leaves him and soon marries a German revolutionary.

At that time Mark Staithes shows Anthony a way of selflessness and asks him to participate in a revolution in Mexico. Anthony, having no alternative, agrees with him and goes to Mexico where he encounters Dr. Miller, who gives him lessons in peace, love and non-violence. Anthony returns to England with Dr. Miller and resolves to undertake the path of love,

truth, unity and sacred life.

The title of the novel is based on a quotation from Milton :

" Eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves ".

The slavery is to one's self and the blindness is that of an unexamined life. Thus the novel exposes Huxley's belief that Yoga or Mysticism has the quality of analyzing and transforming life in the light of the Final End of Man. The conflict between passion and reason can be solved by the realization of the essential unity behind the separateness of things and persons. This realization is a life-long process. It is quite obvious in the following passage from Anthony's diary:

" Reality of unity, but equal reality of division..... One is constantly aware of it aware of being one with other minds, other lives and all being. Occasionally an intuition of unity, an intuition coming at random, or sought for, step by step, in meditation."(p.396).

The female characters in the novel have a central function to perform - that is to help the novelist to build up the theme of conversion. None of them has, in fact, a central importance; yet some of them are significantly portrayed by Huxley.

Mary Amberley is a typical sensualist, who is a larger version of Myra Viveash and Lucy Tantamount. This fish-cold amorist with her dissatisfied lust and mischievous eroticism is a thoroughly interesting portrait, quite matchless in Huxley's world of fiction. The comments made by the other characters in the novel throw some light on her lascivious nature. Anthony says about her :

" Those dismal compulsions ! Like cuckoos in August, Like stags in October " (p.181).

Gerry Watchett, while expressing his loathing for her, says :

" Tiresome bitch ! Jealous, suspicious, interfering. Behaving as though he were her private property. And greedy, insatiable. Perpetually thrusting herself upon him - thrusting the ageing body of hers " (p.222).

In the depiction of Mary's oldage, Huxley has shown the severe consequences of hedonism and lasciviousness.

" The consequences of vice are shown in the treatment meted out to Anthony's mistress, Mary Amberley who in the earlier novels would have been spared the spectacle of her physical decay. In spite of the growing interest in mysticism and things of the spirit the old obsessional disgust of the body, a link between

Swift and Huxley, is still dominant. Huxley cannot forgive the body, and he is fascinated by his own disgust." ⁶

It is quite obvious, when we see Mary Amberley in her oldage, suffering from illness and doping hysteria, addicted to heavy drinking of morphia, worse in body and character, and abandoned and deceived by almost all her friends.

It is Mary's chief function in the novel to deprive Anthony of all normal concepts of morality. In this respect she has all the ruthlessness of her predecessors. She makes Anthony to take the initiative and seduce Joan, Brian's fiancée, by uttering these words :

" I'm ready to bet on it..... Five to one. If you do it within a month, I'll give you five pounds'.

" No, you can't get out of it like that, bet's a bet. Five pounds to you if you bring it off within a month from today. And if you don't, you pay me a pound."(p.264).

Mary Amberley's perversity is explained in her own words thus :

" One's always doing things one doesnot

want - stupidity, out of sheer perversity. One chooses the worse just because it is the worse. Hyperion to a satyr - and therefore the satyr " (p.287).

Mary Amberley represents the degenerate and destructive aspect of hedonism in its later stages. Hedonism, indulged for a long time, generates coldness of heart, indifference to life, reckless destructiveness for the sake of 'fun', and perversity born out of purposelessness. Huxley appears to make his decisive statements about hedonism, which he has explored continuously for a period of two decades, in this novel in terms of the characters of Mary Amberely and her daughter, Helen Ledwidge.

Helen Ledwidge is perhaps, as Peter Bowering says, " the most attractive and successful piece of characterization in the novel. She inherits some of her mother's qualities, her flippant sense of humour, her ability ^{to} give herself completely to the sensation of the moment and the enjoyment of life." ⁷ She resembles her mother in her hedonistic way of life as well as her moral laxity. But, as Peter Bowering further says, " in her affairs she shows some development from her disastrous marriage to Hugh to a fuller and more mature relationship with Ekki Giesebrecht.

But her progress, like her mother's is one of increasing bondage and disillusionment " (p.129).

Through the depiction of Helen's life, Huxley wants to suggest that mere sensuality is wrong because it invariably results in enslavement to the self which leads to irresponsibility and moral degradation. The failure of Helen's ~~hedonism~~ hedonism, her disillusionment and enslavement to the self are expressed symbolically in three closely related scenes : the theft of the kidney, the death of her kitten, and her subsequent seduction by her mother's lover. With Ekki she escapes from the enslavement to the self for some time, but after his death everything is the same as before. A year after his disappearance she wishes that they had taken her too, instead of leaving her there, " rotting away, like a piece of dirt on a rubbish heap. Like a dead kitten." (p.389).

Though depicted as a disillusioned hedonist, Helen differs from the other 'femme fatale' in Huxley's fiction in her sensitiveness and intelligence. Her handling of Hugh's party to launch " The Invisible Lover " is one of the humorous high spots of the novel. In the novel she rarely appears as a puppet, advocating the attitude of sensuality.

The minor character of Mrs Foxe is introduced as a contrast to that of Mary Amberley. Both ladies belong to well-to-do families and both are widows, but their ways of life are different. While Mary indulges in pleasure and moral laxity, Mrs Foxe follows a stern and religious life. She spends most of her time in social work. Mary, who is caught in the Whirlpool of sensuality, has to face tragedy, while Mrs Foxe, with her charity and dignity, wins respect from all. Both of them differ in their ways of bringing up their children. Mary gives full freedom to her daughters, while Mrs Foxe brings up Brian as a staunch Christian. The character of Mrs Foxe, a symbol of morality, is used as a foil to Anthony's Cynical self before his conversion. At the same time, that her perverse Christianity is responsible for the disastrous consequences in her son's life shows Huxley's attitude to Christianity.

The character of Joan Thursley, the fiancée of Brian Foxe, is introduced with the only purpose of showing Anthony's moral degradation when he seduces her just out of mere sensuality. Still there is a psychological factor presented in the depiction of this

minor character. Huxley attributes her shyness to her prisoner- like life with her parents. This is quite obvious in Brian's letter to Anthony, where he says :

" It has been a violent transition from remote country life to London, from cramping poverty to a rich house, from subjection to her father's bad-tempered tyranny to independence " (p.241).

Although all the women characters in Eyeless in Gaza are patently used as instruments in the exploration of the theme of conversion - from hedonism to mysticism - Huxley has depicted the important characters like Mary Amberley and her daughter, Helen Ledwidge, with firmness, precision and a clarity of vision. Although they belong to the family of the hedonists in the early novels, they do not have comic dimension of the early hedonists. They incorporate, on the other hand, Huxley's clear and unfaltering judgement on the ultimate degeneration of a hedonist. In the earlier novels Huxley is amused by the pleasure-seeking women, but in Eyeless in Gaza his attitude towards them has in it a firm ethical evaluation. This indicates that by the time Huxley came to write Eyeless in Gaza he himself had undergone conversion !

III

The Genius and the Goddess

This short novel, published in 1955, is quite different from the rest of Huxley's novels, as it is the novelistic swan-song of Aldous Huxley and the least embittered and satirical of all Huxley's books.

John Rivers narrates the story of Henry Maartens, a brilliant scientist, with whom he has worked as his research assistant and Katy Maartens, his wife, using the flash-back technique. Henry Maartens is a genius whose brilliance as a scientist is contrasted with his inability to be anything but "an idiot where human relations were concerned, a prize ass in all the practical affairs of life",⁸ while Katy, his beautiful wife, is the goddess.

The central incident in the novel recalls some of Huxley's earlier concerns like - what puritans call sexual immorality-can well have much better results than rigid adherence to fixed rules. Henry Maartens is so parasitic upon his wife that when she goes to Chicago to nurse her ailing mother, he himself falls ill and is subjected to appalling

suffering as a result of which she has to return from Chicago leaving her mother in the nursing-home. Nursing has made her pale, drawn and haggard. The temporary lack of her vigour to cure her husband by the sheer radiance of her presence proves disastrous as there seems to be no hope of saving him. At last one night when she receives a telegram about her mother's death, she goes to bed with John Rivers, renews her contact with 'animal grace' and adulterously uses her lover's vigour to cure her husband. Yet in the concluding part of the novel, Huxley makes her meet an accidental death which destroys her perfect body. This is a reminder both of Huxley's obsession with blood and violence and of the constant defeat, throughout his fiction, of the spirit by the flesh.

In the case of Rivers all incidents are shocking. For he loves Katy " metaphysically, almost theologically the way Dante loved Beatrice, the way Petrarch loved Laura " (p.48). But all these preconceived ideas about sex and morality are shattered when Katy establishes sexual contacts with him. His ecstasy is clouded by a confusion of emotions - shame at the loss of his chaste ideals, remorse at the betrayal of his master and even shock at Katy's matter-of-fact attitude

to the physical side of love. His life is further complicated by the fact that he becomes the unwilling object of the passionate love of the daughter of the Maartens, Ruth, who is a school-girl of fifteen. But both the mother and the daughter meet their tragic deaths at the end of the novel.

At first, critics and reviewers were puzzled by the apparent simplicity and directness of the novel. The irony was lost upon most of them. They regarded it as Huxley's return to the Lawrentian gospel of blood-religion. But actually it is a rebuttal and refutation of that creed. It is also a novel of spiritual quest as Huxley insists on moral and spiritual laws and their necessity in human life.

Katy Maartens, the most significant female character in the novel, has her own place in the fictional world of Aldous Huxley. She is presented throughout the novel as an embodiment of the Lawrentian gospel of blood-religion. This Lawrentian character is a perfect blend of three graces - spiritual, animal and human. The description of her hands suggests the human side in her goddess - like personality :

" What strong hands ! What efficient hands ! Honest-to-God hands that were good with screwdrivers; hands that could fix things when they went wrong; hands that could give a massage, or when necessary, a spanking; hands that had a genius for pastry and didnt mind emptying slops " (p.41).

Through her first impressions on Rivers's mind, Huxley has shown Katy's goddess- like qualities. According to Rivers, she is maternity incarnate not only for her children but for her husband also, who is no more than a child in his emotional make-up. For Henry,

" Katy wasn't a person; she was his food, she was a vital organ of his own body. When she was absent, he was like a cow deprived of grass, like a man with jaundice struggling to exist without a liver " (p.76).

Her bright appearance has an ability to pour life into her husband whenever he gets ill.

But when Katy comes back from Chicago as Henry is on death-bed, she is unable to cure him as she has become virtueless, lifeless and empty. Still

" her business is to go on fighting even when it's perfectly obvious that the battle

is lost..... She may be sick with grief and foreboding but she must act as though she were cheerful and serenely confident. She may have lost courage; but she must still inspire it. Absolutely bankrupt, but compelled by circumstances and her own will to go on spending " (p.96).

But her efforts are futile as she is like a goddess deprived of everything. While describing her state, Rivers says :

" It's the line of a born pagan forced by circumstances into a situation with which only a thorough-going Christian or Buddhist could adequately deal. She felt herself abandoned, not by God..... But by the gods, all of them.... They had left her and taken everything with them. She had to find her gods again. She had to re-establish her contacts with life-with life at its simplest, life in its most unequivocal manifestations, as physical companionship, as the experience of animal warmth, as strong sensation, as hunger and the satisfaction of hunger " (pp.104-105).

At that stage, Huxley shows that Katy revives her vitality by going to bed with Rivers.

" She was a goddess who had temporarily broken down and was finding her way home to Olympus by the road of sensuality "(p.107).

In her contacts with Rivers by which she regains her virtues, her life and her strength, she symbolizes the Lawrentian creed of life-worship.

Through the depiction of Katy's portrayal Huxley attempts to point out the failure of the Lawrentian creed. Her sensuality and sex-indulgence help her in her self-preservation, but Rivers's attitude to her has undergone a change, as it is revealed in the following remark of his :

" The goddess, after all, was vulnerable "
(p.141).

Huxley presents her degradation in the eyes of Ruth also who is, from the very beginning, suspicious of her mother's illegal behaviour. That Huxley deeply disapproved of Katy's philosophy and praxis is clearly suggested by the fact that he makes Katy die a violent death - a death which destroys her body.

According to Philip Thody, Huxley's biographer,

" The very character of Katy Maartens is, as he later explained, based on that of Frieda Lawrence, and her relationship with Henry very similar to the one which Frieda had with Lawrence ".⁹

The character of Ruth, though minor, is delineated with an acute psychological insight. Her adolescent development, with the attendant physiological and emotional changes, the teenage feelings of love, pride and jealousy of this " budding woman " are presented with a fine clarity of vision. Throughout the novel Huxley introduces such episodes that hurt her feelings and sharpen the wound. When her mother returns from Chicago, she scolds her for her make-up and throws away the make-up kit into the garbage. Nobody understands the change in her emotional world, on the other hand, she is insulted by everybody. The fact that she is treated as an irresponsible child engenders unrelenting hatred for all in her mind. She is hurt and humiliated at " finding herself rejected by the man she had chosen as her victim and Bluebeard, in favour of another woman - and, to make matters worse, the other woman was her own mother." (pp.130-131).

Ruth's jealousy for her mother is a characteristic feature of her adolescent development. It reaches its climax when she hands over her poem to Rivers, describing what she thinks and feels about her mother and Rivers. It is an outcome of her " jealousy, and rebuffed love, hurt vanity, angry resentment " (p.139). It is the feeling of her

" bitter tastes of wounded pride, of jealousy and suspicion " (p.131) that lead her to her accidental death with her mother.

Apart from these significant women characters, we have in the novel a minor character - that of Miss Beulah, a maid-servant of the Maartens. It is a lovable little sketch of a warm-hearted and cautious woman who always tries to be of use to others.

In The Genius and the Goddess Huxley has tried to write a novel in the psychological mode, and though we can discern an ideological concern - that of the examination of the Lawrentian creed enunciated in Point Counter Point - the main strength of the narrative is in the psychology of Katy and Ruth and the dramatic action that issues from their characters. Huxley always had a keen interest in the psychological complexities of human behaviour (cf. Gioconda Smile) and, for a change, he wrote a novel to satisfy his genius for psychoanalysis before he turned to write Island.

Notes

- 1 D.S.Savage, "Aldous Huxley and the Dissociation of personality", Critiques and Essays on Modern Fiction: 1920-1951, ed. John W. Aldridge (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1952), p.340.
- 2 Ibid., pp.340-341.
- 3 Milton Birnbaum, "Aldous Huxley's Quest for Values: A Study in Religious Syncretism", Aldous Huxley: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Robert E. Kuehn (New Jersey : Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), p.56.
- 4 Peter Bowering, "Eyeless in Gaza", Aldous Huxley: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Robert E. Kuehn (New Jersey : Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1974), p.119.
- 5 Aldous Huxley, Eyeless in Gaza, rpt. (1936, Harmondsworth : Penguin Books Ltd., 1955), p.7. All subsequent references to the text will be indicated by giving the relevant page number at the end of every quotation.
- 6 S. Diana Neill, A Short History of the English Novel (London : Jarrolds Publishers, 1951), p.310.
- 7 Peter Bowering, p.128.
- 8 Aldous Huxley, The Genius and the Goddess (New York : Bantam Books, 1955), p.46. All subsequent references to the text will be indicated by giving the relevant page number at the end of every quotation.
- 9 Philip Thody, Aldous Huxley : A Biographical Introduction (London : Studio Vista, 1973), p.110.