

CHAPTER - IIAldous Huxley and the Novel of Ideas

To understand the nature of characterization in a novel and the kind of characters that a novelist is interested in creating, we have to have a clear idea of the kind of novel that the novelist is writing and the level of narration on which his novel generally moves. Even a cursory reading of Huxley's novels indicates that he is primarily interested in ideas and that his novels are essentially novels of ideas.

I

The novel of ideas is a peculiar product of the twentieth century, obviously stemming from the drama of ideas, pioneered by Ibsen and later modified by Shaw and Galsworthy to suit their purposes. If Ibsen's use of the new dramatic form was serious in tone and heavy-handed in treatment, Shaw's was apparently light-hearted and comic, though his interest in ideas was as serious as Ibsen's, and Galsworthy's was serious and sentimentally inspired by a passion for social reform. The first English novelist who seriously announced himself as a novelist of ideas was H.G.Wells. In a letter to Henry James he said that a novelist was a journalist -

" To you (Henry James) literature like painting is an end, to me literature like architecture is a means, it has a use..... I had rather be called a journalist than an artist, that is the essence of it."¹

R.C.Churchill's remarks are relevant on this context :

" Wells was inclined to over-emphasize the reliance of his fiction on the topics of the moment, saying that most of his work would survive only so long as their ideas remained current." ²

The scientific romances like The Time Machine (1895) and The Country of the Blind (1911) have attained the stature of literary art, but still " the 'idea' is the mainspring." ³ And in his novels like Ann Veronica (1909) Wells was mainly concerned with ideas. The point is, by the time Huxley started writing his novels, the literature of ideas was an established category. The rise of this new category is to be attributed to the very spirit of the twentieth century which is implied in the terms, 'the age of analysis'⁴, 'the age of interrogation'⁵. The First World War and, particularly, the Russian Revolution created a tremendous ferment in the intellectual world and the post-war period was marked by moral perplexity on the one hand and on the other great intellectual curiosity. Frederick J. Hoffman points out that Huxley's novels of the 1920's are " an expression

of the tremendous vitality which ideas had in the 1920's; and that they are " a testimony of the intellectual confusion of that period." ⁶

Churchill tries to trace the tradition of the novel of ideas back to Fielding, Smollett, Scott and Dickens. He says that ~~they~~ are two main currents in the English novel - the one 'flowing from Fielding and Smollett to Scott and Dickens' and the other 'from Richardson and Jane Austen to George Eliot and James', and, Churchill says, " the novel of ideas has mostly stemmed from the former source." ⁷ All this is very interesting from the point of view of literary history, but the kind of the novel that we now call 'the novel of ideas' is a peculiar form of the twentieth century, arising out of its peculiar ethos. It is " a narrative form peculiar to an 'unstable' age - one in which standards are not fixed beyond removal or alteration." ⁸ But what Churchill says about the association of comedy with the literature of ideas is of relevance when we speak of the drama of ideas such as Bernard Shaw's and the novel of ideas such as Huxley's. " Proportion is the essence of the serious literary artist ;" says Churchill, " comic exaggeration, if often for a serious purpose, is the keynote alike of Dickens and the twentieth century literature of ideas; exaggeration in all forms, of speech and idea and

procedure".⁹ Comic exaggeration took the form of wit and humour in Shaw whereas it took the form of satire in Huxley, and this difference would be attributed to the fact that Shaw was an optimist with a strong belief in the evolution of man into a superman and Huxley, a product of the war-years, was a pessimist bewailing, "the wearisome condition of humanity."¹⁰ The significant point is that the British literature of ideas "has managed to carry on something of the Dickensian tradition of English comedy."¹¹ This is of relevance to our study of women characters in Huxley, because exaggeration - comic or otherwise - is the main spirit in which they are conceived and executed.

II

A critical examination of Frederick J. Hoffman's essay on the nature of the novel of ideas¹² will, I think, give us all the premeters of the problem of characterization in it with which we are immediately concerned. The following are the chief characteristics of the novel of ideas, as Hoffman points out :

(a) The novel of ideas is different from the novel of character in that in the former ideas are clothed, given flesh and blood and sent out into a

world in which they may test themselves, whereas in the latter, that is in the traditional form of the novel, the novelist starts with flesh - and - blood characters and explores them in their concrete complexity. In a novel of ideas, 'ideas are acted out by characters or demonstrated by them; and finally, a character often assumes the monstrous appearance of such a demonstration'.¹³

(b) It follows that a character in such a novel often becomes " a caricature which incorporates the furthest possible human demonstration of an attitude with certain grotesque inadequacies of person to which his whimsical creator condemns him." ¹⁴

(c) The action issuing from characters in such a novel is 'always typical or characteristic action, the adventure not so much of a person as of an idea in its contemporary world'.¹⁵

(d) Such a novel demonstrates 'the effects of a point of view upon the person who holds it',¹⁶ and the novel is organized in terms of human events which demonstrate their defects. 'The comedy in an idea is revealed in a concrete demonstration of its inherent untenability.' ¹⁷

(e) " One of the chief objectives of the novelist of ideas is to include men of varying temperaments and

attitudes within the scope of one narrative and thus to dramatize the clash of these attitudes in his novel."¹⁸

(f) Each character (and, of course each event or action) has a point of view 'drawn from the prevailing interests of his creator'.¹⁹ The author, therefore, is 'omnipresent' in a novel of ideas in terms of characters 'ranging from gross caricature to sympathetic exposition'.²⁰

Hoffman's essay has also in it an extremely insightful discussion on the structure of a novel of ideas, but since it is not immediately relevant to our purpose, I have preferred to leave it out ~~of~~ the moment. Hoffman's analysis of the nature of characterization in a novel of ideas is wholly acceptable, and when we look at women characters in Huxley's novels we will have to necessarily bear in mind the above aspects, along with the inevitable two-dimensionality of the characters in the novel of ideas.

III

It would be profitable to sketch briefly the intellectual world of Huxley so that we have a clear idea of his major preoccupations, because it is they which govern the categories of characters that he creates.

There are two areas of his works in which we get Huxley's ideas - one, his philosophical works like Ends and Means (1937), The Perennial Philosophy (1945), Science, Liberty and Peace (1947) and Brave New World Revisited (1958); two, his novels of ideas from Crome Yellow to Island. A study of both of these areas clearly reveals that Huxley's central preoccupation is man's individual development, fulfilment and salvation. To him, social, political and economic reforms are a branch of preventive ethics - they are just means to create favourable conditions for man's individual salvation. Hence the entire Marxist emphasis on the socio-historic process is of little significance to him. He is totally against the Marxist principle of the end justifies the means. He says, "The end cannot justify the means, for the simple and obvious reason that the means employed determine the nature of the ends produced." ²¹ He says, "A violent revolution cannot achieve anything except the inevitable results of violence." ²² He looks with dread at the technological progress of the twentieth century since, according to him, without progress in charity technological progress is useless. As a true individualist he is against all kinds of totalitarianism and dictatorship.

The post - first - world - war situation in England appeared to Huxley somewhat like Eliot's

'waste land' - a place where people have become 'hollow men' leading lives of utter boredom, purposelessness and pointlessness, trying to find escapes in things like hedonism, aestheticism, diabolism, materialism and nationalism. Quite early in his creative career we find Huxley moving towards mysticism (of the Indian variety) and towards the concepts of non-attachment and charity. One of his major preoccupations in his novels is the problem of integrated living. He is all the time worried by the problem of division and self-division, by dichotomy of his life, romanticism versus sensuality, love versus sex, intellect versus emotion, knowing versus feeling, planning versus freedom, idealism versus reality, art versus life and so on. If Lawrence tries to solve the problem of division and self-division in life through his conception of the idea of tension or polarity, Huxley tries to integrate the polarities by transcending them through mysticism. To the later Huxley, mysticism is not a negative path, but a positive path leading to a greater awareness and fullness of life. In Vedanta for the Western World (1945) he speaks of the highest spirit of reality, which is possible for man to experience.

".... at all times and in spite of these handicaps, a persistent few [the great saints] have continued to research to the point where at last they find themselves

looking through their dogmas, out into the Clear Light of the Void beyond. the minimum working hypothesis would seem to run to about this : That there is a God-head, Ground, Brahman, Clear Light of the Void, which is the unmanifested principle of all manifestations." ²³

Within the context of these ideas which form Huxley's intellectual universe, he discusses almost every important sociological, economic, cultural, educational and religious problems confronting the western man. The novel of ideas is quite an adequate form for Huxley's fashion for intellectual discussions and explorations. He is not interested in ideas for their own sake. If that were the case, he would have been a philosopher or a thinker. He is interested in the concrete operation of the ideas in human context which alone lend them a genuine existential validity. He is, in the true sense of the term, a novelist of ideas.

In Huxley's exploration of human dimensions of ideas it is interesting to see that women characters play as important a role as men characters. Particularly in the early comic novels like Crome Yellow, Antic Hay, Those Barren Leaves men and women are on equal footing (according to Meredith, there can not be a true comedy without the equality of sexes). In his later novels like

After Many a Summer, Time Must Have a Stop, Island, which become increasingly serious and less comic, women take the secondary position. In the earlier novels, for example, hedonism is explored more through the women characters like Anne Wimbush (Crome Yellow), Mrs. Viveash (Antic Hay), Lucy Tantamount (Point Counter Point) than men characters. In Point Counter Point, which comes at the end of the first phase, we notice a shift from the comic to the serious and correspondingly the men characters gaining precedence over the female characters.

It is quite interesting to see that the potential saint is always foreshadowed in one of the central male characters like Denis Stone, Theodore Gumbriel, Calamy and Anthony Beavis, and not in a female character. Only in Island we have a mystical spark in Susy Macphail, one of the central characters in the novel. But mysticism on a slightly mundane level, that is, natural mysticism in terms of love of nature and natural spontaneous human communion - finds an expression primarily in women characters like Emily in Antic Hay, Mrs Chelifer in Those Barren Leaves, Mrs Foxe in Eyeless in Gaza and Loola in Ape and Essence.

Notes

- 1 Henry James and H.G.Wells (1958), as quoted by R.C. Churchill, "The Comedy of Ideas : Cross-currents in the fiction and Drama of the Twentieth Century", The Pelican Guide to English Literature : The Modern Age, ed.Boris Ford, rpt.(1961, London : Penguin Books, 1973), p.236.
- 2 R.C.Churchill, p.237.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 The Age of Analysis, ed.Morton White (New York: Mentor Books, 1955).
- 5 A.C.Ward, Twentieth Century Literature (London : Butler & Tanner Ltd, 1964),p.4.
- 6 Frederick J.Hoffman, "Aldous Huxley and the Novel of Ideas", Aldous Huxley : A Collection of Critical Essays, ed.Robert E.Kuehn (New Jersey : Prentice-Hall, Inc.,1974), p.17.
- 7 R.C.Churchill, p.240.
- 8 Frederick J.Hoffman, p.12.
- 9 R.C.Churchill, p.242.
- 10 Fulk Greville, as quoted by Aldous Huxley, Point Counter Point (London : Chatto and Windus, 1935), page following the Title page.
- 11 R.C.Churchill.
- 12 Frederick J.Hoffman, "Aldous Huxley and the Novel of Ideas", Aldous Huxley : A Collection of Critical Essays, ed.Robert E.Kuehn (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc.,1974).



- 13 Ibid., pp.9-10.
- 14 Ibid., p.10.
- 15 Ibid., p.11.
- 16 Ibid., p.12.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.,p.13.
- 21 Aldous Huxley, Ends and Means (London : Chatto and Windus, 1937), p.9.
- 22 Ibid.,p.25.
- 23 Aldous Huxley, "The Minimum Working Hypothesis", Vedanta for the Western World, ed.Christopher Isherwood (London : George Allen and Unwin Ltd , 1948), p.34.