

CHAPTER-IV

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After having studied, Arnold's poems, I ^{have come} here came to know that Arnold's poetry 'a criticism of life' in the Victorian age. In a general sense of the term, 'criticism', Arnold passes judgment on the life of people in the Victorian age. He is a severe critic of the Victorian Age.

In writing criticism in verse, Arnold conforms to his ideal of poetry as 'a criticism of life'. He observed, and was repelled by, the condition of contemporary society. The loss of religious faith and the decline of spiritual and moral values because of the growth of materialism, sickened his soul. The various social evils caused by the unbridled industrial and mechanical progress, filled his heart with gloom. The spiritual unrest, aimlessness and conflicts in the world around him, troubled his mind.

The romantic poetry of the preceding age, with all its exuberance, subjectivity and emotional glow, could not satisfy his classical temper which favoured the qualities of objectivity, restraint and wholeness in writing. A man of acute sensibility as well as great intellectual powers, he could not but react against the conditions prevailing in his Age, and express his reaction in his poetry as well as in prose. His reaction is critical, and not emotional. He

criticises by reviewing the situation existing in the field of society and by commenting or passing judgment on it. His poetry is more of a critical than creative nature. That's why Hugh Walker comments :

His much-condemned definition of poetry as 'a criticism of life' is at least true of his own poetry. Even in a literary sense, there is a surprising quantity of wise criticism in his verse. Goethe, Byron, Wordsworth and Senancour are all examined with wonderful insight; and in the 'Epilogue to Lessing's Laocoon' we have a discussion of the principles of the arts of music, painting and poetry. But Arnold's verse is critical in a far deeper sense than this. It is, in accordance with his own definition, criticism of life. In all his deepest poems, in 'Thyrsis' and The 'Scholar Gipsy', in 'Resignation', in 'the Obermann poems', in 'A Southern Night', Arnold is passing judgment on the life of his age, the life of his country, the lives of individual men.

Arnold was deeply distressed to note the loss of faith in contemporary England. The traditional values were fast dying. He lost his peace of mind. In 'Self Dependence', he is anxious to know his real self. The Victorian age was marked by materialism and machinery, scepticism and spiritual distress. In 'Memorial Verses' Arnold described the Victorian age as the 'Iron time of doubts, disputes, distraction and fears'. 'Obermann once more' is a criticism of people who lost faith in higher values. Moreover, 'A southern Night' is a criticism of materialistic Victorian age. i.e.

Our business with unslackening stride.

'Thyrsis' is criticism of people whose life was torn by conflicts and engulfed in misery. 'Rugby Chapel' criticises the pitiable lot of human beings in this world i.e.

Most men eddy about
Here and there - eat and drink

'Dover Beach' offers criticism of contemporary world engulfed in gross materialism, made insecure by the loss of faith and torn by purposeless conflicts. For him the world

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.

In 'Stanzas From The Grande Chartreuse' Arnold represents a true Victorian who is

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born.

Arnold severely criticised the Victorian age with its social, religious and scientific situation. There was no place for spiritualism. His soul was crippled by materialism and despair. But the Nature widened his soul when he attuned to Nature. But when divorced from Nature, man is either a slave or mad. He says :

Is there no life, but these alone ?
Madman or slave, must be one?

In 'The Scholar Gipsy' Arnold calls the Victorian way of life as :

Strange disease of modern life,
With its sick hurry and divided aims.

Thus, I can say that Arnold's poetry is a 'a criticism of life' in the Victorian age. Arnold is a severe critic of the Victorian age. His observation is marked by objectivity.

Arnold's poetry is a 'criticism of life' according to the interpretation of 'Criticism of Life' given by Matthew Arnold himself in his essay on 'Byron' as "Truth and seriousness of substance and matter, felicity and perfection of diction and manner, as these are exhibited in the best poets, are what constitute a criticism of life made in conformity with the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty".

Arnold's poetry has a truth and seriousness of substance and matter. The stress on human action possessing an inherent interest was his supreme concern. Arnold's 'Rugby Chapel', 'The Scholar Gipsy', 'Thyrsis', 'Memorial Verses', 'Obermann Once More', deal with really great human actions possessing an inherent interest. They have a truth of substance. Arnold's view of things is marked by reality, melancholy, praise and criticism, largeness, deep human

concern, objectivity. That's why Arnold could make a sound and large representations of things.

Arnold's poems too have felicity and perfection of diction and manner. But Arnold doesn't show any originality in his use of language; nor does he try to develop a new poetic diction as romantics did. The Victorians were chiefly concerned with the subject of poetry and they used the language found available for use, and borrowed the language words from various sources including romantic poets. However, Arnold follows the classical ideal of plainness in the matters of language and avoids Neo-classical embellishments and too much figurativeness. He offers no theory of poetic diction like Wordsworth, but follows him in writing in his poems in the plainest and simplest language.

Arnold's criticism of life has accent of 'high seriousness' because in his poetry solemnity and sublimity of great persons, serenity of Nature, which were the products of his inner vision, affect the truth of substance.

Moreover, Arnold's greatness lies in his noble and profound application of ideas to life. Arnold's poetry is the result of powerful and beautiful poetic application of moral ideas to life, - to the question : How to live.

Thus, I can say that Arnold's poetry is a criticism of life in the Victorian age. It is also 'a criticism of life' in ^{the} a sense that it has truth of substance and matter, felicity and perfection of diction and manner. That's why, Arnold as a poet must be viewed in the line of the great poets like Tennyson, Browning and Wordsworth.