

CHAPTER - IThe Fictional World of Aldous Huxley

In order to get a proper perspective for the study of women characters in Huxley's novels, it is necessary for us to sketch a cursory map of the fictional world that emerges from his major novels. Every major novelist worth the name creates a more or less homogeneous world of fiction in which his particular characters - men and women - have their existence and being. This world is not an exact replica of the circumambient universe of the novelist, but it has a parallel existence with devious connections with the actuality of the novelist's own milieu. His fictional world is inevitably created out of the diverse elements that constitute the socio-historical process of which both the novelist and his novels are part. It is the business of the critic to map the fictional world of the novelist and discover the principles underlying its creation. The most important principle of organization that we find in Huxley's fictional world is the fact that his central concern is with ideas and with the writing of the novel of ideas. Before we take up this principle for a detailed discussion (cf. Chapter II), it is profitable to have a general view of Huxley's fictional universe.

I

John Atkins considers Huxley's world as ' a very limited ' one.¹ In comparison with the complex social structure of the actual world in which Huxley lived, Atkins finds that his fiction portrays a very small section of it. " Practically all the action is confined " he points out, " to the upper middle class, and only a section of that : the aesthetic and speculative branch, merging at one extreme with bohemia and at the other with the aristocracy." ² While giving an estimate of Aldous Huxley as a novelist, G.S.Fraser also observes :

" The world they depict is in one sense a narrow one, the world partly of English country houses, and partly of London's literary Bohemia. Nearly all these characters are people with large unearned incomes, or artists, or writers; nobody appears to have a routine job to do, and thus everybody has leisure for endless discussions that make many pages of these novels read less like ordinary fiction than fragments from a philosophical debate".³

Although it is true that Huxley's world is more or less confined to the English upper middle class, it does consist of a wide variety of people from that group - intellectuals, aristocrats, scientists, artists, literary men, school-teachers, religious

authorities, mystics, political figures and so on, and thus Huxley shows what has come out as ' the best ' in the British socio-historic process of the early twentieth century. It is " the great middle and upper middle class, tarred by the aesthetic brush, with their goat feet dancing the antic hay - such is the population." ⁴ Such is the best of the culture for which the society invests everything ! Huxley's world presents a satiric picture of these supposed best in most of his novels. Its main function is apparently to expose their prebentiousness, their emptiness and their centrelessness. It is interesting to see that Huxley's world consists of some recognizable types, since his concern with ideas and ideological discussions demands not psychologically complex characters but sociologically typical ones who would serve as the embodiments or representatives of certain ideological tendencies.

First, most of Huxley's novels have a typical aristocrat. John Atkins points out that Huxley's aristocracy " is not the conventional landed aristocracy of English life and letters, the world described and occasionally satirized by Trollop^e_^; it is rather a group that has been drawn into an alien sphere of action by the interests and friendships of a literary son or a dilettante wife ".⁵ Mr. and Mrs. Wimbush (Crome Yellow),

Mrs Aldwinkle (Those Barren Leaves), Lord and Lady Edward Tantamount (Point Counter Point), Jo Stoyte (After Many a Summer) and Mrs Gamble and Eustace Barnack (Time Must Have a Stop) belong to the group of the sophisticated rich. Most of them live in large mansions, wear gaudy dresses, are surrounded by a number of servants and live a life of pleasure-seekers. Self-pride, showiness and love of dominion are typical features of their nature. Mrs Aldwinkle who treats her guests as her possessions is a good illustration of it. But the most striking characteristic of this group is their intellectual pretentiousness. In Huxley's world the aristocrats are generally comic figures but they are quite unlike those in the fictional world of P.G.Woodhouse. If Woodhouse's aristocrats are full of gaiety and triviality, Huxley's aristocrats have something tragic and melancholic in them behind their comic exteriors.

Alongwith these aristocrats, Huxley presents in almost every novel, an intellectual character who is well-read, learned, philosophically-minded and utterly modern. Most of the figures in Huxleyan intellectual zoo are, says S.D.Neill, " middle-aged cultured voluptuaries who ask little more of life than readable books, amusing conversation, music, art, a quiet life

and reasonable comfort with perhaps a delicate, lascivious, witty, little flirtation ".⁶ The intellectuals in his early novels - Denis Stone, Gumbriel Junior, Calamy and Philip Quarles - are quite comfortable in the world of ideas. But when they are confronted with the world of action they hesitate and run away. Scepticism is the barrier that all of them carry ! His later novels also introduce some intellectuals who are disillusioned and frustrated with the irresponsible world. But they are more evolved than the earlier intellectuals in that they take interest in spiritual wisdom and try to confront the problems and conflicts of their life at its various levels with a view too conquering or transcending them. Anthony Beavis in Eyeless in Gaza is a good illustration of the 'evolved' intellectuals of Huxley's later fiction.

Associated with the aristocrats and the intellectuals there is a group of the professionals - people who direct conversation into certain channels and who throw over the novels an air of knowingness - consisting of painters, musicians, scientists, biologists, teachers, politicians and so on. Huxley, being born and nurtured in a family of scientists and thinkers, was always obsessed with the problem of scientific and technological progress and its relation to human values.

Some of the scientist-characters in his novels are Mr. Shearwater (Antic Hay), Lord Edward Tantamount (Point Counter Point), Dr. Obispo (After Many a Summer), Dr. Poole (Ape and Essence) and Henry Maartens (The Genius and the Goddess). Huxley explores, in terms of these scientist-characters, the nature of scientific detachment and its relation to the world of action as well as the problem of human value. They are all brilliant and competent but quite unsuccessful and apparently comic in the normal world of action. Only the sketch of Dr. Poole remains an exception in this group as he succeeds in his love-affair with Loola and escapes from the degenerate world of Los Angeles.

The other type that occurs time and again in Huxley's fiction is a group of artists. In Crome Yellow Gombauld is a dashing painter and Jenny Mullion a caricaturist. Lypiatt in Antic Hay is an unsuccessful romantic painter, while there is an element of the pitiful and the ludicrous about Senior Gumbril, an unsuccessful architect. In Point Counter Point we meet two painters - John Bidlake and Mark Rampion.

Most of Huxley's heroes are men with literary talent. Denis Stone (Crome Yellow) is a poet, while Calamy and Mary Thriplow (Those Barren Leaves) are

novelists. Philip Quarles (Point Counter Point), Hugh Ledwidge (Eyeless in Gaza) and Sebastian Barnack (Time Must Have a Stop) follow the same profession. It is quite amusing to know that their approach to life is generally theoretical and bookish. The sketch of Mr. Barbecue Smith, a spiritualist author, is drawn with a comic touch. Moreover Huxley's novels introduce journalists like Walter Bidlake, Burlap, Francis Chelifer and Will Farnaby.

It is interesting to note that politicians appear very rarely in Huxley's fiction, though there are faint echoes of political discussions in some of his novels. In Point Counter Point, for instance, the portrayal of Webley as a leader of the British Fascists dramatizes the challenge of Fascism to Democracy, and it reaches its climax when he is murdered by Spandrell and Illidge. In Eyeless in Gaza we come across Mark Staithes, a revolutionist and Dr. Miller, a pacifist, who is always busy with his peace-movement.

Huxley's world is not without its religious-minded people like Mrs Quarles (Point Counter Point), Mrs Foxe (Eyeless in Gaza) and Mr. Bodiham (Crome in Yellow), a professional preacher. There are also teachers like Gumbril Jr. and Mr. Propter. Moreover,

his fictional world consists of diabolics like Spandrell, amorists like Ivor, amoralists like Coleman and mystics like Bruno Rontini, Dr. Miller and Mr. Propter.

II

We may now turn our attention to the women characters in Huxley's fiction and make an attempt to categorize them. We see that it is possible to divide them into three convenient groups - the social ladies, the intellectuals and the positive figures.

Almost every Huxleyan novel has a social lady in it : Mrs Wimbush in Crome Yellow, Mrs Aldwinkle in Those Barren Leaves, Mrs Viveash in Antic Hay, Lady Edward Tantamount in Point Counter Point and Mrs Gamble in Time Must Have a Stop. They resemble one another in many aspects, that is, in their material affluence, their gaudy appearance, their intellectual pretensions, their hatred for the inferior, their love of dominion and their desire to take interest in every walk of life. Mrs. Wimbush is always shown in her rich silk dress with a string of pearls round her neck. Mrs Viveash indulges in a meaningless pursuit of pleasure : She is always visiting theatres, music-halls and hotels. Her cab-ride described in the concluding part of the novel reveals

her pointless attempts to escape into an illusion of cheerfulness. But the perfect sketch of such social ladies is to be found in Mrs Aldwinkle of Those Barren Leaves. While describing her pride in her property, Huxley sarcastically says :

" The whole peninsula and everything it contained were her property and her secret. She had bought its arts, its music, its melodious language, its literature, its wine and cooking, and the virility of its Fascists".⁷

Her dread of getting old, her misquoting the famous authors, her love of dominion and so on render her character utterly comic. While Mrs. Aldwinkle's character is comic, Mary Amberley's in Eyeless in Gaza is grotesque and those of Mrs. Wimbush and Mrs. Viveash have a touch of the pathetic in them. One of the chief concerns of Huxley's is to explore the nature of hedonism, the philosophy of the 1920's , and he often does this in terms of the experiences of women characters. Anne Wimbush of Crome Yellow, for instance, tries to amuse herself with a sort of detached attitude to life :

" I've always taken things as they come,..... It seems so obvious. One enjoys the pleasant things, avoids the nasty ones. There's nothing

more to be said".⁸

Mrs. Viveash tries to rejoice herself by visiting theatres, hotels and music-halls. But what she gets of this hunt is mere frustration, "disillusion after disillusion".⁹ The same novel contains another hedonist, Mrs. Shearwater, who is more dramatically delineated than Mrs. Viveash. Lucy Tantamount of Point Counter Point is another interesting version of this hedonistic tendency, and Helen Amberley in Eyeless in Gaza differs from her mother, Mary Amberley, a disgusting pleasure-hunter, only in her intellectuality. Veronica Thwale (Time Must Have a Stop) and Miss Maunciple (After Many a Summer) also belong to this group of hedonists.

Along with these amusement-hunters Huxley's fiction presents some intellectual women also. The portraits of such characters in his early novels are invariably satirical, while those in his later work appear somewhat serious. The portrait of Mary Bracegirdle in Crome Yellow is drawn with gentle satire which sharpens and becomes piercing in the delineation of Mary Thriplow in Those Barren Leaves, especially in the depiction of her intellectual pretensions. Elinor Quarles in Point Counter Point, though modern and



sophisticated, remains pleasant and charming throughout the novel. Helen Amberley (Eyeless in Gaza) and Sushila Macphail (Island) differ from the earlier intellectuals as they are seriously portrayed.

In his early novels, Huxley portrays most of his female characters with a note of mockery and raillery. Since his primary concern is to depict the disillusionment of the post-war era, his female characters are portrayed satirically and, one might say, negatively as figures of the Huxleyan waste land. The desert is not, however, without its oases - with some fleeting glimpses of 'positive' women characters. Emily of Antic Hay, for instance, is quite different from the rest of women characters in the novel in her fondness for nature, quietude and countryside. Mrs. Chelifer in Those Bareen Leaves, with her devotion to nature and charitable work, remains a positive figure. In his later novels negative characters fade away and positive ones occur time and again. In Ape and Essence we meet Loola without the least pretension to education or good breeding - " Loola au naturel with a musky redolence which, on second thoughts, has something really rather fascinating about it " ¹⁰ Sushila Macphail is also a charming personality in Island. But the characters in this novel suffer from an excess of simplification, for the more dominating the

ideas are, the more reductive becomes the process of characterization.

Apart from certain 'types' of women characters, Huxley's world contains some non-typical, unique characters-for example, Katy Maartens of The Genius and the Goddess is unique in her Lawrentian devotion to life; then there are abnormal characters like Miss Elver who is a moron (Those Barren Leaves) and Jenny who is a deaf caricaturist (Crome Yellow).

III

The foregoing sketch of Huxley's fictional world clearly indicates that it is essentially extremely limited - limited, sociologically speaking, to the upper middle section of the British society of the early decades of the twentieth century. A Marxist critic, Arnold Kettle, goes a step forward and speaks of the two qualities that characterize this world of Huxley's - "narrowness and pessimism".¹¹ "Both are," he says,

"of course, quite understandable in their historical context, nor are they quite separable. The narrowness is to a considerable degree a by-product of the pessimism."¹²

According to Arnold Kettle, the writers of inter-war

years turn in on themselves and become entirely involved in their neurosis and confine themselves to an exceedingly narrow world in which they happen to feel at home.¹³

He further says that these writers present a pessimistic and unsympathetic view of their society " which manifests all the classic aspects of decadence ".¹⁴ " They are not simply writers describing decadence ", he asserts, " they are decadent writers." ¹⁵ Later while talking about Point Counter Point, a novel which apparently contains a wide variety of characters and multiplicity of points of view, Dr.Kettle says,

" Despite its bulk and its pretension, it deals extraordinarily with humanity. Far from offering a cross section of the English society of the late twenties Huxley confines himself to two groups, which, significantly enough, interpenetrate in the world of the novel : the upper-class group of titled Mayfair socialites and the 'literary' clique represented principally by Burlap, Rampion (Lawrence) and Philip Quarles (he has many of the characteristics of Huxley himself)." ¹⁶

Kettle comments :

" Its fundamental artistic weakness is that that world as a living organism never comes into existence. It is as though Huxley is so keen to dissect that he cannot first take the trouble to create." ¹⁷

But he admits that there is a vitality in Huxley's fictional world - " the vitality of a short, if cynical, intelligence exercising itself on certain situations and individuals which it has seen through rather than seen imaginatively." ¹⁸ A Marxist that he is, he condemns Huxley's world as " in the last degree un- hopeful and, as a result, unhelpful." ¹⁹

D.H.Lawrence, on the other hand, is less dog- matic and nearer the truth when he appreciates Huxley's presentation of his world. " I do think that you have shown the truth," he says in one of his letters,

" perhaps the last truth about you and your generation, with a really fine courage..... Still for all that it is a perverse courage which makes the man expect the slow suicide of inertia and sterility : a perverseness of a perverse child." ²⁰

Before we enter the Huxleyan fictional world with a view to studying the women folk in it from close quarters in their localized contexts, it would be profitable to examine the central principle of organi- zation of his fictional world so that our focus of study is properly sharpened and a clear vision of our object is obtained. The principle I speak of is one which is implicit in the writing of the novel of ideas.

Notes

- 1 John Atkins, Aldous Huxley (London : John Calder Ltd., 1956), p.52.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 G.S.Fraser, The Modern Writer and His World (Calcutta : Rupa and Co.,1961), p.76.
- 4 S.K.Ghose, Aldous Huxley : A Cynical Salvationist (Bombay : Asia Publishing House, 1962), p.77.
- 5 John Atkins, Aldous Huxley (London : John Calder Ltd., 1956), p. 52.
- 6 S.Diana Neill, A Short History of the English Novel (Ludhiana : Kalyani Publishers, 1971), p. 354.
- 7 Aldous Huxley, Those Barren Leaves, rpt. (1925, London : Penguin Books, 1951), p.21.
- 8 Aldous Huxley, Crome Yellow, rpt. (1921, London : Penguin Books, 1936), p. 23.
- 9 Aldous Huxley, Antic Hay, rpt. (1923, London : Triad/Panther Books, 1977), p. 161.
- 10 Aldous Huxley, Ape and Essence (London : Chatto and Windus, 1949), p. 60.
- 11 Arnold Kettle, An Introduction to English Novel (London : Hutchinson University Library, 1953),p. 165.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid., p.166.

- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid., p.167.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid., p.168.
- 19 Ibid., p.166.
- 20 D.H.Lawrence's Letters (1922), p.758, as quoted
by Kettle, pp. 169-170.