

Keats's Pagan Conception of Beauty: An Interpretation in Indian Perspective

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Keats the youngest and the last of the Romantics blossomed out precociously as an accomplished poet and faded away prematurely in his early adolescence. He was, according to a critic "The bloom whose petals were ripe before they blew". As his innate poetic talent flowered early in his life, he enriched English poetry by prodigiously contributing to his rich harvest of poetical work. Whereas Wordsworth the pioneer of the Romantic tradition of poetry appeared as a high priest of Nature, Keats the last of the second generation of poets iconised himself as a high priest of Beauty. The former spiritualized Nature with a Pantheistic belief and worshipped her as a manifestation of God but the latter romanticized Beauty with a pianistic conception and enshrined her cult in the temple of his poetry. Like Wordsworth Keats too imparted a spiritual significance to all beautiful objects and phenomena not only of tangible and visible elements but also of all abstract and imaginary things. Keats's exuberantly romantic and aesthetic attitude sharpened his intellectual response to beauty and awakened in him a visionary power by virtue of which he perceived beauty in all forms of manifestation. With the gradual maturity of his poetic mind, his range of perception of beauty expanded and encompassed beauty of art, sculptor, architecture and above all of all abstract things such as love, music, song, dance, solitude, melancholy and dejection. His poems evince his love for all these aspects of life.

In the beginning, his conception of beauty was entirely sensuous just as Wordsworth's perception of Nature in his boyhood was wild and unrefined. He beheld her in the spirit of a wanton boy or "like a roe" without minute observation and interest. He derived "Coarser pleasure" from his observation of Nature in her external manifestation. As he grew into adolescence and his mind was matured, he began to look upon her with a profound spiritual insight and the coarser pleasure was refined into celestial joy. His matured and elevated mind could perceive the immanence of God in all objects and phenomena of Nature.

In like manner Keats's love and appreciation of beauty underwent a change due to a change in his perception occasioned by exaltation of his imaginative and perceptive mind. In the inception of his poetic career he loved with passionate intensity the beauty of Nature and of women. He enjoyed the fragrance of flowers, odour of trees, colour of grassy fields and blue sky. A critic remarked in the context of his love for the beauty of Nature "the earth was his great condoler, and so passionately did he love her with a love far more concrete and personal than that of Wordsworth or Shelley. Keats "Endymion" is impregnated with the vivid picturesque descriptions of sensuous and luxuriant beauty of Nature. The humming of the bees, the sight of flower, the glitter of the sun, the luster of the moon and the song of the birds enraptured him. His friend B.R. Haydon says "the glitter of the sun seemed to make his nature tremble".

He often roamed imaginatively in the enchantingly beautiful fairy land, where the melodious song of the bird entranced him and rendered him oblivious of fever and fret, trouble and tribulation, despair and dejection. "It is this intense whole hearted sensuous love of all forms of natural beauty that inspired and incited Keats". Thus, we find how Keats in the beginning passionately loved Nature and sensuously luxuriated in her beauty.

Apart from his indulgence in the enjoyment of natural beauty he voluptuously responded to the feminine beauty of women. His love for the beauty of women is evidenced by his descriptions of the body and complexion of ladies. The following lines are supportive of it:

"She seemed a splendid angel newly
Save wings for heaven drest"

X X X X

"I met a lady in the meads,
Full beautiful - a faery's child,
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild"

X X X X

Light feet, dark violet eyes and parted hair.
Soft dimpled hands; white neck and
creamy breasts,

Keats's conception of beauty gradually became artistic in outlook and spirit. He began appreciating artistic and sculptural beauty, which is authenticated by his vivid description of walls, windows, tapestry, pictures of the walls, engraved urn and architectural magnificence of edifices. The following extracts are worth quoting in this context:

"O" Attic Shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
I"

With forest branches and the
trodden weed;

X X X X

This love for the beauty of tangible objects gradually assumed the metaphysical and spiritual perspective for all abstract qualities such as beauty, truth, joy, love, romance, indolence, solitude and melancholy.

As his conception of beauty transcended the world of sensuous enjoyment with the gradual elevation of his intuitive and imaginative mind, his vision of beauty attained a state of sublimation on account of which he perceived beauty with truth and truth with beauty and joy. This transcendental conception of beauty was the outcome of Keats's interest in Platonic idealism, Hellenism, aestheticism and paganism.

Many critics identify him as a Pagan poet in view of his concept of beauty inasmuch as his creed of beauty is not rooted in any of the religious or in Western philosophy. Keats sought to express beauty for its own sake. W.A. Long comments "it (beauty) is essential to normal human life; it (beauty) is a reward for labour." His concept of beauty is a creed ipso facto. It inspires him to evolve a religion of beauty and worship it in the spirit of a Pagan. This paganistic view of beauty was entirely and creatively his own individualistic conceptualization unprecedented and unheard of in the realm of any philosophy or poetry. His philosophy of beauty is the summon bonum of all his noblest thoughts.

Keats's profound intuitive perception of beauty impelled his visionary mind to conceptualize a theory of beauty, which he enunciated in his poems and letters. One of his poems in which he seeks to idealize beauty is "Endymion".

A thing of beauty is joy forever,
Its loveliness never increases;
It will never pass into nothingness".

In the lines quoted above Keats does not refer to perishable physical beauty of the earth. He refers to Platonic beauty that is imperishable, celestial, sublime and eternal. The poet further sublimates beauty by blending it with truth in the Ode on a Grecian Urn. He writes;

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty that is all
Ye know on earth and all ye need to know”.

In this context Matthew Arnold says “to see things in their beauty is to see things in their truth and Keats knew it.”

The lines of the Ode crystallize the essence of Keats’s philosophy of beauty. His realization of the identity of Beauty and Truth impels him to indoctrinate his creed of beauty and emphasize the necessity of this knowledge in human life from the viewpoint of its spiritual significance. He, therefore, rightly says “that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know.”

Keats himself asserts this view in one of his letters addressed to his friend Benjamin Bailey on 22nd Nov. 1817. “What the imagination seizes, as Beauty must be truth. Whether it existed before or not for I have the same idea of all our passions as of love; they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty”. Keats further highlights the sublime power of beauty in his poems and letters. In the poem “Hyperion” Keats accentuates this superiority of beauty in the line “that first in beauty should be first in might”. His utterances regarding the infatuating power of beauty in his letter addressed to George and Tom Keats on 23rd January 1818 strengthen his views” He says “with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration”.

With particular regard to Keats concept of beauty and truth Matthew Arnold remarks

“The Truth is that yearning passion for beautiful which was with Keats, truly the master passion-but not the passion of the sensuous or the sentimental poet”, Keats own statement in his letter cited above leads us to assume that his passion for beauty what Shelley called intellectual beauty was certainly a spiritual passion for him.

Keats’s principal objective as a poet of beauty was to explore truth in beauty and beauty in all aspects of life. He loved “the mighty abstract idea of beauty in all thing”. In this context Bradley remarks “this search for beauty in truth was the poet’s end and therefore his law”. Keats by virtue of his intuitive perception discovered this blend of beauty and truth in all manifestation. In the opinion of the poet beauty and truth are not two different entities, they are inseparably and indistinguishably one. Arnold says “they are connected and made one”.

In this context of Keats’s conception of beauty and truth, we can draw an analogy between his creed of beauty and Indian Vedantic concept of God as an epitome of Satyam, Shivam and Sundram. The Hindu Vedantists realize God in terms of these Sanskrit words. According to their conception, God represents Truth (Satyam) Joy (Shivam) and Beauty (Sundaram). He is the supreme Truth that irradiates eternal beauty, which is a source of joy forever. The Hindu devotees of God also conceive of Him and identify Him as Sachidananda in terms of the abstract qualities Sat, Chit and Ananda. The Mandoka Upanishad and the Bhagbat Gita depict the figure of God as an embodiment of Satyam, Shivam and Sundram. To Keats, truth presupposes beauty and joy. From this viewpoint his implicit import of these words beauty and truth is identical to the Vedantic

interpretation of God. Just as Keats uses these words with a profound philosophical implication, the Hindu saints too use these words to describe God in terms of beauty, joy and truth.

Another poet who metaphysically identifies God with the term Truth is Robert Browning. He was a Vedantist in his belief and conception. He held that God is the Absolute Truth. In the poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra" he writes: -

"And God and infinite

Be named here

With knowledge Absolute"

Browning too conceives of God as a manifestation of truth and says, "God is truth and truth God". Probably his knowledge of the Hindu concept of Truth as God inspired him to express this view in the poem. Mahatma Gandhi invariably used the word. Truth in the same sense and proclaimed himself as a seeker after Truth.

In the light of the Vedantic interpretation of the terms beauty, truth and joy, we find that Keats's concepts of these abstract qualities are analogous to that of the Hindu saints. His passion for intellectual beauty impelled him to evolve a religion of his own and this religion, according to Arnold, was of beauty. He further says, "Keats had no religion save the religion of beauty no God save Pan". He found a spirit in beauty. His letters to his friends are illustrative of his quest and pursuit for beauty for beauty and indulgence in it. He explicitly professed his principle in a letter "I have loved the principle of beauty in all things and if I had time I would have made myself remembered." Keats actually immortalized himself and made himself remembered by promulgating his principle of beauty "A thing beauty is a joy forever" "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" "it is

nature's law that the first in beauty should be first in might".

In this context Browning's proclamation of beauty in his poem "The Guardian Angel" is relevant and worth quoting.

O World, as God has made it! All is beauty.

And knowing this is love and love is duty.

These lines illustrate Keats influence on Browning particularly in relation to his concept of universal beauty.

Likewise, Keats's influence on Tennyson is discernible in the latter's adoration of beauty. "His poems express his creed of beauty. Critics hold that "Tennyson saw all the universe of man and nature and God in their relation to ineffable beauty".

Keats's philosophy of beauty, which exerted much impact on the mind of his later poets of the Victorian age, is overtly paganistic in perspective. Nevertheless, it is conceptually Vedantic in implication and interpretation. In the light of the illustrative study of Keats poems and letters, we establish the view that the creed of beauty propounded by the poet bears a close affinity with Hindu conception of God as an epitome of Satyam Shivam and Sundaram. Browning's identification of God as Truth and Truth as God echoes the same Hindu utterance of Sachidananda who represents sat -chit and Ananda. These words of spiritual implications evince Browning's interest in Indian Vedantic philosophy.

This conviction leads us to infer that the same Hindu philosophy which influenced Browning might have also inspired Keats to indoctrinate his creed of beauty.

The conceptual identity and harmony between Keats's philosophy of beauty and

the Hindu creed of Satyam Shivam and Sundaram necessitates and justifies a comparative study and interpretation. An attempt to explicate Keats's Pagan conception of beauty in Indian perspective is a novel approach designed to focus new light on the poet's adoration and contemplation of beauty from the viewpoint of its intellectual and spiritual

significance. The Indian Vedantists realize Almighty Parambrahma as an emblem of Beauty, Truth and Joy. In Indian spiritual perspective, Keats's concept of beauty has much relevance to a comprehensive and comparative study in the context of Indian scriptural interpretation of the terms Beauty and Truth.

Notes and References:

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