CHAPTER - V
AUTO-BIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS
IN
DISRAELI’S NOVELS

"It is in Disraeli's novels, if anywhere, that we find real Disraeli," writes Raymond. Elaborating this remark Baker comments, "Read as a chronological series, his novels provide a lively and illuminating version of English political and social history, during his lifetime; they are also indirectly Disraeli's autobiography." These novels, indispensable as they are to the understanding of Disraeli, the man also show us his inside. Like Bacon, Disraeli lived a double life, and, as in Bacon's case, his public life— the life on which the limelight played— was not the real Disraeli. His life was in his dreams.¹

The idiosyncratic elements in his novels need no further objective testimonials. The writer is invariably and unmistakably present in almost all his novels, right up from Vivian Grey to the incomplete Falconet, in different palpable disguises. This egoistical element in literature, both in poetry and prose, was a trait especially of the Romantic age. Even Tolstoy, who is considered as one of the most objective type of novelists, put himself into War and Peace as Piarre; and into Anna Karenina as Levine. But Disraeli ostensibly overdid it a little in his novels as is clear from his own confession he makes in his mutilated diary. He was anxious, as he says, "to act what I write."

From his early Trilogy we get a glimpse of his three-phased personality—political, poetical and racial. In his mid-Trilogy he repeats the same pattern once again. They pain in bold outlines the three similar aspects of his personality, whereas he is concerned with politics in Coningsby, and religion in Tancred; his poetic heart is moved by the misery of peasants and industrial workers, inducing him to express, in Sybil, realities of life like other contemporary novelists.
The early Trilogy has been used by writers for his pre-political biography. There we have a central figure, portrayed in three different colours and from three different angles. These heroes have a characteristic restlessness. They are victims of vaulting ambitions and mysterious indecisions. They are adventurous and they sigh for power. His first hero, Vivian, enjoying almost the same heredity and environment, Disraeli was blessed or cursed with, adopts a defiant attitude at school because of a keen and sensitive conviction of racial discrimination. Jews were ill-treated all over Europe then, and Disraeli could not remain an idle spectator. He denounced such practices and pleaded for catholicity in religion. He prompts Contarini to say: "The indifference of my father on the subject of religion prevented me at least from being educated a bigot," and he becomes a Catholic.

The first hero is brought up under a liberal father who is a democratic gentleman of lettered tastes. His mother loves him so much that she would not allow her son to go to a public school, Mrs. Falconet believes that "a public school was a place of much wickedness and cruelty." So the hero is sent to a private school, where he takes part in drama and is expelled from the school, because "he is in the habit of circulating opinions," like Shelley, "which injuriously affected the discipline of the school." The hero is not disappointed, and like Disraeli he uses his father's rich library and works at Greek for twelve hours & day. He emerges from his literary seclusion at the age of seventeen, and mixes with society as "an elegant lively lad with just enough of dandyism to prevent him from committing gaucheries." Like Disraeli, Contarini was egoistic, impertinent and flippant, as he himself admits-

I was universally hailed as original and a wit ... one of the most affected, concieted and intolerable atoms but ever peopled the sunbeam of society.

He worships the empire of intellect and believes that the world belongs to the cleverest.
Disraeli sight in *Contarini Fleming* that "life must be intolerable unless I were the greatest of men." After his grand discovery that "Riches are Power," and "Is not Intellect?", Disraeli like Vivian early in life, comes to the conclusion, "Mankind, then, is my great game"; and till the very end of his life Disraeli remained busy in that ticklish game, fielding or batting. Vivian too starts this game with the Carabas party. These facts lead us to believe that Vivian is a portrait of young Disraeli "sketched from a looking-glass". When Disraeli says that "My books are the history of my life," he may be egoistical but he is sincere in his statement. His early life, his education and his political aspirations are painted in *Vivian Grey* permanently and faithfully.

A young man of dynamic energy and courage, brilliant wit and musical voice, like Disraeli, Vivian is anxious to be a Minister. Though he fails in securing the influence of a Noble, he remains unflinched. This Don Juan like Alroy who believes that "the past is for wisdom, the present for action," swears that "in spite of all oppositions, I would be an author; ay! the greatest of authors," so the next hero Contarini resolves "to become a great historical writer." That is why Disraeli's next novel *Alroy* has a historical theme. He might have failed in his political ambition but he is anxious to make experiments in the literary field. Here is a detailed account of his method of literary approach. He fixes upon subjects in which imagination might come to the aid of scholarship. Disraeli further acquaints us cursorily with some of the details of his literary technique.

*Contarini Fleming* was written after Disraeli had his first literary disaster, and for some time life appeared bleak to him. So naturally he had grudge against all—a cruel step-mother and a father "that has no feeling." He hated home and was so much dejected and discontented with life that he would have killed himself, "had I not been supported," as he says, "by my ambition and the desire of distinction and of astounding action that raged in
This pathetic tale of Contarini led critics including Robert Blake, to come out with theory that Disraeli did not love his mother. But we think that the whole family described in *Contarini Fleming* is like Lamb’s "Dream Children", begotten of Disraeli’s imagination. It is quite possible that Disraeli was displeased with his mother, who, in her letter to Murray after “The Representative” episode, while defending her son, mentioned “though a clever boy, he was no prodigy.” He had also enough reasons to complain against his father. Disraeli was knee-deep in debt. He entreated Austen for a lone of £ 1200 but he could not approach his father for money because, “I have opposed his earnest wishes,” he wrote to his friend and “I do not like to revive a most painful subject.” He was firm in his resolution, never to trespass on the resources of his father. Naturally, a family which he could not bank upon even in hard days, he disliked. But it was only a temporary phase or his eventful life. There is little evidence available elsewhere that Disraeli hated his mother or disliked his father.

Making allowance for such controversial references, we can easily utilize *Contarini Fleming* as Disraeli’s psychological autobiography. Written under a depressed mood of uncertainty, it reflects his remorse, his annoyance and his helplessness against the odds of life he was besieged with. After his successive failures, Disraeli was standing at the cross-road of Destiny, though a little puzzled, but no less determined to penetrate the dark veil of the mystery of life. Through a stranger he consoles and encourages himself at this juncture:

> Be patient. Cherish hope. Read more, ponder less. Nature is more powerful than education. Time will develop everything.\(^5\)

Disraeli was contemplating to lead the life of a poet at Naples, but after this auto-suggestion, he appears to have changed his mind and struggled hard to secure a seat in Parliament, and organized the Young England party and led it.

These early novels thus help us to understand Disraeli, the man in the making. The extrovert Vivian is transformed into an introvert Contarini;
but the talismanic counsel of a stranger resuscitates him and he attains greatness through politics. Before taking up Disraeli’s other novels important for biographical purposes, we propose to discuss Alroy, which is supposed to contain a dream-picture of Disraeli as a conqueror.

We believe that in spite of its fantasy, Alroy offers a peep into some of the deep-rooted values of Disraeli’s personal life. He had “a perfect disregard, if not contempt, for servility,” and felt that he was being held captive no less by the Philistine, than by his own blunders, and that he was destined to be either a great man or a great neurotic.6

Alroy raised a controversy with some people’s impression of Disraeli’s lack of patriotism, which he emphatically demolished in The Young Duke and asserted that his life was dedicated to England:

Oh, England! Oh, my country! although many an Eastern climate and Southern race have given me something of their burning blood, it flows for thee.

As all the early novels of Disraeli are dream-pictures and prefaces to his future plans, we can presume that through Alroy he hinted at his anxiety to see his race free from servility.

History tells us that until 1829, Jews along with Roman Catholics and Dissenters were excluded by the Test Acts, which preserved higher positions in public life for members of the Church of England. In 1829, this monopoly was broken so far as the Christian sects were concerned, but the Jews still remained excluded.7 That must have annoyed Disraeli and that is why he went on condemning English people for ill-treating a race which was the mother of Christianity. In this context the martyrdom of Alroy has a symbolic significance. It suggests that Jews could even lay down their life for the liberation of their race. Commenting on Alroy as representing the ideal ambition of Disraeli’s life, Monypenny says that

the thought may have passed through his mind that the true aim of the political ambition which was beginning to shape
itself within him should be to win back the Holyland for the
Chosen people and restore the sceptre to Judah. The critic thinks that in no other way Disraeli's declaration that Alroy represented his ideal ambition can be construed. Our analysis of Disraeli's life and works convinces us that he had three ambitions in life--literary, political, and racial--and he engineered his own method to attain them. He invested his political and literary resources to win equality, honour and freedom for his race. In Tancred and Lord George Bentinck he pleaded strongly for the Jewish race and ultimately secured equal rights for them in 1858, twenty five years after the publication of Alroy.

Apart from echoing Disraeli's ideal ambition, Alroy reveals one of the most significant sources of success in the life of the writer. He writes, "I do observe the influence of women very potent over me." So this "rhapsody recording the struggle of Disraeli's Fancy with his Reason; and his Ambition with Destiny," is dedicated to Sarah, Miriam of Alroy; and for paying rich and glowing tributes to all those ladies who contributed to his personal and political advancement, he wrote his last novel Endymion. He owned that "if in the sunset of life I have still a young heart, it is due to that influence." In an unambiguous term he admits that:

Few great man have flourished who, were they candid, would not acknowledge the vast advantage they have experienced in the earlier years of their career from the spirit and sympathy of women.

We have already referred to The Young Duke for Disraeli's patriotism. Though critics often omit this novel from the auto-biographical series of Disraeli's novels, but his romantic relationship with Henrietta, and close a lovely chapter of his life.

Though he repents and curses himself for "the blunders of an unreformed character" and complains against "the torture of an ill-regulated mind," still he is proud of his sterling integrity. He thanks "his creator, that his
soul is still white, his conscience clear.” Such stray references about Disraeli's clear conscience born of his instinctive adherence to religion are contained in Tancred and Lothair as well, the one painting his racial peculiarities and the other his sincerity for the Anglican Church.

After reading the novels of Disraeli, the reader gets convinced of Disraeli's presence in almost all of them either as an actor or as a prompter. Motivated by self-love, Disraeli painted his own portrait on a large canvas running into volumes. Adding his political novels to these volumes, a full character-sketch of Disraeli is possible. He loved himself as one of the most egoistical of human beings; he loved his native land, England, like a loyal subject and was equally true to his race whose blood flowed in his veins. It is truly said that without a study of Disraeli's books, it is impossible to understand his life, as without a study of his life, it is impossible to understand his books.

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REFERENCES

1. The Criterion (February 1924), p. 159.
2. Benjamin Disraeli, Falconet, Ch. V.
4. Ibid., p. 33.
5. Ibid., p. 58.