CHAPTER - XI
DISRAELI’S : THE NOVELIST

We have now reached a stage when we are in a position to give our own estimate of Disraeli as a novelist. While doing so, it would be profitable, first, to make here and there, a comparison of Disraeli, the novelist, with some of the very important contemporary novelists. Before we attempt to do so, we cannot help examining Disraeli, the novelist, without a brief reference to Byron and Shelley, who influenced him.

In politics, Disraeli stands admittedly a champion, in literature, though not a figure among the greatest, yet certainly one of the great. The keynote of this greatness was supplied by the novelist himself in his novel *Coningsby*. He says, "Man is never so manly as when he feels deeply, acts boldly and expresses himself with frankness and with fervour."

Disraeli acted with passion and appealed to the imagination. His passions, his imagination and more than these, his boldness worked wonder in earning for him political greatness. But as literature was made subsidiary to his political ambitions, he could not attain the enviable height expected.

Developing in the shadow of Romanticism, Disraeli imbibed many of the qualities of Byron, the great romantic. His force, his wit, his romance, his ambition, his sharpness of imagination, his hatred of philistinism, his cosmopolitanism, his revolutionary mind, his lofty speciousness of outlook, were the characteristics which Disraeli borrowed from him.

It was a bold bid on Disraeli’s part to paint Byron and Shelley as heroes in his book *Venetia*, at the time when English society was irritated by the one for breaking traditions and customs; while the other was supposed to be nothing else but a neurotic idologist and a social outcast. It was also his boldness to begin his literary career with *Vivian Grey*, whereby he intended to earn personal distinction by ridiculing great men of the contemporary society.
It may be pointed out that his boldness was sometimes taken for audacity. No doubt, he was boldly frank throughout his life while criticising others and asserting what he deemed profitable and expeditious.

Disraeli's first hero, Vivian, Byronic in dash and egotism, utilized his imagination and spirit in adventures, bothering little about conscience. Under this same Byronic fervour, Disraeli glorified Youth in all his novels. Perhaps, among the three basic principles employed as themes of his novels, Youth has been given priority over Beauty and Power. He believes that "almost everything that is great has been done by Youth," and concludes that "the history of Heroes is the history of Youth." But he could not ignore the part played by women in building the Life-great. So he greatly acknowledges that "it is the sympathy of woman that usually makes him so," because, according to him, life is a two-wheeled cart where "Man conceives Fortune, but women conduct it."

Here it may be pointed out that, if Disraeli stands supreme among his contemporary novelists for being the first to employ his talents to wedding politics to literature, he was also the first in raising the status of women in society, to a recognized height. Women before Disraeli, were used in novels as playthings of their heroes, but Disraeli, paying a full-throated tribute to their attributes, made them if not king-makers, at least makers of a Prime Minister. He interpreted human passions in a broader perspective, and suggested a new line and gave a new colour to the traditional way of thinking in this respect. We find that most of his heroes owe gratitude to women for their benign influence over their life.

Though Disraeli differed much with Rousseau in his political philosophy, we may trace a clear influence on him of the latter's philosophy about human development, in Contarini Fleming. Monypenny, quoting a forgotten critic who referred to "the child Venetia growing up by her mother's side in
happy ignorance of the father, says that Disraeli "was the first writer who resolutely set himself to picture the child life." With the exception of Wordsworth such paintings of child life are rare in the contemporary English literature. But it is said that Disraeli usually lacked Wordsworth's moral approach to life and Nature. However, it may not be denied that though the romantic wonder of Wordsworth, and the romantic strangeness of Coleridge [and] the feeling of religious voluptuousness, the sense of longing and of melancholy were not his. Yet he was devoted to Nature for its mysterious qualities and its impulsive beauty no less. He approached Nature for its moral solitude. He did not fail to realize that "the voices of Nature are abundant, and from the hum of insects to the fall of the avalanche, something is always talking to you."

We may mention here that, unlike the romantic poets, Disraeli's mysticism, born of his racial and Eastern background, had an oriental and supernatural base. It may also be noted that like other romantics he did not invade the treasures of Medieval history and literature for this purpose. We find in his religious and allegorical novels, *Tancred* and *Lothair*; ample expressions of his love for the worship of the mysterious. It may be profitable to remember that Disraeli's heroes, preoccupied either with their literary projects, or engrossed in the game of politics and current problems, never visit the hot beds of politics, though they visit the Continent often to satisfy their longing for the mysterious and also to enjoy the artistic beauty of the East. His heroes are, thus, fond of the East, the land of wonder, mystery and religious culture, because the writer himself admits that the more he saw of the oriental life, the more he was enchanted by it.

Disraeli had an eye for such natural and artistic beauties, that is also testified by his 'Home-Letters', which stand witness to his love for the picturesque and the splendid. He wrote about men and matters, displaying his keen aesthetic
sense. He delighted in painting the physical features of the opposite sex with the passionate emotions of a continental romantic. But love in the traditional sense was hardly the theme of his novels, except in Henrietta Temple. He was puffed up by the artistic grandeur of the ancient cities which satisfied much the element of grandiose in him. He painted sincerely, in his non-political novels, the blooming beauty of the German Court, Venice, Egypt, Baghdad and above all Jerusalem, even at the risk of losing popularity and patronage of the West. He often felt pained seeing the fading splendour of such ancient art.

Though he lacked that emotional depth and warmth of sympathy for Nature, which we have in Wordsworth, he loved Nature as an art and believed that it was a better source of understanding the beauty of life. “Nature is Art, or Art is Nature,” he describes in Popanita. His biographers inform us that he utilized his leisure hours studying the romantic realities of natural life, but his novels, no less, abound in the artificial and dazzling beauty of drawing-rooms. His surroundings convinced him that “the men live, for pleasure or fame [and] the women for pleasure and love,” however, sensuous beauty offered no better relief to his spirit. he felt more at home painting ethereal beauties, like Eva and Theodora. Thus he is often criticized, and it is said that his romances do not touch the physical plane of the popular type. Disraeli, on the other hand, idealistically believed that without moral order physical beauty could not be maintained. Theoretically thus he toes the line of Wordsworth.

Assessing his novels under the nineteenth century background, we may call Disraeli partly a romantic historical novelist, like Scott. Though he believed in the continuity of historical traditions, he utilized the English social hierarchy in an idealized form, only to accelerate the sociological effects of his novels. In such portrayals, while painting the glittering and flashy aspects of the English nobility, their hunts, their great country estates, and their city entertainments, the procession of their women, Disraeli links himself with the
historical novels of Scott. But his portraits, however, are not medieval but from the nineteenth century political and social England and the Continent. He takes the reader to his political world, as Scott takes him to the historical. The English feudal system, no doubt, had a historical and political utility for him and that aspect he utilized in his novels, leaving its romantic and medieval aspects to the sole care of Walter Scott. While discussing the characteristics of Disraeli as a novelist, we may mention that as a worshipper of Womanhood and as a laudator of Youth, his novels paint and predict a "Renaissance of power with new blood". Here he appears to be more influence by Carlyle as compared to Scott.

While Disraeli was busy creating a new genre of political novels, his personal, political and literary friend, Bulwer Lytton prided himself on developing a kind of historical novels different from those of Scott's. He named them as historical novels of politics. These two friends--Bulwer Lytton and Disraeli--were born a decade before the rise of the Great Victorians. Disraeli was younger to Lytton by one year, but his Vivian Grey preceded Pelham of Bulwer. These two comedies of the Patrician manners present a difference in approach and also in presentation of the theme. On these writers and their creations there is a clear stamp of Byron. It may be noted that they imbibed from that great romantic poet, a love for the picturesque, an adventurous audacity and a tenderness towards the East. But Allen says, Lyton in his historical novels of politics, "was at any rate painstaking in research and the genre gave him full scope for his sense of grandiose, his melodramatic attitude of life." whereas, Disraeli, a better genius with all these qualities, used his political novels as a pulpit for his political philosophy, with definite purpose in view.

Bulwer's characters, like those of Disraeli's, were influenced by the contemporary social and political forces. But Bulwer's good heroes, unlike those of Disraeli's fall in life. In his historical novels of politics, Bulwer like Disraeli
advances a tripartite constitutional balance among the Sovereign, the Peers, and the Commons, but under the influence of Carlyle, both these novelist believed that "the common man would be benefited by a return to feudal paternalism" alone. Comparing Bulwer and Disraeli as novelists, the same critics comments that the former's pioneering of his new form of political historical fiction can be said to have been in general, successful, more successful, indeed, than Disraeli's creation of the modern political novel with its extended exposition and its lengthy, undramatic political dialogue.

But it may be pointed out that Disraeli's political novels of purpose, though to all intents and purposes, a branch of the historical novel, are the fascinating creation of a genius. Thus they are not dramatic in form, yet they are in no way less catching in presentation. It may be surmised that unconcerned with the existing literary patterns, Disraeli cared even less for the artistic methods followed by his contemporaries. Self-reliant and unconventional as Disraeli was in his literary technique, he channelized likewise his political views in the form of political fiction, and that was entirely a new experiment.

Taking most of his characters from the actual life, Disraeli employed sparkling wit to effect brilliant reflections on the seamy-side of politics, resulting from his observations and extraordinary discernment. Though he was a keen observer of men and matters, he did not feel relatively as much in most of the cases, so he often inserted too much of his own self in almost all his writings. In our view that was the basic cause of the undervaluation of his works. That is why, while assessing his novels, critics had Disraeli's personal and political background before them and, thus, the literary merits of his works were hardly reviewed with impartiality.

As Disraeli's observations were often not matched with the requisite dose of humane feelings, his novels did not stir the reader's emotions to the desired depth. As such, the human range of his novels is limited. They stimulate
the intellect but do not move the heart to that degree. Disraeli believed as he describes in *Henrietta Temple*:

"... in fine novels, manners should be observed and moral should be sustained, we require thought and passion, as well as costume and the lively representation of conventional arrangements."

But what he preached he could not practise, and we find that thought becomes more important than passion in his novels. Moreover, though intellectually inferior to none of his contemporaries, he marred, somewhat, the beauty of his narratives by too much political paddings and personal eccentricities.

In addition to these waywardness of his nature, there was another reason for Disraeli's unpopularity in the contemporary literary circle. Apart from Bulwer Lytton, he treated his fellow authors with indifference, and that perhaps instigated Thackeray to burlesque and parody one of his political novels, *Coningsby* as 'Codlingsby'. To patch up the differences thus engendered, soon after, Thackeray paid glowing tributes to Disraeli, the politician and the man of letters, at the Royal Literary Fund dinner, and solicited the good offices of Mrs. Disraeli in normalising the relationship. But he fared badly, though posthumously, in *Endymion*, where Disraeli describes Thackeray as St. Barbe "the vainest, most envious, most amusing man." He was, somehow, especially courteous to Mathew Arnold, but Robert Browning was to him "a noisy conceited poet," and Washington Irving was "vulgar and stupid."

Even after discounting effects of incongenial atmosphere thus created by Disraeli's own erratic behaviour, he fares well, compared to some of his contemporaries, and as novelist, he stands nearer to Charles Dickens in one of his political novels, *Sybil*. Though in conception it is very much like Dicken's social novels, it differs considerably in manner of approach. Dickens, as a realist, touched his problems with the pen of a humanitarian, whereas, Disraeli, with almost equal sympathy for such problems, relished intellectual approach
to his themes. The former was least concerned with the political aspect of the aristocracy and did not like their social paraphernalia. He was an advocate of the down-trodden. His sincerity of feeling, invested with a natural touch of pathos made his slum-stories very effective. Such knack of story-telling Disraeli exhibited only in *Sybil*, that he miserably lacked elsewhere.

We have already pointed out that Disraeli had a definite political aim and ambition in life. He combined in himself the artist, the philosopher and the political thinker, all in one. It may thus be assumed that he cared a little less for the impact of the literary values of his novels. His attempt for reader-identification was only sectional. His characters are often self-portraits or mouthpieces of the author. They serve as good critical tools for and against the views the writer had in his mind. His plots are not logically and teleologically well-knit, they, however, exhibit the mirror through the reflections of which they came into being. They contain the contemporary social and political background with Disraeli usually playing or prompting the heroes from the back.

While concluding our comments on Disraeli, the novelist, it is to our advantage to refer to the opinions of two critics, Buckle and Edmund Gosse, whose assessments of Disraeli's novels seem to us fairly objective. Buckle is of the view that

>The novels of Disraeli's first period, while he was largely supporting himself by his pen ... would, hardly, interesting as they are, secure for him of themselves a permanent place in literary history.

Buckle adds to say,

>That place is his as the creator, and to some minds, the sole really successful practitioner, of a new genre, the Political Novel.7

According to Gosse, they (Disraeli's novels) are a minor classic of English literature. But in our view, these minor classic of Disraeli lose much of their effect because they deal more with the local and contemporary problems, rather than the human and universal problems. And yet, we can definitely
claim for Disraeli a durable place in the history of the English novels because of his classical contribution of a new genre of politics novels, as Monypenny asserts.
REFERENCE

7. Monypenny and Buckle, op. cit., p. 1445.