Chapter III

NATURE AND SCOPE OF COMEDY AND COMIC SPIRIT

In the first chapter of this thesis, the general structure of Meredith’s attitude towards Man, Society and Nature is discussed. Because Meredith’s conception of the Comic Spirit and his ‘idea of comedy’ are very closely related to his attitude to life. Further it may even be asserted that his ideas of the Comic Spirit and Comedy are the extension of his primary philosophy of Man, Society and Nature. In this chapter before making a detailed analysis of his Essay on Comedy it is necessary to explain the nature and scope of the Comic Spirit.

First of all the word ‘comedy’ stands for Meredith in a completely different way than the use of the same word in normal discussions on literature. Usually the terms ‘comedy’ and ‘tragedy’ are taken as a crude-divide of the conditions of life. Tragedy presents the serious aspect of life whereas comedy presents the lighter one. The aspects of irony, humour, ludicrous and laughter in general are found in comedy and not in tragedy. But Meredith’s term ‘comedy’ does not observe these traditional divisions. In his novels the Comic Spirit is dominant irrespective of the serious and the lighter divide. Even his serious novels like the ‘Tragic Comedians’ display the play of the
Comic Spirit. So while studying Meredith's novel one must bear in mind this comprehensive nature of the Comic Spirit.

Meredith's Comic Spirit also does not stand on the requirement of irony, humour and ludicrous. Humour and irony are no doubt found in his novels, but here humour is not 'hilarious laughter foreseeing one to hold both the sides'. Similarly, irony is highly polished and intellectual. It is stated that the Comic Spirit is just a super mundane spirit with the clearest insight and real, through detached sympathy tolerate the fool by describing him.

Meredith accepts the fact that no one willingly errs, and it is lack of intelligence that causes more trouble in the world. In such cases one should not be angry and furious against such who are not as wise as we. Meredith wants that we only smile gently at their mistakes. So Comic Spirit is that keen sense of the incongruous which wages a truceless war against the unreal presenting itself as the true, the pretence in the guise of reality. The Comic Spirit is not farcical nor humorous nor rollicking. It is the fine perception of the incongruous and it needs a most subtle delicacy. It flourishes rarely, and only in a society of cultivated men and women.
If the term 'humour' includes all varieties of the ludicrous, it can be divided into two types. The primary function of such humour is to make one laugh and the second function is to make one think. Normally, these two types prevail largely separately, and exclusively. But Meredith is a master of the second type i.e. to make us laugh to make us think. More often Meredith makes us smile but inwardly. So in the context of Meredith the terms 'comic' and 'comedy' and 'humour' are addressed to the mind. In the words of J. W. Beach, Meredith's comedy is 'the humour of the mind'. A study of his novel convinces us that he always aims at the thoughtful and fruitful method of comedy whose soul aim is to correct Folly.

It is already stated that in Chapter I that the characters in Meredith's comedy are intelligent, cultivated and urban. Such respectable men and women possess the follies and foibles and cunning vices, which are detrimental to the progress of the society. In Meredith's novels all protagonists have titles of social status. The secret behind this aspect is that the persons of wealth and social status are more prone to follies. Another reason is that the oddity of an eccentric is no lesson to men in society. It is serious characters that are comic. In other writers, eccentric individuals are presented leading to laughter. But Meredith's protagonists make us think about ourselves.
Actually the Comic Spirit is an invisible phenomenon, which creates an atmosphere where a group of characters exhibit their follies. Meredith does not rue or admonish his sentimentalist. For him a mistaken conduct is not a sin. But for him the distinction between the natural and the unnatural, the perception of the discrepancy between the real and the supposed motive, which makes comedy. It is a ‘game of bluff’ played by the actor against himself, his complacent self-deception, his mock sublime. The incongruity, which is the base of ludicrous in general, is found within a Man’s very soul. It is the exposure of the primitive egoist mistaking himself for a social being. We are also taught that our most cherished ideals are often based upon false estimates of value. The object of Comic Spirit is not crime but Folly. It attempts to prune the imagination and with clarifying laughter retains the deluded to a right sense of values. So the Comic Spirit is primarily a corrective method.

As it is already stated that a perfect harmony among the body, mind and the soul is essential for the individual’s healthy growth which alone can contribute to the progress of the society. Every individual can maintain this balance by following the nature’s dictates. The Comic Spirit is a watchdog to identify such imbalanced persons, and by exposure it attempts to bring them back on to the right path. Meredith is
a serious writer with a purpose and he attempts to contribute towards the human progress and human society. This spirit of a reformer is reflected in the prescription of a delicate and subtle device in mending and improving the sentimentalists and egoists. Meredith says, “Estimate your capacity for comic perception by being able to detect the ridicule of them. You laugh, without loving them less”. Meredith’s attitude is primarily humanitarian as his main interest is to assist the evolution in establishing a healthy and progressive society. Many times Meredith’s attitude towards life and art are compared with that of Moliere. This great artist Moliere also was an apostle of nature, in the sense that he isolates the comic types for laughter and mockery because they violate the laws of nature. It is already seen that Meredith also follows the same process. The conception and execution of the method of ludicrous, especially against those who violate the laws of nature are similar in both Moliere and Meredith. His comic philosophy may be summed up in these words, “Try to understand thy self and to understand nature”.

Nature for Meredith is a harmonious combination of Artemis and Aphrodite – Artemis, the provider of exhilarating joys, and Aphrodite the provider of the voluptuous and wholesome pleasures. This is reflected in his views on marriage. For him marriage is not mere social or sexual union of man and woman. It is not the legal or religious aspect
that makes marriage a sacred relation. On the other hand it is the moral obligation, the result of a perfect understanding that makes marriage sacred. Meredith considers sex as an inevitable phase of man’s life. One who abhors it or one who over indulges in it is a criminal. It is the balance, the middle path between the ascetic rocks and the sensual whirlpools, which keeps a man sound and healthy. Only such a man can contribute to the progress of society, which visualises the advent of the perfect species.

Actually, Nature is the whole and sole of the speculative and creative worlds of Meredith. This all-pervasive phenomenon of Nature employs its most effective weapon to correct the man who disobeys her laws. This weapon according to Meredith is the Comic Spirit. Meredith’s character Woodseer says, “Love nature, she makes you Lord of her boundaries, of any tens squares of the earth.” Nature is everywhere the key word of Meredith’s gospel. His singular advise to mankind is to learn to live by Nature. The Comic Spirit presents itself whenever and wherever the Nature and its laws are ignored or neglected by individuals.

The literary form comedy is as old as Aristotle and Aristophanes. But it is important to note that comedy did not receive any special
attention from critics for a theorisation. On the other hand tragedy was dealt with right from Aristotle in detail. Aristotle himself promised to provide a theory of comedy in his ‘Poetics’ but we do not find that promised treatise on Comedy. Even in the later ages, though comedy flourished in Rome in France and in England, very few expositions analysing the nature and the scope of comedy have been written. On this background George Meredith’s full-fledged ‘Essay on Comedy’ is worthy of admiration. Allordyce Nicoll points out that theory of comedy was conspicuously absent in the past, and only recently there have been some attempts at a theory of comedy and adds, “Meredith’s Essay on the Idea of Comedy is very valuable”.

‘The Idea of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit’ was originally delivered as a lecture on 1st February 1877 in “London Institution” and later printed as book. In this essay and in his articles in the Fortnightly Review, Meredith displays remarkable traits of a literary critic. They are full of subtle and sensitive judgement and assessment. A deep study and analysis of his essay on comedy would provide an insight, not only into the literary form comedy, but also into the depth of his critical ability.
Summary of the 'Idea of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit'

Meredith starts his *The Essay on Comedy* by postulating that good comedies are as rare as the flourishing of a comic poet. If the best comedies and the most genuine comic poets are enlisted, the list does not go beyond two figures. The reasons are provided positively and negatively.

First of all a genuine comedy is possible in a society of cultivated men and women, wherein ideas are current, and perceptions quick. Only in such a society, ideas proper to a comedy can be available. It is not enough to have a comic genius to write comedies. Genuine comedies cannot be produced unless the audiences also are equally equipped to divine the subtlety of matter and manner. So the two important conditions necessary for Comedy are, the genuine writer and a knowledgeable audience. Secondly, the sprightliness and a subtle delicacy to touch and kindle the mind to laughter are necessary. According to Meredith such a combination of qualities is very rare and possible once in a millennium. This is the reason why Meredith states that comedy and comic writer are a very rare phenomenon.
Meredith provides one more reason for the rarity of comedy. Normally, audience or readers are provided with laughter. Meredith divides the entertaining writers, providing humour and laughter, into three categories. They are ‘agelasts’ means non-laughers, ‘misogelasts’, means laughter-haters, and thirdly, ‘hyper-gelasts’ means excessive laughers. The writers, who provide works for these three types of audience, are the great enemies of comic writer. In England the agelasts and misogynists are termed as ‘Puritans’. The third variety of ‘hypergelasts’ is called Bacchanalians. Comedy was born in the ancient Greece, in the midst of roaring festivities, patronised mainly by the sons of Wine jar.

In England comedy flourished under the patronage of Charles II, which was called the ‘comedy of manners’. There is no doubt that Restoration comedy was encouraged by the Bacchanalians, of the royal court of Charles II. It was also written mainly to deride the Puritans and provoke derisive laughter. Meredith calls this as a kind of revengeful desire to laugh at the cost of the Roundheads. He calls it as a case beyond Aristophanic example. Such a comedy is worse in as much as a ‘cynical licentiousness is more abominable than frank filth’.
Even the Bacchanalian comedy is not tolerated by critics on the ground that low and mean topics and regulated license of plain speaking are not proper even though they are presented on the festival days of the god of wine. The Restoration comedy like Wycherley’s ‘Country Wife’ presented obnoxious scenes on the stage, and yet the audience sat through them patiently. However, for the English writers and audience theatre has come to mean ‘to prod the Puritan nervous system like a Satanic instrument’ and as if there are no other subjects to be handled or tackled. Meredith states that the word ‘Puritanism’ though contained hateful qualities, sometimes in the past, need not be accepted now.

According to Meredith Comic genius flourishes, somewhere between the ‘agelasts’ and ‘hypergelasts’. The English Comedy of Manners indulges in ‘a hasty transformation of a drowsy country girl into a varnished city Madam’. It is intended primarily as an escape from Dullness. This comedy also has wit, as its whole and soul. Meredith calls this wit as warlike, as if two soldiers fight with their rapiers, sometimes to flash and sometimes to wound. When this brilliant and quick wit, when it is harmless, sounds like an old woman’s slash on the back of a fool. All these types of laughter-plays make the addicted audience, unable to recognise or enjoy a real comedy. Meredith says, “Believe that idle empty laughter is the most desirable recreation and
significant comedy will seem pale and shallow in comparison”. The popular idea of Comedy is to make people laugh, holding the both sides, without understanding anything. That is why an English critic said that the end of a comedy is often a commencement of a tragedy, “were the curtain to rise again on the performers”. The Restoration Comedy, the so-called Comedy of Manners, is according to Meredith, “a Comedy of manners of the South-sea Islanders under city veneer and it is also meaningless, as vacuous as the mask without the face behind it”.

Actually, Charles Lamb was very sorry for the extinction of such artificial comedy of manners. Meredith says, “The sedateness of his feeling, for a cause condemned even in his time to the penitentiary, is a novel affect of ludicrous”.

The age of the Comedy of Manners is probably the proudest achievement of the English, and Meredith in a scathing attack reveals that it is not worthy to be called comedy at all. Of course he grants exception to the charming Millamant and some parts of Goldsmith and some passages of Fielding. He takes realism of these comedies for severe criticism. He concludes, excepting “Congreve’s The Way of the World, there was nothing to keep comedy alive on its own, neither with
all its realism, true portraiture, nor much quotable fun nor idea – neither salt nor soul".4

In spite of writers like Moliere, the French also have bad patches of Comedy. But the French have a strong school of tradition, which enables the French comedy to come on to the great path, when it goes astray. They have a school of ‘stately comedy’. The greatness of this school is that they know men and women more accurately than we do. According to Meredith Moliere and Menander are the only successful writers of comedy. First of all they observed the manners of their age and gave their characters the colour befitting them at the time. Secondly, they did not paint in raw realism. They seized their characters firmly for the central purpose of the play and stamped them in the idea. Whereas the English school of comedy has not clearly imagined the society and of the mind hovering above congregated men and women; it has imagined nothing. But the comedies of Moliere and Menander appealed to the individual mind and perceived and participated in the social. According to Meredith the comedies of Ben Jonson, Massinger and Fletcher are only “of the poet’s personal conception, that have had no model in life, under humorous exaggeration, and happy or otherwise.”5
“The comedy of Ben Jonson is a scholar’s excogitation of the comic; that of Massinger a moralist.” Shakespeare’s comedies are a wellspring of characters which are saturated with a Comic Spirit. Meredith does not assign Shakespeare a place in the world of comedy. The reason is that his characters are from the world of imagination, and creatures of the woods and wilds, not in walled town, not grouped and toned in to perceive a comic exhibition of a narrow world of society. Meredith opines, “Had Shakespeare lived in a later and less emotional, less heroical period of our history, he might have turned to the painting of manners as well as humanity”.

The social context and other influences also are necessary for the flourishing of comedy. Meredith accepts this condition in view of his comments on Shakespeare. In support of his view, Meredith provides another case of the French Comedy during the reign of Louis XIV. He states that political misfortune had come as a boon for the comic poet. During the reign of Louis, the corrupt Royal Court encouraged, “lively quicksilver world of the animalcule fashions, the huge pretensions, the placid absurdities.”

The Royal court also attracted ‘vociferous quacks and snapping dupes, hypocrites ---- rose pink ladies --- high flying mistresses’. Such a
social condition of pretenders and exhibitionists was a fertile field for real comedy. However, such a purely bourgeois circle must be mixed with the middle class for an ideal comedy. Otherwise a comedy emerging out of only bourgeois circle is likely to be ‘inwardly dull though outwardly correct’. Meredith clarifies that the success of Moliere is not the result of the contemporary French court alone but it is also due to his unrivalled studies of mankind in society. Moliere was lucky to have the French bourgeoisie of Paris because they not only understood but also admired Moliere’s plays, with their sufficiently quick wit and educated enlightenment. In the absence of such appreciative and knowledgeable audience, Moliere’s plays would have been, “perilous ventures on the popular intelligence, big vessels to launch on streams too shallow”.10

Moliere’s play *The Misanthropy* was received by the audience very coldly and frigidly. Only when the middle class audience applauded readers started understanding its real message and value. “Cultivated men and women, who do schism the cream of life and attached to the duties, yet escape the harsher blows, make acute and balanced observers.”10 Moliere is the voice of this class. But in England this large middle class is not interested in studying the real inner world of an individual mind. The reason is that they shun and fear
to face the truth, because such a truthful picture is humiliating to them. But they pretend to be proud by closing their eyes to the inward truth. Meredith says that this vast middle class people, live in a hazy atmosphere supposing an ideal one. They enjoy superficial humour and they also approve of satire but they shiver at comedy because comedy includes all of them into a wretched world of ignoble psychological state.

It is interesting that every reader or spectator while witnessing a comedy excludes himself from the type presented therein. Such a reader or a spectator satisfies himself by exclaiming, “Surely I am not so bad”. At the same time these audience are ready to see sound sense. But they do not recognise that what is presented in a comedy is sound sense. This is due to their ignorance or they don’t want to acknowledge. Comedy benefits the cultivated women more because it presented them as equal to men. Logically, if the sound sense is similar to men and women, their level and objective must also be similar. “Comedy is the fountain of sound sense: not the less perfectly sound on account of the sparkle: and comedy lifts women to a station offering them free play for their wit, as they usually show it, when they have it on the side of sound sense.” The higher the comedy, the more prominent the part they enjoy in it."
Such women like Dorine in Molière’s ‘Tartuffe’ or Millamant in Congreve’s ‘The Way of the World’, are considered by men as ‘heartless’. Because the male dominated society prefers ‘the pretty idiot, the passive beauty, the adorable bundle of caprices’. Actually, women are taught to think so. This so-called quality of ‘heartlessness’ of such women is ‘to be clear sighted’ and ‘to be aware of the masculine gimmicks of sentimentalist and the egoist.’ When a woman uses her wits, she appears ‘heartless’ to the sentimentally reared men. Normally, a man thinks of a women as a silent and passive white paper across which he may give his signature, or a wandering vessel crying for a captain or a pilot. But comedy is an exhibition of women’s battle with men and that of men with men. However, the object of both is life. So the gradual similarity of their impression must bring them to some resemblance. Comedy presents men and women coming to this mutual likeness, when they draw together in social life, their minds also grow similarly. Such a presentation of an equal participation of men and women together, hurts the hypocritical audience and spectators.

The taste of such readers and spectators is only in the idle laughter and vulgar realism. Meredith singularises the English reading public as the victims of such taste. He asserts that it is the English comic tradition which is primarily responsible for establishing and encouraging
such tastes. He accepts that England produced rare comic geniuses like Goldsmith, Fielding. But they could not utilise their comic genius to produce comedies. They only succeeded in producing satires, burlesques and didactic and moralising plays. In a similar vein Meredith blames the English writers for imitating the French Comic Spirit and that too in a corrupted fashion. For example, scene v of Act II of the *Misanthrope* was successively and repeatedly imitated by Wycherley, Congreve and Sheridan. They are all clownishly mishandled imitations. However, Meredith makes an exception of Congreve’s the ‘Way of the World’. It is a veritable example of remarkable brilliancy of writing and the character of Millamant. But Meredith asserts that the play has no ‘ideas’ in it. The play contains only stale motives, and the plot is thrust on them as an afterthought. Meredith wants to call this play *The Conquest of a Town* *Coquette* because Millamant is a perfect portrait of a coquette both in her resistance to Mirabell, the manner of her surrender and also in her tongue. Even the conversation is like that of a woolly fencer. Any brilliant repartee, cast for duelling and to shine, must have an adversary. Molière’s wit is completely different from Congreve’s. It is like a running brook and it does not run in search of obstruction to be noisy over them and it is full of meaning, the wit of good breeding, the wit of wisdom. Meredith does not underestimate the brilliant qualities of *The*
Way of the World. He accepts that Millamant is not only admirable, but her manner of speech portrays her also. "The stipulation with her lover in view of marriage, her fine lady's delicacy and fine lady's easy evasions of indelicacy, until she submits to dwindle into a wife, are superbly presented.

In spite of all these virtues and attributes Meredith claims superiority to Moliere's Celimène. She is a woman's mind in movement, assured with an ungovernable wit. She is the active spirit and personifies worldliness. On similar lines Meredith puts the Greek comedy writer Menander on a high pedestal. Meredith opines that the real genius of Menander, is not available to us, as his plays have come through the translations of Terence. Terence forwarded manuscript translations from Greece that suffered shipwreck; he who could have restored the treasure died on the way home. The zealots of Byzantium completed the work of destruction. It is unfortunate that Menander's comedies are not available in their original. Menander and Moliere stand alone especially as comic poets of the feeling and the idea. These two poets idealised upon life, the foundation of their types is real and in the quick, but they painted with spiritual strength which is solid in art.
Meredith also reviews the performance of the comic writers in different countries. He discusses Italian comedy as experimented by Boccaccio and Machiavelli. Comparatively the Spanish stage is richer in comedies. It is generally short in outline and quick in movement. The speciality with Spanish Comedy according to Meredith is its different handling. It exhibits the consequences of separation between men and women. If men and women are separated, they develop affaimados, which means a kind of famine-stricken condition for both. In such a case the results are tragic. Discussing about the German attempts at comedy, Meredith mentions Heine and Lessing. According to him Jean Paul Richter provides the best type of German Comedy. Even Goethe gives a complete and splendid figure of the man, but no more. The German literary laughter is not frequent, and sometimes it is monstrous. It is never a laughter of men and women together. It comes off unrefined abstract fancy, grotesque or grim or gross, like the peculiar humours of their little earthmen. Spiritual laughter they have not yet attained to: Sentimentalism waylays them in the fight.\12

Meredith adds, “Comic Spirit is of itself exclusive of the idea of Comedy and the less freedom allowed to women in German domestic life will account for the absence of Comic dialogues reflecting upon life in that land”.\13
In the Eastern countries like Arabia and Persia, Meredith says, there is no activity of comedy. Fortunately he does not mention India. He explains the absence of comedy in the Eastern nations: "Where the veil is over women’s faces, you cannot have society without which the senses are barbarous and the Comic Spirit is driven to the gutters of grossness to slake its thirst"\(^{14}\)

Meredith’s sincere advice to cultivated women is, "They are blind to their interests in swelling the ranks of the sentimentalists. Let them look with their clearest vision abroad and at home. They will see that where they have no social freedom. Comedy is absent; where they are household drudges, the form of comedy is primitive: where they are tolerably independent, but uncultivated, existing melodrama takes its place and a sentimental version of them. ---- but where women are on the road to an equal footing with men, in attainments and in liberty ---- pure comedy flourishes ------."\(^{15}\)

Meredith discusses the present social scene in relation to the functioning of the comic plays. At present Folly is multiplying into new shapes due to the wealth and leisure and with many whims and fancies. Actually, there is plenty of Common Sense to drive out this Folly. But the Comic Spirit, which is the first-born of Common Sense is not
working in social or public interest. Meredith asserts that Folly is the natural prey of the Comic Spirit. But the Comic Spirit is not ready to destroy Folly. Because it has lost its anger due to some social pressure, or it has become dormant. Actually one cannot blame the inefficiency of or ineffectivity of the Comic Spirit, we have to blame the individual and the social. To eradicate Folly needs a ‘struggle of essence against essence’. Only then Folly can be struck down toward its annihilation. It is the firm conviction of Meredith that Folly cannot be fought by any method except comedy. Folly is clever, cunning and attractive. It changes its shapes and discovers its own devices to spread invisibly into individual conscience. It is unfortunate that comedy is not administered to remove the poison of Folly. Meredith wails yearningly, “Oh for a breath of Aristophanes, Rabelais, Voltaire, Cervantes, Fielding, Moliere!”

Meredith argues that jokers, humorists, satirists, and ironists are plenty to provide laughter but they cannot perform the duty of the Comic poet, and to drive out Folly. Because comedy differs from every other form related to laughter. Meredith provides a clinical description to show the differences between the Comic and other forms related to laughter. Primarily, if anybody wants to test his capacity for comic perception Meredith prescribes two devices ---when you discover a
ridiculous defect in a person you love, your love for him is not lessened. The second test is when you see yourself ridiculous in their eyes, if you accept the correction proposed by their image. If you pass these two tests, then you are capable of comic perception.

If you detect ridiculous defect, in your loved ones, your relation with that person is chilled by that defect, you are slipping into the grasp of satire. After detecting the defect, if you prefer to sting him under a semi-caress, which makes him doubt whether he is hurt in any way, it is irony.

After detecting the defect if you laugh all round him, tumble him, roll him about and drop a tear on him, pity him as much as you expose, it is the spirit of humour.

The comic perception has all these powers of laughter but it is not to be confused with them. To make it more clear the satirist is a social scavenger working on storage of bile. Irony is the humour of satire, and it works according to the caprice of the writer, it may be savage as in Swift, or sedate as in Gibbon. The humorist provides refreshing laughter, presenting contrast. Meredith provides example of Fielding’s ‘Jonathan Wild’ that presents a peculiar case, amounting to a villain’s ratiocination. It may appear to be humour but after reflection it erases to
be comic and will be satiric. But Fielding's attitude toward Richardson is essentially comic. Byron had powers of humour but he fuses it at times with hard irony. But Byron cannot be a Comic poet due to his anti-social position. In Don Quixote heart and mind laugh together.

The ideal of the comic spirit for Meredith is of course Aristophanes "The Comic poet is in the narrow field, or enclosed square, of the society he depicts; he addresses the still narrower enclosures of men's intellects, with reference to the operation of the social world upon their characters."[16] To understand such work one must have a sober liking of his kind and also a sober estimate of our civilized politics. He asserts that good human relations and civilisation of love can admire and evaluate the Comic Spirit. For example, poverty is never ridiculous to comic perception until it attempts to make its rags conceal its bareness, in a forlorn attempt at decency. When there is a grotesque or a ludicrous situation, humour, satire and irony pounce on it all together as their common prey. But "the Comic Spirit eyes it but does not touch it. The laughter of comedy is impersonal and of unrivalled politeness, nearer a smile; often no more than a smile. If laughs through the mind, for the mind directs it and it might be called the humour of the mind"[17]
Meredith enlightens us when he says the taste of true comedy is to awaken thoughtful laughter. The Comic Spirit is not only the product of civilisation, but it is the sustenance of civilisation. In a famous and oft quoted passage Meredith declares the inseparable relationship between comedy and civilisation;

“If you believe that our civilisation is founded in commonsense (and it is the first condition of sanity to believe it), you will, when contemplating men discern a spirit overhead;…. It has sage’s brows and sunny malice of a faun at the corners of the half-closed lips drawn in an idle weariness of half-tension---- The laugh will come again, but it will be of the order of smile---- Man’s future upon earth does not attract it; their honesty and shapeliness in the present does.”

And whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate: whenever it seize them self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration of one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; or false humility or mind with conceit, individually
or in the bulk – the Spirit overhead will look humanely, malign and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit.” If anybody cannot recognise it, he is completely blind to the spiritual aspect of life. It also amounts to deny the existence of mind of man.

In a perfectly classical peroration, Meredith rises to a lyrical harangue, to impress upon the listeners and readers regarding the basic function and essential quality of the Comic Spirit. With an amazing logic, Meredith explains the sharp-edged differences of the Comic spirit with the other forms of literature. The spiritual and ethereal shape of the Comic Spirit that seems abstract and nebulous, Meredith presents in a most concrete fashion with the help of marvellous metaphors and imagery. The best and the most important function of the Comic spirit is its social function. He says, “A perception of the Comic Spirit gives high fellowship. You become a citizen of the selected world.” Meredith also warns us about the perverse affects of laughter, and he asserts that the laughter directed by the Comic Spirit is not only harmless but also conducive to sobriety in the degree that it enliven. Such treasuries of sparking laughter are wells in our deserts. Sensitiveness to the comic laugh is a step in civilisation. The treasure of world literature does not miss it completely though it appears very rarely. According to Meredith
Aristophanes and Moliere are the greatest of the Comic poets, one representing the ancient and the other modern. Between them appear Shakespeare and Cervantes. Lastly, Meredith exhorts not only the readers and spectators but also writers of England and other countries to concentrate and reflect on the Comic Spirit. It definitely helps the readers to become ideal citizens, and the writers into responsible teachers of noble ideas. This is a tentative summary of the lecture.

After the Lecture Meredith informed to Morley in his letter on February 1st, 1877:

“All went well. Morison in one of his enthusiasms—which makes one remember that one has word praise. Audience very attentive and indulgent. Time 1 h. 25 min. and no one left the hall, so that I may imagine there was interest in the lecture. Pace moderate; but Morison thinks I was intelligible chiefly by the distinctness of articulation”.

Bernard Shaw reviewed the ‘Essay’ in The Saturday Review and found it ‘an excellent, even superfine, essay by perhaps the highest living English authority on its subject’. Taking this opportunity, gave the Philistine Englishman a bit of his mind. Meredith, he said, knew more about plays than playgoers. He had suggested that the English
public had the basis of the comedic spirit in them – an esteem for common sense.

"But I must tell Mr. Meredith that they are everywhere united and made strong by the bond of their common nonsense, their invincible determination to tell and be told lies about everything, and their power of dealing acquisitively and successfully with facts while keeping them rigidly in their proper place: that is, outside the moral consciousness. The Englishman is successful because he values money and social precedence more than anything else, especially more than fine art, his attitude toward which, culture-affectation apart, is one of half diffident, half contemptuous curiosity, and of course more than clear-headedness, spiritual insight, truth, justice, and so forth. It is this unscrupulousness and singleness of purpose that constitutes the Englishman’s pre-eminent ‘common sense’; and this sort of common sense, I submit to Mr. Meredith, is not only not ‘the basis of the comic’, but actually makes comedy impossible, because it would not seem like common-sense at all if it were not self-satisfiedly unconscious of its moral and intellectual bluntness, whereas the function of comedy is to dispel such unconsciousness by turning the search-light of the keenest moral and intellectual analysis right on to it".
William Archer stated that *An Essay on Comedy* may without hesitation be set down as one of the subtlest, wittiest, and most luminous pieces of criticism in the English language'. The relevance of this 'Essay' to the present, need not be exaggerated. However the derogatory remarks made by a reviewer in *The New Statesman*, may be quoted:

'.... as for the exposition of the uses of the comic spirit with which Meredith supported his claims, this arrant sophism can only be his ironical concession to the times .... The intellectualist method of Meredith was old fashioned enough to assume both the essential normality and the permanence of this civilisation now fluttering autumnal down, and so to reduce comedy to a quasi-logical repudiation of whatever was inconsistent with this normality and this permanence. To-day, from wealth of experience, not of wisdom, we see that assumption as itself stuff for comedy'.

G. M. Trevelyan’s comment is subtle. He says that the Comic Spirit, “believes in progress and evolution, but it knows the limits to the possible pace of advance. Those who would have the world stand still, and those who would have us fly through the air to Utopia, are both victims of its gentle shafts”.

“These are the children of the heart untaught
By thy quick founts to beat abroad, by thee
Untamed to tone its passions under thought,
The rich humaneness readings is thy fun.”

Meredith also stresses that Earth is never misread by brain.

“Her children of the labouring brain,
These are the champions of the race,
True parents, and the sole humane,
With understanding for their base”.

Meredith condemned the contemporary practice of realism in fiction. Realism as practised and reflected in the Victorian fiction aimed at exposure of the filth of the surrounding society. Besides the didactic motives of the Victorian fiction were not to Meredith’s taste. Cazamian says, “Any systematic intention of realism is foreign to his (Meredith’s) temperament; he feels against that artistic method a repugnance which he has more than once expressed”. Walter Wright pointed out that Meredith never “wanted literature to be the housemaid drudge of democratic reform. On the other hand he would have let the impish Comic Spirit set up a hum of laughter around his ears. Such laughter would not revolutionise the social order and admittedly it would be heard by a few”. It must be stated that comedy is, according to
Meredith, "no servile handmaiden nor yet a beadle with a whip or a club to scourge sinners self-righteously from the towns end". It is also very interesting to know that Meredith never put comedy and tragedy in two watertight compartments. He imagined comedy and tragedy as contiguous kingdoms, and Meredith's tragic comedians move in an area imprecisely defined. He said,

"In tragic life, God wot
No villain need be! Passions spin the plot,
We are betrayed by what is false within."

It is a fact if what is false within brings tragic disaster, the falseness may still be comic. Meredith observed that the "The Nineteenth Century English aristocracy tended to be feudal in sentiment, lethargic or resistant to political reform, and as feudal as possible in economic practices." Such a society Meredith found to be a fertile field for the Comic Spirit to work. "The comic poet is in the narrow field, or enclosed square of the society he depicts; and he addresses the still narrower enclosure of men's intellects, with reference to the operation of the social world upon their characters. He is not concerned with beginnings or endings or surroundings, but with what you are now weaving." It is not an easy job for the Comic artist to make the balance between the low satiric humour for the unintelligent and the subtle smile
of intellectual sage for the highly civilised. Jan B. Gordon aptly said: “George Meredith’s famous essay on the role of comedy in civilisation is actually a utopian document in so far as it envisions a kingdom ruled by the Comic. It is a realm where proper perception of the Comic Spirit gives high fellowship, where one becomes a citizen of ‘the selected world’. As in most utopias, there are certain general conditions for election: equality of the sexes, at least a moderate degree of intellectual activity, and the avoidance of heavy moralising. In this peculiar covenant, the fulfilment of all these conditions means that “you will, in fact, be standing in that peculiar oblique beam of light, yourself illuminated to the general eye as the very object of chase and doomed quarry of the thing obscure to you”.

It is acknowledged that Meredith’s comedy is not for every one, as “it emphasises the value of a refined ideal of artificial culture”. In the words of Jack Lindsay, “The Comic Spirit is not narrowly partisan, enslaved to some particular personal or class-interest; but is profoundly partisan in its enthusiasm for life, for more life and better life. By its very nature it is linked with a humanistic view of progress into ever greater universality and freedom through the mastery over nature and the political extension of equality and brotherhood.”
George Meredith was more inclined towards the Greek comedy writer Menander rather than Aristophanes. Because George Meredith conceived comedy not as a satire as Aristophanes and some of the neo-classical writers did. It is not social decadence, it is not even the individual deformity that is exposed for laughter, as it is done by many writers of comedy. Meredith’s main idea was to make a person with deformity or discrepancy to look into his own self and to come out of that state, so that he can lead a happy life. Meredith’s conception of comedy is more intimately connected with Darwin’s theory of Evolution.

Meredith finds English literature rich in comic elements but poor in number of comedies. The primary fight of a Comic poet is stated as ‘subtle delicacy’. ‘He must be subtle to penetrate.’ His foes are Puritanical non-laughers, Bacchanalian excessive laughers, and sentimentalists.

‘The laugh of men and women in concert’ is essential to pure comedy, due to the inferior position of women in German society. Germany has not yet attained spiritual laughter. It is completely impossible in such an eastern culture as the Arabian, which thought ‘intensely susceptible to laughter’, keeps women behind the veil; ‘the
comic Muse’ is one of the best friends of cultivated women. Lady Butcher in her “Memories of George Meredith” writes: “He deprecated sarcasm and irony in dealing with enthusiastic feminine natures, but, as always, he commended laughter as the most splendid corrective to complacency”.25

The Comic Spirit is needed to offset Folly, to correct Dullness, and to throw light on public affairs. Meredith maintains that Folly takes many ‘shapes in a society possessed of wealth and leisure’. Plain common sense without the Comic Spirit is too angry, contempt too inhumane. Dullness and boredom can only be banished by the Comic Spirit, which blows away the ‘vapours of unreason and sentimentalism’. Meredith argues that the spirit of Aristophanes is needed in England’s public affairs, and he gives an excellent sketch of the Greek poet’s relationship with the public life of Athens.

The English ‘have the basis of the comic in them – an esteem for common sense’; even so, they lack the Comic Spirit, perhaps because they are not yet used to living in society, a point that Meredith illustrates by a number of anecdotes. Although he names Fielding, Goldsmith, Jane Austen, and John Galt as delightful comic writers in prose, he contends that the English genius in general tends to satire and humour.
A young author must resolutely purpose comedy if he wishes to become an apostle of Earth. The more so that comedy, being not confined exclusively to the theatre, yields itself with considerable facility to the narrative form. Is not Meredith’s ‘The Egoist’ a model of “comedy in narrative”? But, then, all Meredith’s novels are, more or less, comedies in narrative form. The author did not run the risk of taking false step, having determined upon elucidating, before writing, the conditions of the existence of comedy.

Meredith’s contribution to the theory of comedy is that he extends the list of the qualitative benefits of the comedy. He describes anew the quality of comic laughter, gives deplorable examples of what happens to men when the comic idea is absent. He also insists on the necessity of talking about women as equals, and explains the advantages of enclosing the Comic idea in the dramatic form.

While asserting the importance of comedy, Meredith discusses the social conditions of many uncivilised countries, and concludes that where there is no freedom for woman in the society, comedy cannot exist. That is why Meredith’s conception of comedy goes beyond the demands of a literary form. It actually touches the very fibre of human life in relation to the surrounding society. According to him emotion
intellect and the spirit, are the three manifestations of body, mind and soul. The fulfilment of the demands made by body, according to Meredith should naturally lead to the next stage i.e. fulfilment of the mind, and similarly the fulfilment of the demands made by the mind should lead to the fulfilment of the demands made by the soul. According to him this is the ideal state for a man’s life. If this particular movement or flow is marred due to some discrepancy, which is invariably due to the individual ego, man’s life sinks either into sentiments or into disorder. So the major achievement of George Meredith in his essay on comedy is to project comedy as a corrective instrument.

The Comic Spirit exposes the egoism and corrects it by exposure. Meredith conceives egoism as a manifestation of inherent selfishness. He says, “The Egoist is our fountainhead, primeval man: the primitive is born again, the elemental reconstituted”. The civilised egoist is also, according to Meredith, the sentimentalist. Egoism dwells in the contemplation of itself and it is blind to its own limitations. Meredith describes sentimentalist, as one who “seeks to enjoy without incurring the Immense Debtorship for a thing done”. Meredith attempted to lay bare not only the actions but also the motives of the egoist. The sentimental egoist is a man who is false to nature but also to himself.
The important aim is to unmask the selfishness of the egoist and the sentimentalist, and to make them weep over their frailties. From a moral point of view Meredith conceives sentimentalism, as a form of mock sentiment developed largely to excuse a view of life, which we know to be morally untenable. In this attempt, the Comic Spirit is an effective instrument.

Comedy according to Meredith is only possible where the minds of all the actors are in a state of equal and rather distinct cultivation. "The drawing room is the home of the Comic Spirit". A society of cultivated men and women is required wherein ideas are current and the perceptions quick, that he (the comic writer) may be supplied with matter and an audience. "The Comic which is the perceptive is the governing spirit, awakening and giving aim to those powers of laughter but it is not to be confounded with them: it enfolds a thinner form of them differing from satire, in not sharply driving into the quivering sensibility and from humour in not comforting them and tucking them up, or indicating a broader than the range of this buzzing world to them".

Merely exciting laughter is not the function of the Comic Spirit. There is nothing buffoon-like in its nature, as it is no more jocular than
is common sense. Sometimes only, if it compares our conduct with that which should take place in a society better adapted to its functions, it notices the deviation. And then, constrained to administer punishment immediately, in order to safeguard the indefeasible rights of Earth, the Comic Spirit makes use of its weapon: it smiles. And the artist smiles also when he notices this deviation.

But, on the contrary, “whoever laughs at all things misunderstand the comic in comedy.” To study the Comic Spirit is not to study the smile, but much more, a special smile: the smile fine, subtle, grave, mysterious, which is prolonged into a thought; the peculiar smile of Leonardo da Vinci...^{28}

It is stated that comedy is the view that the still and penetrative observer obtains from the observations from a very high and vantage point. Actually the sense of comedy is detachment from the object and the scene. Meredith says in his ‘Essay on Comedy’. “The laughter of comedy is impersonal and of unrivalled politeness, nearer a smile: often no more than a smile, it laughs through the mind, for the mind directs it; and it might be called the humour of the mind”. R. H. P. Curle comments, “It is the smile that dies into a thought.”
Meredith says, “To laugh at everything is to have no appreciation of the comic of comedy.” Actually, even tragedy might be comic but hilarity probably would not be. Comedy is the science of discovering the heart of society as represented by the individuals that form it. As R. H. P. Curle summed up, “The Comic Spirit is one of the weapons of sanity. It keeps before our eyes the sense of proportion, and shows us the path of common sense.”

The speciality of Meredith’s conception of comedy is no doubt closely related to the civilisation and social progress. At the same time it also is closely directed at the individuals who are either egoists or sentimentalists. This conception is evolved from Meredith’s concern for a harmonious blending of blood, brain and spirit in an individual. Sanity is the result of the balance among these three, and any imbalance would lead one towards egoism or sentimentalism. Under such circumstances, Meredith feels that the Comic Spirit alone shall bring the harmonious balance in an individual.

Meredith’s ‘An Essay on Comedy’ is a clearly laid down document in which the spirit of all his novels is permeated. It also is a document which opens up his conception of comedy, which is the fundamental tenet of the philosophy of the Comic Spirit. First of all
Meredith fruitfully distinguished comedy from satire with its direct moral aim. Similarly, he asserts this difference between irony and satire too. It is the part played by humour which makes irony an instrument of comedy. 'The Essay' reviews the literary form comedy right from Aristophanes onwards.

REALISM AND THE COMIC SPIRIT

It is also true that Meredith's conception of comedy and the comic spirit is not completely grasped without a detailed knowledge of his idea of 'realism'. While reading his 'Essay', one comes across as many as eight references made to 'realism'. Whenever Meredith speaks of the derogatory nature of a piece of literature, he uses the term 'realism'.

For example, Charles Lamb's praise of the 'fictitious half-believed personages' in the Restoration Comedy and the consequent grief of them appearing as 'uncaressable as puppets', according to Meredith is due to 'realism'. Molière observed the manners of his age and gave his characters the colour befitting at the time. Molière also depicted his characters firmly for the central purpose of the play to make them permanently human. He achieved because he did not paint them in 'raw realism'. Wycherley's coarse adaptation of Molière's the
'Misanthrope' in the 'Country Wife', "is stuffed with lumps of realism in a vulgarised theme to hit the mark of English appetite, that we have in it the key-note of the Comedy of our stage." This was the unfortunate tradition of the English comedy. In Moliere's play, the moral does not hang like a tail, nor "preach from one character incessantly cocking an eye at audience, as in recent realistic French Plays: " Congreve's Millamant, in wit, is no rival of Moliere's Celimene. What Millamant "utters adds to her personal witchery, and is not further memorable...... Millamant side by side with Celimene is an example of how far the realistic painting of a character can be carried to win our favour, and where it falls short. Celimene is a woman's mind in movement, armed with ungodernable wit; with perspicacious clear eyes for the world, and is most home in it." There is no ambiguity in the passage as to who is better and why. Celimene is superior to Millamant and Millamant's inferiority is due to the realistic method. Meredith talks about the spiritual strength of Menander and Moliere, and these two comic poets 'idealized up on life; and the foundation of their types is real and in the quick, but they painted with spiritual strength, which is the Solid in Art'. Meredith adds, "The idealistic conceptions of Comedy give breadth and opportunities of daring to Comic genius, and helps to solve the difficulties it creates". Now he concludes, "There we feel the power of
the poet's creation; and in the sharp light of that sudden turn the humanity is livelier than any realistic work can make it". Here it is implicit that the realistic method is deficient and defective in comparison to the idealistic method as it is also suggested that the idealistic method is conducive to the Comedy and the Comic Spirit.

Lastly Meredith states: "A consequence of this crude, though well-meant, realism is the collision of the writers in their scenes and incidents and in their characters". This art of the writers is 'Aventuriere', that scatters mica particles on a quartz, a shimmering or spangled of shining pieces on a waste land. Though a writer has all virtues, by adopting the 'realistic method, he cannot produce a hero. The life he presents 'leaves his audience to the reflections of un-philosophic minds'. The culling up of these reference from 'Essay' is to show that Meredith has an apathy for this word. Some times he appears to be recommending it if it is 'higher realism' or 'realism with an idea' or 'realism stemming up from philosophic base'. Hence it is desirable to probe deep in to Meredith's sense of the 'realism'.

Now 'Realism', is a notoriously slippery term. It was not so in its original invention and application. At that time, in the early eighteenth century, it was a very positive and distinguishable term to mean
'representing reality'. It also may be stated that, for one who is not a specialist, the term even now, in general, means something like the same. 'Realism' and 'Realistic fiction' have become complicated probably in the eighteenth century, especially when the intellectuals and materialistic philosophers put forward a new conception of reality. This new thought abandoned the idea that art should show truth to nature. Instead they considered realism as an attempt to establish the nature of truth. These two usages 'truth to nature' and 'nature of truth' sum up the whole controversy regarding 'realism'. The idea 'truth to nature' suggests that making experience conform to some authoritative and arbitrary patterns derived from philosophy or theology. While 'nature of truth' may mean to find truth within one's experience. Here it is not necessary to journey in to the fields of philosophy and epistemology. At present our interest is about the relationship of the abstract idea of Realism as a certain relationship between Reality and literature. Secondly the abstract idea of Reality as it underwent its meaning under the influence of the historically changing trends of philosophy and theology.

The Romantic age revolted against the eighteenth century materialism and idealism, due to its fragmentation of the physical and the spiritual. The Romantics believed in the essential unity of the mind
and spirit and evolved the organic conception of experience in which the artist unified the disparate elements of an experience and brought together his self-perception with his perception of the material world. The new conception the Romantic imagination taught the apprehension of the experience as the total reality and as an undivided whole. Besides this, the Romantic artist was more engaged in the past or the primitive stage or the unseen golden age. As an organic whole, a work of art was seen as a reflection of reality, whose meaning was emanated from its texture and structure. As a product of imagination, a work of art was embodied in itself the principles and proportion implicit in experience itself. Consequently it claimed to be free of externally derived criteria and to shake off intrusive moral questions and to express its meaning through its structure.

The new concept of the Romantic imagination demanded a new aesthetic, a new set of principles of criticism, but in England, the progress of such criticism was too slow. As a result the romantic concept of reality remained aloof, while the practice of realism continued in the old assumption that all works of art should comply with externally derived rules. This contradiction is clearly visible on two occasions. The nineteenth century realist fiction, though a form of Romantic art, emphasises on the reproduction of external conditions of life and the
material laws. While the mid-Victorianism trusted the organic conceptions, their practice was free and individual. The Victorians were sentimentalists and at the same time they attacked the subjectivism. They saw simple emotional needs of mankind as the only medium of self-fulfilment, and they stressed the sympathetic emotions as the basis of morality, which was very important to them. This was a convenient way to integrate emotional and spiritual elements of his own nature and also to conform to the social laws. Like the Romantic, the Victorians doubted the validity of analytical and rational spirit, and they also accepted as a necessary qualification of the condition for the understanding of the individual’s place in the universe. “Their aesthetic ideas were also fundamentally Romantic, though they tended to replace the imagination by the sympathetic emotion of the artist, which enables him to detect the spiritual elements in human character.”

For the mid-Victorian novelist, the basic element is that human life is unified and coherent. Here is a point that the present study has to note very carefully, because Meredith is involved completely in this process. The English and the French accepted this basic principle that human life is unified and coherent. But the French turned to the aesthetic principles of organism, but rejected the social and moral implications. As Ioan Williams says, “Realism in France had emerged an anti-
Romantic mode, opposed to the idealization and heightening of experience, which was felt to be characteristic of French Romantic literature. In reaction, the French realists emphasised man’s subjection to material laws and tended to represent morbid states of mind and repressive aspects of social experience. These tendencies, increasing Victorian suspicion of the French as unstable and amoral, gave the idea of Realism derogatory associations in England, which it took some decades to shake off. This led to the Victorian conception of Realism as ‘to represent material conditions and laws or unpleasant aspects of experience. Those who differed with this definition, searched for a separate term ‘idealism’. The irony is that no Victorian writer claimed this openly, and the critics insisted that compromise between these two terms ‘Realism’ and ‘Idealism’ was the need of the time. The Victorian novelists successfully aimed at the reconciliation of disparate elements of experience, which has moral and aesthetic implications. Besides they also believed that this reconciliation was to be obtained by representing the different aspects of the individual and social experiences with the material conditions of life. These ideas, together with the moral and philosophical value placed on the process of chastening and adjustment, made up a firm and flexible framework within which they produced their novels.
Meredith's Victor Radnor says, "If I read fiction, let it be fiction....I can't read dull analytical stuff or 'stylists' when I want action". By analysis, Meredith does not mean introspection or naturalistic detail. He wants the realistic power to relate action to the consciousness, of its social implications, which involves showing people how people really act, not how they think they act. Meredith's anti-bourgeois position leads him in quest of a new realism able to grasp simultaneously the inner and outer world, the individual and society and to show the struggles going on between the united opposites. Actually in "Diana of the Crossways" Meredith provides the difference between the old and new style of description. Some critics felt that Meredith turned from the external to the internal qualities. Actually Meredith supplants the mere description of either, with the definition of impact. That is why when Meredith talks about Realism, he is not intending the mere externalised narration. Meredith gave a sub-title 'Realistic Story' to his "The House on the Beach", the reviewer's comment is very significant. The review said, "Unluckily realism in the higher sense, is absolute fidelity to nature and to probability, is not with Mr. Meredith's province". The reviewer mistook Realism to the Naturalism. For Meredith 'Realistic' meant "If a sagacious impulse directs them to discountenance realistic tales, the realistic tale should justify its
appearance by the discovery of an apology for the tormented souls”.
(The House on the Beach). So Meredith’s Realism is not a transcript of
Naturalism. It covers both, the full realistic grasp and natural fidelity.
Here Meredith does not clearly state his absolute option between realism
and naturalism and even idealism. He still seems to reject ‘realism’
itself, but is ready to accept it with some adjectives like ‘good’
‘philosophical’. There are reasons for this ambivalence.

The vast and equally successful fictional out-put of the mid-
Victorian age was still based on ‘realism’ in the traditional sense in
theory and practice. All the novelists and critics were drawn to it, in
spite of their initial distaste and suspicion. Similarly though they
attacked the idea that Reality must be established in the world of
conventional physical perception, the mid-Victorian fiction was based
on a naïve confidence that Reality consisted in the material and social
world around them. That is why their novels were surely and firmly
based on Reality, though it is difficult to define it. Even if it is not
identified with matter itself, it certainly lay in the material world. Their
characterisation justifies that the individual accepts the Reality which
lies outside himself and reconciles himself to it, for a better personal
morality. This vast corpus of fiction justifies itself by the variety of
human representation and the unprecedented physical, social and
psychological detail and the immense delight and satisfaction provided to the reading public. This is the background that Meredith’s severe criticism of the Realism has to be studied and understood.

For Meredith, the conception of Realism is secondary, because his primary goal is the society and primary objective is Man. He accepted natural evolution, and his extension of its principles in to three-fold hierarchy of physical, mental and spiritual attainment. The spirit of evolution of nature is reflected in his attitude to life, man, society and literature.

Meredith’s objections to realism may be summed up. First of all, Meredith considered the sentimental romances were not permanent and they die down after providing a temporary delight. Such literature spoils the taste of the young generations which is not desirable in a progressive society. Similarly, the writers, presenting the “Real life” have provided “Gross Realism”.

Many critics have attributed personal reasons, for Meredith’s dislike for realism. Meredith’s novels never had popular success, and they were also financial losses. Contrary to this, novels of cheap entertainment, brought money to their authors. This might have made Meredith jealous of such authors. He stated that, such crude realism is a
sure path for popularity and also financial profits. Whether this argument is correct or not is very difficult to prove. However, Meredith’s condemnation of realism was absolutely sincere even if it costed him unpopularity.

Meredith was a highly polished gentleman with sophisticated social manners and personal ethics. He was never a man of lax morals. Naturally, he could not bear the physical frankness of some ‘Realistic Books’. On one occasion, Meredith apologised, to the young maids for his offence in the enchantress’ scene in the *Ordeal of Richard Feverel*. He was very angry with a French novel written by Mendes. He commented on this book “who reads must smell putrid for a month …… It the monsterisation of Zolaism.” So Meredith’s hatred for realism is due to this naked exhibition of obscenity. He was sure that in the name of Realism, the contemporary fiction promoted a low and mean narration of physical nature and even sex.

However, a stronger reason for Meredith’s objection to Realism is based on a philosophical attitude. The sentimentalists were not able to attain the spiritual through delicate refinement of their sense, so also the realists failed by indulging in too much of physical and fleshy game. According to him, in this aspect, the sentimentalists are worse sinners
than the Gross realists. These realists, obsessed with the physical, cannot see beyond at the sphere of mind and spirit. The 'Rose-pink' of sentimentalism and the 'Dirty-Drab' of pure realism are equally futile as art. Meredith also rejects realism because it has no connection with the idea, and the philosophy. Realism is a more exhibition of outer man and little of man's inner nature. It is a failure because it stops short of the body and would not progress towards the mind and the spirit. It is not very important to see whether Meredith's criticism of realism is valid or not. It is enough that he based his criticism on some principles of his own philosophy. It is also a fact that objections to realism were completely concordant with those principles. In fact, his criticism of the Realists school, exhibits many limitations and drawbacks. But his criticism is justified and also valid from one angle and that is his suggestion of the Comic Spirit as an alternative method in literature. That is why, the relationship between the theory of evaluation and the method of literature, has to be considered.

Although evolution has little to do with the idea of comedy itself, it does have an immediate purpose for which the Comic Spirit operates. Men must live naturally and vigorously with sane and harmonious exercise of the elements of blood and brain and spirit, to escape the strictures of the Comic Spirit. Comedy, the literary agent of the Comic
Spirit, becomes the chief instrument, by which social advance can be attained. This social advance is inseparably connected with the implications of evolutionary progress. So, the Comic Spirit is the ultimate civiliser and progress is the by-product of laughter. In this way, the Comic Spirit has become an important adjunct to Meredith's evolutionary scheme. There seems a contradiction, when Meredith expounds the actual working of the Comic Spirit. According to the evolutions, progress involves all. But the Comic Spirit operates only in a narrow circle of the highly civilised men and women. The contradiction may be remotely defended on the base of the concept of the 'Survival of the Fittest'. But whoever is involved in the evolutionary progress, struggle is there and the evolutionary forces are no less real. Meredith's enclosed sphere of Comedy may be narrow, may be deep, but the Comic Spirit and the evolutionary philosophy are organically united.

After *The Egoist* Meredith's conception of the Comic Spirit as a literary method had been established. The Comic Spirit is the emanation of earth and therefore it is endowed with sanity, clear vision, inborn purity and sympathy with the final purpose of the earth. Both Comedy and Earth have sanity and clear vision; the standards accepted by Comedy are those created by the Earth. Meredith calls this 'Sword of
Common Sense'. The standards of Comedy are those of Earth because since first mind began to be formed from the virgin blood, the Comic Spirit has helped in man's advance and prevented his reversion to the old animal nature. This idea is elaborated in his poem *Ode to the Comic Spirit* as follows:

Once lion of our desert's trodden weeds;
And but for thy straight finger at the yoke,
Again to be lordly paw,
Naming his appetites his needs,
Behind a decorative cloak:
Thou, of the highest, the unwritten law
We read upon the building's architrane.
In the mind's firmament, by men upraised.
By sweat of blood when they had quitted cave
For fellowship, and reward cooked amazed,
Where the prime motive gapes a bird jaw
There, soul of wakened heads, art armed to warn,
Restrain, lest we backslide on whence we sprang,
Pearce better than our dwarf beginning shoot,
Of weary gathered pearl and blossom shorn;

One of the principal means by which civilised man could ensure the development of the individual and society along the right lines, was comedy. It is a spirit. For Meredith art was primarily important by which man could understand the whole of life. It embodies not only
material law, but also the emotional aspect of experience. Meredith
dstates that “the tendency of art is to excellence and that of the spirit to
idealism”. According to him art without philosophy becomes the
pasture of idiots. Philosophy in fiction is a means of clothing the
skeleton of truth with solid flesh ‘Humanly Shapely’. Meredith’s ideal
fiction is, “Representation of process of growth and development in
individuals, and incorporation of an overall criticism of life as a whole”.
In his work, as the very fundamental principle of his thought Meredith
sought for meaningfulness, unity, and coherence. He also sought and
reconciliation between nature and law, circumstance and freedom.

While writing The Egoist, Meredith had consolidated the idea and
also the image of the Comic Spirit. The perfect blending of theoretical
explanation of the essence of the Comic Spirit with a dexterous
execution of the same into fictional technique, is successfully achieved.
In the Prelude he provides a clear plan, but here it is only suggested.
But when he had come to write The Diana of the Crossways, Meredith
was perfectly sure and even more clear about his ideas and their
execution about the Comic Spirit. “Then, ah!... as well as exhibiting the
outer” 38 Diana of the Crossways. In this passage Meredith asserts the
ideological difference between realism and the Comic Spirit. But he
also warns the danger of pursuing the wrong principle and technique. He states, “If in any branch of us … if you do not open to philosophy” 39

But at the same time Meredith’s theory of the Comic Spirit exhibits a comparatively, compromising stand and not any extremity. It is clear that he maintains equal distance with realism and naturalism. For Meredith naturalism is more coloured with sentimentalism. So he hates and abhors it. As a result it appears that he would accept realism on some conditions. This is clearly indicated in his Essay on Comedy.

Meredith does not stop short of a mere explanation. He comes out with an objective correlative for the Comic Spirit with a literary technique. The Egoist is the first and also the best example for this literary technique. Of course he based this literary technique on the works of Moliere and Minander. This process of transforming the Comic Spirit into literary technique is very crucial to follow and to understand. For example he describes realism, at its worst as a correction of the flimsy to which our literature has a constant tendency to recur. He elaborates that even the lowest type of realism appears to be more instructive and useful than Byronics. At the same time this type of realism in spite of this didactic quality is “smell of mud in the nostrils”. Here a clear relationship between the abstract idea of realism
and the actual idea of realism and the actual piece of literature are presented as an illustration. The other example is from Colney’s Comedies in ‘One of Our Conquerors’. He refers to “the custom of our period (called the Realistic) to create when causal opportunity offers a belief in the narrative by promoting nausea in the audience.” Here also the abstract idea of realism is described concretely in terms of the technique of narration. Similarly, Meredith describes the abstract idea of naturalism in terms of literary device. This is to give the necessary pleasure to the audience impatient for blood and glory. Even the terms ‘rosepink’ and ‘dirty drab’ are synonyms for naturalism and sentimentalism. Actually, Naturalism is the result of the revolt against Realism. “Naturalism with its excesses, is thus the retort to the bourgeois-lie. But the situation cannot be left at that kind of negative revolt, which reverses but does not transform values and is thus the last resort as alienated as the prettifications.”

Under such circumstances Meredith prefers realism conditionally.

“Worse than the alternative dirty-drab, you are recurring rosepink is rebuked by hideous revelations of the filthy foul; for Nature will force her way and if you try to stifle her by drowning, she come up, not the fairest part of her uppermost peruse your Realist – really you are castigators for not having yet embarrassed philosophy.”
Ultimately, what Meredith emphasises is Realism plus Philosophy. An art which is the product of a blend of Realism and Philosophy is the best according to Meredith. Such an art has its roots in earth is common experience; but it owns the power to generalise, to create types, to relate present with past and future, to achieve poetic vision as well as realistic impact. In conclusion, "Realism with vision of the future is the only way that grand art can be built in such a world." The author with a vision of the future may have to ignore the unwanted in the present. Meredith himself renounced all the traditional ingredients of the novel. There need not be a plot no formal characterisations. That is why he wants to write his best in perversity. But what is the alternate literary technique expected by the Comic Spirit. This is a vital question. The writers resort to the foul and filthy Realism and the readers enjoy the dirty drab, without brains. The traditional techniques are severely condemned for praised by critics and reviewers. Then how should a writer pursue his professional and propagate his message. The answer to this question is glaringly exhibited by the novels of Meredith himself.

This leads us to the study of Meredith's fictional technique. Meredith's fictional technique deviates from those of the Idealists as well as the Realists. He chooses the middle path. Primarily, Meredith
works on the impersonal methods of Nature. Human nature, like Nature itself evolves from general laws. He aims to expose and elaborates these laws underlying not only life as well as individual. A careful observation reveals the inmost secrets of human action and thought. Besides, Meredith views the novelists vocation as a serious one. Because he dislikes to present the externals or the surface life of the individual and his world. Probably, his model of fictional presentation is adopted from Greek sculpture. It presents a calm omniscience, of ageless perfection, with the spirit of the universal and the faculty of changelessness. Meredith’s adoption of this model is the result of his desire to make the novel as a medium for philosophy. It is stated that philosophy exists for the benefit of mankind, and it presents truth. If it can be realisable, subtly from the working of actual human lives, it becomes the best and the most useful.

This model of a philosophical novel carriers new characteristics and new attributes. Though in this novel, the individuals are analysed but presenting them as types is the first priority. Here are characters who have never walked this earth. They are only compounds of the characteristics of their various classes. They possess an air of etherealised flesh and blood. The novelist closely observes the actions and motives, that build or destroy. He lays his hand upon the throb of
impulse which is individuality and the wit of fate which is fundamental law. Ultimately he knows humanity between Nature and Civilisation losing the centre of control. It is his responsibility and duty to bring humanity back to the current path. Such a novelist, must have absolute imperialist and at the same time he must be an optimist. This philosopher is not a dry and bloodless one, and he is a poet and a humorist. "Philosophy shows him the way of reason and enquiry poetry points to him the oneness of Nature and humanity humour gives the sense of proportion. They imperceptibly welded together in his soul. They make him sae, yet keep him humour; They make him poetical, yet keep him sane."42

Actual observation of humanity with impartiality is the primary requisite. He is expected to identify the basic element of the individual and also the general quality of the type. Such a novelist enjoys a vantage ground of the spirit aloofness and that is the Comic Spirit. He has a perfect view, knowledge and understanding.

Basing himself on this hypothetical position, Meredith pursues his job of a novelist. This is the reason why Meredith’s novels concentrate on close observation of the subjects. Then he analyses the psychological processes of the actions and behaviour. As a spirit he has
full access into the minds of the characters. He ignores the unity of plot on the basis of physical and outward incidents or situations. Very similar to the stream of consciousness technique, Meredith maintains the unity of mental process, and psychological processes, and psychological analyses.

This process is not an easy one. The devices and instruments of traditional fictional technique would be insufficient to complete this job. He resorts to poetical expression, metaphorical skill. In a way the poetical technique, armed with moving metaphor and dynamic imagery has its own limitations and disadvantages. Such a style may terminate in obscurity. However, the purpose of the novelist is high and elevated, and the instruments are also sophisticated, and naturally it is meant for knowledgeable and intellectual readers.
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