CHAPTER - VIII

BENNETT'S HUMANISM
The process of knowing as against understanding the vicissitudes of being human, in fact started with 1890's. But the Georgian era being an age of decadence it took for the lot of the moderns to dive deep into the fluxy state of being human. James Joyce and Virginia woolf made their great contributions in this context. Arnold Bennett always maintained a great desire to involve his artistic energies in the process of being human.

Transition of 1890s.

Bennett's novels take a broad range of time in order to characteristically illustrate this process. Almost all the major novels of Bennett are strident exercises in the process of being human, that too in a society which was otherwise notoriously groping into too much of materialism, and even reckless consumerism. This consumerism affected Bennett's creative power to a great extent. But when he was in his 'creative stride' he was excellent. Bennett's biographer Margaret Drabble pertinently touches the * this point. Drabble writes:

The best books I think are very fine indeed, on the highest level, deeply moving, original and dealing with material that I had never before encountered in fiction, but only in life; I feel they have been under-rated, and my response to them is so constant, even after years of work on them and constant re-readings, that I want to communicate my enthusiasm.
Drabble unreservedly praises Bennett's best books. She says they are 'on the highest level' and 'deeply moving' but the period was such that he had to compromise with his art for extraneous reasons. Sophia does this compromise despite her ardent desire for a new sense of humanism. It was in the siege of Paris that Sophia of The Old Wives' Tale learnt for the first time the primary lessons of spiritual restraint against materialistic exuberance or romantic excessiveness. Not only Sophia sticks herself to the absolute needs of life in an honourable manner, but she imparts these ways on the inmates of her boarding house, pension Frensham. There are many critics who suggested that Sophia, quite intuitively used her old drapers' shop experience for the sort of economic adventure that she takes up here in running the boarding house. They even suggested that if there was no siege in Paris Sophia probably would have ended up on the streets of Paris after she exhausted the petty money she had. It was not for nothing, speaking from the structural aspect of the novel, that she was exclusively thrown to the mercy of the courtesans when she was awfully sick. After her recovery from this sickness she did not show any kind of obeisance to the courtesans. She gave them money quite liberally for the
pains that they had taken. But she did not thank them for which the courtesans were waiting. It is her conviction to be human and humanly restrained that gives her this kind of strange and unreciprocative attitude towards the courtesans. The siege of Paris came to her as a great relieving opportunity. But it would certainly be an uncharitable opinion if we say that she took this opportunity to become rich. It was not to be her intention to be rich; riches certainly embraced her and made her the prestigious owner of the boarding house Jrensham. But we see that it is not her heavy margin-making tactics that made her rich. It was her christ-like compassion towards the poor and unfortunate boarders that makes her the lady of all the concerned hearts. She reigns supreme by rendering herself absolutely human in being the mistress of her boarding house. She took her profession in the Biblical manner of serving the needy. In adopting the formulas of compassion she does not appear to be cut and cut religious. She takes the human aspect of the age old Christianity and sticks to it. It is in this sense that Sophia's story is a great humanising process. That is why evenafter three decades, the moment she comes into contact with a person of the Five Towns her love for her compatriots gets stirred up.
while touching this aspect James Hall says:

"The appearance of peel-swynerton at the pension brings on her second illness, this time shock at recognizing the vacuum of affection that she has created"

For a long time she suppressed her feelings towards her kinsman. A slight provocation, the sight of swynerton brings her back to her Bursley. Sophia has always been trying to reach the inner working of this hum-nism. Her first four years with Gerald did not yield anything.

He and she had once loved and burned and quarrelled in the glittering and scornful pride of youth. But time had worn them out. "Yet a little while", she thought, "and I shall be lying on a bed like that! And what shall I have lived for? What is the meaning of it?" The riddle of life itself was killing her and she seemed to drown in a sea of inexpressible sorrow. (OWT, P.485)

This 'riddle of life' is a little beyond her comprehension. Paris was once a cultural oasis for her. But the ways of that town too proved to be amazing. People were going in a large numbers to witness the execution of the murderer Rivain. She was "watching with agonised glance. This cruel, obscene spectacle" (OWT, P.287)
(ii) **The humanistic aspect of Anna.**

In *Anna of the Five Towns* the process is the same, but the material particulars of the process and the dramatic personal are different. The story of Anna again is a great humanising process. At the outset she finds herself as an Alice in the wonderland when she learns that she is an inheritor of great property of 50 thousand pounds. But as a pure human she remains untainted in her disposition as well as behaviour. On the other hand, in course of time she learns the most difficult art of how not to use this money for any exploitative purpose. If she had to follow the instructions of her father she too would have involved into a rude and heartless miser. It is fortunate for Anna that she finds a true and real trustee in the character of Henry Mynors. Through Mynors she invests the money in the potteries and thereby enhances the liberal prospects of the workmen under her. It is of very strange that she does not take any investor's interest in the potteries business. On the other hand she endows herself into the loving hands of Mynors as his beloved wife. Otherwise it could never have been possible for her, psychologically speaking, to come out of the shock of the suicides of
the prices. It is the reckless and inhuman capitalis-
tic ways of the trade itself, 
ita.

lest the rudeness

o

of her father, that sent prices to suicides. Such a

fact is hard to bear; and that too to a pure and simple

character like Anna. Beyond all the temporal ties that

man is forced to enter into the day to day world, there

is a great human bondage that animates people to live

in mutual trust and faith of each other. That is the

great humanistic ideal behind Bennett's *Anna of the

Five Towns*.

Ephraim Tellwright takes a practical view of

money. His good investments are appreciated by others

but it is true that it has the smell of capitalism. In

the Five Towns life Tellwright was successful. Gals-

worthy's 'strife' shows the class struggle. Some cri-
tics expected Bennett too to write in that vein. While

commenting on John Lucas's opinion Bachelor says:

When John Lucas complains that Bennett does

not focus in this novel on the real struggle

of industrial life, the struggle between man

and man (rather than between man and nature,

which is explored in the novel's opening

chapter) he is asking too much. Bennett would

not and did not, regard class struggle as a

subject for fiction, and if Anna were squeezed

for a political stand it would be found to be

on the side of the masters rather than the men.
Bennett does not take into account the revolutionary social aspect. He takes into account the humanistic aspect. Moreover class struggle did not attract him much. Bachelor hastens to add that "He was a socialist and an atheist and a humanist, and at certain periods of life he was a mystic."

when Bachelor says that he is a socialist and atheist, we need not take it in its full implications. Bennett claims to be a socialist. His sympathy was always with the working class. Similarly we cannot charge him as an atheist though he has taken the religious fanatics into task. But when Bachelor says that he is a humanist we can agree with him fully.

(iii) Evolution of Bennett's humanism.

Bennett's humanism is in some way related to a biographical incident. Bennett had a speech impediment which his parents noticed only when he was reaching the age of twelve. It is believed that this affliction of speech started with a shock he received as a child when he caught his fingers in a mangle. This difficulty, in-fact defect, followed him throughout his life. This speech impediment has its far reaching effects on his
personality also. The manner in which he almost preached all through his novels the most nauseous Christ-like sympathy towards the less fortunate in the society probably comes from this subjective necessity of being sympathised for his natural defects. However, it appears from his biography that he could not get as much sympathy as he desired from his parents, particularly from his father, while his fathers' character appears in all most all his five Towns novels, sometimes as a miser as in Anne of the fives Boards and some time like an autocratic patriarch in Glassener and the like. But the manner in which this father-figure gets treated in The Old Wives' Tale exactly stands in the form of a fictional anti-type. Here the father is permanently impoverished through paralysis and is relegated to bed all through his life. The interpersonal relationship between him and his father gets fictional altered to that of daughter-father filial gratitude formula. Finally in The Old Wives' Tale Sophia, somehow, accuses herself member of times as the killer of her father. It is for the Freudian psychologist to decide as to how far this is due to a sort of unconscious desire for patricide that marched into this narrative sequence in The Old Wives' Tale.
(iv) Idea of Mother - fixation.

There is that subtle sense of mother-fixation of which we find some decent examples in Anna's disposition towards her motherless step-sister Agnes. The same personality traits that seek the mother-fixation sublimation in the fictional narrative gets compounded in her compassionate attitude towards that unfortunate Willie Price whose father again is depicted as being responsible for the business wreck of his son. Finally in the last chapter when Willie Price was emigrating to Australia he had a brief encounter with Anna where in the following conversation.

'You must try to forget it,' she urged him. 'You are not your father',
'I wish I had never been born,' he said.
'I wish I'd gone to prison'.
Now was the moment when,
if ever, the mothers' influence should be exerted.
'So a man,' she said softly. 'I did the best I could for you.'
I shall always think of you, in Australia, getting on',
she put a hand on his shoulder.
'Yes,' she said again, passionately.
'I shall always remember you-always' (p.235)
Anna in showing her whole hearted sympathy to Willie Price asks him to forget it, meaning the secret manner in which she and Henry Mynors supplemented that fifty pounds which his father swindled from the road building fund before he died. Anna and Mynors gracefully shared fifty percent each or 25 pounds each to show that sense of compassionate care and responsibility towards Willie. Anna straight away tells Willie that 'you are not your father', this statement has its double edge where with she shows her own unconscious patricide complex towards her miser father; and at the same time confers upon Willie a rare courage in suggesting that he was not a weakling like his father. Particularly the author's commentary is important here when he says that the moment was ripe where her mother influence should be exerted. She would not get another opportunity to meet Willie since he already made up his mind to emigrate to Australia. Anna's mother instinct towards Willie comes to full force in an earlier chapter where her state of mind is described as follows:

She longed to kneel at his feet, and to comfort him, and to cry: 'It is I who have ruined you - driven your father to cheating his servant, to crime, to suicide; driven you to forgery, and turned you out of your house which you old servant killed herself in making clean for me. I have wronged you, and I love you like a mother because I have wronged you and because I have saved you from prison' (rT. #.223)
The above passage is simply superb being a
magnificent representation of that great Shakespearean
moment of redemption in the King Lear wherein Lear
starts this dialogue towards Cordelia in the last
moment when they were about to be terminated from the
world by that wicked Edmund.

be two alone with sing like birds 'the cage:
when thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel
down,
and ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live
and pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and
laugh
at gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
talk of court news; and we'll talk with them
too,
who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out;
and take upon's spites; and we'll wear out,
in a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great
ones
That ebb and flow by the moon.

(King Lear, Act V, Scene III)

The mother fixational trope is obvious here. The
same mother fixation conversely leads to the unconscious
patricide complex of Jennett himself as a person and as
an author, Sophia's seeking of momentary absence from
her father's room to meet Gerald Scales incidentally becomes
the moment of the violent death of her father. This again
is another incident where the author's patricide complex
seeks a convincing fictional sublimation. It is a
different matter that the incident puts an unerasable and inordinate engram of sin complex on the simple child like intentionality of Sophie, where with she turns into a tragic character in her life. For a discerning reader the very seeds of her most willing separation from her husband later are also to be found here. Her youthful and adolescent infatuation towards Gerald Scales could not really overweigh the intensity of the shatter on her personality that her father's death implicates. Ultimately in the moment of her curt disowning of Gerald Scales in Paris, it certainly must have weighed in her mind that she was a fool to have run away with the weakling of a man even at the expense of her father at that. So in the true Freudian exposition it had often been proved that male children suffering from mother-fixation and patricide complexes often comes to adjustmental failures with their spouses. It is a fact known to all that Bennett himself was an awful failure with both his wives.

Bennett's deepest desire as he showed clearly in his autobiographical novel, Clayhanger, was to win the esteem of a father who loved, but sneered, who wished for his son the proudest success, yet crushed his every
ambition the moment it was expressed. As in the case of Edwin, this type of situations created in his mind a desire for vengeance.

So the boy retreated behind the hedge which he planted around his emotions and the desire to be esteemed by his all powerful father changed gradually into a longing to be avenged for the humiliations he had inflicted.5

This psychological factor of an intention to avenge the insults is in the core of Edwin Clayhanger's character. This kind of grudging fathers towards their own children were not rare in a fast growing industrial society. There are innumerable fathers in the world who secretly nurture a colossal enmity towards their sons who coming up rather in more brilliant colours than themselves or at least who are becoming providentially more successful than themselves. Some of the personality traits of his father which he might have most disliked were taken as the characteristic features and dispositions of Darius Clayhanger. In his later life, when Edwin gets the upper hand in the helms of affairs, instead of taking revenge on his father he shows utmost love and sympathy towards him in the true humanistic way.

That is why, more or less in the same vein, in a true christian spirit Edwin decides to help Hilda when
he found her at the dilapidated boarding house of Brighton. Edwin does the work of a good samaritan about whom St.Luke refers in the Bible.

But a certain good samaritan, as he journeyed came where he was: and when he saw him he had compassion on him. (St.Luke, X-33)

in this Biblical spirit Edwin decides to help Hilda when she turns to be totally bankrupt. All her pride seems to have been completely vanished.

Hilda was the only lady who could make inroads into his heart. In the first of the trilogy, Clyhanger, Edwin and Hilda were very near to their betrothal. But it slips away from the up and the lip. Things took a different shape in the hurricane speed. She was suddenly called to brighton and there she was married to a lawyer of disrepute. George cannon and later it became known that it was a bigamous marriage. Hilda was held responsible for her sudden volte-face. But it remains to be a mystery why the things took such a shape. It is difficult for us to exonerate either Hilda or even Bennett himself from such a criminal lapse of Hilda. Neither Hilda nor her creator Bennett gives a satisfactory answer for all this.

Bennett's Hilda is almost an ordinary woman. She is coyile, but capricious, courageous but not credible.
She had own conviction, but the trouble is that she does not take pain to convince others of all her actions. But the impact created by all this on Hilda was disastrous. It has created a wide chasm between Hilda of Clayhanger and Hilda of Lessways. In Clayhanger she is quite credible and sincere and there her silence is more voluble than words. But in Lessways she spoke and spoke without brake but it went hoarse. When she was seen through a veil in Clayhanger she was magnificent, but when we looked at her on her full face she became an unattractive and fickle-minded woman.

When Edwin saw Hilda in Brighton in such a pitiable conditions he forgets all her past omissions and commissions. In the true humanistic spirit Edwin decides to marry her and Hilda has no other way but to concede. The problem does not stop even there. The domineering spirit of Hilda a refuses to relent. She wanted a say in every domestic affairs including the maintenance of the house, running of the printing press, handling of house servants etc.

She saw Edwin as an instrument to be played upon, and herself as a virtuoso. In such an attitude was necessarily
condescension. Yet this condescension somehow did not in the least affect the tenderness and the fever of her longing for Edwin.

(These Twain, p. 380)

After her calamitous first marriage it is but natural for a reader to expect that when Edwin has shown such a compassion, she should have reciprocated by being subservient to him. It was magnanimous on the part of Edwin to marry Hilda at that stage. But Hilda is Hilda who is a woman with the nerves of steel. She cannot go on singing eulogy to her benefactor to any extent. Though Edwin is a pious gentleman Hilda does not wish to give him an upperhand. Even Bennett himself fails to reach to the interiority of his creation—Hilda. Though he created Hilda, there are moments in which she slips from his hands. The journal entry of Saturday, 11th June, 1910.

I didn't seem to be getting near to the personality of Hilda in my novel. You scarcely ever to get near a personality. There is a tremendous lot to do in fiction that no one has yet done.

(Journal entry June 11, 1910)

(v) No occasion for physical violence:

In spite of the innumerable instances where violent and antithetical dispositions come to a conflicting ground, it can be broadly assumed that there are no scenes of
direct physical violence in Bennett. As a matter of fact the Edwardian novelists let loose innumerable strategies of physical violence. The same was carried on into the post war novels rather in a serious and smoother manner.

Despite his connections with the socialists, and radicals, Bennett never supported violence. But he always sympathised with the downtrodden. Walter Allen's remark is significant here. Allen says:

He considered himself as a socialist, but at no time was he a militant propagandist for socialism, he was in-fact, a member of the liberal party an advanced radical for whom the enemy always Tories.

Though he believed in certain political ideologies he desisted from propagating violence. In those days many radicals thought that violence was the ultimate answer for many of the social evils. In Bennett there are certainly violent moments very strategically narrated by the author. Sophia's antagonism to her mother & when her mother declared Sophia's schooling to have been dropped, Anna's violent repulsion to the fact of her father's disposition towards
prices and Edwin's innumerable humiliation that he suffered in the hands of his father are only a few examples of violence in operation. But in none of these circumstances physical violence was resorted to. This in itself substantiate that Bennett resolved to be a superior craftsman to all his contemporaries. Novel, he always believed is an intelligent and sophisticated visualisation of the facts of life. In the name of realism he did not condescend to go down below the order of decency. This could be done by him in spite of all the plinth-making influence of the French naturalists in whom the strategies of physical violence are casual operations. Thus Bennett is a realist of an elevated order.

...
References


4. Ibid - p. 170
