Chapter - IV

FIRST PHASE (1800-1811)

Any comparative study to trace the development of Shelley's thought and poetry would reveal two cardinal aspects of his poetry -- thought and feeling. Being a precocious child by nature, Shelley showed an immense understanding of the problem of social inequity from a very tender age. 'It is a mystery as to how Shelley became so much conscious of the evil all around him at that age. An average boy of his age could easily remain happy being callously unmindful of the fact of suffering of humanity. His rich parentage could have been a good excuse for his indifference. But he was destined to be otherwise.

'Boyhood shows the life as morning shows the day' - can reasonably be said of Shelley. Not only it can be said but it can be said with emphasis as well. There are very few poets in English literature, who showed so much consistent development as Shelley did. Shelley's was a rare case of consistent maturity. Often children take a note of additions all around them, but they do take it out of some puerile curiosity. And hence one is simply bewildered to know Shelley's grasp over the dark side of reality. Though feelings dominate thoughts in his lyrics but there are a good number of poems in which thought dominates over lyrics but there are a good number of poems in which thought
dominates over lyricism or spontaneity. No doubt Shelley's idea of the nature of poetry goes a long way to show that he regarded poetry as a means to serve the positive end of bringing about a change in the existing order. And poetry, divorced from thought cannot accomplish this noble task. Hence it is but natural that Shelley should have profound belief in the paramount importance of thought in poetry. Shelley never made any secret of his positive emphasis on the dominance of thought not only in his poetry but on the development of his whole entity.

We must not be oblivious of the fact that Shelley's poetry shows a continuous development and maturity of thought which is coterminus with his development as a poet. It is significant that his thought seldom suffers any relapse or reversion; it continues to develop, deepen and mature with the passage of time. But unfortunately many critics missed or ignored this singular achievement of Shelley. Some critics appreciated Shelley but they did so for wrong reasons since they appreciated lesser qualities of Shelley such as his lyrical excellence, sonority, spontaneity and so on proportionately ignoring the genuine claim of Shelley as a positive and consistent thinker. But there were still others who well recognized this singular achievement of Shelley and acclaimed his genius. Karl Marx, whose knowledge of the historical perspective of the development of literature as well as philosophy of many countries is simply unbelievable, has unequivocally pointed out with emphasis that Shelley's thought was in the continuous process of maturity, and had he lived longer, he "would always have been one of the
advanced guards of socialism."

To trace the development of his ideas we will go a long way if we simply analyse his ideas in an early poem like Queen Mab and in a mature poem like The Mask of Anarchy. For instance his ideas in Queen Mab were largely vague, nebulous and sometime amorphous and betray his lack of depth and accuracy. In other words his reformism in Queen Mab is couched in a verbose and bombastic style; while in The Mask of Anarchy language and style are simpler but powerful. It can clearly be seen that verbiage and bombast of the early phase have yielded place to lucidity and profundity in the mature phases.

A critical evaluation of Shelley's early poems shows the significance of his nascent ideas for his early poetry. And if we trace the relation between his nascent ideas and his early poems, it seems that there is a parallel development of both. Being precocious in disposition and studious by nature, Shelley did have a unique grasp of the serious problems of the days since his boyhood. He used to read for hours on end day in and day out and to brood over still longer and hence it is little wonder that the origin of such characteristics as reforming zeal, republican spirit, egalitarian creed and obsessive concern for the problem of evil can be easily traced to the social and political ideas surging in his mind during this period.

The singular feature during this period was the well-meritted
change in the nature of his thought and poetry from an ivory tower romanticism to a consciousness of social problems and duties. True, poems like Original Poetry, Victor and Cazire, and Wandering Jew abound in 'Terrorism', 'Occultism' and 'Mysticism' but the threads of 'Reformism', 'Republicanism' and 'Egalitarianism' are artistically interwoven in the fabric of the terrifying incidents in these poems.

It was a strange coincidence that Shelley, whose obsession dealt with the problem of evil was a lifelong one, was on the theme of evil in his very first poem, Verses on a Cat which was composed in the transition period of the closing eighteenth century and emerging nineteenth, when the poet had hardly attained the age of composing a poem, not to make a mention of its thought-content. The poem reveals and establishes beyond doubt his awareness of 'the modes of distress which torture the tenants on earth'. Although the poem is about an insignificant feline species -- a cat -- the poet speaks of 'the various evils, which like so many devils', attend the poor soul from their birth. But why is there agony of life? Is it because of something inherent in the system or owing to something imposed upon? Apparently the minimum demand and expectation of everyone are reasonable and capable of fulfilment, but underneath there is the unbridgeable gulf between what one possesses and what one longs for:

Ironically, his last poem The Triumph of Life, which remained unfinished owing to the cold touch of cruel death, was also a sincere endeavour on the part of the poet to find an answer to ultimate problem of evil.
One wants society
Another variety
Others a tranquil life;
Some want food,
Others as good,
Only want a wife.

(IV, 19-24)

The cat suffers but by no canons of judgement we can say that its expectation from the society is unreasonable or too much because

This poor little cat
Only wanted a rat

(V, 25-26)

Then the pertinent question arises as to why does the little cat suffer when its desire is so meagre and reasonable. For this we will have to dive deeper. It would be too much to expect that Shelley had already found answers to all these baffling and apparently unaccountable problems -- definitely he did not find that and he himself was fully aware of his limitations and made a clean breast of his incapability:

Some a living require
And others desire
And old fellow out of way
And which is the best
I have to be guessed
For I cannot pretend to say.

(III, 13-18)

But the very fact that these problems had stirred his emotion is sufficient to draw our sympathy for this boy who was destined to be one of the most controversial men of letters of the English speaking world.
Taking the thread from the last line of the above-quoted passage, I like to say here with emphasis that one thing is very clear about Shelley: he had no pretensions. We may genuinely believe that had Shelley indulged himself in the art of pretending, he would have been able to absolve himself of many serious charges genuinely brought against him by the age he lived in as well as those succeeding. Unlike many reputed poets, Shelley was singularly consistent in his preaching as well as practising. In fact he was one of the few persons who were always sincere in their dealings and he always practised what he preached and preached what he practised. Such close conformity between one's actions and sermons is rare even today. Many of the utterances of Shelley could be taken on their face value, their inherent contradiction notwithstanding. His was the words coming out of deep thought and sincere feeling.

Evils of colonialism are very much known today. Now there is no two opinions about the fact that colonialism is an indirect and inhuman way of immorally exploiting the people of the colony by its master race in the pretence of civilising the former so that it learns to stand on its feet; in plain words it means a shameful drainage of wealth of colony and consequent pauperisation of its inhabitants. But we simply wonder to see an English boy of seventeen, belonging to the privileged class, protesting in unequivocal terms against the nefarious colonial designs of his own country. It is still more astonishing because of the fact that this shrill voice of protest and prophecy rose as early as in 1790 when the world made a complacent sanction of
the idea of colonisation and thought that its good effects outnumbered
its evil effects, if any, and that too from the soils of England which
was the most powerful and effective champion of colonial rule.

Shelley could easily see behind the smoke-screen of the British
colonial design and consequently could attribute all the miserable
conditions of the Irish people to the ills of colonisation since Ireland
had been for long a colony of England. In the Irishman's Song (1809)
Shelley fulminated against England because of the crime it had perpetrated
against Ireland. It is the British colonial expansion that has caused
the wide wasting ruin in Ireland.

See: the wide wasting ruin extends all around
Our ancestor’s dwellings lie sunk on the ground
Our foes ride in triumph throughout our domains,
And our mightiest heroes lie stretched on the planes

(6-10)

No word can describe the extent of all-round suffering of the
Irish people: Literally all good turned to evil:

Ah! dead is the harp which was wont to give pleasure
Ah! sunk is our sweet country’s rapturous measure, ....

(11-12)

Shelley does not advise Irish men to accept things lying low.
He does not ask them to be fatalist and to unquestionably accept the
colonial rule of England and remain impotent, weak and weak. The
champion of revolution and the hater of oppression cannot even dream of
such a pusillanimous measure. What Shelley suggests is exactly that
which fits in his philosophy. No evil is permanent and the duration of evil could be and should be curtailed and its wings clipped by the conscious and deliberate efforts of the same-thinking people all over the world. He, therefore, inspires the Irish in the name of their patriots who even sacrificed their lives in the great cause of their country. The Irishmen should fight the oppression; not only that, they should fight till the last drop of their blood and should not rest or respite until and unless the last vestige of the colonial rule is uprooted from their holy motherland;

Ah! where are the heroes; triumphant in death,
Convulsed they recline on the blood sprinkled heath,
Or they yelling ghosts ride on the blast that sweeps by,
And 'my countrymen: vengeance', incessantly cry.

(13-16)

Colonisation helps neither the master nor the slave. The slave country is reduced to a meagre animal existence owing to the exploitation of the ruling country. It gradually gets deprived of even basic human qualities such as moral courage, righteousness, charity and fellow feeling and becomes the breeding ground of vices like selfishness, flattery and all sorts of degradations associated with the lives of degenerated human beings. And contrary to popular belief, the ruling country is not also ultimately benefitted on account of its colonial empire. Since the country flourishes on the exploitation of its colonies, its own people become expert in the art of mendacity, treachery, exploitation, hypocrisy and selfishness. Instead of stabilising its
economy on the correct footing by increasing production and ensuring smooth and equitable distribution, it seeks short-cut to national prosperity through shameful exploitation. And consequently, when it is deprived of its colonies, its economy crumbles like a pack of cards. And to crown it all, it breeds unending rivalries and wars between the countries having colonies of its own and those not having colonies but aspiring to have. One simply stoops in admiration when one finds that even at such an early age Shelley could see through the nefarious game of colonisation and could decry it with great vehemence rising above the petty considerations of chauvinism and national prejudices.

War (1810) unmistakably shows Shelley's understanding of the horrors and evils of war. He broods over the main cause of human misery and squarely puts the blame on the despicable manoeuvres of kings and statesmen which often, if not always, leads to war. In this poem he declares in unequivocal terms that 'death', 'fate', and 'ruin' have been hurled on this bleeding world by 'ambition', 'avarice', and 'power' of these worldly monsters disguised as monarchs.

Ambition, power and avarice have hurled
Death, fate and ruin, on a bleeding world.

Life of a soldier is deliberately glorified and romanticized. He is presented as a superman who is smilingly willing even to sacrifice his life at the altar of his country. Wreaths of flowers are deliberately placed to hide the tormenting presence of the corpse within. But Shelley
had the unique insight of seeing the ugly truth behind the machinations of war. It is strange that at that early age he could see 'the skull beneath the skin'. The brave and sincere soldier leads a life of extreme hardship and dies in the foreign land unwept and unsung. He even cannot have a last glimpse of his near and dear ones, his kith and kin. He has sacrificed his pleasure, his joys, his happiness and his peace of mind for fulfilling the whims and fads of his king; and he is going to sacrifice his life. But what for? In bleeding body he utters his doubt.

3 It is interesting to note that it was simply the ills of colonisation which resulted in the First World War since the newly-powerful Germany shockingly realised that the colonial dish had already been shared mostly by England, France, Spain and Portugal. Germany, aspiring to 'have a place under the Sun', and thinking herself 'capable of infinite expansion' challenged the monopoly of England and France and took to arms. Ironically enough the Second World War was a sequel to the First. Even Rabindranath Tagore bitterly attacked war: "Call it patriotism if you so like, call it nationalism if you so please, call it defence of democracy if you so chose, but war after all is the wild dance of death" said he. Though there are some 'just wars' but most of the wars take place when "might is right, greed is guide, and selfish advancement is nationalism."

S. Radhakrishnan, one of the greatest of philosopher-rulers of the modern world, could easily see the nefarious design behind a war. In one of his essays he declared, "Even as cannibalism, head-hunting, witch-burning and duels are regarded as antisocial, war must be regarded as a monstrous evil. We must admit that moral standards apply to states also; and actions considered evil and unsocial in an individual, cannot become right and moral when performed by the state. War, which is murder and theft committed by large number, however necessary it may be, is an evil." S.Radhakrishnan: Illusions of War: Specimens of English Press; ed. Roy & Bhattacharya. Macmillan; 1970.

4 Wilfred Owen in his war poems in general, and in Futility in particular, exposes the ugly and inhuman aspect of war. George Bernard Shaw in his Arms and the Man demystifies the life of a soldier and shows that it is not patriotism but mercenary considerations that enrols one as a soldier and that all talks of self-sacrifices gallantry and chivalry are mere high-sounding nonsense since a soldier, like any civilian,
For whose support this fainting frame lies low;  
For whose support in distant land I bleed;  
Let his friend’s welfare be the warrior’s meed.

The last line immediately catches our imagination and draws our appreciation. What a befitting parting wish. No honour for himself, no reward for his family; but only the welfare of his friends; but that reasonable demand is not fulfilled because that does never reach the ears of the king:

4 Contd.

places safety of self at the top and does not hesitate to take mean recourse to save his own life.

If we study the poems of the pre-world war poets (Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and others) and the post-world war poets (T.S. Eliot and others) we may have an idea of the spiritual void the world wars have created. Commenting on this peculiar post-war development S.U.Khan writes; “There is a shade of difference, however between the strong indignation of the War poets and the blinding disillusionment of the postwar years, of which the chief spokesman is Mr. T.S. Eliot. The war poets knew the futility of war; they did not know the futility of a whole civilisation. They knew something of the values which was unacceptable to them and against which they revolted; they had not yet yet known the moral and spiritual desolation of the post-war years”. S.U.Khan : Modern English Poetry from 1920 to 1930; Milton and the Devils Party and other Essays; Aligarh; 1969, p.63.

Sassoon was bitterly critical of the gambling of war. “According to him there is some one responsible for the maddening massacres, the unbelievable suicides in trenches and the pathetic nervous breakdown of modern warfare. Perhaps the ‘Cheery old’ and blundering generals, perhaps the ‘scarlet major’; perhaps the lustily cheering crowds, who send the brilliant young soldiers to their doom, are to blamed; Sassoon is not quite sure” (ibid., pp. 63-64). But the most scathing attack on war probably came from the pen of Wilfred Owen who had a first hand experience of the evils of war and who was killed in the First World War just before seven days of the armistice when he was hardly twenty-five. The following sad lines of Expostulo haunt us even today.

Slowly our ghosts drag home; glimpsing the sunk, fires glossed
With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle there;
Shutters and doors, all closed; on us the doors are closed;
We turn back to our dying.
He hears me not—ah! no kings can hear;
For passions' voice has dulled their listless ear.

This poor dying soldier does not know to whom he should place
his last desire. He lifts his hands and offers his prayer to the Almighty
and succumbs to his injury. But Shelley won't spare this well-dressed
and well-fed monster sitting on the throne and flourishing on human
misery. He lifts his hand, points his finger and declares point-blank.

Oppressors of mankind to you we owe
The baleful stream from where these miseries flow;
For you how many a mother weeps her son,
Snatched from life's course ere half his race was run;
For you how many a widow drops a tear,
In silent anguish, on her husband's bier.

The widow of the hero puts a volley of questions before 'Almighty
power' about the desolation wrought by war. Her queries reveal that
Shelley repudiated the divine-right theory of the kings. He scathingly
criticised their manœuvres:

It is then Thine, Almighty power, she cries,
Whence tears of endless sorrow dim these eyes?
Is this the system which they powerful sway
Which else the shapeless chaos sleeping lay,
Formed and approved?

(29-33)

Shelley disapproves of the eighteenth century optimistic
philosophy of 'whatever is, is right' and with greater conviction he
discards the divine-right of kings. All these human agonies and
sufferings can have no divine sanction whatsoever. And consequently he,
who is instrumental in bringing so much ill upon mankind, can never be the chosen agent of God.

He never bade the war-note swell
He never triumphed in the work of hell.

(35-36)

It becomes clear that for this fallen state of human beings monarchs are responsible to a great extent. Monarchs are the symbols of material tyranny and are the evil counterparts of the priests who stand for spiritual tyranny.

Monarch of earth! Thine is the baleful deed,
Thine are the crimes for which Thy subject bleed.

(37-38)

In a mental state of anguish and utter frustration Shelley asks whether this evil state will remain forever thereby making the future of mankind barren and bleak.

Ah! when will come the time, when o'er the plain
No more shall death and desolation reign?

(43-44)

But one of the preconditions for the dawning of that bright day is that monarchy with all its evil accomplices should be done away with. The millennium would come but

Not whilst some in cold ambition's dreams
Plans for the field of death his plodding schemes.

(47-48)

The monarch is inhuman even to his core. He is only mindful of his petty loss or gain and is oblivious of and callous to the joys and
sorrows, even of life and death, of his subject.

There is not even an iota of truth or justification in the Divine sanction behind the claim of kings, who are no better than any individual.

Kings are but dust — the last eventful day
Will level all and make them lose their sway.

(59-60)

A Tale of Society as it is (1811) describes how the tyrant's blood hound forced the only son of the poor woman to use power for wielding arms. The man before going to the army earned a meal of honesty and 'with affectionate discourse beguiled' the keen attacks of paid and poverty: The rigours of army life weakened his body and poisoned his natural goodness. The poem shows Shelley's conviction that inhuman treatment meted out to soldiers goes to harden their souls:

And though his form was wasted by woe
Which tyrants on their victims love to wreak
Though his sunk eyeballs and his faded cheek
Of slavery's violence and scorn did speak.

(48-51)

The poor old woman had no good and pleasant memory to fall back upon: no present means to maintain herself and no future hopes to sustain. Her only hope was her innocent and gentle son and the poor lady had pinned all her hopes on him. But he had to go to the army under conscription and when he returned what a great and tragic change. He

Had bled in battle; and the storm control
Which ruled his sinews and coerced his soul
Utterly poisoned life's unmingled bowl
And unsubduable evils on him brought.

(61-64)

The theme of death has been a recurrent and lifelong obsession with Shelley. Often we do not understand what we should surmise the reason to be. Shelley might have been in love with death since his life; thought he, was a bed of thorns or as some critics would have us believe that Shelley was an escapist and was too coward to face the difficult world. Even Shelley's works give contradictory ideas.

In one of his poems presumably composed in 1809 (and named as Dialogue by T.J.Hogg) Shelley enters into an artificial dialogue between Death and Mortal. Death does invite the Mortal to embrace him because in Death and Death only 'the innocence sleeps 'neath the peace giving sod'. 'And the good ceases to tremble at tyranny's nod'. The last lines appears to be very significant. If we are to take the meaning literally we feel that Shelley went too far. The question which obsesses us at this stage is whether good always trembles at tyranny's nod and whether death is the only remedy. Shelley has not so far formed a comprehensive philosophy to answer such intricate question, but the very fact that it posed such a serious problem points to Shelley's groping and brooding nature. The answer given by the Mortal also corroborates to this view when it praises death out of frustration of life by saying that in Death the scorpion of perfidy no longer goads and the phantoms of prejudice vanish away. But Shelley's curiosity does not stop here. He is interested
to lift the veil\(^5\) of Death, so his Mortal asks

Yet tell me, dark Death, when thine empire is over,
What awaits on Futurity's mist-covered shore?

(19-20)

But though Shelley's 'Death' answers in an evasive way, as expected, his recipe, even at this age, is no mean an achievement. He ushers in Love\(^6\) as the panacea of all ills.

... but a spirit of Love
That will name their blest advent to regions above.

In brief, Shelley's poetry of the first phase reveals that the young poet became conscious of the harm that the social, political and religious institutions had been doing to the ignorant and backward masses. Therefore, his poetry of this period is a young man's expression of his abhorrence of tyrannical institutions such as monarchy, aristocracy and Christianity. However, the over-enthusiastic tone and the vehement denunciation of evils tend to obscure his thought.

\(^5\) I dare not unveil
The shadows that float o'er Eternity's vale (21-22).

\(^6\) Another poem composed in 1810 (also entitled by Hogg 'The Death') Shelley emphatically declares

That everything, but Love, destroyed
Must perish with its kindred clay.