CHAPTER IV.
The Doctrinaire element of Corelli's Novels

Marie Corelli is popularly known as a writer of romances. The majority of her reading public enjoyed her works as delightful literature. The greatness and importance of a work of art depends on the integration of the writer's personality and his creative vision. It is his vision of life and temperament that create the world of illusion, which interprets reality for us. Literature is "the expression of the imagination." In a great work of art life is made even more significant and symbolic.

While considering the novels of Marie Corelli the first question that confronts us is whether her works are novels or romances. Both the terms, 'novel' and 'romance' are used without any distinction by literary critics and historians to describe her works. E.M. Foster refers in his Aspects of the Novel to the 'formidable mass' and the 'amorphous' nature of the novel. The conception of the novel as a literary form has never been rigid or constant. It has changed from one literary epoch to another. A French critic even defines a novel simply as "a fiction in prose of a certain extent."
'Fiction' is a wide term. It includes both the romance and the novel. It is that "species of literature which is concerned with the narration of imaginary events and the portraiture of imaginary characters." It is taken for granted that in every work of art and events and characters are neither photographic representations nor factual truths about some living or dead persons, though there may be some resemblance between the events and characters in a work of art and those of actual life. The novel has been defined as a "fictitious prose narrative or tale of considerable length... in which characters and actions representative of the real life of past or present times are portrayed in a plot of more or less complexity." The novel, then, is a work of art which is close to real life. But the romance differs in some respects from the novel. The New English Dictionary defines 'romance' as "a fictitious narrative in prose of which the scene and incidents are very remote from those of ordinary life." It is also stated that its main story is "often overlaid with long disquisitions and digressions." The scenes, incidents and characters in a romance, unlike those in a novel, appear to the reader to be remote and far removed from the interests of ordinary life. The readers take delight in them more as mere spectators. Again

2. Ibid. Vol. VI.
3. Ibid. Vol. VI.
4. Ibid. Vol. VI.
the romance, with its long disquisitions and digressions, many not have the unity of effect which obtains in a realistic novel like Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance.

Corelli's works of fiction cannot all be included in the category of the novel. They are romances rather than novels. Many of her works do not represent actual life; they rather narrate the things that are supposed to happen in some fanciful worlds. The characters in these narratives are shadowy and hardly real. Works like *A Romance of Two Worlds*, *Vendetta*, *Ardath*, *Wormwood*, *The Soul of Lilith*, *Temporal Power* and *The Life Everlasting* are not realistic. In some of her works there is just a faint likeness between the incidents and characters described and real life itself. Her characters are flat and wooden. Even works like *The Murder of Delicia*, *Boy and Love* and *the Philosophy* cannot be called 'novels' in the strict sense of the term. The proper term for her works of fiction, then, is 'romances'.

Critics have tried to classify Corelli's novels according to their subject matter and treatment. In his biography of Marie Corelli, Kent Carr divides her works into three categories, novels of imagination, religious novels and novels with a purpose. He describes novels like *Vendetta*, *Thelma* and *Ardath* as novels of imagination. He classifies *Barabbas* and *the Sorrows of Satan* as religious novels. He mentions in
the division of 'novels with a purpose.' A Romance of Two Worlds, Wormwood, The Mighty Atom and others. But later, in the same context, he remarks: "Vendetta, Thelma, Ardath, The Soul of Lilith, Genesta and Ziska come under no particular classification, but form a band of striking and often tragically beautiful, imaginative efforts." Carr's biography was published in 1901. Some of Corelli's later works are not therefore considered in his classification. His method of classification is rather misleading. He groups some of the novels as novels of imagination, but this is too vague a description of the genre. Carr includes Barabbas and The Sorrows of Satan in the category of religious novels, because they deal with Biblical personages. But this seems to be a minor aspect of Corelli's creed and the word 'religious' is a more restricted term than the world 'philosophical'.

J. Cuming Walters, in his 'Personal Tribute' to Corelli, divides Corelli's works into two classes, - the speculative and psychological and the melodramatic. Corelli herself seems to suggest these two divisions of her works in the prologue to The Life Everlasting. Some of her novels are definitely melodramatic. But the other division suggested - the 'speculative and psychological works' seems to be a vague description again. Some of Corelli's novels in which she deals with her creed,

1. Miss Marie Corelli - by Kent Carr. p. 89.
are speculative and metaphysical. But they are not 'psychological' in the sense, for example, in which *Ulysses* is psychological. Corelli seldom enters into the deeper layers of the minds of her characters. Some of her novels deal with the psychic, that is, with the spiritual problems of life. They are philosophical.

The classification of the works of authors like Marie Corelli is not an easy task. Corelli's novels have a number of intermingled purposes. If some of them are grouped in one division on the basis of a common aspect or two, the other aspects of those novels are likely to be ignored. All her novels are generally written with a purpose. Some of them deal with philosophical problems and some with social and moral problems. On the whole, it seems desirable to classify her novels into four groups which can be clearly distinguished from one another:— Philosophical novels, melodramatic novels, novels with a purpose and pseudo-scientific novels.

The following works can be included in the division of philosophical novels: *A Romance of Two Worlds*, *Aradath*, *The Soul of Lilith*, *Barabbas*, *The Sorrows of Satan*, *The Master Christian Satan* and *The Life Everlasting*. In these novels, Corelli propagates deliberately her new creed of Christianity.

In the division of melodramatic novels can be grouped: *Vendetta*, *Thelma*, *Wormwood*, *Ziska*, *Temporal Power* and *Innocent*.
In the division of novels with a purpose can be classed:


The Young Diana and The Secret Power can be described as pseudo-scientific novels.

Can we regard Marie Corelli as a novelist who was also a propagandist? "Art", says Abercrombie "is the expression of aesthetic experience. The Artist transfers his experience to the recipient... art is always purposive,... the purpose of it being nothing but to transform the experience into expression." As a work of art the novel moves the reader and gives him delight. The purpose of the novelist is served if he is successful in communicating his aesthetic experience in words. He is neither a theorist nor a moralist. "He is revealing life, and his problem is how to make the reader hear and feel and see as he has done himself." But the novelist has to deal with all kinds of problems, - scientific, social, religious or moral. Hence the novelist often makes his work of art a medium for propagating his theories and principles. "The novel has been made a vehicle for the teaching of history, the advocacy of causes, the showing up of abuses and initiation in the secrets of sex." Life is a heterogeneous flux. The novelist has to select his material from life to reveal it in an artistic manner.

Was not Corelli a propagandist? Were not the great Victorian novelists propagandists or moralists or reformers? Was not H.G.Wells a theorist in some of his novels? If a doctrinal novel is not a work of art, then Corelli's novels are not works of art at all. Her works are novels with a purpose. In some of her novels she endeavours to transmit the entire philosophy of her new creed of Christianity. As Cuming Walters says: "Miss Corelli's romances ... were not only vivid stories, they were her means of imparting knowledge and doctrine. Not one of them but has a 'purpose', and it is of no slight interest to notice the animating cause in each work."¹ The moral mission of the novel was an accepted convention with Victorian novelists. This convention was followed by the men and women writers of popular fiction in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The principle of "Art for Art's sake", and the work of foreign artists like Flaubert, stimulated the writers of the eighteen nineties to concentrate on the artistic value of a work of art, irrespective of its social or moral purpose. There appeared at that time great artists of fiction like Henry James and Joseph Conrad. But Marie Corelli clung to the traditional conceptions of the novel. She considered literature as a means for the moral good of the world. Her novels were "the overwhelming serious prose moralities... her most successful books were noisy indictments of contemporary

In the prologue to *The Life Everlasting* she explains openly why she introduced philosophy in her novels: "I should perhaps have preferred, ... to set forth the incidents narrated in the ensuing 'romance' in the form of separate essays on the nature of the mystic tuition and experience...", but I know that the masses of the people who drift restlessly to and fro upon the surface of this planet, ever seeking for comfort in various forms of religion and too often finding none, will not listen to any spiritual truth unless it is conveyed to them, ... in the form of a story." She wrote her non-philosophical novels with a view to entertain the public. "I played with my pen, and did my best to entertain the public with stories of every day life and love, such as the least instructed could understand." The affected tone and the explanation of the purpose of her 'stories' clearly reveal her inartistic conception of the commercial novel. Her novels are not pure works of art. They are admixtures of art and propaganda. Corelli has been severely criticised by some literary critics for her loud didactic tone. While comparing Hall Caine and Corelli, Harold Williams says: "Though on occasion he does not disdain the prophet's mantle, he is free from

Miss Corelli's hysterical exoathedra dogmatism."¹ In his Fifty Years of English Literature, Scott James calls her "the sensational, monotone mouthing prophetess, Marie Corelli."² But Corelli's dogmatic voice varies according to the nature of the themes in her novels. Some of her non-philosophical works like Vendetta, Thelma, Norwood, Temporal Power and Innocent are first and foremost, meant to be artistic creations. The moral purpose or idealism of the writer comes home to the reader incidentally, while reading those narratives. Even here, the social criticism is shrill and declamatory in tone. "A perfect work of art will be one in which the content is important and significant to all men, and therefore it will be moral."³ A good novel teaches naturally a moral lesson. But it is implicit in the work. It is revealed in the expressed vision of life of the novelist. It has to be admitted that Corelli devoted such talents as she had as a novelist to the propagation of her doctrine and dogma. That is why a consideration of her philosophy is of prime importance in an evaluation of her novels.

Corelli was a romanticist in a growing world of science and industrialism like W.B. Yeats and A.E. She was at heart a dreamer and a visionary. Fiction served her as a means of escape.

into an ideal world of enchantment. Her spirit, being tired of the sophisticated atmosphere of decadent London, sought freedom in the land of romance. Corelli had in her, not only the negative side of a revolt against industrialism like Hardy but also the positive side of mystical statement as in A.E. and W.B. Yeats. But Corelli possessed an imagination of a lower quality. She lacked a clear vision of the practical human world. She was therefore a lesser writer. If Yeats and A.E. accepted aestheticism, Irish mythology and symbolism and Indian philosophy, Corelli accepted the essentials of theosophy indirectly and endeavoured to fuse them with a new view of primitive Christianity. If some of her novels like The Sorrows of Satan are devoted to the negative side of her philosophy and expose the degenerate society of her day, some others like The Life Everlasting are devoted to the enunciation of her positive doctrine of life and love. She believed in the transmigration and in the immortality of the human soul. She believed in the law of Karma and the ultimate reunion of the soul with God. She sought a grounding for these principles in the teachings of Jesus Christ. She glorified Jesus above all other founders of religions and conceived of him as the sole mediator between God and man. An exposition of these basic principles of her creed will be attempted in the second part of this thesis.

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