

IDENTIFYING KANTIAN AESTHETICS: A SELECT STUDY OF COLERIDGE'S POETRY

Saumya Srivastava

Amity School of Language, Amity University, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore Kantian philosophy of aesthetics in Coleridge's poetry. Coleridge's poetry carries a marked influence of Kantian system of thoughts. In fact, the whole Romantic movement is guided by the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Kant's "Aesthetic judgement is given an indispensable place in forming a picture of the relation of the human mind to the world of experience" (Scruton 162). The main purpose of this paper is to explore Kantian aesthetical notions inherent in the poetry of Coleridge. Coleridge's reason, understanding, thoughts, sense, experience and imagination are guided by the Kantian principles of aesthetics. Kantian metaphors need to be explored, in order to understand Coleridge's system of thoughts.

Keyword: Kantian Aesthetics, phenomenon, noumenon, Primary Imagination, Secondary Imagination

1. LITERATURE

Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*, proclaimed that literature is autonomous which does not have any purpose apart from itself. The thought 'Art for art's sake' was not given by any poet or critic for the first time, but it was given by the philosopher Immanuel Kant. By saying that literature is autonomous, he means that art is complete in itself and its main purpose is to delight us. Any form of art, music or poetry should be able to give pleasure to the readers. Kant is considered as the greatest philosopher of modern times. Romantic thought is said to have developed from Kant's system of aesthetics. Kant was born in 1724 in East Prussia. He was the professor of logic and metaphysics. The two greatest influences which structured Kant's system of thoughts

were: first, the tradition of pietism followed by his family and second is the impact of French Revolution. He lived during the times of wars when East Prussia was captured by Russia. These situations stirred him inwardly. For him, philosophy not only examines the object in the form in which we know, but it also refers to the process of knowing itself. His major works include *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, *Critique of Judgment*, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* etc.

Kant makes a distinction between the phenomena and noumena. He says that the mere experience of the object or the way the object appears to us is referred to as phenomena. Noumena are the objects themselves. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant says that 'knowledge' is the amalgamation of the impressions that we receive from the world and also the component which we supply in constructing the world.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge is the critic, philosopher, poet and thinker. He is best known for his poetry like: "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", "Kubla Khan", "Frost at Midnight", "Dejection: An Ode" etc. His works were greatly influenced by the philosophy of German thinker Immanuel Kant. Coleridge's basic premise on which all his poems are based is the faculty of imagination. Like Kant, Coleridge sees "imagination as a faculty which unites what we receive through our senses with the concepts of our understanding" (Habib 443). Coleridge considers 'imagination' as the supreme faculty, but he puts 'reason' on even higher pedestal than imagination. According to him imagination constitute, sense and understanding and reason consists of sense, understanding and imagination. Coleridge's thought on

Kant believes that "imagination reproduces the information given to us by our senses into images" (Habib 372). Kant says understanding of the external world and even the world within, helps to enhance the power of imagination. Kant gives the classification of two types of imagination. The imagination can be 'Reproductive'. This kind of imagination "operates in our normal perception, combining the various data received through the senses into a unifying image, which can then be conceptualized by the understanding". (Habib 446). Coleridge refers to this kind of imagination as the "primary imagination". The primary or reproductive imagination helps in organizing the data or stimuli received by the senses into the concept of understanding. This is actually the human perception of the world. This imagination is fragmentary in nature. These are the mere images formed on the mind, which needs to be processed through understanding. The primary or reproductive is the raw perception of the world through senses. Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan" is followed by a subtitle "A Vision in a Dream, a Fragment". Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan" is a fragmented dream poem. In real life Coleridge was severely ill. He had a dreadful experience of the pain of gouty arthritis. To bear this severe pain, he used to take opium. Once, after taking some opium he grew drowsy while reading a passage about a court of Kubla Khan from Samuel Purchas's "Pilgrimage". He composed the mental representations of this poem in a dream-like state. When he woke up he organized these mental representations into an organic whole which is understandable. The mental representations were in fragmentary form. The images he formed in his mind in the dream-like state were only the perception of the world through senses. These images were the primary imagination because these images were perceived by the senses and were in fragmented form. There was no organized form of these images when they were present in the mind of Coleridge. It was only when Coleridge woke up from his dream-like state and wrote these verses, that these images gained an appropriate form. The primary or reproductive imagination can be the

"symphony and song" of the Abyssinian maid in Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan". The sweet melody of her song which is perceived by the poet through senses acts as a raw data. This is the primary imagination of Coleridge. Similarly, in his yet another poem namely, "Dejection: An Ode", Coleridge laments on his inability to organize the raw data which he perceived through his senses into a concept of understanding. Though, he perceives the stimuli present in the nature around him but these stimuli are not fierce enough to stir his imagination. It is only through imagination that the stimuli are converted into mental images. Poet laments on his inability to convert these sense perceptions into the form of mental image. The poet also does not possess the power to convert the mental images into the secondary imagination. The fragmented data he perceives from the surrounding do not stir his emotions. His sadness deprives him of his power of imagination. The external stimuli do not stir his imagination. Therefore, he is unable to convert his primary imagination into the secondary imagination, which is the mark of poetic genius.

According to Immanuel Kant the imagination can be productive and spontaneous. This kind of imagination has the power to create a new surprising form by assimilating different mental representations into an organic whole. Through productive imagination one can experiment with their mental representational powers. This freedom and spontaneity gives way to the romantic thought. Kant says that the imagination should not be entirely free. It must follow the laws of understanding. It should not go beyond the power of understandability. There must be harmony between understanding and imagination. There should be a "willing suspension of disbelief" (Coleridge). One must be compelled to believe the unbelievable in a work of art. There must be freedom of imagination but that freedom must not violate the laws of understanding. This spontaneous or productive imagination is referred by Coleridge as "secondary imagination" or "poetic imagination". "It is the secondary imagination which is poetic: like Kant's

productive or spontaneous imagination, this is creative and forms new syntheses, new and more complex unities out of the raw furnishings of sense-data" (Habib 446). The primary imagination is common to all people. It is the mental representations that an ordinary individual forms when he/she perceives the stimuli through senses. But the secondary imagination is specific to the poetic genius of the poet. Every ordinary individual cannot convert his raw perceptions into a new surprising form. The poet is gifted with this genius to convert the sense perceptions into a beautiful work of art. The poet has this power to convert fragmented mental images perceived through senses into a completely new form. He does so by creating new combinations of mental images. This secondary or poetic imagination is dependent on primary imagination for its raw material. The creativity of secondary imagination is based on the raw perceptions of primary imagination. Secondary imagination is ultimately rooted in the actual perception of the world in a newer form. This is depicted in Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan". Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan" is a fragmented poem. Coleridge perceives the raw image of the "A stately pleasure-dome", in his dream. His secondary imagination is his art of creation. He gives almost a newer and divine form to the palace of Kubla Khan. The account of his dream, manifested in his poem "Kubla Khan" is the work of secondary imagination. Poetic imagination is at its climax when in the end he says that if he could revive the sweet melody of Abyssinian maid in his heart then through his poetic imagination he-

would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! Those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,

For he on honey-dew hath fed,

And drunk the milk of Paradise (Coleridge).

Through the use of his poetic imagination or productive imagination, Coleridge claims to build the same magnificent palace in the air which Kubla Khan ordered to build in the past in reality. In the poem "Kubla Khan", Coleridge says that through his poetic genius he can build a palace in air which will be even more magnificent than what he saw in his dream. The palace which he saw in his dream acts as a primary imagination for Coleridge. The palace which he claims to build is his secondary imagination which will have that same "sunny dome!" and "those caves of ice!" (Coleridge). The palace built by Coleridge will not be in concrete form like that of Kubla Khan instead this palace will be made by Coleridge's poetic imagination in the form of a beautiful work of art. This palace will be built in the form of words. This palace will have a picturesque element which can be imagined by the reader. Coleridge's poetic genius will create a beautiful palace in the minds of the readers. This visual imagery will compel the reader to form that magnificent palace in the air through his imagination. Coleridge laments on his loss of this poetic imagination in his poem "Dejection: An Ode". He rightly asserts that the tranquil night with serenity and calmness all around does not stir his productive or spontaneous imagination. The pacifying, soothing and peaceful beauty of nature does not possess the power to "startle this dull pain" which is ingrained in poet's heart. Therefore, the poet urges for the storm to occur so that his imagination may revive and works wonders for the mankind. Poetic or secondary imagination is the mark of poetic genius. The loss of this poetic imagination robs Coleridge of his genius which is specific to the poets. Sadness ingrained in his heart deprives him to assemble the raw perceptions into something new and surprising. The raw perceptions which are acquired by the senses, forms a mental image on the mind of the poet. Kant calls this mental representation as the reproductive imagination and Coleridge calls this as the primary imagination. Coleridge in his poem "Dejection: An Ode" laments on

his inability to convert this primary or reproductive imagination into secondary or productive imagination. The "tranquil night" which is calm and repose; "Unroused by winds" does not provide the poet with the strong stimuli which can be perceived through his senses. Even if the stimuli are perceived by his senses, then also these stimuli are not strong enough to stir Coleridge's secondary imagination.. The poet wants a storm to occur so that may be that would stir his emotions and enrich his poetic imagination. He wishes that the storm shall "startle this dull pain" and he can restore his productive imagination. He laments at his inability to create admirable work of art in the form of poetic creation.

Romantic writers and many literary figures of the late nineteenth century followed Kant's philosophy. "To take a direct interest in the beauty of nature, asserts Kant, is always the "mark of a good soul" (Habib 377). Romantic thought is always preoccupied by the beauty and serenity of nature. They see divine powers in nature. Therefore they seem to follow Kant to a larger extent. Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* suggests that when we receive sensations from the nature, then these sensations took a form which "contain, as it were, a language in which nature speaks to us and which seems to have a higher meaning" (qtd. in Habib 378). Coleridge sees a meaning in nature. He thinks as if the nature always speaks your inner feelings and always empathizes with you. This aspect of divinity in nature is brought about by Coleridge in his poem "Dejection: An Ode". The sadness running in the blood and heart of the poet is communicated by the dullness and calmness of the nature. He says that only storm can "lift the smothering weight from off my breast". He thinks that nature is able to understand his inner thoughts. Therefore, his only hope lies with the nature. The nature can speak of the inner feelings of the poet heart through storm. This view of nature communicating to man is visible in yet another romantic poet, namely, Percy Bysshe Shelley. In the poem "Ode to the West Wind", the sensation of the West Wind took a form in which nature

communicates a higher meaning to man. In his poem "Ode to the West Wind", the West Wind seems to speak of the poet's boyhood days, when he was as ferocious and as strong as the West Wind. Poet seems to seek a higher and divine meaning in nature.

Kant believes that art produces pleasure through the presentation of sensations. He also believes that art must fulfill its purpose. The purpose ingrained in the poetic creation of "Kubla Khan" is to build the same "stately pleasure-dome" through imagination in the minds of the readers. Coleridge succeeds in building that palace through his art of poetic imagination. His words give speech to his thoughts. The visual imagery of the magnificent palace comes in front of the reader's mind while reading the poem. "Dejection: An Ode" is basically a mournful lamentation on poet's loss of poetic imagination. This is main reason due to which poet is preoccupied with the feeling of sadness. This utter sadness does not allow poet to feel anything apart from sadness. Nevertheless, poet is happy to see his friend happy, who is also the source of joy for others. He says that joy is an emotion, whose beauty has such powers that it can create a "new Earth and new Heaven". The poet gives a stark contrast between the two opposing emotions or feelings. In the end, he says that though his heart is full of sadness but he wishes eternal joy to his friend. The purpose of this work of art is to wish for eternal joy of his friend. The utter sadness ingrained in the heart of the poet has deprived poet of his sleep, but he wishes for his friend:

With light heart may she rise,

Gay fancy, cheerful eyes,

Joy lift her spirit, joy attune her voice;

To her may all things live, from pole to pole,

Their life the eddying of her living soul!

O simple spirit, guided from above,

Dear Lady! Friend devoutest of my choice,

Thus mayest thou ever, evermore rejoice. (Coleridge)

The purpose of the poem is exhibited in the last lines of the poem. The poet aims to wish eternal wish and joy to his friend. Though his heart is full of sadness but he wishes for the eternal joy of his friend.

Kant believes that art is imitation of the already existing form. The work of art must be abstracted from the original product of art. The art is given a newer form by the employment of genius. "Kubla Khan" is the poem whose idea is derived by Coleridge from Samuel Purchas's work "Pilgrimage". Coleridge has imitated this idea in a newer way. Similarly, in the poem "Dejection: An Ode", Coleridge's idea of the Moon's ominous foreshadowing which gives the indication of the upcoming storm is derived from the "Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence". The imitation of these ideas by Coleridge conveys the Kantian philosophy with which the entire Romantic Movement is guided. Kant says that every art is an imitation of the actual art. He asserts that the genius of the artist lies in its creation into a newer form. Coleridge succeeds in his poetic creation. He gives a newer and surprising form to the imitated idea.

Kant defines aesthetic idea as "a presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which...no [determinate] *concept*, can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely" (qtd in Habib 379). Aesthetic idea is the idea which gives pleasure. This idea is the representation of the imagination which cannot be understood within the framework of language. The presentation of the imagination by Coleridge in the poem "Kubla Khan" requires much thought to completely understand the idea or essence behind the words. The aesthetic idea cannot be directly conveyed through the medium of language. It is left on the reader's imagination to understand the idea which is not completely expressed by the artist. The aesthetic idea involves much thought process on the part of the readers as the structure of language cannot reveal the essence of the aesthetic idea completely. We can only get a glimpse of the poet's

intent but the language cannot express the aesthetic idea completely. Similarly, in the poem "Dejection: An Ode", we cannot completely understand the sadness ingrained in the poet's heart. We can only understand a part of it because of the subjective and abstract nature of the aesthetic idea. Kant says that "imagination is powerful in creating "another nature" out of the material that actual nature gives it." (Habib 379). The natural material available to Coleridge was Samuel Purchas's "Pilgrimage". Through his imagination, he creates a new nature in the form of his poem "Kubla Khan". He almost gave a supernatural divinity to the palace of Kubla Khan with "A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!". "Hence genius consists in a peculiar combination of imagination and understanding" (Habib 379).

Kant asserts that our experience is converted into knowledge when the raw material of sensation is worked upon to convert it into the finished product of thought. In the first stage the coordination of the sensations takes place which consequently forms the perception on human mind. This is how the experience is gained. Then these perceptions are coordinated so as to develop a thought which consequently leads to the attainment of knowledge. Sensation is merely the awareness of the stimulus. When the sensation forms an image on the mind then it is called perception. The mental image is formed on the reader's mind in the poem "Kubla Khan" when Coleridge gives the description of the palace of Kubla Khan which he saw in his dream. The greenery surrounding the palace, the walls, the towers and the river Alp which ultimately sinks into the Subterranean sea, gives the reader a perception of these sensations. Reader can actually form a mental image through these sensations. He can actually visualize the magnificence of the palace and its surrounding. Coleridge also deals with the supernatural element with great dexterity. His mysticism is such that we are forced to believe in it. He calls this as "the willing suspension of disbelief" i.e. although the mysticism is beyond the comprehension of human mind, but the portrayal of ideas is such that we are forced to believe and visualize those aesthetic ideas.

The mysticism is not beyond the laws of understanding. We form the perception of even those ideas which we can never believe in reality. The mystic "chasm"; "A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!" and "Ancestral voices prophesying war!" are the ideas in which one can never believe in reality but Coleridge's art of poetic imagination or productive imagination compels us to form the perceptions of these sensations. These sensations eventually gets transform into the unified thought of knowledge. Kant says that sensation is the very beginning stage of experience. It eventually passes into experience.

Kant asserts that "only those sensations are selected that can be moulded into perceptions" (Durant 349). Coleridge in his poem "Dejection: An Ode" is aware of the calm and composed night, which means that he is able to feel the sensation of the tranquil night. But this sensation is not enough to form a perception on his mind as this sensation does not suit his purpose. The external stimuli are not in harmony with poet's mind as the poet is going through a great turmoil. Therefore, he urges for the sensation of the storm as he thinks that the ferocity of storm will only help him to form a perception on his mind. This perception will help him to order his thoughts and eventually acquire knowledge. Kant says that "Sensation is unorganized stimulus, perception is organized sensation" (Durant 352).

Kant proclaims that it is the mind, which coordinates the experience. This experience further helps in the unification of thought. The unified thought helps to acquire knowledge. Through this knowledge wisdom can be acquired. Kant believes that the world we perceive is very different from the actual world. Actual world is a thing in itself. The world which we perceive is always very different from the actual world because in it's experience it passes through the mode of sense and thought. "The moon as known to us is merely a bundle of sensations" (Durant 354) which is to say that our mental structure transforms these sensations into perception and these perceptions into conceptions or ideas. The result obtained is that "...moon is *for us* merely

our ideas"(Durrant 354). Hence, every object on the Earth is merely our conception of it. We form ideas of every object. We do not take the object as a "thing in itself", which Kant refers to as "noumenon". Noumenon is the actual object and phenomenon is the experience of that object. The distinction between Kant's notion of "noumenon" and "phenomenon" is same as the difference between "appearance" and "reality". This appearance means how the object appears to be and reality is the actual existence of an object in the original form. In the poem "Dejection: An Ode", the description of the new moon holding the old moon in it's lap conveys the idea that the worn out sadness will soon be replaced by happiness and joy. This is the conception of the poet when he saw the moon in the sky. Here, the actual moon is the "noumenon" and the poet's idea or experience of the moon is the "phenomenon". "Kant's greatest merit", says Schopenhauer, "is the distinction of the phenomenon from the thing-in-itself" (Durant 354). Similarly, the actual palace of Kubla Khan may be very much different from the way the poet describes it's magnificence in the poem. Also, as poetry is an object of art so, each reader will have a different conception of the palace. Each reader will visualize a different image of the palace in his mind. The process of sense and thought is different in every individual. Therefore, the conception of ideas of palace will also be different in each reader.

"The great achievement of Kant is to have shown, once for all, that the external world is known to us only as sensation; and that the mind is no mere helpless *tabula rasa*, the inactive victim of sensation, but a positive agent, selecting and reconstructing experience as experience arrives." (Durant 373). Kant says that it is productive imagination of the poet which presents the ideas to our senses with completeness. This is the genius on the part of the poet which leads towards the ideal totality. "Hence poetry can produce emotions which cannot be expressed by our ordinary, definite concepts, and it is poetry above all, according to Kant, which can manifest the power of aesthetics ideas". (Kant 183). Kant puts poetry on the highest pedestal as this is the only

art form which sets the poet's imagination free. Kant says that the wealth of thought cannot be completely put in the structure of language. Kant also asserts that though poetry is a "free play of imagination", but this play is proceeded in harmony with the laws of understanding. The role of imagination is "a willing suspension of disbelief". He considers world as the fundamental construction of our ideas. We construct the world in the way we want. Every individual is engaged in the intellectual construction of the world. "Kant's philosophy and aesthetics have had vast influence, especially on Romantic thought and Romantic conceptions of the literary imagination" (Habib 380).

REFERENCES

- [1] Bowie, Andrew. *German Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Print.
- [2] Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. "Dejection: An Ode." *Poetry Foundation*. 1802. Web. 27 October 2015.
- [3] "Kubla Khan, or, a vision in a dream: A Fragment." *Poetry Foundation*. 1816. Web. 27 October 2015.
- [4] Durant, Will. *The Story of Philosophy: The lives and Opinions of the Greater Philosophers*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006. Print.
- [5] Habib, M A R . *Modern Literary Criticism and Theory*. Australia: Blackwell, 2005. Print.
- [6] Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*. Trans. James Creed Meredith. Nicholas Walker (ed.). New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. Print.
- [7] Scruton, Roger. *A Short History of Modern Philosophy: From Descartes to Wittgenstein*. London and New York: Routledge classics, 2002. Print.
---. *Kant: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. Print.