

Events And Thoughts Affecting 20th Century Poetry**Dr. Vartika Raj****Associate Professor****Department of English****JDVM P.G. College****Kanpur****(Received:29March2020/Revised:10April2020/Accepted:20April 2020/Published:30April2020)****Abstract**

Since time immemorial, man has been expressing his feelings through his writings. These expressions have resulted from the society and events which take place in society. Socio-cultural and political events affect the human mind and form new psyche that is inherited by the supervening generations which constitute the current of the consciousness that flows over the age. Poetry is one such medium that reflects the consciousness of the age.

Key words: Poetry, War, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Great War.

Introduction

Modern poetry has its genesis in the events that took place in the twentieth century. The death of Queen Victoria in 1901 marked the culmination of the Victorian poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite poetry which pre-dominated during the latter part of the nineteenth century. The poetic consciousness, theme, styles and other constituents of poetry are often determined by the socio-cultural, political, economic events and other features causing those changes which a following era witnesses. At the dawn of the twentieth century the world notices many such changes which influence the poetic trends of the age.

The throne of Britain was ascended by as many as five monarchs – Edward VII (1901 – 1910), George V (1910 – 1936), Edward VIII (ascended and abdicated 1936), George VI (1936 – 1952), and Elizabeth II (reigning since 1952). Britain was the centre of industrial revolution and territorial expansion. It is said that the ‘sun never set upon the British Empire’ as it had its territories all over the world. However, the two wars it had to fight – the Great War of 1914 – 1918 and the Second World War of 1939 – 45 left it both politically weak and economically impoverished. In the political sphere, it had to shed itself of all its imperial assets in Asia and Africa. In the economic sphere, it had to face a competition not only from the other European countries but also the countries it had freed. Consequently, there was economic depression, poverty and unemployment all over. Nonetheless, it was still one of the most powerful economies of the world. The major change which took place in the political scenario in Britain was the rise of the Labour party which first emerged in the election of

1905 and was voted to power several times thereafter. This marks a swing to socialism in the country.

The Entire Europe was undergoing political and economic crises. Russia was in the grip of military civil unrest. The Russian revolution of 1917 was a result of two major revolutions (in February and October) which led to the end of Czarism and the coming to power of the Bolsheviks. The people of Russia were highly dissatisfied with the reign of Nicholas II (1868 - 1918) who had forced millions of peasants to participate in war. The immense loss of life, injuries sustained by peasants, deteriorating economy, civil unrest, and food shortages enraged the people only further. They completely lost their faith in the Czar. In February 1917, an estranged crowd of women workers, who had left factories, gathered on the streets of the Russian capital Petrograd to protest against food shortages; they were soon joined in by men and gradually it appeared that the entire populace had joined in to support the demonstrators. The Czar's officials ordered the army to take control of the situation and quell the demonstrators. The soldiers initially opened fire killing a large numbers of people but the protest did not subside and soon even the soldiers got united with the protestors to uphold their cause. This February Revolution led to the abdication of Czar Nicholas. The Duma or the Russian Parliament soon formed a Provincial government to occupy the void created by the removal of the Czar. Provincial government mainly comprised bankers, industrialists, capitalists, lawyers and landowners. All this while, the Petrograd Soviet which was a trade union of workers and soldiers had remained very influential. The Provincial Government vied with the Petrograd Soviet for control of the Revolution. The power now was in the hands of the weak Provincial Government and the Petrograd Soviet. However, even this Government could not prevent the Russian involvement in the war and faced outright opposition from the peasants and the workers who demanded the right to take their own decision. The soldiers as well as the peasants started claiming their lands. When the Provincial Government denied fair distribution of land, the peasants came forth to occupy land themselves. The Bolsheviks also educated the peasant to seize both land and power. In July 1917, the peasants challenged the Provincial Government but ended up defeated. Later, in October 1917, the Bolsheviks, with the armed workers, seized the post and telegraph offices, electrical works, rail road stations and the State Bank in Petrograd and found a new socialist Government with Lenin, at its head, who later became an epitome of socialism.

There were several other events affecting the entire world like the formation of the League of Nations after the Great War and the United Nations Organization after the Second World War

to ensure peace and cooperation in the world. The tremendous advancements in science, invention of nuclear weapons, and successful expedition to space also contributed to the world scenario. There was an ongoing struggle between the communist and the capitalist ideologies in several countries. This led to the formation of two major power blocks – the Anglo-American standing for the democratic way of life and the Russian representing the communist attitude. The world found itself aligned to these two power centres and there was an era of cold war. The intensity of the cold war kept increasing until the collapse of USSR in the late nineties. The communist ideology, at the end of 20th century, took a back seat and the world found itself under the Anglo-American power block with USA as its centre.

In the late eighties of the 20th century Iraq invaded Kuwait to capture its energy resources. America had to intervene as it was one of the biggest energy consumers of the world. The gulf war enraged the Islamic countries all across the world. This led to the rise of religious extremists, mainly from Islamic community. By the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the world faced a new problem in the form of terrorism in which different countries used the tactics of Guerilla warfare against the enemy nation. The world politics changed once again after the 9/11 attacks on twin towers in USA.

Socio-cultural and political events affect the human mind and form new psyche that is inherited by the supervening generations which constitute the current of the consciousness that flows over the age. There had been two seminal thinkers who influenced the life, society and literature in the twentieth century in the same way as Darwin did in the Victorian Age, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. While Karl Marx was a socio-political thinker; Sigmund Freud was the father of psychoanalysis. Though Karl Marx lived through the nineteenth century, his philosophies revolutionized the world in the twentieth century. Marx was the father of communism, an ideology which laid stress on the proletariat and denied *laissez faire*. Marx was of the view that the power should not remain vested in the hands of a few individuals; instead, it should be distributed among the working class. He emphasized on the supremacy of the community. His philosophy inspired the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the Chinese Revolution apart from dozens of smaller-scale revolutions across the world.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was primarily a doctor specializing in Physiology of Nervous System. While Karl Marx's philosophies focused mainly on the community, Freud theories dealt with the 'self'. Freud's theories have had their influence both on literature and literary critical theories. Freud conceived man as a biological composition, thus negating the parental and the familial bonds. Man, therefore, became an individual devoid not only of the familial

bonds but also of the human values which had sustained him over the ages. This loss was so overwhelming that it generated a perpetual quest for the roots.

Before man could overcome this feeling of loss, Nietzsche announced to the world, “God is dead, we have killed God” – a statement which not only added to human misery but also made him devoid of his own identity. The basic existence of Man stood questioned to such an extent that it was reflected in literature by the existential motif. This up-rootedness could also be attributed to the wars, revolutions and the political events during the century. With the advancement in science and technology and the growth of industry, people migrated in the hope of better opportunity, better career and better life. The political and social crises also accelerated the process of migration. The age-old family structure was shaken. The casualties and forced migration during and after war completely devastated the family structure. Families became homeless, children lost their parents, and wives lost their husbands. Women were forced to leave their domestic life in order to earn a living for their family. The infants and the aged were neglected. There also came about a loss in human values because it is a woman alone who is a reservoir of tradition and culture and imparts these to her children. The children felt devoid of the parental bliss, proper upbringing and guidance. This led to their feeling insecure, alone, and unwanted which was reflected in their personality and behaviour. The condition of orphans was even pathetic. The Great Depression that followed the Great War worsened the situation. People became jobless; there was an acute shortage of food. The entire social structure had tumbled down. There was desperation and unrest and many died of illness and starvation. There was a sudden increase in the suicide rates. Mass migration became a trend. People left their homes in search of jobs.

On account of socio-political and cultural upheavals and new discoveries in the area of human consciousness man revolted against the age-old social, political, and religious beliefs. As a result, he lost faith in human values, love and belongingness. He became an isolated individual limited to his carnal fulfillments. He underwent thorough pessimism, despair, estrangement, disappointments, envy, boredom, frustration, and isolation in a varied ways.

Conclusion

Poetry as an outpouring of deep-felt human emotion has been a prominent medium of expression of the overflowing current of human consciousness since the beginning of civilization on this planet. The poets of the 20th century who bore the traumatic effects of two Great Wars, Russian Revolution and the Great Depression in direct or indirect ways had their concerns in the re-moulding the psyche of their period. They expressed their age with a

mission to create a new sane society. There are war poets like Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke, Robert Graves, and Herbert Read. In his poem “Strange Meeting” Wilfred Owen writes:

Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were,
I am the enemy you killed, my friend
I knew you in this dark; for so you frowned
Yesterday, through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.

Similarly in his poem “A Doctor’s Journal Entry for August 6, 1945” Vikram Seth writes:

I called out, panic-stricken, to my wife
Pale, bloodstained, frightened, Yecko-san emerged,
Holding her elbow. ‘we’ll be fine,’ I urged —
‘Let’s get out quickly.’ Stumbling to the street
We fell, tripped up by something at our feet.
I gasped out, when I saw it was a head;

It becomes clear from the examples given above that poetry is influenced by the events and thoughts that prevail in the society.

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