



Reflection of the Notion of Materialism in the Selected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge- The Rime of the Ancient Mariner and Kubla Khan

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Abstract— *Materialism is a means by virtue of which people belonging to the consumer culture get satisfied with their present life and lifestyle. However, there is a parallel notion that the happiness gained through materialism is short lived. The existing literature that reflects on cultural materialism mainly intends to analyse the historical context of certain socio-political and cultural phenomena from a radical and rebellious point of view. Samuel Taylor Coleridge is among some of the noteworthy litterateurs whose works are rich in philosophical undertones. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore how Coleridge criticized materialism through the use of these philosophical undertones. After conducting the study, it was found out that Coleridge's works can be considered as tools for expressing the perils of materialism.*

Keywords— *Materialism, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Xanadu.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Understanding Materialism and Its Application in Literature

The term materialism has been defined from various angles by different scholars. The basic intention of materialism was to explain the purposes of individuals in the world. Materialism states that people search for materialistic happiness through the consumption of material possessions. Materialism is a means by virtue of which people belonging to the consumer culture get satisfied with their present life and lifestyle. However, there is a parallel notion that the happiness gained through materialism is short lived (Manchanda). In the longer run, it ceases the satisfaction that people gain from their life (Roberts et al.). This contradiction regarding the notion of materialism has become the fundamental theme of many literary works. Literature has depicted the notion of materialism from three angles; the first angle is that literature serves as a means of social control. The second belief is that literature serves as a tool for influencing the behaviour and attitudes of people on the parameters of

socially desirable and undesirable. The third angle is that literature depicts materialism by portraying how materialistic culture dominates a specific society (Milton C. Albrecht). In nutshell, literature that reflects on cultural materialism mainly intends to analyse the historical context of certain socio-political and cultural phenomena from a radical and rebellious point of view (Mambrol).

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Samuel Taylor Coleridge belongs to the genre of late 18th and early 19th Century litterateurs whose works combined both creative and critical faculties (Shalabi and Sadeq). His works deeply influenced many litterateurs of his age. He had a distinctive place in the world of literature particularly due to the unconventional themes and conversational patterns of his works. The everyday languages that Coleridge used in his poetries were rich in imaginative elements, poetic images and ideas that often challenged traditional beliefs (Solomonescu; Shalabi and Sadeq).

II. NEED OF THE RESEARCH

Materialism has been a topic of significance in the literary circle for generations. While some litterateurs have talked about the significance of materialism in human life in their literary products, others have been vocal about the ill effects of materialism and material culture on humans. Samuel Taylor Coleridge is among some of the noteworthy litterateurs whose works are rich in philosophical undertones. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore how Coleridge criticized materialism through the use of these philosophical undertones. Some of the selected works of Coleridge such as will be *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Kubla Khan*.

III. DISCUSSION

Kubla Khan is one of the masterpieces of Coleridge that was 1797 and published in 1816. It is said that Coleridge wrote this poem under the influence of opium. As distinctive of the literary style of Coleridge, *Kubla Khan* is also rich in dreamlike imagery and extravagant visions. The poet takes a critical view of dream, imagination and nature in this poem (Shalabi and Sadeq). One of the basic features of materialism is that selfish materialistic pursuits lead to loss of faith and degradation of religiousness (Durvasula and Lysonski; Dollimore). Thus, it can be said that *Kubla Khan* is a subtle call of Coleridge to return to religiousness and reinstate faith. The poem is rich in external symbols through which Coleridge renews the vision of the divine. Again, while mysticism is at the core of *Kubla Khan*, conversion into the image of God is at the heart of Coleridge's mysticism in the poem. The symbolic use of waterfalls, mountains, and caverns in *Kubla Khan* stands for the oriental landscape which facilitates the divine transformation of the soul (Hedley et al.). Thus, some lines in the poem read as,

*In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.*

*And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree
And here were forests ancient as the hills*(S. T. Coleridge).

These initial lines of the poem introduce the readers to an imaginary land named Xanadu. Since this study intends to understand how Coleridge criticised materialism and

questioned the fruitfulness of materialistic pursuits, it can be stated that the choice of the setting was deliberate. It was a strategy of the poet to criticise the prevailing societal culture but in an indirect manner. This trend was a common tendency about litterateurs whose works reflected significant social and cultural criticism. But the litterateurs used various techniques such as imaginary settings, calibrated situations and hypothetical incidents to express their views about the prevailing social scenario (Mohammad et al.; Albrecht). Specifically, in the case of Coleridge, the study of (O'Connell) reveals that a link between dream and poetry is a distinctive feature in the works of this poet. The reason is, Coleridge believed that on close reading of these lines, readers could understand that he attempted to establish that a poet is a dreamer who does not pass any judgement. Instead, he intends to make his readers dream so that they can wake up to the reality all around them at the first motion of their will and stop disbelieving. If this understanding of Coleridge's style is applied to the analysis of *Kubla Khan*, readers could understand that the poet has talked about the materialistic desires of a king who wanted a 'stately pleasure dome' at the city of Xanadu as symbol of the prowess of the king. Nevertheless, Coleridge simultaneously expressed the transitory nature of such materialistic desire through the phrase 'a sunless sea.' The next shift in the readers' attention is caused in the poem through the lines –

*But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover*(S. T. Coleridge)!

These lines are bound to create curiosity in the minds of the readers and make them wonder what could have been that factor which stopped the worldly prosperity and opulence of a powerful king like *Kubla Khan* all of a sudden. Coleridge uses mythical indications to criticise the futility of material gains in the next lines too where he writes,

*A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover*(Coleridge)!

In these lines, Coleridge juxtaposes words like holy with enchanted, waning moon with haunted and a woman with demon-lover. Thus, it can be interpreted from here Coleridge intended to express that a supposedly holy place that is filled with all the material extravaganzas will lose

its sheen after some time and become a haunted deserted land where the sun, which is symbolic of the opulence of a king, would transform into a waning moon. Even the aesthetic beauty of a woman would fade with her death and turn her turn into a deceased soul who craves for her demon lover. Basically, this poem by Coleridge intends to draw the attention of the readers towards some distinctive loopholes of materialism through juxtaposed symbols throughout the poem, like “*stately pleasure-dome*,” “*caverns measureless to man*”, “*gardens bright with sinuous rills*”, “*intense bearing trees*”, etc. with “*sunless sea*”, “*savage place, holy and haunted*”, etc. It can be stated that through these imageries, Coleridge intended to highlight a fundamental truth regarding materialism; even though materialistic pleasures garner fulfilment and satisfaction, it is short-lived in nature. Materialistic desires are the manifestation of death based insecurity when individuals make futile attempts to secure their identity, existence and power through the exhibition of material possession (Kasser; Kasser and Sheldon). Thus, returning to analysis *Kubla Khan*, it will be found that Coleridge has shown how the king wanted to immortalize himself through the construction of “*a stately pleasure-dome*”. But his death has shattered the plan, and now whatever exists in its place is hallucination. Thus, Coleridge writes,

“...I 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(Coleridge).”

Similarly, a close analysis of another poem of Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, will also show how the poet has criticized the futile outcome of materialism through the combination of both supernatural and natural elements. From the point of view of materialism, the core aspect that is emphasized in this poem is materialistic desires influence selfish greed and destroys ethics and morality (Mead and Stuppy). The pursuit for materialistic gains also makes people depressed and feels lonely at a point in time. These inferences can be established by reading some of the specific parts of the poem. For instance, in the initial reading of the following few lines of the poem, readers would find that a spooky and lonely mariner stops the wedding guest and forces him to listen to his story. The guest does not accompany him willingly. Rather, he stays back out of fear. So, the lines read,

*It is an ancient Mariner,
And he stoppeth one of three.
'By thy long grey beard and glittering eye, ... (Coleridge)*

*...The Wedding-Guest stood still,
And listens like a three years' child:
The Mariner hath his will... (Coleridge).*

*The Wedding-Guest sat on a stone:
He cannot choose but hear;
And thus spake on that ancient man,
The bright-eyed Mariner(Coleridge).*

Through the narration of the story of the mariner, Coleridge portrays that the mariner set his journey into the seas in a fair-weather which suddenly changed and became unfavourable,

*The Sun came up upon the left,
Out of the sea came he!
And he shone bright, and on the right
Went down into the sea...(Coleridge).*

*...And now the STORM-BLAST came, and he
Was tyrannous and strong: ... (Coleridge).*

*...The ice was all around:
It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,
Like noises in a swound(Coleridge)!*

Thus, while the fair weather can be considered as the symbol of prosperity, Coleridge has also depicted its transitory nature through the arrival of the storm blast. While the bright sun can be symbolic of opulence, the arrival of the storm blast and the sudden transition of the bright weather into icy cold depicts the short-lived nature of this opulence. If this is analysed from the materialistic point of view, it can be said that these instances depict materialistic magnificence as short-lived and bound to fade after a time (Kasser). In the next part of the poem, Coleridge introduces an Albatross whose arrival changes this dismal weather and makes it bright and sunny again. Here, initially, the Albatross is presented as a Christian symbol of religiousness and faith because the mariner concludes that the arrival of the bird has made the weather favourable again (Coleridge; Lee). Another feature of

materialism is that selfish desires and craving for opulence gradually causes loss of faith and deterioration of religiousness (Fisher; Hansen and Kainz). This loss of faith is depicted in the poem through the instance where readers could find that the mariner kills the Albatross, which was initially interpreted as a good omen for him, and hung it around his neck. Coleridge also showed through the poem that the mariner killed the Albatross under the influence of some sinister spirits who haunted him in his dreams and influenced him to do so. Thus, the lines read,

And some in dreams assurèd were
Of the Spirit that plagued us so;
Nine fathom deep he had followed us
From the land of mist and snow(Coleridge).

And every tongue, through utter drought,
Was withered at the root;
We could not speak, no more than if
We had been choked with soot(Coleridge).

Ah! well a-day! what evil looks
Had I from old and young!
Instead of the cross, the Albatross
About my neck was hung(Coleridge).

IV. CONCLUSION

The study intended to understand how Coleridge criticised materialism and pursuit of materialistic gains through his poems, Kubla Khan and The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. After conducting the study, it was found out that Coleridge's works can be considered as tools for expressing the perils of materialism. Coleridge mainly depicted these outcomes of materialism in the form of loneliness, futile hope for immortality, un-fulfilment and loss of faith and hope. The key literary techniques that Coleridge used for the purpose include imagery, symbolism, plot construction and setting.

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