

REALISM AND ROMANTICISM: THE POST 9/11 PSYCHE AND OUTLOOK

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The time period typically associated with the Romantic Age in literary history was characterized by unrest, disorder or insubordination, courtesy the French Revolution. At such a juncture the agenda of the Romantic poets to embrace idealism through the voicing of subjective emotions and feelings is often questionable.

The 21st century witnessed the tumult of a nation after the 9/11 incident, paving its way to an economic recession. Dwelling deep into the trauma of 9/11, writers around the globe are dubious about what the next sentence should be! A trembling imagination and a shivering reality came upon all the writers/poets of the world. This sudden gust of “reality” sugar-coated with the sensation that a disaster of such a massive scale could happen anywhere in the world, at any given time has disoriented not only the literature post 9/11 but also the canon before.

This paper attempts to question the meaning of the words “romanticising” and “reality” by juxtaposing and contrasting selected works of William Blake, William Wordsworth and P. B Shelley with the counter realistic post-modern theory of “realism”. Is there “reality” in “Romanticism” or Is “Romanticism” just a mere way of escapism? Can certain alternative paradigms of safety whistles be derived/ deciphered from the three chosen poets that could alter the understanding of the post 9/11 world? Has the adherence to the 21st century perceived “reality” barricaded us from imagining the “Romantic”? The prophetic nature of the three poets discusses the fluidity of power, subvertive structures of ethics/values and the repetition of history. For these reasons, a perusal of these poets is a necessity in the post 9/11 era. It is in such a context in the Post-modern era, which could be argued to be similar to the 18th Century England in its socio-political vibe, a re-reading of the Romantic poets hold its value.

This paper is an outcome of a consuming fear, a lingering trauma and not an intellectual dilemma. On the 11th of September 2001, an unimaginable event in the United States of America shook the foundations of human belief system, subverted the power structures and dismantled all constructed and practiced formulas of ethics. The 21st century thus witnessed the tumult of a nation, the United States of America, after the 9/11 incident and paved its way to an economic recession.

The wave of American Realism in literature that stressed hard to depict a contemporary view of what was happening; an attempt at defining what was real and accessible now stood at a dead end. All the knowledge that we have of the world is the knowledge of history, we remain incredibly naive on the details of our future. For this reason the word “before”, is a vista through which history is elucidated. I believe, at this juncture, at the death of articulating the Real, a retrospection of the antithetical past- of the Romantics holds its relevance or is the tale of the

Shelley, the Wordsworth and the Blake just a reverie of the past? This paper attempts a juxtaposition of Realism and Romanticism through the perspective of a post 9/11 psyche.

In today's post 9/11 world, is Romanticism, which is primarily an attitude towards life and secondly a time period that produced literature of a certain school contextual? Has the post 9/11 events disillusioned mankind in his search for an “unattainable” romantic ideal?

For the appropriate cognition of the argument of this paper, a proper discernment of the post 9/11 psyche and the idea of how our psyche affects our perspective is mandatory. The theories of postmodern subjectivity outrightly deny the existence of an autonomous self. “This question of the subject and the living ‘who’ is at the heart of the most pressing concerns of modern societies,” remarked Derrida. “Who am I?”, is easily one of the most philosophically tangled question, the postmodern man has made an attempt to answer. The theories of subjectivity that have dominated the last thirty years of literary and cultural studies all agree on one thing. They reject the idea of the subject as a completely self contained being that develops in the world as an expression of its own unique essence. The self, it is mostly argued, is a constructed product of an incorporation of choice on the external stimulus. The 9/11 incident is one thus stimulant and this paper for its proper rendering reads the 9/11 incident as a cultural point of destabilization. The result is an effervescent trauma. Along with the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon that was under fire, the trusted immunity, innocence and the great image of the United States of America was also under threat. The rest of the world was awestruck at the idea that such an influential nation could also be attacked. This notion of trauma, the feeling of a nearing apocalypse rampaged its way into the psyche of the post 9/11 citizen.

The post Freudian theory defines effects of trauma into two, says Heinz Hartman, “One is the traumatic event, registered rather than experienced. It seems to have by passed perception and consciousness, and falls directly into the psyche. The other is a kind of the memory of the event.” The residues of a traumatic event hold its grip in the psyche of a person, modulating, regulating and at times also altering perspectives. As far as 9/11 incident is concerned, the collective trauma of the innocent people's state of mental unpreparedness aggravated by the merciless exploitation of the initial trauma and the fundamentally inhuman nature of the military establishment has created the strange perpetually traumatic psyche of ours. Inconspicuously, W.H.O has recorded a 53 percentage increase in depression among the youth of The United States of America and other European countries after the 9/11 incident.

The etymology of the word “trauma”, roots backs to 15th century when it was used to refer to “any external wound”. It was only in the 17th century Greece, the word was attached with the meaning of an “internal destabilisation”. The word was widely used in the medical and legal register of the 18th century England, as the country was traversing through the glorious industrialization. Interestingly, the century also saw the advent of the Romantic ideal.

Delving deep into the trauma of 9/11, writers around the globe are dubious about what the next sentence should be courtesy the unprecedented, inexpressible and irrational nature of the incident. The post 9/11 Literature came face to face with a “Semiotic Void”. Syllables, words and ideas dripped away from the clutches of poets/writers. This sudden gust of “reality” sugar-coated with the sensation that a disaster of such a massive scale could happen anywhere in the world, at any given time has disoriented not only the literature post 9/11 but also has tilted the understanding of the pre 9/11 literature.

A retrospect of the evolution of literary movements makes it clear that history repeats. Acts of valour, cries of vengeance and deeds of horror are just entities in the chain of action, each taking its course to complete, nevertheless striking at the precise moment to rekindle a once

foretold history. The 9/11 incident hence provides a challenging yet feasible medium to compare and contrast Romanticism and Realism.

Forty years earlier, Philip Roth, an eminent writer from the United States of America whose novels portrayed middle-class Jewish life, lamented the difficulty of the novelist's ostensible obligation to “understand, describe, and then make credible, much of American Realism.”

The quest to verbalize reality as we live it, was a key ingredient in the advancement of the literary theory and also a very hefty endeavor for which the solution most often was a Cretan's labyrinth. Realism aimed to designate a recurrent mode, as posited by M. H. Abrams, in various eras and literary forms, of representing human life and experience in literature. What sort of literature can now truly represent human life after 9/11 or even for that matter articulate the 9/11 narrative? Such questions hit the foci of the establishment of Realism, and marked the failure of realistic articulation and a halting of Realism as an attitude towards life.

More often than not, tragedy and despair calls forth the tools of metaphor and incandescent imagery. Agony acts as a cause to a concomitant need to encrypt and prolong the process of meaning making because agony in realistic terms fail to deliver the meaning if said in crispy, short sentences. This is one reason as to why the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States of America after the 9/11 incident, overtly opined “We believe the 9/11 attacks revealed four kinds of managerial failures but primarily a failure of imagination” or for the instance Herman Melville, the American short story writer concluded his short story *Bartleby, the Scrivener* with the popular lines “Imagination will readily supply the meager recital of poor Bartleby's interment”. A direct allusion to imagination, which is strictly antithetical to realism, to come and assist the readers in the discernment of reality. A rather interesting allusion isn't it? A hope that imagination- a proto Romantic ideal would supplement the diring need for realism. The Romance is said to present life as we would have it to be- more picturesque, fantastic, adventurous, or heroic than actuality; Realism, on the other hand, is said to represent life as it really is. The Semiotic Void created by the 9/11 incident seeks new forms of expression.

The advent of Realism in our cognition of culture has deprived us from the basic human intuition to “imagine”. However, the 9/11 incident triggered a feeling among the American citizens to “imagine”, but to imagine the other. The knowledge of the “other” does only one thing precisely; it helps us to set a place for ourselves. Many Muslims and Sikhs were victimized, after being “imagined” as suspicious and possessing the killer motive. The post 9/11 United States of America developed a radical sense of imagination, one reason as to why the idea of “fantasy” is hugely applauded by the youth, showing distaste towards reality.

The element of prophetic voice much adored by the Romantics of Europe is in much demand in the present scenario too. Lines like “And ‘mid this tumult Kubla heard from far Ancestral voices prophesying war!” of Samuel Taylor Coleridge can now be seen not as a mere opium induced poesy but as rich and vivid sense of knowledge of the possible unreal. The prophetic nature of literature much lacked by the heralders of American Realism can now, after the 9/11, easily find and associate with the premonition and predictions of the Romantics. Realism lacked prophecy and Romantics adored it. The silence of the realist was over ruled by the echoing refrains of the Romantics. The conflict is between accepting the real and seeking the ideal.

The lines of P.B Shelley's “Ozymandias” resonate in the ear of a reader of literature whenever the thought of the burning world trade centre hovers around. Being a product of the post 9/11 psyche, my perspective of the poem has changed so much so that, when in the last

lines, Shelley tells that “No thing beside remains. Round the decay, Of that Colossal Wreck, boundless and bare, The lone and level sands stretch far away.” I am forced to understand that the ruins as the glory of the desert. The contemporary becomes boring until it falls down. Even though the sculpture of the king is broken down, the ruin is still at the centre of the desert, still encompassing all that surrounds it. A glorification of ruins is the chief feature of the Romantic ideal but unlike the nuances of Realism, Romanticism always invokes a movement, a shift, a traversal in search of the ideal. A juxtaposition of Romanticism and Realism under the viewpoint of post 9/11 psyche establishes that Realism fails to articulate trauma in its complete essence whereas Romanticism successfully encompasses trauma in its preoccupation with the idea of ‘pursuit’. For the pursuit, the attempt, the Lyrical Ballads seeking and the striving triggers man forward. Romanticism stands as a symbol of this movement, whereas Realism represents the image of Tantalus. Of course Romanticism is an ideal and the search for that ideal by its very nature will be fruitless. However, in the search of the Romantic Ideal, the searching is the manifestation of Romanticism. If we continue to strive for an ideal, whatever it maybe, the better the world will be. The post 9/11 literature thus is a clarion call for the publication of the next. Not to forget that the first Lyrical Ballads was a direct repercussion of the French Revolution, the Industrial revolution and much bloodshed, a somewhat similar milieu as of today.

One prime limitation of this paper is the attribution of the aesthetics derived from trauma of the 9/11 literature often designated by the presence of 'traumatic' elements, such as repetition, flashbacks, prolepsis and satiating images of disaster. The argument presented in this paper is based on an assumption of not considering literature of that kind. Secondly, even though I have placed Romanticism and Realism in the same array, special attention was taken not to formulate this argument on the basis of specific works but to consider the general characteristics of both the movements hugely due to the spatial limitations. I was not outrightly rejecting Realism but only advocating a readjustment of its nuances in the post 9/11 context; a necessity to be context sensitive. Realism ought to be of that sort which would reveal the interiority of the human mind in crisis, a blend of psychological and social realism. If such a combination of realism also fails in addressing the trauma, what are the alternative schools of thought that could? Is realistic fiction/poetry incapable of adequately conveying the crisis at all? Will man also end up questioning the authenticity of the crisis since the contemporary narratives fail to represent it? Among all such confusion, doesn't only Romanticism offer us an intellectual standpoint to perceive the crisis?

“I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.” (Blake)

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