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ALDOUS HUXLEY
AS THE NOVELIST OF IDEAS

Dr. URJA MANKAD

Assistant Professor of English, VVP Engineering College, Rajkot



ABSTRACT

The current paper endeavours to highlight the variety of theme that Aldous Huxley has explored in his prominent writings. Aldous Huxley was very different: aloof, fastidious, profoundly a pessimist, upper class both by birth and disposition. His prolonged study of the mystics has convinced him that the mystical experience itself would lead the individuals to direct union with the Godhead, this can be experimentally verified; and his last works are almost all concerned, directly or indirectly, with an attempt to synthesize the existence into a comprehensive system, which he calls the perennial philosophy.

Key words: themes, good times, sex, boredom, salvation, spiritual quest, perennial philosophy

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Aldous Leonard Huxley was born in 1894, a son of Leonard Huxley, who was an editor of "The Cornhill magazine", and grandson of T.H.Huxley, the illustrious Scientist; Sir Julian Huxley, the biologist was his brother. His mother was Ann Arnold and he was thus connected, both on paternal and maternal sides with that distinguished intellectual aristocracy which was a dominant force in the late 19th century England. He was educated at Eton, and at Balliol College, Oxford; after leaving the university, he taught for a while at Eton, but soon he decided to devote himself to writing.

For those who were growing up during the 1920s, Aldous Huxley seemed unquestionably the most stimulating and exciting writer of the day. His style in itself was a novelty, highly wrought, yet extremely readable, deriving from unfamiliar models, and providing a refreshing contrast to that of older writers such as Galsworthy, Bennett and Wells. Huxley was an impact of an alert, penetrating and widely ranging intelligence. The effect was intoxicating like the Khockespotch that imaginary genius described in "Crome Yellow" (1921), Huxley had,

"delivered us from the dreary tyranny of the realistic novel: like Khockespotch, he preferred to study the human mind; not bogged in a social plenum', but 'freely and sportively bombinating' (06)

Huxley's erudition was encyclopaedic, yet he wore his learning lightly, with an off-hand, man-of-the-world air, which was entirely disarming. He was often, in those days, accused of intellectual snobbery and it is true that he was capable of referring such comparatively recondite figures as suggested the style of the contemporary gossip-writer.

His writings cover an enormous range not only of form but of subject-matter too, apart from his purely creative work, he wrote learnedly and perceptively of painting, music, science, philosophy, religion and a dozen other topics. His development falls roughly into three phases.

1. The earlier stories and novels were mainly satirical and were largely concerned with the debunking of accepted ideas and standards. Like T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Wyndham Lewis and others of his own or a slightly elder generation, he was profoundly affected by the progressive breakdown of 19th century ideals which had culminated in the First World War: and his predicament is reflected in these early volumes, in which the surface gaiety serves only to emphasize this underlying pessimism.
2. The second phase may be said to have begun with the publication of "Proper Studies" (1927), the first of his books to be explicitly serious in intention. Thenceforward, though he continued to write novels and short-stories, he assumed a more responsible role, that of the teacher, the professional philosopher, and can no longer be regarded as primarily a novelist, whose chief purpose remains to entertain.
3. The third and final stage in his development can already be inferred from the works of this period. Though by temperament a sceptic, Huxley always, recognized within himself, the need for some kind of religious approach to the universe. Throughout his career as a writer, he showed a recurrent interest in the phenomena of mysticism, but Huxley, with his greater intellectual honesty, refused to abandon his empirical attitude in such matters, and his approach to his later philosophical position has been cautious in the extreme. His prolonged study of the mystics has convinced him that the mystical experience itself would lead the individuals to direct union with the Godhead, this can be experimentally be verified.

Despite homogeneity, of his writings, he remains a strangely paradoxical figure; an intellectual who profoundly distrusted the intellect, a sensualist with deep-seated loathing for bodily functions, a naturally religious man who remained an impatient rationalist.

In his case, the novelist of ideas easily turned into a novelist with a thesis, a thesis that would become almost the anti-thesis of his starting point. Aldous Huxley elaborates a little nature of the book to be written:

A synthesis there undoubtedly must be, a thought-bridge that would permit the mind to march discursively and logically from telepathy to the four-directional continuum from poltergeists and departed spirits to the physiology of the nervous system. And beyond the happenings of the séance room, there were the events in the oratory and the meditation hall. (Huxley: 131)

There were five major concerns of Huxley. These are discusses below:

1. Good times:

In the Huxley's universe, a 'good time' covers a wide area. But always it is seen more under an aspect of a warning than an invitation to simple and natural delight.

The more deliberate of his pleasure-seekers are curiously unhappy and self-defeated.

In *Eyeless in Gaza*, Mary and Helen, mother and daughter, have the same lover, Gerry. The revelation strikes the daughter dead. This is an individual good-timer.

For the image of collective, compulsive good timers- 'always happy' as Huxley says- one has to go to the *Brave New World* (1932). Here is a Pavlovian conditioning or human engineering at work, now a familiar feature of world. Along with Soma, a brilliant pun, the citizens of the After Ford World State of Dictatopia have their choices of surrogates. The dispensing is however, not without dissenting voices, at least one, the noble Savage. The savage rejects the entire regime of what he calls lying happiness. That is, against the almighty state, he asserts his right to freedom. In these circumstances, it is but the right to be unhappy.

In retrospect, the search for happiness is seen as a step towards awareness. But Huxley's interest seems clinical.

2. Sex:

It is in *Antic Hay* (1923), that the sex theme reveals its cutting edge. Lypiatt, an early sketch of Lawrence, speaks of faith in the 'one reality'. Coleman picks up the phrase and gives it a typical twist.

'One reality', he repeats and reaching out a hand across the table and caressing his companion Zoe's bare white arm, adds, appreciatively, 'and that is callipygous'. Soon after he begins to chant his parody or pseudonym to "Reproduction, reproduction," But for meaninglessness undefined, he had to go to Myra Viveash again, 'we inherit Nil', that is how she sums up the modern predicament.

3. Conversion:

The source of happiness does not seem to lie in ethics and principles but in materialistic pleasure. The ironical theme indirectly emphasizes the need of emotional and spiritual uplift.

The conversion theme recurs and is developed in *Those Barren Leaves* (1927). There, Calamy, a sketch of the later Huxley, leaves Malaspina Place for a six-month experiment with truth of the contemplative life.

In *Point Counter Point* (1928), except the idealized Lawrence, sex is not the source of happiness to anyone. In *Brave New World* (1932), the situation is quite different and the problem of ethics and inhibition has been neatly got rid of. Sex or 'having' -to use the vogue word- is safe ceaseless. Only this does not go without a protest.

The conversion theme makes a re-entry in *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936). Through a series of flashbacks, journals or diaries, there is the evolution of the engage Huxley hero, Anthony Beavis. *After Many a Summer* (1939), marks another stage in the pilgrim's progress. While the California Joe Stoyte pursues erotica and rejuvenation stands there, at the other end, Propter, an uncompromising critic of a world given over to false values.

4. Boredom:

None can reach heaven without passing through hell. Boredom and diabolism precede holy living. In the meantime, as proper ruminates, "Men commit evil and suffer misery because they are separate egos caught in time" (135).

It seems that his earlier enthusiasm over life worship has subsided. Behind the surface of gaiety and diabolism- the moral issues make themselves more and more felt, especially from the middle period. In *Ends and Means* (1937), the chapter on belief begins with three questions:

- a. What do we want to become?
- b. What are we now?
- c. How do we propose to pass from the present position to the condition we desire to reach?

Huxley had once been fervent spokesman of the Blakean or Lawrentian cult of life of the senses. The enduring example of this mood or special pleading is 'Do What You Will' perhaps his most enjoyable work.

5. Salvation:

The axiological note, of 'ultimate purposes and organizations, had been struck far back. As Calamy tells the fellow guest at Mrs. Aldwinkle's Italian House Party: 'Salvation's not in the next world: it is in this. If one desires salvation, it is here and now'. "Also, it is not fools who turn mystics. It takes certain amount of intelligence and imagination to realize the extraordinary queerness and mysteriousness of the world in which we live". (Quoted by Ghose:137)

In *Time Must Have A Stop* (1945), Huxley echoes the perennial stance that there is only one corner of the universe where one can be certain of improving and that is one's own self. He is turning within. In spite of such traditional strategies, Huxley's special concern cannot be denied, as has been done by most Marxist critics.

Looking back upon the evolution of the intellectual, and his preparatio evangelica, what do we make of it? How shall we deal with this articulate, amusing, but agonized commentator of the contemporary scene, and his varying attempts at achieving wholeness and freedom, to guide us towards the sane society? The celebration, no longer absorbing, exacts a heavy price and affects his reputation as a novelist to an unusual degree. As Walter Allen has pointed out, Huxley's ideas were the machinery by which he projected the novel. But, unless

dramatized, the life of ideas, as Philip Quarles did not fail to notice, is that it is a made-up affair. This convicts nearly the whole of Huxley's career as a novelist, as the perpetrator of a series of made-up affairs. (Ghose; 139)

Aldous Huxley equipped the novel with brains. In the process, he forgot the body. The entirely inorganic quality of his technical innovations has not escaped notice. Theories about multiplicity of eyes, musicalization of fiction, and discontinuity have been exposed rather than illustrated or embodied.

As one man's strategy to put the bottom in again, the split-man's search for wholeness, it deserves more than a passing tribute. If ideas are not enough, men cannot do without them either.

6. **Spiritual Quest in the novels of Aldous Huxley:**

In *Point Counter Point* (1928) and *Brave New World* (1932), Huxley was concerned with the proper study of mankind in a fairly serious way. He considered men in the context of their personal conflicts and also in the context of social and political forces. This was according to the humanistic tradition in literature which was based upon the double approach of sociology and psychology. Huxley was conscious that the approach was not quite adequate to the problems of erring and suffering humanity. In all these novels, there are repeated references to serenity of mind and quiet contemplation. The spiritual solace which Huxley offers is essentially different from the solace offered by Wordsworth, Matthew Arnold or Tennyson. It is not Nature –worship of Wordsworth, neither the sweetness and light of Arnold, nor again case of Tennyson. It is a doctrine of rigorous discipline and intellectual awareness. His mysticism is not a sedative or a tranquiliser; it is a discipline and a way of life which has the keenness of a razor's edge.

The six novels of his latest phase are devoted to this spiritual quest for a unifying principle which would resolve the miseries and conflicts of life at its various levels. In the first of these novels, *Eyeless in Giza* (1936), it opens on the usual note of spiritual conviction that Prof. William Tindall calls it a 'religious novel'. Before the publication of this novel, Huxley was busy with pacifist activities. He was impressed by the Gandhian method of passive resistance, and in *Ends and Means* (1937), he discussed the approach with great length. The other influence under which he wrote the novel was the influence of Gerald Heard. In America, they both studied Yoga and Hindu-Buddhist Philosophy under the guidance of Swami Prabhavananda of the Ramkrishna Mission and it is possible, as Prof. Tindall suggests, that the portrait of Mr. Propter in *After Many A Summer* is modelled on Heard. It was as a result of Heard's influence that Huxley could develop his persona more and more along the positive lines of spiritual faith. The mystical approach of love and awareness based on a faith in the divine ground, was a more rational and satisfying creed. It influenced all the literary and intellectual work of his latest phase of writing. The next novel *After many A Summer* (1939) has been rightly described by Mr. Jocelyn Brooke as a "Comedy of Longevity". In *Brave New World* (1932), Huxley had presented the nightmarish picture of the future world of machines and technocracy. *Ape and Essence* (1949) is a brief futuristic novel describing the other alternative, atomic annihilation as a result of Third World War. It is a post-atomic vision of the future and though the theme may seem to justify Huxley's melodramatic treatment of it, the most gloating relish which he plies on the horrors somewhat diminishes the total impact of the story.

Some frequent themes in the works of Huxley with reference to the novels in particular are mentioned as follow:

In *The Genius And The Goddess* (1955), Huxley explores a situation which he had explored more than once that is the frequent combination of intellectual pre-eminence with a total inability to cope with the emotional demands of life. In *Island* (1962), Huxley returns once again to the theme of Utopia. A remote island, Pala, is populated by a community whose principles of government are founded basically upon Tantrik Buddhism. In contrast with *Brave New World*, this later utopian fantasy portrays a way of life, which many have found congenial. But Huxley, though he may have preferred the world of Pala to that of *Brave New World*, came to realize that such earthly paradises must prove finally helpless against the assault of industrialism and modern scientific techniques. This novel has, even for Huxley, who has never taken a very hopeful view of the future, a profoundly pessimistic tone. *Brave New World Revisited*, (1959), is a long

narrative in which Huxley reconsiders his prophetic novel of 1932. Many of his predictions came true, he points out, very much sooner than he expected and the outlook give little cause for optimism; yet it is our duty, he says, to resist the forces, which menace our freedom, even though we may be fighting a losing battle.

In 1946, appeared *The Perennial Philosophy*, a kind of anthology with an extensive running commentary drawn from the writings of the mystics, Huxley's purpose was to extract from the manifold aspects of the subject a kind of highest common factor, a system of philosophy which shall include yet transcend the various methods by which men have sought to attain direct communication with God. On the other hand, there can be no doubt whatsoever about the intellectual integrity of Huxley himself. His 'conversion' involved no intellectual surrender, no sudden act of faith; it was the result, rather, of a prolonged and critical investigation of the available evidence conducted with the caution and objectivity of a scientist.

It is far cry from *Limbo* to *The Perennial Philosophy*, yet Huxley's works a considered as a whole, reveal a remarkably consistent pattern of development. His earliest books, apparently so slight and even frivolous, contain the germs of his later and more serious productions. This internal cohesion is more surprising in view of Huxley's enormous range of interests, for the most part, whose ideas operate within far narrower limits or who have specific axe to grind.

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