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**MALCOLM LOWRY-A FLOWER BORN TO BLUSH UNSEEN**

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**ABSTRACT**

NO, my secrets are of the grave and must be kept. And this is how I sometimes thinks of myself, as a great explorer who has discovered some extraordinary land from which he can never return to give his knowledge to the world:.....”<sup>1</sup>

Clarence Malcolm Lowry (28<sup>th</sup> July, 1909-26<sup>th</sup> June, 1957) was an English poet and novelist who is best known for his 1947 novel “*Under The Volcano*” which was voted no. 11 in the Modern Library 100 Best novels list. Some critics consider this novel-*Under the Volcano*-to be one of the greatest of the century but it has never been fully appreciated.

But my present paper will focus not on the novels written by Malcolm Lowry but his short stories which have till now remained unexplored. Critics acclaimed Malcolm Lowry’s- “*Under the Volcano*” as a classic and focused all their attention on this novel. They seldom refer to his stories, treating them as if they are insignificant or an appendage, willingly tied to the idea of Malcolm Lowry as simply a novelist. I want to counter this misconception ruling the roost in literary circles. The stories of Lowry should not be pushed into the penumbra. The novels of Lowry presents a segment of life shrouded in darkness but this portrayal of the fractured portion of life is not in keeping with the declared objective of the novelist which is succinctly summed up in the statement: “The Voyage That Never Ends.” To Malcolm Lowry life is a voyage, a continuous voyage and any attempt by a reader to parcel out the integrated vision of the novelist into fragments, ignoring the whole picture emerging from his creative work inclusive of stories and Psalms and songs is not acceptable.

**KEY-WORDS:** Appreciate, acclaimed, appendage, fragments, voyage, integrated, inferno, collaboration, protagonist, perusal, acumen, oblivion, harmonious etc.

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Life in the novel of Heraclitus is like a stream and it is nothing but chasing a mirage on the part of a man who makes the vain endeavor of saying that this part of the purling stream is separate from that part because the stream has a protean fluidity.

To Malcolm Lowry, life is an iridescent spectacle and there should not be any forced demarcation. If a critic is of the view that Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* is a classic, it is not difficult to agree so far as it is the probing of the damnation of man. But Malcolm Lowry's vision has another vista to offer provided we have not put on blinkers on our eyes. *Under The Volcano* is a great novel. It is a voyage into the inferno, though journey through hell is not destination of the lost love. In the novel it is the world of the protagonist, George Fermin, and not the entire world of the author. The misunderstanding arises when do not make any distinction between Malcolm Lowry and George Fermin, the protagonist in the novel. The charge often laid at the door of Lowry is that his protagonist in the novel suffers from grievous flaw of becoming a projection of his own troubled soul.

"God, how pointless and empty the world is! Days filled with cheap and tarnished moments succeed each other, restless and haunted night's follows in bitter routine: the sun shines without brightness, and the moon rises without light. My heart has the taste of ashes, and my throat is tight and weary with weeping. What is a lost soul? It is one that has turned from its true path and is groping in the darkness of remembered ways..."<sup>2</sup>

So, I shall strive to open up a new path, traversing which we may take a look at the creative writings of Malcolm Lowry as a short story writer. A collection of short stories "*Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*" (1961), was published after Lowry's death. The scholar and poet Earle Birney edited Selected Poems of Malcolm Lowry (1961). He also collaborated with Lowry's widow in editing the novel *Lunar Caustic* (1968) for re-publication.

Even a documentary film was made on the life-story of this unsung hero. "*Volcano: An Inquiry into the Life and Death of Malcolm Lowry* (1976) is an Oscar-nominated National Film by Board of Canada documentary directed by Donald Brittain and John Kramer. It starts with the inquest into Lowry's "death by misadventure", and then moves back in time to trace the writer's life.

I shall try to take in the whole picture. The misunderstanding arises when we don't heed D.H.Larence's salutary critical principle in the evaluation of a work of art. Trust the Tale and the Teller. In his stories we find Lowry moving out of inferno and making for a new realm which pulsates with life though the throbbing of life may be of short duration or sometimes it has the promise of enduring love dealing a march over the evil forces bent on undermining the forte of a man's life.

"To say nothing of what you lose, lose, lose, are losing, man. You fool, stupid fool...You've even been insulated from the responsibility of genuine suffering...Even the suffering you do endure is largely unnecessary. Actually spurious. It lacks the very basis you require of it for its tragic nature. You deceive yourself."<sup>3</sup>

And

"For a time they confronted each other like two mute unspeaking forts."<sup>4</sup>

All the stories by Lowry which primarily constitute the area of my study have a new terrain, where the demon of Ravine and Barranea with their gaping mouth are ready to swallow man but Malcolm Lowry evolves the plot in such a manner that those passing through the treacherous terrain do not fall into the jaws of damnation. The novelist who in course of his novels *Ultramarine*(1933), *Under the Volcano*(1947), *In Ballast to White Sea, October Ferry to Gabriola*(1964), *Lunar Caustic* (1968) is groping in the darkness. He wants to have light which may dispel darkness closing in upon his universe but all in vain. Even in a Lowry classic like *Under the Volcano*, the protagonist George Fermin makes love to Yvonne but all overture is stillborn and fulfilment recedes, sinking into oblivion. But a slim story "*The bravest Boat*", through its title, is suggestive of the tenacity of a lover like Sigurd consummating his love with Austria: "*And it was to this shore, through that chaos, by those currents that there's little boat with its innocent message had been brought out of the past finally to safety and a home. But ah! All the storm, they had come through.*"<sup>5</sup>

In short the problem to be studied is to disentangle from each other the two sides of Malcolm Lowry's literary career:

1. Malcolm Lowry working in the genre of novels.
2. Malcolm Lowry working in the genre of short stories.

The short story Malcolm Lowry has written is in no inferior to his practice of the craft of novel. When Malcolm Lowry feels that his quest for positive values is against odds and that negative values have started predominating despite his wrestling with them. The sea-saw rhythm between good and evil in the novel gets loaded in favor of the latter and the author finds that the balance is tilted negatively and therefore he shifts from the craft of the novel to the craft of the short stories. Malcolm Lowry cannot stomach surfeit of evil in the novel and continues with the voyage of establishing equilibrium. He is seen arriving at the last story "*The Forest Path to the Spring*." and rounding of the collection of stories. Thus, the problem is quite pertinent in the context of the criticism of Malcolm Lowry because if we do not take the stories into account we have just one arc of circle and for want of remaining arc the circle remains incomplete and hence this research paper is an attempt in the direction of getting the whole which is an inclusive picture of life, assimilating into its fold good and evil in a harmonious state.

*"The short story was very appropriate for him as it is a highly complex form of literary art answering a different type of the felt need of its clientele...Owing to its brevity, concentration and its short compass, it can only presents a single segment of life, against the setting of a single situation. It emerges out of the peculiar mood of the artist which varies in range and variety...It is compounded of the same materials, furnished by life itself."*<sup>6</sup> Edgar Allan Poe has termed it as a prose narrative, requiring from half hour to one or two hours for its perusal. It has unity and brevity, singleness of emotion, original and lifelike theme and characters and plot revolves around a single incident or some problem.

A perusal of the foregoing research has given an intimation of the convincing argument in favor of entering the critical arena centering on Malcolm Lowry. This research has a quarrel with estimate of Malcolm Lowry based on his novels. It is because this study has painted the novelist in the blackest hue in stealing into the mind of the reader that Malcolm Lowry has a metaphysic of evil quite appalling and awful. My aim is not to present the fact what others say or write about Malcolm Lowry. Instead my endeavor is to scoop out the truth and bring it before the reader that Lowry was a significant novelist as well as a great story writer who was neglected till now as a good craft man in writing short story. I think that it is my moral duty to displays the stories of Malcolm Lowry before the world so that the people would know that Lowry was a heavy drunkard, novelist, poet, essayist as well as story writer. Because if a researcher or reviewer does not probe the entire corpus of the writing of an author, he does disservice to him.

Research is not the parroting of what others say about someone or something. The true end of research is the disinterested endeavour to scoop out the truth and bring it before it before the reader. If a researcher does not probe the entire corpus of the writing of an author, he does disservice to him. An artist buried in the graveyard does not come to make a rebuttal of falsehood being propagated about his works. In the novels Lowry has a perception and he wants to embody that vision in his work of art. We must not dictate terms to a poet like Baudelaire or a novelist like Graham Greene who, in many of their works, deal with darkness reigning in the psyche of man and the journey is into grace through damnation. The journey in Lowry's novels is no doubt through hell with momentary attempts at grasping for grace ending in utter futility. The stories I have referred to are designed for grappling with the intricacies of life mired in filth, squalor and despair and life also popping up with vigour and zest. All the stories of Lowry have this comprehensive sweep of putting the warring antinomies of life together in a small corpus of stories. A brief textual study of the stories bare out my contention:

- (a) "*The Bravest Boat*": The title is pregnant with significance. On the one hand it gives an insight into the theme of love weathering all storm and on the other hand it may give rise to a misreading of the story that it is a symbolic one denuded of the matrix of a specific situation. But the story is to be interpreted on both the planes-symbolic as well as realistic. Two lovers are there in Stanley Park in Vancouver. One is Sigard, a seaman embarking on a cruise and the other is Astrid, a beautiful, passionate girl. The story writer beautifully describes the natural scene against the backdrop of which the love drama is being enacted. The

boat is symbolic of a pair of lovers sailing through the rough sea buffeted by the tossing waves. It is likely that the boat of the lovers may capsize and the lovers may meet their watery grave. But the lovers are quite confident and both struggle against the tempestuous sea and reach the shore safely. It is love that is triumphant in the face of the perilous sea and strikes the keynote of the universe that Malcolm Lowry's will unfold.

- (b) *"Through The Panama"*: It is the second story and it is quite a long one. It runs into seventy- five pages and it normally does not have the size of a story. It is in form of a journal of Sigbogorn wilderness and from this a notion may be there that a journal is not the stuff of a story. It is the account of a journey by sea from Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada to Rotterdam. The person undertaking the journey is Malcolm Lowry himself. The narrator is the journeyman and he himself is involved in the tale and he invents another name Martin Trambaugh. It is narrator within narrator. The ship will pass through Panama and the journey through Panama breaks into two halves, one visited to Omen and the other wrestling of the journeyman with Omen or the demon. The story has got marginal glosses and they appear to be disconnected from the main plot. The allusion is also to S.T.Coleridge's sailor killing the Albatross, making expiation resulting then in his salvation. It is a tale told by Malcolm Lowry and Martin in great detail, based on guilt and expiation. The guilt is committed but salvation is also attained but this design is also attained but this design is not in the novel where guilt predominates over salvation.
- (c) *"Strange Comfort Afforded by the Profession"*: Like the first two stories, the third story is also a war with despair. The protagonist, Sigbogorn Wilderness, chooses two literary artists, Keats and Poe for his alter ego. He visits the room where Keats died and he also quotes lines from Poe. These two allusions are designed to highlight the despair and also the yearning for regeneration. Thus this story is also part and parcel of the Lowry universe different in contours from the Lowry universe in the novels. It is a universe either informed with life at places or at places trying to recapture what is missing in their lives.
- (d) *"Elephant and the Colossus"*: This is the fourth story in the "Hear Us O Lord.." sequence. Like the preceding stories it also deals with the theme of despair stalking the protagonist, Kennish Drumgold Cosnahan. If the protagonist has an experience of the darker facets of life, he comes out of despair and vigorously battles with it. Through the animal character of the elephant the story writer shows that what the protagonist lacks in the community of men he finds recompense in the animal world. If the world of men is forbidding and riddled with frailty, he fondles the elephant Rosemary and with a sense of pride he figuratively communes with the elephant and holds its head and comforts it. The novelist in Malcolm Lowry has not this perception in his novels of the fraternity with the animal world. In the story "Through the Panam" and "The Elephant and Colossus", the story writer in Malcolm Lowry rises above the tyranny of self and goes all out for care and solitude for Rosemary, the elephant in "The Elephant and Colossus" and for Albatross in "Through the Panama." In "The Elephant and colossus" the change in the Lowry landscape in stories is revealed through the significant statement of Cosnahan, "*Felt as if there were some power deep within his own mind capable of thinking of a hundred things at once, each one of which was funnier than the last, more purely ludicrous while at the same time more purely serious.*"<sup>7</sup>
- (e) *"Present State of Pompeii"*: The fifth story "*Present State of Pompeii*" is an account of Roderick Fairhaven's journey to Mount Vesuvius. It is a tale of devastation wrought by the volcano, Mount Vesuvius. But the protagonist is not confined to picturing wreck and ruin alone. Rather, his attention is irresistibly drawn to remaking of the city afresh and this rising like a phoenix shows that there is something ingrained in life which impels people and things to rise from ashes and bloom with all its foliage. This theme of death and resurrection does not engage the mind of Lowry, the novelist.
- (f) *"Gin and Golden Rod"*: This is the sixth story. It also centers round spoliation and ruination that has overtaken the present civilization in the wake of industrialization. But pitted against this craze for industrialization is the impulse to the rhythm of life which is recalcitrant to man's rapacity.
- (g) *"The Forest Path to the Spring"*: It is the nucleus round which the whole sequence of "Hear Us O Lord..' revolves. The novelist, a resident of Eredanus, a shack at Vancouver, going along the path to the spring to

fetch water meets with a lion and this lion also figures in Dante's Inferno. The lion is inimical to the world of man but it goes away. In the same vein the novelist pictures himself as a pilgrim through hell encountering the forces shaping his hold on life but braving the odds he shows no signs of flinching from the forces of despair. The scene in the tale depicting the protagonist's homecoming, embracing his wife with gay abandon, is worth noting: *"When I returned home it was as if I had flown into my wife's arms and I tried to tell her about it. But no matter how hard I tried I could not express what the feeling was like beyond saying it was almost as if a great burden had been lifted off my soul."*<sup>8</sup>

Static moments of this sort are not noticeable in the novels of Lowry; howsoever hotly they may be praised by his admirers. The story ends on a note of complete rapport: *"Longing and hope fulfilled, loss and rediscovery, failure and accomplishment, sorrow and joy seemed annealed in profound emotion."*<sup>9</sup> This intuitive vision of love is absent from the Lowry universe.

It is a tiring job to build up the scaffolding of the short story's genesis toll date. The writing of short stories may be taken to the hoary past. The biblical story of Abel and Cain and the story of the return of the prodigal have the seminal idea of story writing in the days of Yore. When stories of this sort were written the emphasis was on the narrative and the moral message couched in the tale. But the art of story writing has undergone many changes with the passage of time and consequently the stories of our time have reached a stage when both the elements, narrative and moralistic, are under eclipse. In the beginning the format of a story had a broad outline narration coupled with morality but in our times the emphasis is on the psyche of man slumbering beneath what appears on the surface. It is this delving deep into the recess of the human heart which is much more valuable than the portrayal of manners and morals. This depiction of manners and morals in the eyes of the present day story writer is a tip of the iceberg.

D.H.Lawrence in one of his letters talking about his pursuit of writing stories, observes that his forte is not the stable ego consistent with a moral scheme. He bids farewell to ecstasies and goes in for something fluid and plastic in men. Thus the story writer in our days has dispensed with the older elements such as narration and characterization and morality like Virginia Woolf he is not after gig lamps symmetrically arranged but after the shifting reality, a new gospel comes into being with the coda that the individual has got multiple selves and there is a perpetual warfare amongst forces operating in the psyche. The story writer wants to catch what floats on the surface of consciousness and wishes to orchestrate them into a unity. James Joyce in his celebrated novel Ulysses and in his story collection Dubliners takes recourse to the technique of "Stream of Consciousness". This is an important evolution in the art of storytelling where nothing is static, everything is dynamic. And the writer has hawk-like vision for capturing the evanescent human landscape. Malcolm Lowry's mind is shaped by this technique but there is no slavish imitation of James Joyce does. Lowry uses the technique of "Stream of Consciousness" no doubt in his novels but in his stories he always cares for evolving something that will hold-fast the desperate elements in the minds of men. He, therefore, invents a technique of his own.

Anthony Burgess in his book Novel Today observes that Malcolm Lowry has the remarkable acumen of embarking on a courageous enterprise of forging a new technique and the technique of unifying musical leitmotif into unity. Lowry does not remain content with a single draft, either of a novel or a short story. He subjects them to the rigorous scrutiny and jettisons a draft the moment he feels that the draft is not adequate to his vision. Moreover, he has a peculiar knack for working on novels or short stories simultaneously. This too is typical tightrope walking. If we take the technique of Malcolm Lowry in "Hear Us O Lord" we find that the characters recur in the stories but they are not the same. They grow and assume rich dimensions in different stories. In the publisher's note we find a remark highlighting Malcolm Lowry's technique employed in the short stories: *"Lowry had conceived this last as a unit and had arranged the tales and short stories of which it consists in a kind of curve, so that each story had a bearing on either side of it."*<sup>10</sup>

Conclusion

It has a distinctive place in my approach to the subject. I have tried my best to co-relate the life of the story writer Malcolm Lowry with my appreciation of his stories. But this co-relation between the two need not

be taken as a specimen of biographical criticism. Biographical criticism has its perils because it errs on a side which may lead a reader astray from the path of an honest assessment of the writer. Art is no replica of life. It is not a photographic representation. Art involves the play of critical toil on the subject of felt experience. It is not an affair of very similitude. It is not a transplant from one sphere to the other. The life, the times and the setting are no doubt good for arriving at enjoyment and understanding but the pursuit is not to getting lyrical over some aspects of the life of writer in consonance with the predilection of the reader concerned. I have painstakingly made a selective choice of the facts on the life of *Malcolm Lowry* so that a justifiable appreciation of his work of art may be arrived at.

I have also put Malcolm Lowry, the story writer, in the perspective of the stories of Russian, English, American and French writers. To my mind Lowry has his forbears in Conrad, James Joyce, Melville and Faulkner. Malcolm Lowry was a rare talent whose ambition was equal only by his problems. Struggling with alcoholism and singularly unable to manage his own life, he "believed himself to be hopelessly unlucky" and as volume editor Nicolas Bradely points out, "The evidence suggests that he was right."

His collection of short stories, "Hear us o lord from thy dwelling Place" reveals a world of crashing prose in which Lowry draws heavily from his turbulent life to forge a tale of both heaven and hell on earth. From the rich paradise of British Columbia and the echoing beauty of Italy, to the unrelieved suffering of Mexico, Lowry stories are layered, interwoven tales that speak to an unrealized literary potential.

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