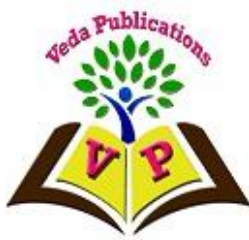


**MARXIST OVERTONES IN AUDEN'S EARLY POETRY OF THIRTIES**

Dr Sujata Rana

*(Professor (English), Department of Humanities, D C R University of Sc. & Tech., Murthal (Sonapat))*Email: suju69rana@yahoo.co.in**ABSTRACT**

The period of 1930's, opening with the Great Depression of 1929 and ending with the outbreak of World War II was a highly disturbed one, especially in European history. It was a period of uncertainty and distress--overshadowed by an atmosphere of horror, terror, instability and devastation. In such a time it was but natural for the writers like W. H. Auden to be attracted towards political and economic philosophies of Marx. As the leader of the poets of the Thirties, he strongly pleads for a positive programme of action involving struggle and moral choices in times of socio-political malaise. The Marxian epistemology asserts that by interacting with his environment, choosing and acting, man can change himself and his environment. This paper intends to explore the influence of this Marxian 'freedom-necessity-choice' concept of human existence on Auden by critically analysing some of his early thirties poems. Influenced more by Marx the philosopher than Marx the social reformer or political analyst Auden did not embrace Marxism in its rigid form but adopted it as a means to find a workable theory of human nature and a reliable basis for understanding an individual's actions in society. From the reading of these poems it is evident that Auden's role as a poet during the thirties was to awaken people out of their complacency and self- deception and jolt them into self-exploration by making them aware of the need to choose and act. It makes him a truly modern poet, sensitive to the question of the authenticity of modern man's existence.

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THE DECADE OF THIRTIES

The period of 1930's, opening with the Great Depression of 1929 and ending with the German invasion of Poland in 1939, which signalled the outbreak of World War II, was a highly disturbed one, especially in the European history. Witnessing hunger marches, mass rallies, world-wide unemployment, political manoeuvrings, dictatorial brutalities, ruthless oppressions, protests and wars the entire decade was really a period of uncertainty and distress for the common man as well as the men of letters. Mentioning some of the most important international events one can catalogue Japan's and Germany's withdrawal from the League of Nations, Japan attacking China, Italy invading Abyssinia (a fellow member of the League), Germany's illegal rearming, Hitler's reoccupying the demilitarised zone of Rhineland, the worldwide threat of monstrously rising Nazism and Fascism, Spanish Civil War of 1937, Sino Japanese War of 1939, Germany's intrusion into Czechoslovakia, Italy seizing Albania, France's and England's policy of non-intervention, Nazi-Soviet Non Aggression Act, and finally Germany's invasion of Poland. So the whole decade was shadowed by an atmosphere of horror, terror, instability and devastation. In such a time it was but natural for the writers to be attracted towards political and economic philosophies of Marx. W. H. Auden shared with C. Day Lewis, Stephen Spender and Louis MacNeice a common consciousness of the political and economic upheaval of the decade and felt inclined to react strongly and take a revolutionary stance. While poets of the nineteen twenties considered "politics alien to literature" the poets of the thirties were intensely conscious of the politics of their time.

POETRY OF URGENCY AND WARNING

Auden subscribes to Wilfred Owen's statement: "My subject is war and pity of war...All the poet can do today is to warn." By "warning" he means a constant comment, analysis and assessment informed by a sense of urgency of crisis and responsibility, by an anxiety to improve society. So Auden's commitment to the social cause of jolting the individuals out of complacency and apathy is an obvious one. Louis MacNeice once claimed that the poets of the thirties had more important things to do

than to be highly cultivated and esoteric. He meant their political commitments. One great quality of Auden's poetry is its sense of urgency, its conversational tone and idiom, bringing reader face to face with the grim realities existing around him: "Smokeless chimneys", "damaged bridges", choked canals, smashed trucks, locked power stations, etc.

The socio-political malaise of the thirties forced Auden and his contemporaries to take a definite political position of resistance to the new phenomenon which was viewed by them as a social menace. They began to abandon their philosophical individualism in favour of ideas that frequently came directly or indirectly from Marxism. Not prepared to accept the condition of European socio-political scene marred by violence, terror, uncertainty, hunger, distress and degeneration Auden then felt a strong desire to work for building up collective resistance against all these and explore the possibility of re-establishment of an ideal social set-up. In his poems written during the thirties Auden intends to suggest – the ripeness of the time for the "destruction of error" by a positive programme of action involving struggle and moral choice. The necessity for choice and action becomes important for bringing about order to the diseased society. And the form of society can be changed only by becoming morally conscious of a sense of responsibility we owe to our fellow human beings. Auden's poetry of the thirties cannot simply be called poetry of political commitment. Rather it would be better to call it an intensely time-conscious poetry, "time-obsessed, time-tormented, as though beaten with rods of restless days" (Spender 137). In fact, no writer during the thirties could afford to sit in ivory tower when "matters" were "settled with gas and with bomb".

The Marxian epistemology asserts that by interacting with his environment, choosing and acting man can change himself and his environment. Man is not only free to choose, he must choose if he has to rise above the level of human behaviour. The more wisely man chooses the more control he would gain over his environment. This paper intends to explore and analyse the influence of this Marxian freedom-necessity-choice concept of human existence on Auden which is evident in many poems of his early thirties volume called *Look, Stranger*.

**MARXIST COLOURING OF SHORTER POEMS**

"A Communist to Others" starts with the line "Brothers, who when the siren roars". The poem is in the form of a self-conscious address by a liberal intellectual to the workers showing his sense of identity with them:

We cannot put on airs with you
The seas that hurt you hurt us too (EA 121)

The bourgeois, the ruling class which exploits and victimizes the working class, the poet believes, can be defeated and overthrown:

Those who in every country town
For centuries have done you brown
But you shall see them tumble down
Both horse and rider (EA 121)

In another poem from the same volume, "August for the People and their Favourite Islands" addressed to Isherwood Auden recalls how in 1926 they were without any socio-political awareness, always indulging in the fantasies, in the illusionary hopes of private love, "in private joking in a panelled room." Finding these things inadequate and ineffective now "in the hour of crisis and dismay" he urges Isherwood to use his strict and adult pen for the responsible task of making "action urgent and its nature clear", "to give us nearer insight to resist / The expanding fear/ the savaging disaster." (EA 156)

In this disturbing time which is threatening the peace and liberties of nations and the very core of human civilisation, Auden thinks, we cannot afford to sit idle and wait for the improvement of the things on their own as "the dangerous flood / of history" never "sleeps, nor dies/ And held one moment, burns the hand." The very Marxist concept of changing society by revolutionary action rings aloud in the lines from another poem "The Malverns":

These moods give no permission to be idle
For men are changed by what they do. (EA 154)

During the thirties (1933-39) Auden visited Belgium, Iceland, Spain and China and examined their socio-political scenarios in the perspective of Europe. From his visits and experiences he found that everywhere man was surrounded by forces that threatened his identity as a human being.

The poems of *Look Stranger!* are united by the image of England in crisis. Here we find a broadly leftist analysis of social and personal ills. Most of the poems in these volumes face the division between the two worlds, the private and the public and demand courage and wisdom from us that would heal this breach and show them as two aspects of an integrated whole. The opening piece, a short dedicatory poem to Erika Mann reflects this problem of division very well:

Since the external disorder, the extravagant lies,
The Baroque frontiers, the Surrealist Police;
What can truth treasure or heart bless?
But a narrow strictness? (EA 111)

So the problem posed is how to unite the opposing worlds of the "external disorder" and "the narrow strictness" of the inner world. The special temper of the poem is linked with a realization that a determined and collective bid to unite the two worlds is a compelling imperative which we shall ignore at our own peril. Another poem "A Summer Night" also attempts at combining the personal world of "Islands" and "gardens" and the political one of "violence", "tyrannies of love" and "gathering multitude outside". Although this problem of division between the internal and external worlds is the hallmark of the whole of Auden's poetry, the poetry of the thirties particularly emphasizes the urgent need of uniting the two opposing worlds. And this can be done effectively when we learn to take sides, choose and act instead of remaining complacently lost in self-enclosed illusionary worlds. Auden had by then learnt to face reality with courage and make definite choices which reflected his partisanship or what can be better called a sense of responsibility towards those who are suffering and are being victimised.

Another major shorter poem "The Chimneys are Smoking" is addressed not to the working class but to the lovers. They are urged to postpone their uncertain groping and "choose the crooked" route of attacking the conditions which enslave love to uncertainty and frustration. "Danse Macabre" (It's a farewell to the drawing room's mannerly cry) also uses the dialectic of change in the society through action. Beginning with a call of bidding farewell to all those things that represent the bourgeois culture the



poem uses multiple ironies aimed at capitalism and fascism simultaneously.

The enemy (the “devil”) is the enemy of degenerated capitalism which ought to be bidden goodbye if we want to save ourselves from the dangers of a totalitarian set-up. In fact, the rising power of fascism and the degenerated form of democracy both were causes of serious concern for a radical liberal writer that Auden had become in the thirties. The necessary death of old order represented by the bourgeois society suggested in the concluding stanza shows Auden to be a leftist liberal advocating the death of old social set-up and the emergence of a new one:

The fishes are silent deep in the sea
The skies are lit up like a Christmas tree,
The star in the west shoots its warning cry;
Mankind is alive, but Mankind must die (CP 131)

The last line clearly indicates that the death of the existing form of society is necessary for the continuity of mankind's survival. Another important poem “A Summer Night” also suggests the death of the old social set-up and birth of a new one through the image of wheat crop:

But when the waters make retreat
And through the black mud first the wheat
In shy green stalk appears. (CP 104)

The drowned parental voices of the private life will rise through happy childish cries of the new order. In this poem the private world of privileged life in England is overpowered by the pressure of the immediate, public world – the world of hunger, miseries, tyrannies and horror. Forecasting the death of old, protected, private world represented by bourgeois capitalistic class and rebirth of a new, fresh one the poem ends with a prayer that love may survive to soften the world after deluge. Samuel Hynes rightly observes that the poem can be called a Marxist poem as “it is about sickness and death of the bourgeoisie, and the revolutionary new world that is coming”(135).

“SPAIN 1937”

Another poem with predominant Marxist overtones is “Spain 1937” which Auden composed immediately after his brief visits to Valencia and Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War in 1937. He

intended to participate in the war as an ambulance driver but he was refused permission and was asked instead to propagandize for the cause of Republican Spanish Government which was at war with the forces of the Right, supported by a section of army headed by General Franco who was aided by the armed forces of Germany and Italy. The passionate appeal of the poem for urgent struggle draws its strength from the poet's ideological distrust of fascism. The poem, no doubt, seems intended to show the urgency of action for saving the elected Republican Government of Spain from overthrow by a military junta aided by Fascist dictators. The main thrust of the poem is that this war is a focal point in human evolution and on this battleground depends the question whether the progress of civilisation would continue or not but unlike the cheaper kind of jargon-ridden political poetry, the emotions in the poem are not anger, horror or fear, but a balancing of pleasure in contemplating man's past achievements and future prospects against the sense of present urgency of action and struggle, embodied in the refrain “But today, the struggle”. It is up to man's unique personal responsibility and his own choice whether he builds the just city or rushes into romantic death:

“What's your proposal? To build the just city? I will.

I agree. Or is it the suicide pact, the romantic Death? Very well, I accept, for

I am your choice, your decision. Yes I am Spain.”(SP 53)

Through these lines Auden seems to say that history means nothing without the clear decisions of individuals. That is why, participation in action, which is struggle against fascist forces in Spain here, is now unavoidable as the thoughts of impending catastrophe of war have now become a reality. At present, says Auden, our enemy is within us all – our own fears and greed which make us wish to save our lives through quack cures or a holiday's brief respite:

For the fears which made us respond
To the medicine ad. and the brochure of winter cruises
Have become invading battalions;



And our faces, the institute – face, the chain store, the ruin.

Are projecting their greed as the firing squad and the bomb. (SP 54)

From the battleground scenario Auden turns to the future, the “tomorrow”. He says that in future there will be researches on the aftermath of the war, on the lengthening of lives, there will be:

.....the rediscovery of romantic love

The photographing of ravens; of the fun under Liberty's masterful shadows; (SP 54)

The future will be full of entertainments and achievements only when the present is tackled effectively. In the present what was mental earlier has become physical. What the Spaniards should struggle for is to make a choice between sickness and health, and the cure is only the commitment to some form of action.

At the end, the poem returns to the abstract propagandist theme. Auden who seems to have foreseen the defeat of the Republican government tries to reason out its possible defeat in terms of its failure to confirm to the ultimate democratic course of history:

We are left alone with our day, and the time is short and

History to be the defeated

May say Alas but cannot help or pardon. (SP 55)

As history is the product of human choices, it can only regret at them once these are wrongly made. As is clear from the movement of the poem it is not explicitly about the Spanish Civil War. The war is not so much the subject of the poem as its occasion. Although the ‘struggle’ carries ideological connotations in the poem it has a more general, a less polemical meaning. It is not Marxian ‘class struggle’, but the struggle involved in making a moral choice that goes on all the time in our lives. The speaker in the poem talks more about the past and future of the human civilisation as well as matters relating to human nature such as necessity, freedom and choice than about the politics of that time. Nor it is a pure propaganda piece as Auden is much aware of the loopholes of the Republican side as well as the moral difficulties of war. That is why we have an

elaborate pattern of self contradiction and self criticism in “Spain 1937”.

CONCLUSION

Influenced more by Marx the philosopher than Marx the social reformer or Marx the political analyst Auden did not embrace Marxism in its orthodox form but adopted it as a means to find a workable theory of human nature and a reliable basis for understanding an individual's actions in society. In fact, in his bid to make poetry an agent of moral clarification in times of crisis Auden is never tempted to make it propagandist nor is he interested in championing the cause of any political party or economic class. Being a true artist he never had any confusion about art and propaganda. Art, to him, “is not concerned with telling people what to do , but with extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear , but only leading us to the point where it is possible for us to make a rational and moral choice.”(EA 329) Auden's function as a poet during the thirties is to awaken people out of their complacency, self- deception and self-imprisonment, jolt and shock them into self-exploration and make them aware of the need to choose and act.

But his political interest was always subordinated to his interest in the nature of human existence. Auden, even in this phase of political activism, remained a kind of moralist concerned with the basic question of human ethics rather than a propagandist poet interested in championing the cause of any political party or ideology. In fact, going beyond pure Marxism he protests against the self-negating, self- defeating attitude of ordinary people, their tendency to ignore the call of conscience, their attitude of escapism and self-deception and their procrastinating and apathetic tendencies, which makes him a truly modern poet – sensitive to the question of the authenticity of modern man's existence.

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