



George Eliot's Notion of Unorthodox Theology in *Adam Bede*

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In *Adam Bede*, George Eliot introduces Dinah Morris, the Methodist woman preacher at the second chapter of the narrative. It seems that Eliot introduces Dinah as the fictional prop to manipulate her readers to revere the religion of human compassion and sympathy- the compassion and sympathy that can be sought in the core of traditional religiosity questioned with intellectual honesty. Dinah is not ecstatic, while the allegation that she is bilious, she has the simplicity and grace which can only be attained from a deep faith and purity which is inherent in her. Dinah walks “as simply as if she were going to market, and seems as unconscious of her outward appearance as a little boy”¹ even when she is going to preach. The simile ‘little boy’ makes her the denizen of the world of purity, divinity and sympathy so very recurrent in the pantheistic vision of Wordsworth where the child is ‘the father of man’, educated and nurtured in the cradle of Nature or the ‘Supreme Good’.

In her presentation of Dinah preaching before the rural folks- “the simple things she said seemed like novelties, as a melody strikes us with a new feeling when we hear it sung by the pure voice of a boyish chorister; the quiet depth of the conviction with which she spoke seemed in itself an evidence for the truth of her message”², Eliot, however, is building up a vivid picture of ‘pity incarnate’ and the readers experience in their vision a metonymical fictional embodiment of ‘divine compassion’ which true faith arising from the ecstatic fulfillment of happiness in sharing the happiness of others, can endow. Dinah’s ability to offer a resonance of a ‘friendly presence’ and her empathy for the poor and suffering, is not the result of the ideal she is up to since she has to perform the role of a preacher, but an outcome of- as she has committed herself to her faith:”...what God’s heart is, what are His feeling towards us.”³

One may disagree with the view that *Adam Bede* is “emphatically agnostic in its philosophical implications and unashamedly secular and humanist in the moral message that it preaches”⁴ only because Eliot’s notion of

religiosity is often a kind of ‘unorthodox theology’ which has not resulted in a ‘dispassionate avoidance of Christianity’ in her narratives but in an ‘existential engagement with the faith she had once embraced’⁵. It can be accepted beyond doubt that *Adam Bede* in its preaching of the moral message is humanist and that is only because as it conveys the essence of humanism which lies in Eliot’s acceptance of the Feurbachian idea. This idea preaches that the only way to serve the society positively can be found in one’s interaction with the other members of the society through an intercourse of love, sympathy and compassion, and the origin of this attitude can be sought in the core of traditional Methodist preaching exemplified through the deeds of Christ. If Eliot be stamped as agnostic only because she had the influence of positivist and altruistic philosophy on her, then in her defense it can be argued that the basic idea of the positivist psychology deals with the innate cravings of human beings are for society and sympathy which can be offered by religion too.

In fact Eliot is respectful towards those who believe in traditional religion. She bore the profound conviction of the efficacy that lies in all sincere faith, and the spiritual blight that comes with no faith. Her understanding of the true meaning of ‘religion’⁶ is quite convincing in her treatment and development of her protagonists in her novels where every bond between two people through love, friendship, compassion and sharing others’ suffering is ‘religion’. Eliot’s respect for the believers in traditional religion is evident again in *Adam Bede* in her creation of Adam modeled after her father Robert Evans.⁷ The inspiration of the narrative owes its debt to the account related to her by her Methodist aunt Elizabeth Tomlinson Evans and has served for the basic pivot of the narrative in Hetty’s infanticide, trial and punishment. But the uniqueness in Eliot lies in her presentation of the incident in prison and Hetty’s confession before Dinah without ever damping it with religious fervour; rather she has endeavoured to dig out the intrinsic purposefulness of religion. This Eliot has attained by engaging herself in an adventure of intellectual honesty through the arduous tracks of religion thronged with doctrines, sermons, dogmas and divine incarnations which dazzle the eyes that seek to look into the truth hidden in its trove and brings into its realm the essence of reciprocal compassion, tenderness and pity and can be well summed up in her own words:

“I have not returned to dogmatic Christianity...but I see in it the highest expression of religious sentiment that has yet found its place in the history of mankind”. (Letters)

John Purkis in his *Preface to George Eliot* has briefly discussed the religious revival in the 18th century including the preaching of Wesley which led to the foundation of the Methodist church and revitalisation of other sects and its impact on the family of the Evans. He points out that for one of Eliot's uncles became a Baptist and two became Methodists and as Eliot has corresponded and exchanged visits with her aunt in between 1839 to 1842, she has expressed her view outspokenly in the concerned passage in the third chapter of *Adam Bede*:

“Love of this sort is highly distinguishable from religious feeling. What deep and worthy love is so? whether of woman or child, or art or music. Our caresses, our tender words, our still rapture under the influence of autumn sunsets, or pillared vistas, or calm majestic statues, or Beethoven symphonies, all bring with them the consciousness that they are mere waves and ripples in an unfathomable ocean of love and beauty: our emotion in its keenest moment passes from expression into silence, our love at its highest flood rushes beyond its object, and loses itself in the sense of divine mystery. And this blessed gift of venerating love has been given to too many humble craftsmen since the world began, for us to feel any surprise that it should have existed in the soul of a Methodist carpenter half a century ago, while there was yet a lingering after-glow from the time when Wesley and his fellow-labourer fed on the hips and haws of the Cornwall hedges, after exhausting limbs and lungs in carrying a divine message to the poor.”⁸

Eliot continues to show the difference in attitude that eventually crept in and unequivocally announces her sympathy towards the essence of Methodism barring the superstitious beliefs that it indulges and criticises those who look down upon Methodism as a whole without ever trying to delve deep into its principles:

“That after-glow has long faded away: and the picture that were apt to make of Methodism in our imagination is not an amphitheatre of green hills, or the deep shade of broad-leaved sycamores, where a crowd of rough men and weary hearted women drank in a faith which was rudimentary culture, which linked their thoughts with the past, lifted their imagination above the sordid details of their own narrow lives, and suffused their souls with the sense of a pitying, loving, infinite Presence, sweet as summer to the houseless needy. It is too possible that to some of my readers Methodism may mean nothing more than low-pitched gables up dingy streets, sleek grocers, sponging preachers and hypocritical jargon-elements which are regarded as an exhaustive analysis of Methodism in many fashionable quarters.

That would be a pity; for I cannot pretend that Seth and Dinah were anything else than Methodists- not indeed of that modern type which reads quarterly reviews and attends in chapels with pillared porticoes; but of a very old-fashioned kind. They believed in present miracles, in instantaneous conversions, in revelations by dreams and visions; they drew lots, and sought for Divine guidance by opening the Bible at hazard; having a literal way of interpreting the Scriptures, which is not at all sanctioned by approved commentators; and it is impossible for me to represent their diction as correct, or their instruction as liberal.”⁹

The lines succeeding the above passage do attest to her antipathy towards conventional superstitious practices in the name of religion, but this also shows that she has not shaken off the very essence latent in it:

“Still- if I have read religious history aright- faith, hope, and charity have not always been found in a direct ratio with a sensibility to the three concords; and it is possible, thank Heaven! to have very erroneous theories and very sublime feelings. The raw bacon which clumsy Molly spares from her own scanty store, that she may carry it to her neighbour’s child to ‘stop the fits’, may be a piteously inefficacious remedy; but the generous stirring of neighbourly kindness that prompted the deed has a beneficent radiation that is not lost.”¹⁰

A close scrutiny of Dinah’s preaching before the rural folk unveils the true message behind what she speaks of Christ and the evil in men’s’ lives- that sin and self-indulgence begets misery and redemption is possible through love which is the touchstone in human suffering and frustration. Having recognised this unfathomable omnipotence of love and compassion, early in the narrative Dinah tries to prepare Hetty for the possibilities of pain in life and later in the novel she enters the dark stony cell of Hetty as an antagonistic force set against the unforgiving attitude of the world towards Hetty, in whom ‘forgiving love’ exists because ‘suffering is known’ and brings back Hetty to humanity. Dinah succeeds in this mission when she resorts to prayer and the unresponsive Hetty spills forth her agony before her. This is surely a result of Feurbach’s influence on Eliot which stresses the power of confession to relieve one’s suffering. But this is not just enough to estimate Feurbach’s influence on Eliot which can be sought out in the Feurbachian ideal that ‘love with understanding and understanding with love is mind, and mind is the totality of man as such- the total man’, which is sufficient to explain what Eliot is up to in her delineation of the prison scene.

Antithetical to Dinah's religiosity, often too serious about trivial things, is Mr. Irwine whose light remarks on religion and its sacraments are quite shocking because he has been introduced to us as a representative of the established Church; he can say to her mother:

"Ah! You witch mother, you sorceress! How is a Christian man to win a game off you? I should have sprinkled the board with holy water before we began...you've not won the games by fair means, now so don't pretend it."¹¹ He is introduced in Chapter-5 and in this Chapter the Church of England comes under severe criticism but Irwine remains a 'pluralist at whom the severest church-reformer would have found it difficult to look sour'. His innate pity for the poor folks is evident in his attitude towards the Methodists and this is further supported when in course of the narrative he is a sympathetic listener to Dinah's complaint when she feels that in spite of her having stated the position of heart, her sayings are not taken heed of or received apathetically by the listeners.

Now this complaint lodged by Dinah may be considered as a proof of her education to face the demands of humanity in the flesh and blood world than venturing in the ideal world of moralising. She fosters her faith in God and in suffering love, which, when thwarted with indifference, (she) starts to realise from this point (though not explicitly shown in the narrative) the self-centeredness of religion which advocates reward in Heaven for leading a good life and punishment in Hell for committing sins to the true essence of Christianity which puts stress on the peremptoriness of duty towards fellow human beings. May be due to this realisation she agrees to marry Adam to whom duty is the foremost demand of a religion and that Dinah becomes conscious of the truth to obey God's will is synonymous to one's abiding the deep innate impulses. How futile is mere preaching the sermons or following the rigorous religious dogmas, unless one positively shares others' feelings with compassion and sympathy, is exemplified through the indifferent reception of Dinah's sermonising and negative attitude towards Mr. Ryde for his strictness, who succeeds Mr. Irwine, though he is an expert in doctrinal manners, by the parishioners; whereas Mr. Irwine has won the hearts of the people by the virtue of his tolerance and good will and can be regarded as the fictional embodiment of Eliot's own belief.

Adam too speaks for Eliot when he finds religion as 'something else besides notions' and it is a realisation that 'sets people doing the right thing'. Adam's name connotes the Biblical fallen forefather of man, who suffered disgrace and was unparadised only to find redemption through

salvation under the guidance of God or his emissary, and Eliot through Adam stresses that redemption can be achieved through the proper performance of worldly duties without causing any harm to fellow men, but rather in stretching out his helping hand towards them. Eliot has beautifully expressed Adam's realisation during when Adam joins the Sunday service to mourn for his deceased father: "...the best channel he could have found for his mingled regret, yearning and resignation; its interchange of beseeching cries for help, which outbursts of faith and praise- its recurrent responses and the familiar of his collects, seemed to speak for him as no other form of worship could have done."¹²

In Chapter-1 where Adam is introduced at the backdrop of the workshop, he is shown as "though not in paradise- enjoying the happiest state of fallen man"; he resides in "a state in which work and duty are felt to be satisfying in themselves" and the hymn he sings during work is suggestive of the "satisfying fulfilment of duty with traditional religion". His sense of righteousness makes him less readily accessible to compassion than his brother: "The idle tramps always felt sure they could get a copper from Seth; they scarcely ever spoke to Adam". All his personal passions and emotions (though guided under the beliefs of Christian virtues) that rushed towards Hetty can be considered selfish, changes its course under the catalytic influence of the subsequent incidents involving Hetty's infatuation towards Arthur, her infanticide and trial and his meeting with Arthur in the woods. He realises that in spite of his sincerity to his religious faith he has too much of self and pride in him- which, perhaps, has directed him to marry Dinah whose faith in sympathy for other as and suffering love would minister him for the greater need of the society. On the other hand, Dinah, whose passions goaded her to follow earnestly the path of a preacher and ultimately finds in Adam's attitude towards duty as religion, attains an ecstatic experience in domesticating herself and in interchanging her role as a preacher for a total involvement in the fate of common humanity. Both of them become aware of the truth that the incarnation of suffering Christ is actually the suffering of one in others' sorrows in the journey of life and that common suffering leads to sympathy which is the foundation stone of true love and true love is gold when tempered with sorrow and mutual compassion.

However, an unsympathetic critic might accept the novel as Eliot's preaching for the religion of humanity, a mouthpiece for intellectual positivism, but if one delves deep into the inner moral of the narrative, it cannot but be undeniably accepted that Eliot has not steered away in her

acceptance of truth latent in traditional religious sentiments. She seems to have offered a new ideology in lieu of it. Through the presentation of Adam and Dinah, their aspirations, frustration in betrayal of expectation and their final realisation, Eliot endeavours to bridge the gap between personal selfish passions goaded by orthodox religious fervour and its subsequent sublimation into 'natural' religion which is humane and universal. The gradual yet sublime diffusion of Dinah and Adam's narrow world of personal emotions to an impersonal one, so much enriched with moral potential of humanity, can best be summed up by the following lines from Eliot's own poem *O May I Join The Choir Invisible*:

" ..May I reach
That purest heaven, be to the other souls,
The cup of strength in great agony,
Enkindle generous ardour; feed pure love,
Beget the smiles that have no cruelty-
Be the sweetest presence of a good diffused,
And in diffusion ever more intense. "13

References :

1. Eliot: *Adam Bede*, Chapt-2 (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2000) p.33
2. Ibid, p.37
3. Ibid, p.37
4. Jan Jedrzejewski: *George Eliot* (Routledge, 2007) pp.39-40
5. Jason Neal Patrick, *A Theology of Suffering Love: A Critique of the Fictional Embodiments of Divine Compassion in the Novels of George Eliot*, Diss., Baylor University.
6. As told earlier that 'religion' comes from 'religare' which means 'to bind' and thus the true meaning of 'religion' attains the sense of 'a bond'.
7. Though not idealised, the creation of the character of Adam largely owes to her childhood memories.
8. *Adam Bede*, p.46
9. Ibid, p.46
10. Ibid, pp.46-47
11. Ibid, p.61
12. Ibid, p.182
13. George Eliot: *Silas Marner, Brother Jacob, Poems* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co. By arrangement with Collins, 1977) p.286