

QUEST FOR TRUTH IN MEVILLE'S MARDI

Dr. MEENA KUMARI

“Certainly it is heaven upon earth to have a man's mind move in charity, rest in providence and turn upon the poles of truth.”(Bacon-Of Truth)

Shelley, Carlyle and Emerson have presented their lifelong quest for truth in their works. Melville, who was very much influenced by all these great authors, seems to agree with them when he presents his protagonist in the search of truth in his works. Richard Chase observes-

“It seems generally agreed that the voyages of Melville's heroes in the early books *Typee* (1846), *Omoo* (1847), *Mardi* (1849), *White Jacket* (1850) and *Moby Dick* are in one sense Quest for truth.”¹

Deception of truth is essential in literature the writers must use allusive characterization, symbolism, imagery and allegory to convey the real significance of their truth. The author must be convey the real significance of their truth. The author must be successful in inviting and urging the reader in to a search for truth. Edgar Dryden discusses Melville's truthful theory of narration through indirect means. Like Carlyle, Melville, doubled the ambiguity of reality. Edgar says that in his opinion Melville believes that the human and the world of nature cannot be called reality. The human race can think of approaching the truth through fictional characters and situations. Dryden discusses that Melville's truth telling is very conscious and deliberate. Pain and pathos permeate through whole of Melville's fiction. But at the same time the reader knows that he is reading something about the permanent existence of truth. For Melville there was a difference between facts and truth. Literature and fiction in particular is meant for conveying truth not facts.

The author discovers truth not only through real experience and instinctual inspiration but also through his employment of various writers and their ideas. Melville's own use of historical source helps him to derive the truth from them. Beginning from *Mardi* and culminating in *Billy Budd*, Melville draws on transformed sources because he believes that truth comes out through a continuous reassessment to the region of ideas. Melville's first purely fictional character appears in *Mardi*. This narrator who soon Christians himself Taji, makes no pretence of being Melville. The fictional character of Taji is the logical sequel to Melville's earlier narratives. By the time he wrote *Mardi* he had come to view the creative artist as a prophetic type and throughout this book he examines the various ways that could utilize his traits to create a persona.

Rather than writing a book which conforms to the contemporary expectations and form of remance including a typical omniscient, third person narrator Melville selects to write a literary experiment which he loosely terms a romance to describe it's purely fictional nature. In actuality, he had created the creator.

The disjointed structural unity and inconsistent narration of *Mardi* have long been critical problems. A contemporary review complains that in *Mardi* a heap of fanciful speculations, vivid discription and allegorical typifications are flung together either little order or connection."² Consequently many modern scholars are indelgent about Mardi's hybrid nature and view it as a product of Melville's discovery of philosophical writers and sudden intllectual development.

Some critics have attempted to redeem Mardi's narrative unity. Nathalia Write argues that " the book illustrates Melville's concept of the principal of organic form."³ The students of narrative voice view its inconsistencies as an expression of the constantly evolving symbolistic imagination, as manifestation of the progressive isolation of the searcher and as the narrator's rejection of actuality to embrace a world of dreams. The critics examine some of the philosophical ideas and symbolic irony of *Mardi* found in more complete forms than in Melville's later works.

Melville's discovery of his creative self also includes his discovery of a unique way to narrate his work. The inconsistencies of the narrator and the genric shifts in *Mardi* actually manifest his experimental development of the narrative persona. Melville explores various facets of the imagination through his characterization of Mohi, Babbalanja and Yoomi respectively the historian, the philosopher and the poet who accompany Taji on his journey round Mardi. These characters represent three alternatives for narrative personal and genres. Melville the great Mardian author who often is viewed as Melville's self portrait, integrates these characteristics and represents the fully developed artist. The story of sailors, narrator's adventure shows his transformation from historian to flawed mystic prophet. His own narrative presentation of *Mardi* demonstrates both the possibliliteis and limitations of the narrator.

Many characters in Mardi narrate stories, including Babbalanja, Yoomi, Media, Samoa and Yillah but the major story teller during the journey is Mohi, the bearded historian who is "one of the keepers of the chronicles of the Kings of Mardi."⁴ Although this title seems to associate Mohi with the Biblical prophets, his stories do not resemble the stories of Bible. He delivers unembroidered accounts of the past in order to explain the present. His stories resemble legends by consistently pointing out to the origins and explanations of natural events, kingdoms of Kings. Mohi's concern to present the

truth through factual accounts of origins teaches the importance and role of history to a narrator.

The historian's preference for unvarnished truth appears in the catalogue of his knowledge, in his comments on other stories, and in the narrator's descriptions. The range of Mohi's knowledge is impressive,

“Our delightful old Dioderus was furnished with the greatest possible variety of histories, chronicles, anecdotes, memories, legends, traditions and biographies. There was no end to the library he carried. In himself he was the whole history of Mardi, amplified, not abridged, in one volume.”⁵

The emphasis on the value and present use of the past enriched by Mohi, pervades all of *Mardi*. Babbalanja, Yoomy, Media and Taji all recognize a pattern of the past existing in and having meaning for the present. The fullest explication of the special role of history appears in the anonymous political scroll that could have been written by one of the travellers, although either Media or Babbalanja is the author.

The Philosopher Babbalanja agrees with Mohi about the importance of the past and embraces a view of history that resembles the anonymous scroll. He declares-

“Nothing changes, though much be new fashioned, new fashions but revivals of the things previous. In the book of the past we learn naught but of the present; in those of the present, the written out in capitals in the first page penned.”⁶

But Babbalanja's primary interest in the activities of the mind causes him to focus on the cyclic nature of thought. He believes that greatest aspect of history is the previous ideas of great thinkers which are used and reiterated by present thinkers,

“The catalogue of the true thoughts is but shell; they are ubiquitous; no man's property and unspoken or looted are the same. When we had them, why seem they so natural, receiving our spontaneous approval? Why do we think we have heard them before? Because they but reiterate ourselves, they were in us, before we were born. The truest poets are but mouthpieces; and some men are duplicate of each other, I see myself in Bardianna.”⁷

The value of history lies not just in its facts and explanations of origins, but in its facts and explanations of origins, but in its records of redeem Babbalan's respect for learning and his view of intellectual history explain his frequent citation of ancient Mardian authors such as Bardianna, Allah Mololla and Vavona.

Aided by the ideas of the past, Babbalanja seeks to discover the meaning of life through the exercise of his mind. He constantly analyses and judges of phenomena they encounter in their voyage around Mardi and he frequently debates philosophical issues with the other travellers. Invariably, he cites ancient and obsolete authorities to back up his arguments and conclusion. His dissatisfaction with history and poetry arises because neither discipline reveals true meaning. When Mohi delivers a typical simple recital of a fact, Babbalanja inquires, "But has it any meaning you know of?" He explains the goal of his search to his group,

"I am intent upon the essence of the things, the mystery that lieth beyond; the elements of the tear which much laughter provoketh; that which is beneath the seeming, the precious pearl within the shaggy oyster. I probe the circle's center, I seek to evolve the inscrutable."⁸

Similarly he complains about a song of Yoomy's, "What, Minstrel; must nothing ultimate come of all that melody? No final and inexhaustible meaning?" But philosophy and learning fail him as well. His euphoria upon reading "A Happy Life", soon wears off. Even his favourite thinker Bardianna, does not reveal all. Babbalanja laments-

"The profoundest thinker seldom tells us all the thing; seldom reveals to us the ultimate and the innermost.... and never carries us with him, to the unconscious, the idea immense, the super essential and the one."⁹

Babbalanja like his author seems to be uncertain over the question of his identity. His reason and activity of his conscious mind appear to be only part of his essential self, and the philosopher is unsure of what the other part consists. His understanding of the influence and living presence of the past in the present suggests that part of himself consists of other previous thinkers. But the character of Babbalanja also proposes a diabolical theory, an intellectual theory, and a theory of marked stranger within to example his irritational actions and speeches.

"There are times when I fancy my self a lunatic," he admits yet even when his reason loses control, the gibberish that Babbalanja talks and the wild speculations of the devil Azzageddi are still directed towards exploring the essential truth of life.

For Babbalanja then, truth is more than the record of the past facts and account of origin. His multifaceted search is directed towards uncovering truth by ascertaining meaning. Other thinkers, historian and poets fail him in their ambiguous conclusions while he fails himself by submitting to his instincts and passions. He accepts that man's knowledge is limited. All of his experience through out the journey point to this conclusion. He is unable to discover true meaning

through the ideas of past thinkers, intellectual discussions and analysis, his own meditations, story telling or even in his irrational babbling and emotional outbursts. The philosopher's goal to uncover truth by ascertaining meaning through various activities of his mind remains unfulfilled.

Mohi and Babbalanja have different attitudes towards predictions. The philosopher believes in the cyclic nature of history and admits that past is a prophet and future is the prophecy fulfilled and it is difficult to read the future. The past may predict the future, Babbalanja hesitates to practice prophetic interpretation. Mohi on the other hand, when faced with hieroglyphics in Vivenza, studies them carefully and then interprets them. He is not concerned with meaning but with facts so prediction is possible for him. His ability to arise emotion through artistic creation, the poet in Mardi is as powerful as a king and demi God. His attempt to ascertain and to depict truth arises out of this creative ability.

The three travellers' diverse approaches to truth emerge clearly in their different reactions to critical situations. When Taji admits that he murdered Aleema in order to win Yillah, Babbalanja sees the murder as explaining Yillah's disappearance "an evil deed gained you your Yillah, no wonder she is lost." Mohi makes no comment for Taji merely has revealed a historical fact but Yoomy cries, "Oh! Taji I had shrunk from you.... But for the mark upon your born. That does the tender of your words." Philosopher finds meaning, the poet sees emotions manifested physically which one power his instinctive recoil. Babbalanja finally admits that there are so many things man must not think of. All three attempt to represent to the essential truth of life, but they each inwoke it in a different way. The historian views truth as the record of past fact and the origins of thing, the philosopher seeks to find truth by probing the deep meaning of life by the activity of his mind, and the poet tunes to expressions of beauty and emotions to render truth.

These attempts by the three travelers to speak the truth of life reveal their most important similarity to author, because the author incorporates all three meanings of history, the intellectual search for meaning and instinctual evocation of beauty and emotion in delivering his truth.

His dependence on the past extends specially to past written accounts. He mines other authors for ideas as he attempts to speak the truth. But his subjection to the uncertain inspiration of the imagination along with his multiple voices and narrative techniques often make his work obscure and ambiguous and casts a burden of responsibility upon the explicators of his truth.

Yoomy's final appraisal of the work reveals its essential truth. "It has bettered my heart." Melville's masterpiece demonstrates the unusual structure and generic mixture of the work that the great author produces. The Kozatanza depicts an entire world, which is sensual and emotional as

well as intellectual. When Lambardo creates the creative, he finds sweet scent and singing birds, sorrow and mischievousness and prophetic voices with a message. He also discovers many historical voices which speak through him

Initially *Mardi* regards himself as a historian especially during the first third of narrative he compares himself to a historian. By explaining his reasons of jumping ship and his adventures previous to discovering Mardi, he relates the origins behind his later quest. He delights in making wide range historical allusions and comparisons. His voice is that of a witty urbane gentlemen who is reminiscent about the past and is very self conscious that he is narrating a story. He frequently uses clarifying phrases, such , “to tell the plain truth,” let me come closer to this part of my story” or “now to tell”.

All these methods shows him to be a practical author and narrator. His self portray, at the same time indicates his concern for the material aspects of life. He copiously plans how to navigate the boat and how to find land. Neither superstitions nor philosophy stand in the way of this practical man. He applies a practical analysis both to material appearance and to narrative.

In brief *Mardi* is the story of Herman Melville and his great understanding of the wide range of reality. Like Philip Sidney he make a comparison and contrast among history, philosophy and poetry. But he does not exclude any one of them. Rather he feels that to make perfect writer all the three are essential because of poet is a combination of historian, philosopher and of a prophet. Not only this while telling about insanity or madness of a prophet one can very well remember the statement of plato when he tells that poets or the prophets are divinely inspired. When they speak, they suffer from the fits of divine madness. Melville remembers Shakespeare who makes the imagination of the lover lunatic and the poet, all compact. Melville as a practical prophet assimilates all the scientific realities, natural phenomena and literature in to the making of a writer. By creating a work like *Mardi*, he has created a writer within his own personality of an author of *Moby-Dick* and *Billy Budd*. No Doubt he can be ranked with, Dante, Carlyle and Shakespeare because the first love and aim of an author is the search for ultimate truth that remains a vision for all grand sires upon earth.

1 Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition*, (Ludhiyana : Kalyani Pub.; 1973), p. 90

² Walson G. Branch, ed., *Melville : The Critical Heritage*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; 1974), p. 143.

3. Nathalia Wright, *Form as Function in Melville* , PMLA 1952; P. 330-32

4. Herman Melville *Mardi : And a Voyage thither* , (Chicago : North Western University Press ,

1970) ; p. 197

5. Ibid , p.419

6. Ibid p. 580

7. Ibid p.397

8. Ibid p.352

9. Ibid p.581

