

CBCS
Semester - II
Paper Code – 202-ENGH-C-4
British Romantic Literature
Samuel Taylor Coleridge - Kubla Khan

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round;
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!

And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,

As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,

A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:

Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst

Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,

Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:

And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever

It flung up momentarily the sacred river.

Five miles meandering with a mazy motion

Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,

Then reached the caverns measureless to man,

And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean;

And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far

Ancestral voices prophesying war!

The shadow of the dome of pleasure

Floated midway on the waves;

Where was heard the mingled measure

From the fountain and the caves.

It was a miracle of rare device,

A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

A damsel with a dulcimer

In a vision once I saw:

It was an Abyssinian maid
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Critical Appreciation:

Kubla Khan enjoys a pride of place among the poems written by Coleridge. The poem is acclaimed for its haunting melody and wonderful metrical skill. The poem is also notable for its interest in the marvelous and the mysterious, and its depiction of the pleasant and charming face of nature in sharp contrast to its wild and the uncontrollable features. Notable are its dream element, supernatural factors, Gothic horrors, and romantic qualities. Its power of description, ability of suggestions, and

capacity of rousing curiosity are other important qualities that reserve for it a prominent place in history of English poetry.

There lies a curious history behind the composition of this poem. In the summer of 1797 the author took opium to relieve himself from some pain, and fell asleep in his chair while reading some lines from *Purchas his Pilgrimage* concerning Kubla Khan and his pleasure –dome. During his deep sleep he composed from two to three hundred lines, and immediately after waking began to write them. Unfortunately he was called out ‘by a person on business from Porlock’ and detained more than an hour. Returning to his former place he found to his great disappointment that what he had seen in his vision during the sleep he could no longer remember. Consequently the poem lay in an unfinished form.

The poet, therefore, rightly calls it ‘a fragment’. In its present state the poem clearly consists of two parts. The relationship between the parts – the first part dealing with Kubla, his pleasure –garden and the deep chasm, and the second with the Abyssinian maid, the ‘I’ raised to the peak of excitement, and his eating of some special food- has stirred up really a hornet’s nest. According to some well-known critics the two parts are bound logically, and a consistent idea runs through them in a neat way. Our view, however, is completely different. We trust that though the poet wanted it to be a long narrative poem like its sister poems- *The Rime of the Ancient mariner* and *Christabel* – his intention of presenting a consistent work of art was frustrated because of the interruption that took place at its initial stage. Hence the two parts stand unrelated to each other.

There is controversy with the identity of the word ‘I’. Some take it to mean the poet himself, and consider the theme of the poem to be the act of poetic creation. Its literal meaning, however, does not support such a view. Only those who insist upon symbolic interpretation might arrive at such a decision. However, Coleridge’s sources and the literal meaning of the poem state and suggest that the ‘I’ of the second part is an Assassin, a follower of the Old Man of the Mountain. Possibly the poet wanted to present the narrative through his mouth and to make him the main figure of the poem. However, the poem’s fragmentary nature stands in the way of coming to such a conclusion with absolute assurance.

From the poet's own admission we come to know that *Kubla Khan* was composed in a dream. Hence it is more than probable that the poem will contain some elements of dream. When the shadow of the pleasure-dome floats in the middle of the river it appears like a dream-like object. The gardens bright with winding streams, and fragrant with many sweet-scented flowers, and the ancient forests enfolding sunny spots of greenery also lend dreaminess to the atmosphere. There is one direct reference to dream: the young Assassin once saw 'in a vision' an Abyssinian maid playing on her dulcimer and singing about sensual pleasures of the earthly paradise of Mount Abora.

The *Kubla Khan* is one of the finest specimens of romantic poetry and its uniqueness can be realized by any connoisseur of art. The poet chooses his subjects out of the middle Ages. Both Kubla and the Assassin belong to past times. Likewise Xanadu and Mount Abora, Abyssinia and Paradise take us back to Oriental mysteries and to far-off lands. We trace elements of Gothic horrors in the river's going underground through 'caverns measureless to man' and its final plunge with a commotion into 'a lifeless ocean', in the deep chasm flinging up a mighty fountain, huge fragments of rock, and a sacred river one after another, and in the deep of 'holy-dread' which the spectators expect the drugged and frenzied Assassin to commit any moment. Equally amazing are its supernatural features revealed particularly in a women's visit 'beneath a waning moon' to 'a savage place' in search of her lover, a demon in the human form, and in the mindless drumming of the Abyssinian maid on her dulcimer advertising the sensual pleasures of Mount Abora only to send the enticed Assassins to their fate. The limitless aspiration of man, an ingredient of romanticism, is shown in the building of two earthly paradises, one by Kubla Khan and the other by the Old Man of the Mountain. An equally impetuous feat is the Assassin's charms and music only for the sake of throwing them to their fate.

Finally we must refer to the technical mastery displayed in the poem. Its haunting melody is a joint creation of rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, onomatopoeia, and the combination of soft consonants and long vowels. Equally important are its experiment with unlike metres, use of the ballad metre, and exploitation of various stanza forms, line-lengths, and number of lines. Its fine diction and use of a few chosen figures of speech have undoubtedly also heightened its aesthetic beauty.

We may, thus, conclude that in spite of its being a fragment, Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* possesses certain charming and extraordinary qualities for which it can rightly claim a high place in the history of English poetry.

Features of Romanticism in the poetry:

1) The first feature of romanticism is love of nature. In romantic poetry nature is described with accuracy and sensuousness. Romantic poets like Coleridge painted not only the pleasant sides of nature; they also brought within their scope its wild features. As a result, the untamed and disorderly manifestations of nature became prominent in their poetry. Coleridge here draws both the pleasant and wild features of nature. On the one hand, there is the description of the 'fertile ground', and, on the other, the 'deep romantic chasm' with 'ceaseless turmoil seething'. He introduces exotic landscape in 'gardens bright with sinuous rills' which reminds us particularly of the Mogul gardens of Kashmir, a description of which the poet got from one of his sources. In the gardens 'blossomed many an incense-bearing tree'. Here we get a fine description of nature.

2) The second feature of romanticism is the poet's interest in the past particularly in things and events of medieval times. This gets associated with his interest in exotic legends and mythology found in Oriental literature and in the 17th – century travel writers like Purchas. Coleridge's reference to Xanadu and Mount Abora reminds us how curious he was to know about the far-away and the long-ago. His mention of Kubla Khan and of the Assassin clearly shows his interest in figures of medieval times. The Assassin's claim that he could build a beautiful dome with music in the air reminds us of Coleridge's acquaintance with flying carpets, floating palaces and hanging gardens he read of in Oriental literature like *The Arabian Nights*. From his own admission, again, we come to know how indebted he was to Purchas, a writer of travels and adventures.

3) Supernaturalism, Gothic horrors, terror, passion and naked emotionalism, and the sublime are other features of romanticism. We are fortunate enough that *Kubla Khan* displays each of them in right proportion. The Sublime is revealed in Coleridge's reference to the river, sea and ocean, the hill and forest, the fountain and cave. Supernatural figure and incident are mentioned respectively in the expression- a 'woman wailing for her demon-lover!' and in the following:

“A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:

Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst

Huge fragments valued like rebounding hail.”

Gothic horrors are found, besides the nymphomaniac’s crying for her demon-lover, in ‘caverns measureless to man’, in the river’s plunging into ‘a sunless sea’ and in the Assassin’s contemplated act for which the people standing round him shut their eyes ‘with holy dread’. There arises creeping terror when the young dragged and frenzied Assassin is presented with his ‘flashing eyes’ and ‘floating hair’! Both passion and naked emotionalism are revealed in the woman’s lustful search for her demon-lo-a song publicizing the sensual pleasures of Mount Abora.

4) Another feature of Romanticism shows man’s soaring aspiration which transcends mundane limits. This is visible in Kubla’s building of a pleasure – dome – ‘a sunny dome with caves of ice’. Another instance is the earthly paradise set up in Mount Abora by the Old Man of the Mountain. A third instance is the desire of building a dome like Kubla’s with music and of setting it up in the air.

The principal figure of a romantic poem is a solitary figure, a rebel, a social non-conformist. Romantic poetry gives value to what is special in an individual over what is representative. It is for this that the protagonist is shown to revolt against conservative morality. It is not uncommon that romantic poetry glorifies rebellion against the religious and ethical norms of the time. Such figures are the woman wailing for her demon-lover, the Abyssinian maid enticing youths with her own sensual charms and alluring music; and then sending them out to their fates. The nymphomaniac’s desire for her demon-lover, the maid’s throwing of youths out to their fates without pity, the employment of Assassins for the killing of enemies in the name of religious interest, and the eating of such drugs as hashish, however curiously named, are clearly against the canons of morality as well as the tenets of religion.

5) In romantic poetry prominence is given to imagination as the supreme creative power. In fact, it is valued more than reason. In *Kubla Khan* imagination plays most prominently in the description of the dome of pleasure, the course of the river

Alph, and the deep romantic chasm. It is equally prominent in the account given of the Abyssinian maid and the Assassin with his claimed ability to build a dome 'in air' and his eating of such magic food as 'honey-dew' and 'milk of Paradise'.

6) Finally, in romantic poetry we note 'a shift from poetry as limitation to poetry as creation'. Spontaneity of composition and freedom from neo-classical rules and conversations were the main demands of such poetry. The Romantic poets laid emphasis on experiments and innovations in verse in respect of materials, form, and style. They also urged that poetry should grow not according to pre-set rules and conventions but according to organic laws. This we notice in full measure in Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*. Since it grows according to its organic laws, it becomes a unique and beautiful specimen of art.

These are the prominent features of romanticism that are revealed in the poem in a clear and convincing manner.

Assingment :

This is the first assignment for second semester. Do it in A4 sheet or tear blank pages from your copy and do it. Submit this assignment in channel file once the college reopens. At present if you do not have any channel file, please do not go anywhere to get it. Just keep the answers ready in your copy.

Read the poem carefully and answer the following questions :

- 1) What did Kubla Khan decree?
- 2) Describe, after Coleridge, the pleasure-dome that Kubla ordered to be built.
- 3) Who was Kubla Khan?
- 4) What are the things which the vaulting of the huge fragments is compared?
- 5) Trace, after Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* , the important stages in the movement of the sacred river.
- 6) How many apparently impossible things do you notice in Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*?
- 7) 'A savage place!' Why is it called 'savage'? What effect does it produce?

8) 'Woman wailing for her demon-lover!' What picture can you fancy out of this? How is it linked with the structure of the poem?

9) 'A damsel with a dulcimer'. What does the speaker feel about the vision of the damsel?

10) 'Weave a circle round him thrice

And close your eyes with holy dread.'

What do the above lines signify?

#####