

**CBCS**

**Semester - II**

**Paper Code – 202-ENGH-C-4**

**British Romantic Literature**

**Samuel Taylor Coleridge - Kubla Khan**

**Analysis of the poem:**

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A Sately pleasure –dome decree:

When Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man

Down to a sunless Sea

It describes Kubla's pleasure –dome and the onward journey of the river Alph. Kubla Khan was the famous Mongol emperor of China and the founder of the Yuan dynasty. He possessed such wealth and men that whatever he ordered was immediately carried out. He selected a spot in Xanadu, supposed to be a remote place in Central Asia, for the building of a summer residence. According to his order a tall and handsome domed structure was built there for the recreational purposes of the Emperor. The place had the full blessings of nature. There the sacred river alph, after flowing sometime over the land, entered into caves whose depth was impossible for man to plumb, and then plunged into a dark sea. These lines depict man's relation to nature and the immense power of Kubla. It has symbolic importance in the sense that it combines pleasure (pleasure-dome) and sacredness (sacred river) which, according to Coleridge, is the sign of true art. The pleasure dome in Xanadu may be regarded as an attempt on the part of Kubla Khan to set up an earthly paradise. Coleridge was inspired by *Purchas his Pilgrimage* to compose this poem. According to G.Wilson Knight the pleasure-dome represents immortality. In the words of Graham Hough, Kubla 'is such an all-powerful lord that he can create his pleasure dome by mere decree'. Humphrey House comments: "It is this decree that matters, for it images the power of man over his environment and the fact that man makes his Paradise for himself, dome by mere decree". Alph is probably a contraction of Alpheus, a river which is mentioned in classical texts as having prolonged underground sections, and is associated with the Nile (the sacred river). The caves represent 'final annihilation'. The caves are so deep that man cannot measure their length using a standard unit. To man caves are immeasurably deep. According to Knight the sea, together with the caves, represents 'infinity of death'. It is also an instance of Coleridge's interest

in Gothic horror. It may refer to an underground lake bereft of sunlight or an open sea so deep that sunlight cannot penetrate beyond a shallow part of its surface. 'sunless sea' is also an instance of alliteration. The opening description of the pleasure – dome and its surrounding shows that the combination of pleasure and sacredness which for Coleridge as for Wordsworth was the sign of true art.

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.

These lines describe the natural beauty of the landscape where Kubla set up his summer residence. The Chinese emperor wanted to build up an earthly paradise in a place suitable to his purpose. For this ten –mile land of Xanadu was chosen. Kubla set up a pleasure-palace in the midst of this land. Obviously it was no ordinary place but one over which nature smiled. There were gardens in it beautiful with many winding streams. They looked bright as the sunlight sparkled on them. They also had a large number of plants and trees bearing sweet-smelling flowers. In addition to the gardens the place had forests and hills that originated in the long past. The forests, again, contained some patches of green vegetation which heightened their beauty manifold as the sunlight illumined them.

The extract reveals to what a height landscape-gardening could reach when man and nature join hands together. The rhythm of the lines too expresses the smiling face of nature. The gardens also remind us of the Mogul gardens of Kashmir, an account of which Coleridge got from Purchas, a writer of travel tales.

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!

These lines point to a deep chasm and its wild neighbourhood visited by a deserted woman searching for her lover. In Kubla's Xanadu the entire area was not cultivated or improved by human touch. Through these lines we come to know of some wild and primitive sections of the place. There was, for example, a deep chasm arousing both fear and wonder. It was one suited

for tales of romance. The chasm, suited in the green hill, did not go down straight. It rather sloped downward cutting obliquely across a screen made of fragrant cedar trees. Its neighbourhood was untouched by modern changes. It remained wild, primitive and uncivilized as before. Still it seemed to be a sacred and magical place to a woman who had her first love-experience here. Unfortunately she was deserted by her lover who was really a devil in the human form, although this fact was withheld from her. As she was under the spell of love, she paid regular visits to this place when the moon decreased its brightness expecting to meet her lover there again. But her hope was not fulfilled. So she cried loud and long to express the sorrow of her heart.

The extract is in sharp contrast to the earlier descriptions of nature made smooth, soft and smiling by cultivation and human care. Here the emphasis is placed on the wild and awful aspects of nature. The chasm goes downward paying no heed to obstructions, and may suggest its link with hell. The words 'savage' and 'demon' intensify this impression. In the ballad of the demon lover, too, we find how the beloved fails to detect the true nature of her lover who ultimately drags her down to hell. The lines, according to Knight, finely blend 'satanism with sanctity and romance with savagery'. Here again we observe Coleridge's weakness for tales of Gothic horror. Alliteration ('cedarn cover', 'woman wailing') and long vowels heighten the effect of melody.

Amid whose swift half – intermitted burst

Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,

Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail.

Here the poet describes the gushing out of a mighty fountain which is associated with other activities too. The poet referred to a deep chasm situated in Xanadu. It was an awe-inspiring chasm. At this bottom went on some non-stop agitation imitating the action of boiling. It seemed the earth was gasping rapidly in a troubled manner. Suddenly a great spring came up out of this chasm. During its rapidly occurring momentary intervals high internal pressure caused by underground explosion threw up large pieces of rock that jumped above the surface with tremendous force. This forceful jumping up of rocks has been compared with two things- with hailstones that spring back after hitting the ground, and with grain that flies up when the thresher uses the flail to dehusk the corn.

The extract raises a picture of the fountain quite different from the ordinary. Its water does not come up constantly but with momentary pauses during which another activity- the jumping up of huge pieces of rock- starts to the great wonder and fear of the perceivers. This clearly shows the poet's interest in the marvelous and the Goth

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.

These lines describe the forward movement of the river till its final plunge into an ocean. One remarkable geographical item of Kubla Khan's Xanadu was a deep chasm which flung up a mighty fountain that turned out to be the source of the sacred river known as Alph. After reaching the ground the river ran through wood and valley in a lazy motion and in a winding way for five miles. Then it reached a number of caves so deep that it remained beyond the capacity of man to take measurement of their depth. Afterwards it produced a loud and confused noise as it made a straight plunge into an ocean without any living creature in it.

Here we first find the river arising out of a shooting jet of water. Then it becomes quite and pleasant as it moves along the surface. It arouses wonder and fear while it goes under an uproarious plunge into a lifeless ocean. Extra charm of this passage is onomatopoeia (in the first line) and a few instances of alliteration. Here we note the blending of clear and pleasant elements with those that are secret and fearful.

And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far  
Ancestral voices prophesying war!

These lines describe Kubla's hearing from a distance of a noise foretelling war. The source of the sacred river Alph was the fountain that gushed out of a deep chasm. For five miles the river ran in a lazy motion through, valleys and woodlands. Then it reached 'caverns measureless to man' and went underground. Finally it fell down into 'a lifeless ocean' making a loud and confused noise. Kubla's pleasure-dome being situated in the middle, he could hear the noise but it seemed that the sound was coming from a distance. It further seemed to him that through the confused noise his ancestors (one of whom was the celebrated emperor Genjhis Khan) were warning him about an impending war. Kubla himself being a famous Mongol general, his fancying of confused sound prophesying war (with which is also associated confused noise) is but quite natural. In this context Lowes states, 'we accept that Kubla Khan heard voices in the tumult, psychologically how true it is to imagine that he heard voices prophesying war, since he was himself a great general!' This expression has also biological importance, for while writing this Coleridge was also fancying about his own writings against the war with Revolutionary France.

It was a miracle or rare device,

A sunny pleasure –dome with caves of ice!

It describes the nature of the pleasure-dome which the Chinese emperor ordered to be set up in Xanadu. The spot where the pleasure-dome of Kubla was erected was a nice one. Situated by the side of the river Alph, it stood midway between the place from where the river started its course and that to which it finished its journey. The shadow of the pleasure dome also fell in the middle part of the wavy river. For the advantageous position of the dome, Kubla could hear the melodious rhythmic sound jointly made by the sounds of the fountain and the caves. The building itself was a brilliant feat of architectural and engineering skills. Outwardly it was bathed in cheerful sunshine while inwardly it had cave-like chambers packed with ice, thus making it an ideal summer residence.

The extract presents a paradoxical picture since the domed structure is sunny as well as ice-cold. It also shows the combination of opposites (heat and cold) which, according to Coleridge, is the true aim of art. In the words of J. R. Watson, ‘after the surprising “war!” we have a sudden tranquility, a water-born image of the dome of pleasure casting a shadow on the waves’. What is most worthy to note here is the suggestion that the dome contains within itself the elements of its own annihilation. Whenever any reference to the dome is made, the word ‘pleasure’ invariably goes with it, as the word ‘sacred’ goes with the river. This pleasure is devoid of sacredness; it is mere enjoyment and denotes nothing but sensual which is further intensified by the expression ‘caves of ice’, caves pointing to secrecy, darkness and illicitness while ice reflects lack of healthy, normal and warm relationship as well as frigidity that follows excessive pursuits of pleasure.

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

These lines express what an Assassin once saw in his vision. The grand master (popularly known as ‘the Old Man of the Mountain’) set up an earthly paradise in Mount Abora, ‘a place supposed to be in Abyssinia. He belonged to a fanatic sect that sanctioned murder of enemies for the furtherance of its religious cause. Accordingly he lured young men to his earthly paradise to give them a foretaste of what types of sensual pleasures they would enjoy there in the event of their facing martyrdom while trying to fulfill their questionable mission. They were also given the promise of living there for the rest of their lives, should they return alive after successfully

completing their mission. They were takers of hashish (and hence known as Assassins) which induced them to visualize the joys of the paradise speedily. In the above extract we get a picture of an Assassin who was allowed admittance into the paradise only once. However, it left a deep impression in his mind. In his hashish- induced state of vision once again he could see some happy pictures of the paradise. Once there was a picture of a beautiful unmarried woman of Abyssinia, possibly a dancer. She was playing on a stringed musical instrument known as dulcimer while singing most melodiously about the pleasures of the paradise. She was obviously a decoy of the grandmaster luring the Assassins with the sensual charms they would enjoy should they go out to fulfill his mission. Accordingly the young Assassin here, possibly a Tartar youth as pointed out by Prof Lowes, dreams of the beautiful Abyssinian maid and her song celebrating the joys of the earthly paradise of Mount Abora before setting out to commit a highly risky act.

Could I revive within me

Her symphony and song,

To such a deep delight 't would win me,

That with music loud and long,

I would build that dome in air,

That sunny dome! Those caves of ice!

These lines point out what the Assassin, the follower of the Old Man of the Mountain, would do were he successful in bringing back to mind the song of the Abyssinian maid. What offers continuous inspiration and encouragement to the Assassin in remaining steadfast to his mission is the picture of the earthly paradise in Mount Abora objectified by the beautiful Abyssinian maid playing on her dulcimer and singing a song in celebration of the sensual pleasures of the paradise. Never can he forget the joys of the place and the assurance of his living in there whether he succeeds (in killing the enemy or destroying his most outstanding property) or fails (faces martyrdom) in his mission. Recalling the picture of heaven symbolized by the singing (and possibly dancing) Abyssinian maid is imperative on his part as without it he will not feel emboldened or enthused to set out on his dangerous mission. The music and the song he heard in Mount Abora are the sweetest things he experienced there; he will get such intense joy and happiness that nothing seems impossible for him to achieve at that hour of delight. His joy leads him to such a state of perfect bliss that he thinks that he will be able to do jobs much better than Kubla Khan. Behind the making of his pleasure-dome there lay lots of money, toil, and engineering skill. But he can set up a gorgeous building like Kubla's, a sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice, simply with his ecstatic music sung 'loud and long'. What is more marvelous

is that, unlike Kubla's, his structure, instead of standing on solid ground, will float 'in air' in a region outside earthly changes.

In *Purchas his Pilgrimage* there is a reference to Mahomet's sensual paradise in which 'damsels skilful in songs and instruments of music and dancing' were employed to hook young men willing to set out on a dangerous mission. Marco Polo, his other source, mentioned the entrance of 'drugged devotees' to the earthly paradise to have a foretaste of the eternal bliss. The young Assassin, too, feels the need of recalling the pleasures of the paradise (one of which is the Abyssinian maid together with her song) that alone can give him the strength necessary for achieving superhuman feats-be it the murder of an enemy or the building of a gorgeous pleasure-dome in air.

And all who heard should see them there,

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!

His flashing eyes, his floating hair!

The lines constitute the speech of those who stand round the young Assassin. The follower of the Old Man of the Mountain is allowed to enter into the earthly paradise only once in order that he can have a preview of the eternal bliss available there. He cannot forget the beauty of the Abyssinian maid and the sweetness of her song alluding to the sensual pleasures of the paradise which will be his forever should he undertake to carry out the dangerous mission. Now before setting out to do the daring job once more he tries to recapture the joys of the paradise typified by the Abyssinian maid and her song. This fills him with so much delight that performance of supernatural feats does not appear impossible to him. Hence he says that while Kubla built the pleasure-dome at the cost of enormous money, man-power, and engineering skill, he would set up a similar structure simply with music, and his building would yet be more marvelous for it will float in the air, and those who would hear him sing loud and long would actually see it there (i.e., in the sky), for in his joy he would be able to produce the illusion of reality. Instantaneously they will be convinced that he is not an ordinary man but one possessing superhuman power. Awareness of this will make them feel very much alarmed and they will loudly alert one another to be on their guard. They will then pay more attention to him only to find to their great fear that he is not in a normal but in a drugged state. Consumption of hashish has dilated the pupils making his eyes extra-ordinary bright. Since this drug removes the sense of responsibility, he fails to take care of his hair as a result of which his locks float in the air. His frenzied state, thus, fills them with an unknown fear, and makes them uneasy about an impending disaster.

The extract tells of the building of a dome in the air by music which will not appear absurd should one remember the building of Troy by Apollo's music or Aladin's floating palace or Nebuchadnezzar's hanging gardens of Babylon. Carried away by extreme joy, the Assassin can produce the illusion of reality that is why the listeners can actually see the dome there (i.e. in the

sky). The 'flashing eyes' and 'floating hair' clearly present the frenzied state of a drugged Assassin.

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.

Here the people standing round the young Assassin first feel the need of restraining him, failing which they resolve to ignore altogether what he does, for intoxication have put him in a state beyond their control. The follower of a fanatic sect has come out to fulfil his mission. His religion has sanctioned the murder of a person regarded as its enemy. The grand master has assured his living in the earthly paradise should he return alive fulfilling his mission. His religion also guarantees his enjoyment of perpetual bliss there in the event of his facing premature martyrdom. As assassination is not possible in cold blood, he tries utmost to have a vision of the paradise the charms of which will spur him on to his mission. As done by others, he too, follows the practice of taking hashish soaked in sugar ('honey dew') and of drinking white-coloured hashish-mixed drink ('milk of Paradise') to induce an ecstatic vision of the paradise to which the grand master admitted him once in order to give him a preview of the eternal bliss he would enjoy there in case he showed his willingness to carry out his instructions. The Assassin particularly remembers the beautiful maid of Abyssinia-and her unearthly song. This fills him with such delight that he thinks that he will be able to perform superhuman deeds. Joy leads him to sing loud and long, and with its assistance he produces the illusion of reality by virtue of which those who stand round him could see him build a dome like Kubla's in the air. They are at once convinced that he is no ordinary man but one possessing superhuman power. Awareness of this instantly fills them with so much fear that they caution one another to be on their guard. A close look at him convinces them that he is no longer in his normal senses, for his 'flashing eyes' and his 'floating hair' clearly reveal him to be in a drugged state- a state when he can commit any rash and dangerous act. Therefore, they first of all try to confine him to a particular spot and to make him powerless by drawing a circle round him three times in the manner of a magician. This failing, they are left in a state of utter quandary. They decide no longer to offer any resistance to him. They resolve to shut their eyes to such an act of his which is committed in the name of religious interest and considered holy although it is extremely fearful and raises nothing but aversion. They regard him beyond their control because of his consumption of intoxicating drugs.

The expression 'holy dread' clearly links the young follower with the Assassins who thought nothing of killing an enemy for the furtherance of their religious interest. Coleridge's interest in



the Gothic is once again revealed by what he seeks to make of the Assassin by letting him partake of some intoxicating drugs.

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