

**CHAPTER-IV**

**FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS  
OF MATTHEW ARNOLD**

## PART-II

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### 4.1 MATTHEW ARNOLD'S VISION OF LIFE :

Preceding chapters have thrown enough light on the various influences that shaped mental make-up of a creative genius in Matthew Arnold. Matthew Arnold's first phase of life is as a poet; his second phase is as a critic. Arnold's link with poetry will explain the factors governing his vision of life.

Poetry holds its mirror to life; life also gets reflected through poetry; poetical mind does its interpretation through the various vicissitudes of life. Arnold's poetry is very much concerned with life.

Arnold, perhaps more than any other poet of his time, saw life around him and was deeply affected by the changes that were occurring. The various changing scenes of Victorian society leave their deep impressions on the mind of Arnold. Fountain of poetry springs from his observation of life around him. Fraser Neiman observes, "His poetry has validity because, at it best (for example, in 'Callicles' song of 'Cadmus and Harmonia', 'the Forsaken Merman', 'The Scholar Gipsy', 'Thyrsis', 'Dover Beach', 'Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse') Arnold's imaginatively created world gives us emotions and generates the ideas on which it invites us to reflect."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Fraser Neiman, Matthew Arnold (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1968) 58-59.

Arnold emphasizes proximity to life as required qualification to a poet. This is clear in the essay on “The Function of Criticism”, where he remarks:

“... and quit these considerations which are apt to become too abstract and impalpable, - everyone can see that a poet, for instance, ought to know life and the world before dealing with them in poetry; and life and the world being in modern times very complex things, the creation of modern poet, to be worth much, implies great critical effort behind it; else it must be a comparatively poor, barren, and short-lived effort. This is why Byron’s poetry had so little endurance in it, and Goethe’s so much; both Byron and Goethe had a great productive power, but Goethe’s was nourished by a great critical effort providing the true material for it, and Byron’s was not; Goethe knew life and the World, the poet’s necessary subjects much more comprehensively and thoroughly than Byron.”<sup>2</sup>

The above quotation provides the needed explanation about the relationship of life and poet. Arnold’s idea of poetry is deeply rooted in life. In the words of Lionel Trilling “... the close relationship between Literature and life which Arnold perceived and explained gave him his hold upon his readers.”<sup>3</sup>

Arnold was at his advantage to have more opportunities of favourable situations for large experience out of life than his cotemporaries like Carlyle, Ruskin and Dickens. For example, his duty of school Inspector exposed him to

<sup>2</sup> Stefan Coillini, ed. Matthew Arnold : Culture and Anarchy and other Writings. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) p.29.

<sup>3</sup> Lionel Trilling, Matthew Arnold, 1982 ed. (Oxford: UP, 1939) p.192.

various classes in society; and his extensive travelling also gave him wider perspective.

Thoughts and feelings matter in poetry as its subject matter. During the Victorian period there were the same tendencies in Vogue. There were certain group of poets. Some of them much cared for thought elements predominantly more; the other group, for idealistic notion. Emotions, love for beauty, flights of imagination coloured the latter group of poets. Matthew Arnold makes his stand clear to his readers that he wrote poetry to find an outlet for the ideas which he had acquired through rich experience of life, and through wide readings. As G. Robert stance puts it, "The approaches that Arnold makes in his poems on poetry are noticeably different from either Tennyson's or Browning's like Browning – in this one respect at least-Arnold's interest is fundamentally intellectual."<sup>4</sup> To Arnold poetry was not pastime, he had rather serious concern of life he did not escape from life, he rather mingled with it and recreated beauty out of it. In the words of Nirmaljeet, "Carlyle Ruskin Arnold and Keble all concerned with eternal values of life."<sup>5</sup> Arnold's serious concern about life can be seen in an example of a poem namely, 'Dover Beach.' In this poem Arnold give the description of the tranquil English Channel of Dover, glowed with moonlit. The waves of the sea advancing or retreating give rise to the contemplative thoughts. These thoughts are concerned with religious faith, which is receding. The serious concern is – how to preserve this faith. Arnold's own solution lies in his poetical line, "Ah, love, let us

<sup>4</sup> G. Robert Stance, Matthew Arnold (Princeton: Princeton 1967), P.14.

<sup>5</sup> Nirmaljeet Oberoi, Matthew Arnold as a Critic, Creative New Literatures Ser. 04. (New Delhi: Creative Books, 1995) 6.

be true'. As G-Robert stance says, "For Arnold aesthetic and critical ideas are ultimately the same . . ." <sup>6</sup> Therefore, the Romantic scene and the philosophical musings are blended together in 'Dover Beach' poem.

Arnold's critical sensibility is part and parcel of his poetry as well as this prose, so, the definition – poetry is the criticism of life. The definition meant that Arnold did not isolate literature from other types of knowledge. The basic function in Arnold's concept – the criticism of life, is critical activity.

It is Arnold's deep interest in life led him to the field of poetry, his presentation of life is characterized by critical force. By the critical power he acts as an interpreter of life, showing the goodness, greatness and charm of life.

Arnold's vision of life mainly rest on the phrase 'criticism of life'. With reference to the essay on "Joubert", it means encompassing the whole of literature. In the essay on Wordsworth, it is a constant reference to life, with the question 'how to live'. This 'criticism of life', really involves the whole of literature and life. The basic function involved in the criticism is critical activity. In the words of Arnold, I said: "Of literature of France and Germany, as of the intellect of Europe in general, the main effort for now many years, has been a critical effort;

<sup>6</sup> Robert Stance, Matthew Arnold: The Poet as Humanist (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1967), p.16.

the endeavour, in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is.”<sup>7</sup>

Arnold imbibed the critical sensibility in greater degree and therefore, we find his poetry characterized by this feature. Therefore G Robert Stance says, “Potential in Arnold the poet is the greatest critic of his age... so that from the ‘The Strayed Reveller’ and other poems to the volume of 1867, we find many poems – serving not only as examples of sound practice, but as instruments of critical exploration and definition.”<sup>8</sup>

Arnold’s phrase ‘Criticism of life’ strikes a classical balance of imagination by reason’. It also gives a sense that aesthetic is inseparable from morality. Thus, it seems that poetry caters to the spiritual need in man. It is the crossover to the question ‘how to live’. Therefore Arnold in his essay on “The study of Poetry” says, ‘The future Poetry’ is immense because in poetry where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, at time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer, stay ... The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry.’<sup>9</sup>

From the quotation in the preceding paragraph, it becomes clear that Arnold elevates poetry to the place of religion. Again in the words of Arnold, his essay on

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Arnold, “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” The English Critical Tradition, eds. S. Ramaswami and V.S. Seturaman. 1986 ed Vol.2. (Madras: Macmillan India Ltd., 1978) p.17.

<sup>8</sup> Stance 15.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Arnold, “The Study of Poetry” Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold Ed. A Dwight Culler (Boston: Houghton, 1961) p.306.

“The Study of Poetry”, he says, “The best poetry is what we want; the best poetry will be found to have power of forming, sustaining and delighting us, as nothing else can.”<sup>10</sup>

The above function of the poetry can be performed successfully, if the poetry is of the highest order of excellence. Therefore, while regarding poetry we must have a sense of the best, the really excellent and the strength of joy that is to be drawn from it.

While dealing with subject-matter, Arnold, first of all sheds spasmodic approach to poetry. Spasmodies wanted modern poets should deal with modern subject. And they believed that the inferiority of a subject can be hidden by the superiority of the expression. But according to Greeks and Arnold, matter and manner should be excellent as no amount of make up can hide the ugliness beneath. Thus Arnold remarks, “The superior character of truly and seriousness, in the matter and substance of the best poetry, is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement marking its style and manner.”<sup>11</sup>

Arnold's idea of poetry is deep rooted in life. He had more opportunities or favourable situations to have large experience out of life than his contemporaries like Carlyle, Ruskin and Dickens. For example, his duty of School Inspector exposed

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Arnold “The study of Poetry” Ed. Culler 307.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew Arnold “The study of Poetry” Ed. Culler 314.

him to various classes in society; and his extensive travelling gave him wider perspective.

In the words of Lionel Trilling, "... the close relationship between literature and life which Arnold perceived and explained gave him first hold upon his readers."<sup>12</sup>

Arnold's approach to life was not fragmentary. There was a compressive look at life at its various facts. He was interested in life as a whole. There is an example of some poets, who were occupied only with some particular aspect of life. Tennyson, for example, dealt with problems of faith, democracy and war; Browning engaged himself with Psychological insight and philosophical profundity; Arnold then, was interested in life as a whole

The whole of life, but not slice of it forms the basic tenet of Arnold's critical writings. As Joseph Carroll writes, "The fundamental source of Arnold's critical importance is his own sense that literary theory must not be isolated from other types of knowledge, that it must take its place within a comprehensive vision of man's place in nature and in history. His individual perceptions and judgments have weight precisely because they are not merely the expression of an amorphous

<sup>12</sup> Lionel Trilling, Matthew Arnold (Oxford: OUP, 1982) 192.



sensibility, but rather formulating within a continuous effort to give shape and definition of the whole range of human experience.”<sup>13</sup>

There is an impact on the mind of Arnold by Greek Philosopher in viewing life steadily and whole. Arnold’s approach – the whole view of life – takes him toward the un-blurred vision, that can be called his steadiness of vision. This was possible when he contemplated on the whole rather than fragmentary. With this steady or consistent outlook at-life, according to Arnold, a poet is able to arrive at a unity; and the true poet sees such unity. As G. Robert Stance puts it, “But Arnold also suggests that by achieving this unified vision the poet penetrates to essential underlying realities and arrives by this means at something like vision of totality.”<sup>14</sup>

The obverse idea of the wholeness is also welcome, because it is viewed by German Idealists as the organic principle. According to this organic principle reality is the living whole and its parts embody the pattern of the whole. About the two systems of approach Stance remarks, “This melding of two diverse traditions represents the unifying activity that is essential to Arnold’s Theory”. Arnold recognized such combination in German poet, Goethe, as an example of wholeness of vision, the poetic achievement. This unifying or synthesizing aspect characterize Arnold’s Works. The main business of a poet, according to Arnold, in his words, “... the grand work of literary genius is a work of synthesis and

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Carroll, Introduction, The Cultural Theory of Matthew Arnold (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). p.XIII.

<sup>14</sup> Stance 31.

exposition, ... of dealing divinely with these ideas, presenting theory in the most effective and attractive combinations, making beautiful works with them, in short.”<sup>15</sup>

Even Greeks considered the total impression of a work more important than the parts and Arnold agreed with them. This agreement shows Arnold cared for harmony and completeness in things. Thus poetic truth of high seriousness and style of poetic beauty go together. We have to accept the truth of saying - truth is beauty and beauty, in turn, truth. Poetic beauty deal with what Arnold called “fascinating felicity”, the ‘perfection of liveliness”, the “natural magic”. Both poetic truth and poetic beauty are the two ways of interpreting life - one on moral basis and another way is that of the natural magic. The two ways are timely mingled with each other in Arnold’s theory of poetry.

Arnold’s concept of poetry is governed by the fundamental qualities, namely, poetic truth and poetic beauty. This vision of Arnold’s poetry is akin to Aurobindo over-head poetry-mantra. The best form of poetical expression is mantra. According to Aurobindo the mantra arises from the vision - vision of the soul - a true creator and the true hearer. Vision is the intuitive perception. In the words of V K Gokak, “One of the things that intuition does for us is to reveal the real that lies hidden behind the actual.”<sup>16</sup> Arnold really possessed this grand vision of life for his poetry. This can be better comprehended in comparison with Aurobindo’s poetical vision.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Arnold “The Function of Criticism” eds. S. Ramaswamy and V.S. Seturaman 19-20.

<sup>16</sup> V.K. Gokak, An Integral Vie of Poetry: An Indian Perspective (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1975) 13.

In order to know the grand concept of poetical vision of Arnold, Arnold's poetical vision is referred here. Aurobindo's recurring theme in literary criticism with an unmistakable insistence - that poetry is essentially an activity and expression of the soul. This statement echoes with Arnold's statement in course of his essay on Thomas Gray. While pronouncing judgement on the poetry of Dryden and Pope, Arnold said, "The difference between genuine poetry and the poetry of Dryden, Pope and all their school, is briefly this; genuine poetry is concerned and composed in the soul. The difference between the two kinds of poetry is immense."<sup>17</sup>

Vision itself characterise gift in a poet. Aurobindo has made clear-cut distinction between gifted poet, a man of vision and an intellectual poet, a man of wit. Therefore poetry without vision can be enlivening, even brilliant, but it cannot be great. Hence, vision is an essential character in a poet of the high order, as discrimination is to the philosopher and observation to the scientist. V K Gokak highly speaks this benefit as, "What moves us and elevates us is the poetry conceived in the soul that which comes a heart-easing utterance, and prepares us for a new and unexpected revelation of reality."<sup>18</sup>

Arnold's poetical vision anticipates Aurobindo's poetical vision. But Aurobindo developed the vision out of his own spiritual experience, but he does not owe anything to Arnold to this. Therefore, S R Prasad in passing reference in

<sup>17</sup> Matthew Arnold "The study of Poetry" Ed. Culler 329.

<sup>18</sup> Gokak 11.

his critical essay says, "The reference to Arnold here should not, however, lead us to think that Sri Aurobindo's spiritual view of poetry is derived from Arnold's dictum. No, it is entirely his own experience and expression .... The fact being so, I referred to Arnold here only to show there is a very close and real affinity between him and Sri Aurobindo, when they both put so much stress on the soul element in poetry and not prove that Sri Aurobindo derives his critical outlook on the point from Arnold or for that matter, any other European Writer ..."<sup>19</sup>

Poetry conceived in soul or in spirit leads us further to his famous concept, culture. This embodies Arnold's comprehensive vision of life. Nirmaljeet Oberoi aptly remarks as, "Arnold's outfit as a critic of literature and life was really thorough as he had learnt from his Greek masters like Sophocles to see life steadily and see it whole. This comprehensive view of life enabled him to be a really enjoyable critic of literature and saved him from being colourless and rigidly scientific."<sup>20</sup>

Arnold's concept-grand application of ideas to life directly implies the relationship of life and literature. The grand application of ideas to life means trying to achieve the state of excellence, which is achieved in poetry. The best poetry always exhibits in its aesthetic beauty, such an excellence can also be achieved in the day to day life of human beings. To see the beauty of life in its excellence is the cultural and moral excellence. This is the consistent view of

<sup>19</sup> S.R. Prasad, The Literary Criticism of Sri Aurobindo (Patna: Bharati Bhavan Publishes, 1974) p.19.

<sup>20</sup> Oberoi 26.

Matthew Arnold as a poet and critic. As G. Robert Stance puts it, "The word consistency is meant to connote those realizable qualities of Arnold's poetry which I have tried to understand and define, and also to suggest the tendentious purpose of this study – to affirm that Arnold's whole imaginative enterprise is a consistent effort to apply ideas to life."<sup>21</sup>

From the preceding consideration one thing becomes clear that Arnold from the very beginning of his dandyism period of poet to the serious critical period tries to preserve the consistent effort to apply ideas to life. Therefore G. Robert Stance says, "By approaching the poet through his ideas one necessarily sees how the same problems occupy him from the beginning to the end of his career", Although early phase of Arnold's poetry was rooted in his dandyism, but it was not a hurdle to his serious views in poetry. Lionel Trilling points out to this view as, "But in 1849 he is twenty seven and still joyous and his friends are puzzled by the Strayed Reveller that has just appeared."<sup>22</sup> Joseph Carroll also points out the link between poetry and prose as, "Arnold's early poems establish the spiritual plight to which all of his later, prose work responds."<sup>23</sup> Arnold's poetic exploration is wider and broader. That means Arnold's poetic vision is tantamount to Aurobindo's vision, as referred in the foregoing pages. In other words this exploration endows Arnold with comprehensive outlook at life and its infinite possibilities.

<sup>21</sup> Stance 11.

<sup>22</sup> Trilling 35.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Carroll, Introduction, The Cultural Theory of Matthew Arnold (Arnold (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

Arnold's poetic theory may be criticized for not keeping up its pace with practice. G. Robert Stance clarifies this point as, "He knew, better than anyone else, that his poems did not fulfill his own criteria; his job was to avoid false poetic practice and aspire toward the ideal of excellence he had defined."<sup>24</sup> This view speaks of the future possibilities of the poetry, similar to the concept of overhead poetry of Aurabindo.

Before attempting Arnold's concept of culture, it is worthwhile to look at a brief analysis made by V K Gokak in the following way. V K Gokak while defining cultural concept presents the following view as, "It is well known that the anthropologists who claim to have culture as their special field of study are themselves not agreed on the connotation of the word. Anthropologists like Weber and Maclver are inclined to make a distinction between culture and civilization, restricting civilization to science and technology and culture to philosophy, religion and the arts. But Kroeber uses the word 'culture' as the customary term applicable alike to high or low production of societies. 'Civilization' is used as a term for the larger and richer cultures, carrying an overtone of high development of a specific society".<sup>25</sup>

Arnold's concept of culture stands for the latter part of view in the above quotation. We encounter a new concept of culture in his literary intelligence having a great concern for life. His stress on qualities of mind and spirit in literary culture

<sup>24</sup> Stance 5.

<sup>25</sup> V.K. Gokak, India and World Culture (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1994) 1-2.

has expanded scope of literary criticism. Basil Willey comments too on this literary specific culture with reference to Arnold's book "Culture and Anarchy" as, "Estate ergo vas perfect! Was the motto of Culture and Anarchy of it may very well stand as the motto of Arnold's whole message."<sup>26</sup>

In the preceding quotation Arnold's core thought of culture is 'perfection'. It is the pursuit of perfection. In the words of Arnold: "Culture is then properly described not as having its origin in curiosity, but as having its origin in the love of perfection; it is study of perfection. It moves by the force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good."<sup>27</sup> This perfection at which culture aims must be general perfection, harmonious perfection. This perfection is able to afford peace, as "...the peace and satisfaction which are reached as we draw near to complete spiritual perfection, and not merely to moral perfection, or rather to relative moral perfection."<sup>28</sup>

Arnold's concept of culture is not superficial. It is not in the state of having but in becoming. To have means, it will not be able to turn out an individual into that form of refined form of culture. Then Arnold says, "...And perfection which

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<sup>26</sup> Basil Willey, Nineteenth Century Studies, 1980 ed. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1949) 252.

<sup>27</sup> Matthew Arnold, "Culture and Anarchy" Ed. Collini 59.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew Arnold, "Culture and Anarchy" Ed. Collini 68.

consists in becoming something rather than in having something, in an inward condition of the mind and spirit, not in an outward set of circumstances.....”<sup>29</sup>

The perfection is one in which the character of beauty and intelligence are both present and which unites the two noblest of things namely sweetness and light. Arnold attributes these characters to poetry as “In thus making sweetness and light to be characters of perfection, culture is of like spirit with poetry follow one law with poetry.”<sup>30</sup>

Culture has its motto in the following words of Bishop Willson: “To make reason and will of God prevail.” From this, it is clear that culture is not the frivolous and useless things which Mr Bright, Mr Frederic Harrison, and many other liberals were apt to call it. Culture gets much benefit from Hellenism; it lets free flow of fresh thoughts of stock notions. Culture believes in right reason and in a paramount best self. Therefore, it encourages a centre of power in the form of the best self, a state.

The idea of the something the best endowes Arnold with superior critical sensibility. As Arnold says, “But criticism, real criticism, is essentially the exercise of the very quality. It obeys an instinct prompting it to try, to know the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics and

<sup>29</sup> Matthew Arnold, “Culture and Anarchy” Ed. Collini 62.

<sup>30</sup> Matthew Arnold, “Culture and Anarchy” Ed. Collini 67.



everything of the kind; and to value knowledge and thought as they approach. This best, without the intrusion of any other considerations whatever.<sup>31</sup>

Arnold assigns a sacred duty to criticism to create an intellectual and spiritual atmosphere in society. He wants critical effort to be impartial business. Arnold observes the phenomenon as. "... in order to avail itself of the field now opening to it, and to produce fruit for the fixture, it ought to take the rule may be summed up in one word - disinterestedness. And low is criticism to show disinterestedness? By keeping aloof from what is called 'the practical view of things,'<sup>32</sup> by resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches." From this consideration, it becomes clear that Arnold was in possession of comprehensive view of life with sharp critical sensibility.

<sup>31</sup> Matthew Arnold, "Function of Criticism" Ed. Collini 35.

<sup>32</sup> Matthew Arnold, "Function of Criticism" Ed. Collini 37.