



## ROBERT BROWNING AS A PHILOSOPHICAL POET

**DR. RAJKUMAR M. LAKHADIVE**

Head, Department of English,  
Mahatma Basweshwar College,  
Latur – 413 512. (MS) INDIA

### ABSTRACT

*Robert Browning is not merely a poet but a prophet. We can seek in him, as in Isaiah or Aeschylus, a solution, or a help to the solution, of the problems that press upon us when we reflect upon man, his place in the world and his destiny. He has given us indirectly, and as a poet gives, a philosophy of life. He has interpreted the world anew in the light of a dominant idea. Browning had certain definite opinions about the spiritual function of love. This opinion was striking and solid, as was everything which came out of Browning's mind. One of his great theories of the universe was what may be called the hope which lies in the imperfection of man. Browning expresses the idea that some hope may always be based on deficiency itself; in other words, that in so far as man is a one-legged or a one-eyed creature, there is something about his appearance which indicates that he should have another leg and another eye.*

### INTRODUCTION

Robert Browning is popular for his philosophy of life and especially for his optimism. He was gifted with an almost unlimited power of imagination which was always exerted upon real things, visible or invisible; that is to say on everything that a human being can think and feel; he is realistic because he is never visionary. He treats of visible realities- the experiences of men and women- and this makes him a philosophic poet. Browning is not a profound thinker in the sense that he takes much on trust, assumes much to be true, and never questions the truth of our basic or innate ideas. He frequently expresses his view on human life. Like William Wordsworth and P. B. Shelley, he comes to us with a more or less distinct theory of the relation of man to the universe, and exhibits his theory by means of imaginary character and scenes.

There is a saying of Hegel's, frequently quoted, that 'a great man condemns the world to the task of explaining him'. The condemnation is a double one. It generally falls heaviest on the

**DR. RAJKUMAR M. LAKHADIVE**

1Page



great man himself, who has to submit to explanation. The last refinement of this species of cruelty is to expound a poet. At the very best, he is only a guide to the beautiful object. He must fall back in silence so soon as he has led his company into its presence. He may perhaps suggest "the line of vision," or fix the point of view. From this, we can best hope to do justice to the artist's work, by appropriating his intention and comprehending his idea.

Art, morality, religion are supreme in its own sphere. The beautiful is not more beautiful because it is also moral, nor is a painting great because its subject is religious. Art is never at its best except when it is a beautiful representation of the good. Browning is, first of all, a poet. It is only as a poet that he can be finally judged. The greatness of a poet is to be measured by the extent to which his writings are a revelation of what is beautiful. Browning has manifested a peculiar sensitiveness in his poetry. In his Preface to *Pauline* and in several of his poems – notably *The Mermaid*, the *House*, and the *Shop*, he explicitly cuts himself free from his work. He knew that direct self-revelment on the part of the poet violates the spirit of the drama. He asks himself in his poem:

*Which of you did I enable  
Once to slip inside my breast,  
There to catalogue and label  
What I like least, what love best,  
Hope and fear, believe and doubt of,  
Seek and shun, respect—deride?  
Who has right to make a rout of  
Rarities he found inside? [At the Mermaid]*

He repudiates all kinship with Byron and his subjective ways. He refuses to be made king by the hands which anointed him. Both as man and poet, in virtue of the native, sunny, outer-air healthiness of his character, every kind of subjectivity is repulsive to him. He hands to his readers 'his work, his scroll, theirs to take or leave: his soul he proffers not'. For him "shop was shop only." Though he dealt in gems, and throws for the open market:

*You choice of jewels, every one,  
Good, better, best, star, moon, and sun. [Shop]*

He still *lived* elsewhere. He had 'stray thoughts and fancies fugitive'. There are hardly more than two or three of much importance which can be considered as directly reflecting his own ideas, namely, *Christmas Eve* and *Easter Day*, *La Saisiaz*, and *One Word More*—unless, spite of the poet's warning, we add *Pauline*. The light he throws on his men and women is not the unobtrusive light of day, which reveals objects, but not itself. Though a true dramatist, he is



not objective like Shakespeare and Scott. The characters of these writers seem never to have had an author. The reader feels that Browning himself attends him through all the sights and wonders of the world of man. He never escapes the sense of the presence of the poet's powerful personality. Browning has only one way of looking at the world. He has one supreme interest. He pursues these issues everywhere with a constancy shown by hardly any other poet. In consequence, his works have a unity and certain originality.

Browning is conscious of no theory. He does not construct a poem for its explication. He rather strikes his ideas out of his material, as the sculptor reveals the breathing life in the stone. Browning also is ruled by the ideas of his own age. With Carlyle, he is the interpreter of our time, reflecting its confused strength and chaotic wealth. He is the high priest of our age, standing at the altar for us. He gives utterance to our needs and aspirations, our fears and faith. By understanding him, we shall understand ourselves and the optimistic power within us. Browning had a strong faith in the immortality of the soul. And he wrote a number of poems on this. Evelyn Hope is one of them which show Browning's faith in the power of live and in the immortality of the soul. He represents his firm belief in this poem that no wish remains unfulfilled in heaven. God, the all loving and all rewarding benevolent father of the universe, sees that no dream of a sincere and devoted person should remain unfulfilled. Through a middle aged lover, Browning expressed his own philosophy.

The lover in the poem loves a young girl of sixteen years and her name was Evelyn Hope. But she died at the tender age of sixteen. The lover comes in her room. Like a typical hero, he begins to meditate upon the philosophy of human life and death. The fall of the lays of light through the clinks of the shutters is the symbol of the lover's hope for his union with his beloved in the life to come. This is also the philosophy of Browning:

*Little has yet been changed, I think-  
The shutters are shut, no light may pass  
Save two long rays through the binge's chink.*

The central interest of the poem lies in the optimism of Browning. Browning was never feared by adversities, misfortune or death. To him failure is the pillar leading to the pinnacle of success. He believes that if he fails on earth. God will surely reward him for his noble deeds in Heaven. These lines show Browning's optimistic view and faith in God:

*"For God above  
Is great to grant, as mighty to make,  
And creates the love to reward the love."*



Browning wrote some religious poems also in which he expressed his own philosophy of life 'Rabbi Ben Ezra' is one of them. This poem is rightly considered one of the greatest philosophic poems in English poetry, and is certainly a gem of philosophic wisdom in Browning's poetic output. The poem embodies Browning's philosophy of life and his general attitude towards, youth and old age. It is the manure expression of the poet about man's actual mission in life, and the purpose of man's existence on the earth. It is a poem that can give right guidance to man in the wise conduct of his life, and can help him to attain salvation in his life. It is one of those rare poems that awakens us from our passivity and indifference to spiritual values. It exhorts us to devote our time to the strengthening of the soul, rather than wasting our time in the gratification of our bodily and sensual needs. In this poem, Browning advises people that they should welcome each misfortune. For it will encourage them to a greater effort. Man should work hard to achieve some moments of joy even at the cost of the pains three times their value. Says Rabbi Ben Ezra:

*"The welcome each rebuff,  
That turns earth's smoothness rough  
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go,  
Be our joys three parts pain!"*

So rabbi Ben Ezra advises us as follows:

*"Strive, and hold cheap the strain;  
Learn, nor account the pang;  
Dare never grudge the thore."*

This poem also shows Browning philosophy on the immortality of the soul. Browning could never believe that death brings the end of the divine spark irradiating human life. God is the potter and the soul is the clay. Both of them endure forever. He says:

*"Fool! all that is at all,  
Lasts ever, past recall;  
Earth changes; but they soul and God and stand sure.  
Time's wheel runs back or stops potter and clay endure."*

Browning's healthy optimism is exhibited in the poem. Rabbi says:

*"What I aspired to be,  
And was not comforts me."*



Browning believes that a man who had failed in a noble struggle was likely to be placed on a higher pedestal in the kingdom of God as compared to the little man who aspired to gain little and succeeded in achieving that little in his life and this faith of Browning was voiced fervently in Rabbi Ben Ezra:

*"Not an the vulgar mass  
Called 'work' must sentence pass  
Things done, that tool the eye and had price  
But all, the world's coarse thumb  
And finger failed to plump  
So passed in making up the main account,  
All instincts immature  
All purposes unsure  
That weighed not as his work, yet swelled the man's accounts."*

This poem is meant for those persons who consider that the aim of life is merely to live for the gratification of bodily needs. Browning gives a jolt to such thorough going worshippers of the body, and awakens them from their mistaken conception of life. Browning belief that man is a higher creature than brutes and animals. Man has a soul which is far more elevated than the soul of animal creation. It is necessary for human beings not only to care for their body but also for the elevation of their soul. If a man spends his life in mere eating and drinking and has no consideration for the betterment of his spirit, he is not better than a brute:

*"Poor vaunt of life indeed  
We're man but formed to fee  
Enjoy, to solely seek and find and feast  
As sure an end to men;  
Irks care the crop-full bird? Frests doubt the  
Maw-crammed beast?"*

Man should not choose to be brutish for he has a divine spark irradiating his being. He should develop his spiritual power and work for his salvation. 'Andrea Del Sarto' is another philosophical poem of Browning. It shows Browning's philosophy about the human relationship in the material world. Like Fra Lippo Lippi, it represents another study of the mind of an artist. In this poem Browning represents his philosophy through Andrea Del Sarto. He was a famous artist and he married with Lucrezia. But she married Andrea Del Sarto only for money. The poem represents the relationship between husband and wife in the material world. The poem brings out Browning's optimism, his faith in God, and in the immortality of the human soul. He believes that man can enjoy the good things of life only by believing that



they have been created for his enjoyment by God himself. There is also consolation for the erring man that all his mistakes would be rectified in heaven. Andrea Del Sarto hopes to be rewarded in heaven, for being underrated on earth:

*'Tis safer for me, if the award be strict,  
That I am something underrated here,  
Poor this long while, despired, to speak the truth."  
He emphasized the necessity of keeping high ideals in one's life:  
Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,  
Or what's heaven for?"*

The poem also throws light on his theory of art. He believes that artistic greatness is not merely a matter of technical perfection; it must also be expressive of the urge within the artist's soul for the ideal and the unattainable. A great artist must pitch his ideals high, and the ideal must always elude his grasp. Attainment and satisfaction result in complacency. Then there is no longer that "Ceaseless Striving". It is the secret of all great art, with a result that a placid grayness overtakes the work of such artists. This was the tragedy of Andrea. He achieved technical perfection and so lacked the inner urge for great achievement. His art lacked 'soul' the fire and glow of passion and inspiration, and so much be ranked inferior to the art of Rafael and Angelo, painters who were for his inferiors in technical excellence.

'Fra Lippo Lippi' is the other philosophical poem of Browning which expresses his philosophy on man's acute consciousness of the flesh and blood. The main character of the poem is Fra Lippo Lippi who was much conscious of bodily sex and attraction. But through this painter Fra Lippo Lippi, Browning represents the reality of life. In the following lines Browning preaches Fra Lippo Lippi but indirectly to preach all the painters. He advice painters to paint the inner beauty of man which is called soul not only the outer beauty:

*Your business is not to catch men with show,  
With homage to the perishable clay,  
But lift them over it, ignore it all,  
Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh,  
Your business is to paint the souls of men.*

Here brother Lippo expresses Browning's philosophy that God has made wonderful and beautiful things for the admiration of men. He says:

*. . . You've seen the field  
The beauty and the wonder and the power,*



*The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,  
Changes surprises, - God made it all!  
For what? Do you feel thankful, ay or no,  
For this fair town's face, yonder rivers line,  
The mountain round it and the sky above,  
Much more the figures of man, women, child,  
These are the Frame to? What's it all about?  
To be passed over, despised; or dwelt upon,  
Wondered at?*

Browning believes that awareness of beauty in this world makes us give thanks to God who is responsible for it. Beauty is one of God's finest gifts. In any case, this world is not to be despised. It is a world full of wonder and delight. All the things we love in it help to draw us to the God who made them. The particular function of art, too, is an important one. Art does not improve on God's creation. What it does is to draw our attention to important things that we might otherwise have missed:

*For don't you mark, we're made so that we love  
First when we see them painted, things we have passed  
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see.*

He believes that it is right to enjoy this world. It is right to love God because he created it. Religion and morality are well served by a right appreciation of the things in the world:

*. . . This world's no blot for us,  
Nor blank - it means intensely, and means good  
To find its meaning is my meat and drink.*

'Abt Vogler' is a poem which is based upon music but it also shows Browning's philosophy of life. Browning believes that nothing that is good is ever lost. In the poem, Abt Vogler is a musician who wishes that his architecture of sound could remain, as remained the magical place that Solomon made the spirits build to please Queen Balkis. But the poet says that the musician need not regret that the music composes in a moment of divine inspiration cannot be remembered; he need not regret that it has been forgotten. Forgotten it is by the man who made it. Forgotten it is by the people who heard it; forgotten it is therefore by all mankind.

Browning, dealt with the problem of Evil vis-a-vis human life in which he was intensely interested. Browning was never disheartened by the presence and power of evil, but considered it necessary for the progress of man in his life. He believes that evil checked man



from attaining perfection and kept him perfect. It was better that man, struggled to achieve perfection but could not attain it, for perfection is stagnation and 'what is' come to perfect perishes'. Hence Evil provided the necessary balancing force in life and saved from reaching perfection. Evil was no doubt men's foe, but it was a foe without which progress could not have been possible. Evil was therefore a condition of man's moral life, and his moral progress. Evil was a permanent as good and it was man's duty to fight and struggle against the forces of evil believing like Abt Vogler that:

*There shall never be one lost good*

*What was will live as before,*

*The evil is null, is nought, is silence implying sound*

*What was good shall be good, with evil so much good more.*

Evil is a mere negation, and has no objective reality, any more than a shadow between lights or a silence between sounds. This theory of the non-existence of evil has formed the basis of various ethical systems, both ancient and modern. Nothing really great can be achieved in this world. But imperfection here simply means perfection in the other world. Browning is a poet with a message. However, Browning has no formal message. 'No church, no philosophy', in the technical sense'. But he had definite and firm views on human life and human nature, and of the relation of both to God. He did not belong to any school of philosophy nor was he the disciple of any philosophy. He was immensely interested in life. He had thought deeply and calmly on the problems of life. He had come to certain conclusions about the values of philosophical and spiritual life. His conclusions about life have a philosophical touch and high intellectual approach. He was not moved by the aesthetic movement of his age which believes in art for art's sake. For him, art is for life's sake. He was interested in the study of human personality.

## REFERENCES

- 1) Dr. B.R. Sharma "Robert Browning Select Poems" (Meerut: Sahitya Bhandar; 2001)
- 2) Dr. Raghukul Tilak "Studies In Poets, Robert Browning" (Delhi: Rama Brothers; 1997)
- 3) B.R. Mullik "Studies In Poets, Browning" Vol. XVI (Agra: S. Chand and C.: 1956)
- 4) J.N. Mundra "Browning Selected Poems" (Bareilly: Student Store; 1996)
- 5) B.R. Sahrma, "Studies In 19th century English Poetry" (Agra: Pustak Bhavan; 1965)