

The Triumph of Man-Made Values in Relation to The Loss of Natural Values in The Poem the Forsaken Merman by Matthew Arnold

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Abstract—Industrial Revolution has remained one of the significant revolutions in the history of world, paving way for great many radical changes in the days to come. With the advent and progression of the industrialization of the nation, the English Victorian age was rife with the struggle to maintain the status quo of established ideologies and the alternate new, scientific outlook of dealing with life at large. The Poem *The Forsaken Merman* by Matthew Arnold is representative of this struggle during the Victorian period in English lives. The research paper analyses the depiction of these two contradictory viewpoints through the two diverse worlds presented in the poem in the framework of a narrative of love forsaken.

The Forsaken Merman is a poem based on the love between two beings, a human mortal and a merman, representing diverse worlds. The Merman belongs to the world of nature i.e. the world of sea while the lady love has her innate home in the world of land i.e. the earth, the human world. One is a natural world and the other is a man dominated world. Matthew Arnold depicts the value systems of both of these worlds bringing out the differences in these set of values. Through the poem, he has criticized the social and religious belief systems that dominated the human world and controlled the individuals into following the set norms of the times. The paper analyses the diverse viewpoints depicted through the poem and brings out the differences between the values represented by Man-made society and Nature.

Index Terms—Society, Nature, Love, Contradictory viewpoints, Science, Religion.

Among various themes in literature, the theme of love abounds across ages and cultures. It has been portrayed in its various aspects including pure love, lost love, unrequited love, spiritual love, forsaken or abandoned love etc. Literature is replete with the

depiction of innumerable situations centered on the notions of betrayal, deceit, loss, suffering, isolation and rejection in love relationships. Most of the tragic love tales arise out of the result of a constant tussle between the individual aspirations and adherence to the social norms. The social divisions such as class, caste, race, religious affiliations, material differences and some other aspects could play culprits at times. The literary platform becomes a tool in the hands of the writers and thinkers to bring to fore the criticism of such ideas that subject the humanity into blindly following the social norms.

In this regard, the present research paper has undertaken the poem, *The Forsaken Merman* by the Victorian English Poet, Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) for analysis of the love relationship gone wrong during the Victorian times. The poem was written at the times when Arnold was studying at Oxford University in the early 1840's and was published in his first collection of poems, *The Strayed Reveller, and Other Poems* in 1849.

The later half of the eighteenth century had been a vibrant age for England and its people, along with the rest of the world. The world witnessed the emergence of some of the major significant revolutions, that transformed the humanity at large forever. It included the Industrial revolution along with the period of Enlightenment, paving way for emphasis on scientific temper, technological advancement and rational outlook upon the lives of the Englishmen. The exchange of ideas, debates, discussions and discourses among the intellectuals as well as the learned people became a common phenomenon. The conservative

ideologies faced a tough time dealing with arguments based on rational approaches. The succeeding Victorian age was rife with the prevalence of such contradictory viewpoints with the conservatives holding on to their traditional value systems and the liberals welcoming the innovative ideas based on scientific approaches.

The crucial work of Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (1859) came as a jolt to the hitherto existing beliefs in the sphere of religion. The theory of evolution and the notion of Survival of the Fittest challenged and shook the very premises upon which the Christianity had empowered itself so far. The Victorians were perplexed and faced a dilemma. The society became divided in its opinion of following the religion. The idea of institutionalization of religion was challenged throughout the age. However, there were some movements such as those of Oxford Movements that strived to re-instill the fading faith of the Christians in their religion.

Matthew Arnold's poem, *The Forsaken Merman* is centered upon the religious and social rift of the times, depicted by a great divide between the values of the human world and the natural world. Arnold has narrated the story of a Merman through the poem, who represents the life under the sea i.e. the world of nature. The poetic voice (of Merman) creates a picture of a happy and contented family as he tries to remember the past life of his marriage with Margaret, a mortal from earth. The poem begins on the note of an anguish in the voice of the Merman as he stands upon the shore of the sea and calls out to his wife, who has now forsaken him for the life on earth. He shares his desperation with his young children too, who are asked to call out their mother. He wants to exploit the emotions of the children to fetch the 'mother' back to their world by arousing feminine consciousness in her. The little children probably do not understand the gravity of the situation and therefore remain silent. The only voice that the readers get to read is of the Merman.

In the poem, the Merman ruled the world of sea by *sitting on a red gold throne in the heart of sea* feeling contented with his life in the company of his beloved wife and children. There is an abundance of life here.

*Sand-strewn caverns, cool and deep,
Where the winds are all asleep;
Where the spent lights quiver and gleam,
Where the salt weed sways in the stream,
Where the sea-beasts, ranged all around,
Feed in the ooze of their pasture-ground;
Where the sea-snakes coil and twine
Dry their mail and bask in the brine;
Where great whales come sailing by
Sail and sail, with unshut eye,
(Arnold, 1849, lines 35-45)*

The Merman is deeply connected to the nature and finds every natural being as connected. While he stands on the shore, he describes clearly the movements and activities of nature including *the winds, the salt tides, the white wild horses, sea-beasts, great whales, sand-strewn caverns, salt-weeds* etc. These natural elements play cheerfully in nature. It is a harmonious world with no feelings of discrimination or ill-will, hierarchy, power-play, distinction etc. towards one another, unlike in the human world. The natural elements seem to be in perfect coordination with each other. But the picture of harmony changes to disturbance with *sea growing stormy* and *little ones moaning* after Margaret abandons the sea-family.

The world represented by the Merman could be the pre-industrialized world, which followed the simple set of values in life. Life in such times would not rely much upon the mechanical clock and thus would lack the preciseness of dates and hour in everyday lives. This behaviour can be understood in the manner in which the Merman seems to have lost the notion of time of his wife's desertion. He constantly asks the children *if it was yesterday that she went away? And were we long alone?* Industrialization has not touched this part of the world yet. With industrialization, the human lives have become constantly mechanical and routinised. Her existence becomes only a memory for him now. The betrayal of Margaret comes in the form of a religious calling to her with the sound of Easter Bell ringing in the church on the shores of the sea. Her longing to offer her prayers with her folks on earth is well understood by her husband, who immediately sends her *up through the waves* and expects her *to say thy prayers and come back to the kind sea-waves*. Margaret's mortal earthy world is depicted in contrast to the harmonious world of nature. Once she reaches

her native earthly home, she gets lost in her religious duties and clearly forgets her family under the sea. Such is a trance of human world for her.

As observed by the Merman in the poem, the world on land is devoid of cheerfulness. The town is described as a *white-wall'd town* with *the narrow-paved streets* indicating the narrowness of the human minds. *All is still* there, with no other activity than the offerings of the Church prayers. The Church is described as *the little grey church* standing in *cold blowing airs* (unwelcoming). It is located upon the graveyard, indicating a sense of death. Death is end of life and all its activities. *The graveyard stones are worn* with the constant rains. The church has *small leaded panes* through which Merman tries to peep into the inner hall for prayers. *Loud prays the priest and shut stands the door in the church*. The church represents the man-made institution and therefore it reflects restrictions in every aspect of its existence. The Non-believers into Christianity cannot be a part of the religious rituals and practices, thus are to be *shut out*. It is expected for the believers and the conformers to remain *sealed in their attention to the holy books* and not to be distracted from the religious duties. Margaret's eyes become *cold and strange* with constant praying. Such is the influence of religion and religious hold upon the human mind that they forget their own existence, the fellow-beings and everything around them. Faith in religion becomes the supreme act of life, above everything else. Religion expects complete surrender from the individual.

Margaret's human world creates distinctions among individuals. The poem depicts the collaboration of the religion and society to bind the people into conformity. The system excludes the outsiders/those who do not share their belief system and faith. Upon pleading to his wife from the small leaded panes, Margaret *gave me never a look, for her eyes were seal'd to the holy book!*

The book is holy but it has shut others out. The bell is holy but it's sound has separated the members of a family. The notion of holiness (a man-made idea), thus is hollow and ironically presented in the poem, in mocking terms. The wife remains silent throughout sitting in the church, hinting at the fact that her belief in the religion has silenced her from being conscious about her own existence i.e. her individuality. She

cannot understand herself separated from her religious obligations. Religion has a power over her.

Arnold has also brought out the essential differences in the two distinct worlds by means of painting them through various shades of colors. For instance, the world under the sea has been colored in bright, cheerful colors, indicating the aliveness of beings. The throne is of red and golden color indicating the royalty. Also, the wife is shown as sharing the royal throne with the king, implying the practice of egalitarian system. *The lights quiver and gleam* under the sea illuminating the world of nature. *The sea is clear green*, pointing towards the element of transparency in the natural world. On the contrary, the world on land is described as colorless or bland, associating it with a feeling of hopelessness. The church is painted in grey color, while the town is white-walled and sleeping. As the poem progresses towards the end, one notices that the hopefulness in the voice of the Merman has given way to the feelings of utter helplessness and acceptance of the reality that the wife and the mother has been lost forever to the mortal human world. The strength in his voice becomes increasingly feeble as he begins to address her as *Cruel Margaret* and *Faithless Mortal*. The human values (corrupt and discriminative) remain triumphant in the poem by overpowering the nature and natural values (harmonious and simple).

Matthew Arnold's poem, *The Forsaken Merman* represents the constant tussle between the man-made norms and values in the name of social, religious, cultural affiliations etc. and the individual belief systems. The poem captures essentially the dilemma of the Victorians and portrays the contradictory viewpoints prevailing during the contemporary times by presenting it in the mold of a beautiful love-story gone wrong.

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