



PROJECTION OF VEDANTIC THOUGHTS AND RELIGIOUS OVERTONES IN ROBERT BROWNING'S POETICAL WORKS: A BRIEF ANALYSIS

Dr. S. Chelliah

Professor, Head and Chairperson, School of English & Foreign languages & School of Indian Languages, Department of English & Comparative Literature, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamilnadu

Cite This Article: Dr. S. Chelliah, "Projection of Vedantic Thoughts and Religious Overtones in Robert Browning's Poetical Works: A Brief Analysis", International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Modern Education, Volume 3, Issue 2, Page Number 106-109, 2017.

Copy Right: © IJMRME, R&D Modern Research Publication, 2017 (All Rights Reserved). This is an Open Access Article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to project Robert Browning as one of the greatest Victorian poets who took the art and vacation of the poet with high seriousness, making poetry as something closely related to life and its problems with no faith in the theory of 'Art for Art's sake' and to show to the public such a view of the poet that poetry and art should be intimately in touch with reality and life with his special focus on defining poetry as nothing but an instrument for unfolding the souls of individuals in all their complex aspects and the purpose of poetry and art was neither social propaganda nor political reform but study of human soul in all its diverse aspects. It neatly examines how Browning considered the poet as a sage and a teacher bent upon the task of bettering humanity by his noble message and philosophic thought coupled with religious and vedantic thoughts – incorporated in his poetry.

Key Words: Poetic Vacation, Seriousness, Devoted Votary, Idle Vision, Social Propaganda, Political Reform, Human Soul, Sage, Synthesis & Vedantic Thought

Robert Browning is one of those great poets during the Victorian period who took the art and vacation of the poet with seriousness. He was as much a devoted votary of the muse of poetry as Milton. He did not consider poetry as the product of an idle imagination aimed at entertaining idle persons. He neither designed to offer such literature as should be a substitute for a cigar or a game of dominoes to an idle man, nor subscribed to the view that the poet was a utopian idealist taking the readers to an unreal world of shadows, dreams and idle visions. Browning held the view that poetry was closely related to life and its problems. He had no faith in the theory of 'Art for Art's sake'. He believed that art was no abstraction, thin, avid and theoretic. It should be pulsating with life. For him, art was life's sake and his poems of art, philosophy and religion vindicate his stand that poetry and art should be intimately in touch with reality and life.

According to Browning, poetry was nothing but an instrument for unfolding the souls of individuals in all their complex aspects and for the poet, the purpose of poetry and art was neither social propaganda nor political reform but study of human soul in all its diverse aspects. Poetry, in his opinion, is a fit medium to study individuals and their souls and external life should be put under the dominating influence of inner life. He considered the poet as a sage and a teacher bent upon the task of bettering humanity by his noble message and philosophic thought coupled with religious and vedantic thoughts – incorporated in his poetry. No doubt, he was a great thinker, having a sympathetic attitude towards all the scientific progress and mental activity and inquiry of his times. Truly speaking, Browning is one of those great English poets who have given a concrete synthesis of life, a creative and constructive line of thinking and a deep philosophy of life rooted in optimism and faith, considering God as the supreme being who is over Nature and prevailing throughout for the whole universe is a crystallized thought of God to the Poet:

God dwells in all
From life's minute beginning up at last
To man.

Browning's faith in God and soul did not prelude his genuine interest in the world and human life which he believed to be real and good. As Chesterton has put it, "He stands prominent among those great universalists who praised the ground they trod on and commend existence like any other material in its samples". According to Browning, life is nothing but probation and life succeeds life. Man's soul is immortal and death need not frighten us. What man failed to achieve in this world would be attained by him in the next. That was Browning's faith and hope and in "The Grammarian's Funeral", he stated:

Leave now to dogs and apes
Man has forever.

Such is the optimistic philosophy of Browning. His optimism as G.K. Chesterton has put it, "was not founded on any arguments for optimism, nor on opinions, but on life which was the work of God". As a poet of humanity, he was interested not in the mass of men and women but in the life of individuals. His chief interest lay

in the presentation of the 'soul' of human entities and he fixed his thought on the soul of man, peering into all the nooks and corners of the soul with great zest and insight. His thoughts and ideas get intermingled with the Vedantic thoughts. 'Vedantic thoughts' can be defined as nothing but the deeper understanding of soul, God, universe etc., of the sages of India after the vedic period, mostly found in Upanishads. Most of his thoughts expressed in his poems about the soul, God and the universe are wonderfully similar to the thoughts found in the Upanishads, attesting to the saying:

"God is the source and the end of all beings,
and therefore all creations" (Venkatesananda 222).

Robert Browning is said to have employed the Vedantic thoughts in his poetry as a solution to the problem of human life:

"God is in heaven
All's right with the world". – 'Pippa Passes'.

May be considered as the basic theological thought on which Browning has built up his theology. The Western theological belief of God is that God is omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient whereas the Vedanta says that God is omnipresent, omnipotent, omniactive, omnisaturated and absolutely independent. 'Vedanta' is a vast ocean of thoughts and the Western ideology has some similarities found in it. According to Vedanta, the world is in Brahman and the Brahman wills the world and it is manifested. In the words of Roy E. Gridhey "in his poetry, Browning would transcend in a most revolutionary way, from the value of his culture and would challenge the existence of the body of acknowledged truth spoken out of" (P 10). Ruskin wrote:

"Browning is unerring in every sentence he
writes of the middle Ages; always vital,
right and profound" (Davies 304)
Bagahot has gone to the extent of saying about Browning as:
"He is great, not in mere accomplishments,
But in himself. He has applied a hard
stray intellect to real life; he has applied
the same intellect to the problem of his age" (P 6).

Like a majority of poets, Browning is remarkable with a highly sensitive educational nature. To blend a profound knowledge of human nature and a keen perception of the awful problem of human destiny, Browning, as a distinguished poet with the serenity of his intellect, has given his ideology, with the conversation of a joyous, hopeful spirit to know men and not the despair of them, to battle with men's spiritual foes and not be broken by them. In the words of R.W. Dixon, "Browning works are preaching instead of teaching" (322).

Robert Browning has thrived to put forth what is essential for humanity and for the soul. In this respect, he stands singular during his period to move the Western world towards the main concept of life, God and universe. The followers of Vedanta substantiate that the world has many trials to come out of the Maya and be enlightened about the concept of soul, God and universe. The same goal of Vedantic writings gets projected rather beautifully in the works of Browning. All the religions view God more or less in a similar manner. All have the belief that God is one and He is the Almighty to control the universe. God is the creator, omnipotent and immortal. For all religion, God decides everything, whether you call it 'Allah' or 'Lord' or 'Christ'. The concepts that God is the creator and sustainer, All – Powerful, omnipresent, omnipotent, the Decider and He is beyond Maya are reflected in Browning's poems. These concepts are very similar to vedantic thoughts. 'Love is God' is also a Vedantic concept that is found in his poetical works. In the poem 'Karshis – an Epistle', written about an imaginary physician, Robert Browning says that God is the creator and sustainer of the world. He writes:

".... Who but God himself
Creator and sustainer of the world"

He notes in the same poem that God made the world with the sun and moon to match it. In the poem, 'Evalyn Hope', Browning writes that God is mighty to make and create the love to reward love. In the poem, 'Rabbi Ben Ezra', he says that God is the maker and He remakes to complete the aim of life. He also writes,

"Our times are
in His hand"

In the poem, "A Grammarian's Funeral", it is written that the very task of God is to make the earth a perfect one:

"God's task to make the heavenly period
perfect the earthen".

In "Caliban upon Setebos", Browning writes that God makes all things and move them.

"He made all these and more,
made all we see and us"
Himself, make a second self".

In the poem, 'Fra Lippo Lippo', he gives the concept that God is the creator by the line,
"God made it all"

The poem 'The statue and the Bust' of Browning also gives the concept that God is the carver.
"Him, the carver, a hand to aid
who fashions the clay".

In "Abt Vogler", it is stated that God is the Builder and makes:

"Therefore whom turn I but to thee,
the ineffable Name Builder and
Maker thou of houses"

In 'Andrea Del Sarto', he writes that God makes us to lead the life:

"I like the life He makes us lead"

Here in all quoted lines the positive approach of life that is found in Vedanta is reflected rather perfectly. In the poem, 'one word more', Browning writes that God has created the earth, rock, water, and living crowds;

"He who smites the rock and spread the water
Bidding drink and live a crowd beneath Him".

All Upanishads preach that Brahman is the creator and sustainer of the world. In Upanishads, one can find that the Lord is the fundamental of the entire phenomenal existence which is super – imposed upon. In the words of Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, "As a mighty wind moving everywhere rests always in space, even so, know thou that all beings rest in Me" (P 216). The Prasna – Upanishad preaches that Brahman is to be understood as the creator and He is independent in nature and without any attributes. He is merely a spirit. "Brahman is then to be conceived in his relation to the world where he is the creator" (Roer 99).

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan writes about the Vedanta philosophy and represents this concept by the word, Paripurnasakkiam. He translates Svetasvatara Upanishad as "Isvara creates without implements. He is able to transform Himself into manifold effects by His great powers. God scatters abroad life and power, out of His fullness of His joy". Here the concept that God is the creator and the world is the manifestation of Brahman is seen. Thus, one can find that Robert Browning has written in a similar manner in tune with the Vedantic concept of God. "Nature is complete" is the term that one finds in the poem of Browning. The line "Perfect I call thee thy plan" is found in the poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra". These two lines make one accept that Browning has the concept that God is Absolute, perfect and Complete. This is the second concept that goes in line with the Vedantic thought about God. For Browning, as for Kant, the ideas of the reason, God, free will and immortality were the postulates of moral life. And the God he believed in was the God of love because;

"A loving warm within its cold
were diviner than a loveless God".

Browning possessed a religious nature and in his poetry one can come across different aspects of religious life beginning from the undogmatic Theism to Christian Apologist of cleon. In *Caliban Upon Setebos*, the poet deals with the religion of a Primitive. The deity Setebos whom Caliban creates from his own mind is really the deity of a savage. The primitive finds in Setebos the quality that he himself cherished in his own personal life. Since it is the deity of a savage, it is completely devoid of moral virtues. Caliban finds in Setebos all those qualities and virtues which he himself had desired to have in his life. The poem shows that each man has the God whom he deserves. In Rabbi Ben Ezra, the poet puts the best that he has to say about life and its religious problems. It is his best work representing his philosophical thoughts. "Saul" is a poem of unsurpassed lyrical fervour and beauty. The speaker in Saul is David and the poem is a prophecy of the Messiah – not, however, the Messiah of Jewish tradition, but the Christian Messiah. "A Death in the Desert" is also notable among the religious poems of Browning. In his poem "Evelyn Hope", the poet reveals his thoughts plainly. He says that God is above all things and He is great and mighty.

Vedanta preaches that God is above all and the Almighty. Brahman is the eternal thing, the goal of all knowledge and nothing can be there complete without Brahman. The whole universe exists and functions in accordance with the will of Brahman. Brahman is called Eswara when it activates the functions of the world. In all religions, the soul is said to have sin and virtue according to its actions. For God, there is no sin and no good or bad. God is above all these. In Abt Vogler, he writes that evil is nothing, to God and there is so much good for evil also. There is only goodness in God whereas we, the human beings have both good and evil actions. Even for our evil actions, God gives us good guidance. The Vedantic doctrine is that Brahman is above such attributes as virtue and sin, good and bad, noble and evil and He is all pervading, unlimited, infinitely great and purest of all.

The Vedantic doctrine of Sri Sankara Charya is that Paramathman is in the Jeevathman and is in ourselves and by Maya, it appears to be external and we see everything through the mirror called Maya. In the words of Mahadeva Sastri, "Within is the whole of this universe. By Maya, it appears as external, reflected as it were in a mirror" (P 4). 'God is above Maya or ignorance', is another concept found in Robert Browning. He insists that men seek only joy and feast which are poor means to achieve the goal of life. When we are successful on realizing God, he calls all men to follow Him to get the best out of life to trusting. God, as our times are in His hand. In the poem, "Caliban Upon Setebos", the poet accepts the concept of Maya or, to say, ignorance of the soul. In the poem, 'Saul', he writes that man is ignorant of the size, sum and value of all things that look small or big. This ignorance is called Maya in Upanishads:

“The value in proportion of all things
Or whether it be little or be much”.

‘God is immortal’ is the next concept given in Browning’s poems. He says that God and soul are immortal; “... thy soul and God stand sure”

He further adds that when the soul enters into the field of divinity of God, then it becomes immortal like God. In the same poem, he states;

“What entered into thee
That was, is and shall be”.

By putting the words ‘was’, ‘is’, and ‘shall’ shall be he nicely points out the three stages of life namely past, present and future and impresses that God is immortal. In the poems ‘One Word More’ and ‘By the Five side’, one finds him emphasizing the concept that God is love. Love is the process by which two souls or many souls – find happiness. There should be a subject and an object for love. Love is given importance as it implores happiness for both the subject and object. But for the love of God, there is no object because the object itself is love’.

According to Vedantic thought, the Upanishads view the universe as God’s manifestation and so the universe is for our happiness and we are for the happiness of the universe. In the poem “one word more” Browning gives out his concept of the universe that one being is meant to help the other in the universe for example, the moon is there to inspire the human beings to turn towards God and get the highest attainment. Interaction between the universal beings is the third concept found in Browning’s poem;

“... moon could love a mortal
use, to charm him...
She would turn a new side to her mortal”.

As all the beings are relative in nature in the universe, and are so designed that one being is assisting the other, starting from the heavenly bodies. The higher beings naturally look after the welfare of the lower ones. This relationship is meant for the upliftment of even the lower beings. Browning has given the example of moon inspiring the human mind in his poetry. As the soul and the universal beings are the manifestations of Brahman, the omnipresence, there cannot be any change in the spirit of the universe. This is the one of the Vedantic thoughts found in Robert Browning’s poem “By the Fire Side”. The unaltered nature of Athman is the next concept found in the poem,

“When Earth breaks up and heaven expands
How will the change strike me and you
In the house not made of hands”.

Browning is in the same view in seeing the world as the creation of God, the souls of human beings and others are the offspring of God. Regarding the concept of soul, Robert Browning finds the identity of God with the soul. In “Rabbi Ben Ezra”, Browning writes that God and soul are immortal.

Thus, it is to conclude that God has created the world but Vedanta has viewed the world as the manifestation of God. Robert Browning in the folds of Vedantic thoughts never goes or deviates from the vedantic optimistic approach to life. He is one among the English poets who have revealed the high philosophy of life bringing home the fact that “God is in Heaven all is right with the world”.

References:

1. Bagehot. Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning or Pure Ornate and Grotesque Art in English Poetry. British Review 1864.
2. Davides, Hugh Sykes. The poets and Their Critics. London: Hutchinson & Co Ltd, 1962.
3. Gridhey, Roy E. Browning. London: Rouletedge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1972.
4. Niikhilanda. The Upanishads: A New Translation. New York: Ramakrishna Vivekananda Centre, 1977.
5. Radhakrishnan, S. The Vedanta according to Sankara and Ramanuja. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1939
6. Roer, E. The Twelve Principal Upanishads. Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1931.
7. Venkatesananda, Swami. The Song of God. South Africa: Children Yoga Trust, 1972.