



UGC Approved Journal

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

ISSN-2321-7065

Impact Factor : 5.27



Editor-in-Chief

Volume V, Issue VII July 2017

www.ijellh.com

[About Us](#) | [Editorial Board](#) | [Submission Guidelines](#) | [Call for Paper](#)

[Paper Submission](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Terms & Condition](#) | [More.....](#)

AMITABH ROY

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

ALIPURDUAR MAHILA MAHAVIDYALAYA

THE CULT OF EVIL AND HIDDEN OPTIMISM IN BAUDELAIRE'S POETRY

Abstract

Baudelaire's 'Les Fleurs du Mal' is possibly one of the most debated collection of poems in the poetic world. The French poet who heralded modernism in poetry could successfully open a new vista in poetic criticism through his relentless description of dark, shabby and negative aspects of human life.

Imagination in Baudelaire's writing attains a separate height which makes his poems venomous and at once symbolically critical. A unique blend of rejection of earthly life and optimism for a 'new' future lies hidden in Baudelaire's poetry.

Keywords: Dark, Les Fleurs du Mal, nothingness, negation, optimism.

INTRODUCTION

Baudelaire had a keen eye to observe the dark aspect of human existence. Nothing that is gloomy, evil and annoying escapes his notice. He himself declares that there is no light in his universe, only squalor and boredom reign there. His world is filled with an overwhelming sense of evil. His subject is boredom, ennui, death, agony and things that does not suit the taste of time. From this radical standpoint his aestheticism emerges which becomes the cult of evil. In the soil of evil, the flowers of his poetry bloom.

In aesthetic judgement, Baudelaire can be viewed as a unique poet who presents a synthesis of art and morality. He is repelled both by purely utilitarian and purely formal conception of

art. He holds the view that art, by taking into its purview and transposing all elements of life without exception, can provide, incidentally the highest of moralities. Baudelaire states his conviction that the essence of reality is not material but spiritual; and that it is through a feeling for the beautiful that man is made aware of this spiritual essence, this soul existing in everything.

Imagination, is in a word, an almost divine faculty capable of seizing the spiritual reality which is both represented and marked by external experiences; of perceiving not philosophically by the use of reason or deduction, but directly. Baudelaire's vividly imaginative passion with his instincts of passion are aided by a determined will, a self – reserve, an intensity of conception, an implacable insolence, an accurate sense of the exact value of every word. Writing poetry was not simply an act of self – indulgence: Baudelaire would never have subscribed to Apollinaire's view. Ideally, Baudelaire claimed on various occasions, the poet should act as a spiritual, even a mystical role, revealing not only the hidden life of things on earth, everything joined in unsuspected unity, but the relationship of all things earthly and heavenly.

Baudelaire believed that the exclusion of reason and passion from poetry would result in a purely material and formal beauty. To him, all works of art, all forms of human life were as powers and forces producing pleasurable sensations.

Two themes appear and reappear in Baudelaire's poetry. One is the sense of hurrying time. In his back, he always hears "times winged chariot hurrying near." The other is called "ennui", which in its most virulent form becomes 'spleen', then 'degout'. His poem 'L Horloge' expresses his feeling about the rapid movement of time forcefully:

"Soon it will sound, the tocsin of your Fate –
 from noble virtue, your still – virgin bride,
 or from Repentance, last resort from all,
 the message comes: Too late old coward !
 Die! " (translated by Richard Howard 1982: 82)

Ennui is the fastidious monster of '*To the Reader*' which introduces the Les Fleurs du Mal. It is one of the dark forces, paralyzing virtue, activity and life itself. The poet has a sensation

for having been stuck, when it seems essential to advance. The ugly in the world find their place in Baudelaire's poetry. He speaks about prostitutes, vampire, serpent, cat, streams of blood, morgue, muti – coloured heap of rubbish and stinking corpse too.

Death is the subject matter of at least fifteen poems in *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Isolation, despair and a longing for change are the distinguishing traits of his poetry. "My youth was nothing but a lowering storm occasionally lanced by sudden suns; torrential rains have done their work so well that no fruit ripens in my garden now" (translated by Richard Howard 1982: 20), says the poet in the opening lines of '*The Enemy*' and he concludes '*Artist Unknown*' with the lament that many a bunches of flower disperse their sad smell in vacant. In '*The Sun*', he describes himself wandering aimlessly in the streets. In '*Craving for Oblivion*' he finds himself pulled by time into some deep abyss. He was so obsessed with sadness during the last days of his life that he came to hate even the words 'happy' and 'happiness'. In a letter to the journalist Jules Jamin he contended that the words 'heureux' (happy) and 'joie' (joyful) were synonyms of the English words 'complacent' and 'stupid'. He wrote in one of his letters to his mother that there was nothing he liked "better than to be alone". He believed in the regenerative and redemptive value of solitude.

The attraction of Satan is manifest throughout *Les Fleurs du Mal* and implicit in the very title of the collection. What makes Baudelaire apparently anti life is his so – called Satanism found in the short cycle of three poems about Satan. *Le Reniement de Saint Pirre* contains a denial of God's interest in man as well as the denial of the value of the sacrifice of Christ. Ostensibly it is based on the values of a disappointed idealist, values which attach to an ideal of good. First, God and then Christ are judged and rejected for having fallen short of this ideal. *The Abel et Cain* is directed against the servile race of Abel and envisions the triumph of the race of Cain, despised and rejected of God and of this bourgeois society alike. An almost parallel can be noticed in Michael Madhusudhan Dutta's championing Meghnad, a forgotten and rejected hero and denouncing a much praised warrior Lakshmana in his '*Meghnad Badh Kabya*'. As Michael reconstructs a Ramayana story, so does Baudelaire a Biblical Story.

Baudelaire also becomes the prisoner of the sick, hurry and divided aim of the city life. 'Desire to be alone' and 'desire for oblivion' haunted him. And that is why this quest for freedom. The poet's soul desperately searches the tempting blue sky outside the prison:

“Anywhere! Anywhere! As long as it be out of this world.” In the poem ‘*L’Voyage*, the poet invokes death and says, “This country bores! O Death! Let us set sail!” This apparently may mean that his destination is the land of death. But in his end is his beginning. Even when he deals with the ‘saddest thoughts’, there is a pining for ‘sweetest songs’ of humanity. His is a journey from darkness to light, from dungeon to freedom, from Inferno to Paradiso.

Critics like Abu Sayeed Aiyub criticizes Baudelaire for branding both nature and woman ‘abominable’. Aldous Huxley and Lionel Johnson call him a ‘bored Satanist’. G.T. Clapton applies the term ‘tragic sophist’. But, T.S. Eliot argues that, “Without the morbidity none of his work would be possible or significant.” Baudelaire’s suffering implies – “the positive state of beautitude.” His life and poetry are silent warnings of the way he has chosen. In this sense, *Les Fleurs du Mal* is not an invitation to the land of negation, rather it is a strong criticism of his own choice. Goethe and Rabindranath Tagore are seen as the representatives of ‘poetic health’ and Baudelaire as just opposite. But it is not the health of Goethe, nor malady of Baudelaire that matters in itself, “it is what both men made of their endowments that matters.” T.S. Eliot dismisses both the charges of escapism and Satanism against him and justifies, “Satanism itself, so far as not merely an affectation, was an attempt to get into Christianity by the back door.” (Eliot 1930:421)

Approaching God via the back door or via the way of Satan is nothing new, unknown or unprecedented on history. In Bhagwad Gita the following words of Lord Krishna can be found, “Arjuna, however men approach Me, even so do I seek then; for all men follow my path from all sides” (IV, P.II)

Basing themselves on this assurance the Vaishnavas hold that one can approach God even by the path of hostility and Ravana and Simpala are cited as the examples of the same. Baudelaire’s journal bears testimony to his faith and explains the nature of his poems. There is a famous entry there, “There is in every man at every moment two simultaneous aspirations, one towards God, the other towards Satan. The urge towards God, or spirituality is a desire to rise; the urge towards Satan, or animality, is a joy in descent.” (Bereton 1973: 155)

Many of his poems show a deep response to beauty and even to the wonder of the world around. It is usually tinged with melancholy. Buddhadeb Basu in his ‘Baudelaire O’ tar Kavita’ observes that melancholy as such was not discerned in ancient literature and art. It

was discovered in the age of Renaissance and developed in the works of the Romantics. This melancholy expresses human longing for the distant, for the unknown and the unattained, even the Infinite and the Absolute. It shows dissatisfaction with the near, the known, the acquired, the material.

Like Meursault in Albert Camus' *'The Outsider'*, Baudelaire also felt a stranger to himself as well as to the world. He emerges as an eternal onlooker of the dark drama of human life. His canvas of poetry presents a picture of nothingness which is silently replete with a positive optimism for another life. He is a painter of night who waits for the dawn. *Les Fleurs du Mal* is an ongoing journey from the land of negation to the domain of poetic health and affirmation.

Thus, Baudelaire, who is probably seen as an anti life poet with utmost rejection and negation for life becomes a poet of hidden layers. A critical insight into his poems reveals his tinge of optimism which remains underneath. This optimism is never pronounced loudly, rather it is left for reader's discovery.

References

- Ayub, A.S. *Adhunikata O Rabindranth*. Kolkata. De's Publishing. 1995
- Basu, B. *Baudelaire o tar Kobita*. Kolkata. De's Publishing. 1999
- Baudelaire, C. *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Translated by Richard Howard. London. Pan Books Limited. (20) 1983.
- Baudelaire, C. *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Translated by Richard Howard. London. Pan Books Limited. (82) 1983.
- Brereton, G. *An Introduction to the French Poets*, London. Methuen. (155) 1973.
- Eliot, T.S. *Selected Essays*, London. Faber & Faber. (421) 1930.