

"Transformation of Suffering" in Robert Browning's *The Last Ride Together*

Abstract:

The purpose of this research paper is to identify and elaborate the process of transformation of suffering if a suitable positive attitude is held by the sufferer. Any suffering howsoever intensive and unbearable it is, can be transformed with the help of suitable positive attitude boosted by efforts on the part of the sufferer. An attempt has been made to show how conscious suffering leads to transformation of suffering and transformation of suffering results in spiritual awakening. In the entire process, positive attitude, self-realization and conscious efforts and will to transformation play key role.

Robert Browning, a renowned English Poet and Playwright, illustrated and exemplified the above-mentioned process of transformation of suffering in poem *The Last Ride Together*. This research paper clearly shows how literature and psychology are strongly correlated.

Keywords : transformation of suffering and positive attitude

The Science of Attitude

Attitude is a great transformative force. It is attitude through which a person looks at the object. It is the attitude that creates the reality for oneself. An attitude can be of two types: positive and negative. Positive attitude brings very evolutionary force and opposite is the case- the negative attitude brings destruction and deterioration. One has to create positive attitude through critical thinking. Positive attitude does not come automatically. It is a task. It is a matter of efforts on the part of the person whereas negative attitudes come automatically and unconsciously. Gerard Heaver says, "Attitudes function as a third force - the way we look at something determines the way we react to it- and because the second state of consciousness is unable to see third force, normally, our attitudes are invisible to us. Nevertheless, if we wish to change the way we react to things, we must understand and change our attitudes. The first and second forces, the events which happen to us and the machines to which they happen, are difficult or impossible to change, but we can change our attitudes and in this way change the triad in which we find ourselves. Right attitudes change a mechanical triad into one that is more conscious." [1]

From the above excerpt, we can conclude that our reactions and responses come from the attitude we hold. If we are not aware of the manifestations of our machine (A popular aphorism of Gurjieff that man is a machine- stimulus-response machine. Man does not and cannot do anything. Everything happens in his life. Man as machine is governed by external forces and he has no control of his own) Hence, in the second state of consciousness, one cannot see his attitude so there is no question of changing the attitudes. Man is carried away unconsciously but in the third state of consciousness i.e. the state of mind in which one can fully comprehend the course of one's mind, one can understand and change one's attitude. This requires prolonged objective observation. Through prolonged observation one can discriminate the right and wrong attitudes and at the same time one can realize the positive outcome of right attitude, its utter need to change the situation and the futility of negative attitude.

Transformation of Suffering

Transformation of suffering is basically a concept of Gurjieff School. Gerard Haven says, "The practice of separating from suffering and experiencing it in such a way that it can be accepted freely and without negativity. In its highest expression, transformation involves the activity of higher centers and leads to powerful experiences of increased consciousness." [2]

It can be concluded from the above excerpt that in the process of transformation of suffering, the suffering is there but the sufferer does not suffer. Through conscious efforts, he changes his attitudes towards the suffering and he tries to separate from it. He fully accepts the suffering without judging. He intends and strongly aware of non-expression of negative emotions. At the end of the process, he transforms the suffering into the higher state of consciousness. In this process of transformation, the following things play key roles:

- conscious efforts
- conscious attitude
- will (strong intentionality) not to express negative emotions
- will (strong intentionality) to accept the suffering freely
- will (strong intentionality) to separate from the suffering

If one succeeds in this process of transformation of suffering, what he receives is the state of mind, the spiritual enlightenment in which he has the experience and the taste of higher state of consciousness.

Transformation of Suffering in Robert Browning's *The Last Ride Together*

Let's practically see in the poem how conscious efforts on the part of a conscious person bring transformation of suffering through conscious attitude. "*The Last Ride Together*" is a dramatic monologue. In a dramatic monologue, a single person not the poet; speaks out a speech that makes up the whole of the poem. The first-person speaker in the poem is the mouthpiece of the poet, Robert Browning but not the poet himself. This is evident from the phrases like I said, I know, my whole heart I claim, my mistress, my last thought, I miss, I alone, I hoped, I gave my youth and I sign'd. The poem comprises of ten stanzas, each consisting of eleven lines each. The poem follows the rhyming pattern aabbcddeec.

The rejected lover explores the end of a love affair in the poem. The title suggests the last ride that the lover has spent with his love. This is obviously an occasion of great suffering that brings pang of permanent separation however the narrator-the rejected lover rather than feeling sad about the end, he feels happiness for the love that he underwent and which remains in his memory. The rejection brought unhappiness at the outset but through his conscious efforts, he holds at attitude of not having any ill-will for his lady-love. On the contrary, he tells his beloved that the uncertainty is no longer present as he knows that he would not get her love. This shows his courage in accepting the worst the harsh reality. He has positive emotion of gratitude he says, his beloved's love was the most meaningful thing in his life and after he has lost her love, his life has lost all its meaning and significance. Despite of the failure, neither the lover has any anger towards her beloved nor does he blame her for anything. He believes in the fate and that his failure was ordained by God. He has accepted that rejection and suffering was destined to him and therefore he has no one to put the

bliss on. In fact, he feels proud that he had the opportunity to love her and enjoy her company for a long time. He is grateful towards her for the beautiful and blissful moments they had together. For this he asks God to bless her. Though he has no hopes of ever getting her love back in his life, he requests her for two wishes. First, he should be allowed to cherish the memories of his love and the memories of the happiness during the courting period. Secondly, if she considers nothing indecent in this request, he wants to go on a last ride with her.

The lady is in a dilemma, not able to decide whether she should accept the request or reject it. For a moment she bows down her head as if she was deeply thinking about it. Her eyes reflected pride as well as pity. Her virgin pride is in conflict with her pity for her lover. She hesitates for a moment and these brief moments seem like torture to the lover. It is a matter of life and death for him. If she accepts his request for having a last ride with him, it would mean life for him but if she refuses then it would mean death for him. Finally, the lady accepts his request. The lover is extremely happy, it seemed like the circulation of blood in his body has been regenerated. When the lady stood confused, deciding whether or not to accept his request, the lover felt lifeless. Presently, his life and activity has been restored to normal by her favourable reply. The lover is at peace as he is going to enjoy bliss and his lover's company for another day. He hopes for the world to end that very night so that his moment of bliss becomes eternal. In that way, he would be with her always and there would be no need of despair at being rejected by his lad-love.

Stanza 3: The third stanza is about the description of the heavenly bliss which the lover experiences when his beloved lies on his bosom. He compares his experience with nature's joy and healing power. He feels like a man, who sees an evening cloud, swelling up like the sea-wave, illuminated and made beautiful by the light of the setting Sun, the Moon and the Stars. The man looks at the cloud, he is passionately drawn towards it and it seemed like the cloud was coming closer to him. In such a moment, he feels he has been transported to heaven and his body has lost its physicality. But he is afraid at the same time. He is afraid that his lover would leave him anytime and that this moment of bliss would end forever. Stanza 4: The last ride begins. This blissful experience gives the lover soul a terrific experience. The poet compares the lover's soul to that of a crumpled paper which has been kept like that for a long time. When exposed to wind, this paper opens up, the wrinkles get smoothened and it starts fluttering in the wind like a bird. In the same way, the lover's soul has grown wrinkled due to the grief of his failure in love. But after encountering the last ride with his beloved, his soul experiences tremendous joy and feels rejuvenated. The lover says that his hopes of getting her love are a matter of the past. He feels that regret for the past is of no use. The lover thinks that it is now of no use to act in a different manner or express his love in different words for getting her love. This could lead her to hate him instead of loving him. At least now she does not hate him but is indifferent to his love. At least, now he has the pleasure of having the last ride with her.

Stanza 5: The lover as he is riding by his beloved's side thinks about the sorry state of humanity of the world. He consoles himself that he is not the single person to fail and suffer in life. Not all men succeed in their efforts. The landscape seems to him to have a different look. The fields and the cities through which they are passing seem to him more beautiful than before. He feels as if his own joy has illuminated the entire region on both sides. The lover realizes that all human beings work hard to achieve their goals but only a few succeed. Like others, he too had failed but still he has his last wish fulfilled by riding with his beloved. The lover does not want to complain about his failures but enjoy the ride to the fullest in the company of his beloved.

Stanza 6: The lover as he rides with his beloved continues to think about the world. He says that brain and hand cannot go together hand in hand. Conception and execution can never be paired together. Man is not able to make pace with his actions to match with his ambitions. He plans a lot but achieves a little. The lover feels that he has at least achieved a little success by being able to ride with his beloved. He compares himself with a statesman and a soldier. A statesman works hard all his life but all his efforts are merely published in a book or as an obituary in newspapers. Similarly a soldier dies fighting for his country and is buried in the Westminster Abbey, which is his only reward after death. Sometimes an epitaph is raised in his memory but that is all.

Stanza 7: The lover then compares his lot with that of a poet. He believes that a poet's reward is too small compared with his skills. He composed sweet lyrics, thoughts of emotions of others, views that men should achieve beautiful things in life. But the reward he gets in return is very little and he dies in poverty in the prime of his life. Ordinary men cannot compose such poems. Compared to the poet, the lover considers himself luckier as he has at least achieved the consolation of riding with his lover for the last time.

Stanza 8: In this stanza, the lover considers himself superior than the sculptor and the musician. A sculptor devotes long years to art and creates a beautiful statue of Venus, the Greek goddess of youth and beauty. Through his art, he expresses his ideas of beauty and grace. But the reward for his hard work is all too less. People admire his work, praise it but the moment they see a real girl, they turn away from it. The real girl may have ordinary beauty but still when the people see her, they turn away from the statue. This shows that life is greater than art. Therefore, the speaker says that in this case he is more successful than a sculptor because he can ride with his beloved and the sculptor cannot have this happiness. The lover then talks about a musician. He considers the musician as unsuccessful as the sculptor. A musician devotes his best years to composing sweet music. But the only praise he receives is by his friends and his music is used in operas which proved to be popular. But at the same time, tunes which once popular are soon forgotten. The lover considers himself happier and more successful than the musician. He has the pleasure of enjoying the last ride with her beloved. The musician can never enjoy this happiness.

Stanza 9: In the ninth stanza, the lover states his point that none succeeds in this world, despite the best efforts, the lover goes on to say that it is not easy to know what is good for man. Since the lover is Browning's mouthpiece, he expresses the view of the poet: success in this life means failure in the life to come. If the lover is destined to enjoy the supreme bliss in this world by getting the desired love of his beloved, he would have nothing left to hope for in the near future. He feels that he has reached his destination in this world and has achieved the garland of victory by winning the love of his beloved. He may have failed in his love but it means success in the other world. Now, when he will die he will think of reuniting with his lover after death. If a man gets perfect happiness in this world, heaven would not be attracted towards him.

The lover believes that he would have the highest bliss in heaven where he will meet his beloved.

Stanza 10: During the ride, the lover was lost in his own thoughts while his beloved did not speak a single word. But it did not make any difference to him as her company is a heavenly bliss for him. Man has always looked upwards and imagined that heaven lies somewhere in the sky. This heaven is symbolical of the best that man can imagine. Similarly, the lady is his heaven and he enjoys the same happiness which others hope to enjoy in heaven. The lover thinks that it would be a heaven on-earth for him if he continues to ride with his beloved forever. He wishes that the moment should become everlasting so that they could continue to ride together forever and ever. That would indeed be heavenly bliss for him.

References:

1. Haven, Girard, Creating A Soul (Ulysses Books, Oregon House, CA, 1999) p-61-62
2. Ibid p- 629

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