



Developing Evolutionary Imagination: Prophetic Vision of H.G. Wells

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H.G. Wells is the pivotal figure in the evolution of scientific romance into modern SF. He wedded the literary imagination with the theory of evolution and his scientific romances are the fitting conclusion of how the evolutionary imagination developed in the 19th century. According to Michael Page, “It is with Wells that 20th century imaginative literature and futuristic thought begins” (Page, 149). He attributed an independent status to science fiction and established it. Speaking about Wells’ contribution to science fiction, Robert Schole and Eric Rabkin say that “Mary Shelley planted the flag on the new territories, but Wells explored them, settled them and developed them.” (*Science Fiction: History, Science, Vision*, 15) This is evident as we go through his varied themes in novels like *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896), *The invisible Man* (1897) and *The War of the World* (1898). An analysis of these scientific romances certainly puts forth his prophetic vision and his ability to penetrate into the limits of the impossible.

His reputation as an original writer of imaginative work was established with the publication of his first scientific fantasy, *The Time Machine* (1895). This work is a big jump in authorship, not in space but in time. He finds himself safe in future where no conjecture or speculation of his could be questioned. With the help of a time machine, he embarks on a journey to the future of 8002701 A.D. and discovers a world, in many respects, completely altered. It is a beautiful world inhabited by people who are mild, meek and gentle.

In fact, the time traveler hopes to find these people with highly developed intellects, able to comprehend what have been mysteries to the modern mind, but instead, he discovers that a kind of intellectual lethargy has overtaken them. Their ways of living are different. They live and dine in community Halls; their diet is fresh fruit and they wear loose robes of finished fiber. They do not work and simply wander aimlessly and smile and sing languidly. These are what he calls Eloys. The shocking thing about these Eloys is that they are devoid of emotions, compassion for others. Probably the course of time and the evolutionary changes in human nature have made these people lose the emotional side of their personality. Wells records one incident when some people are bathing in a shallow. One girl is seized with a cramp and drifts downstream, but none makes the slightest attempt to rescue her. The time



traveler, however, is able to save the poor mite and soon both are united in a strange friendship.

The narrative becomes more interesting when the time traveler goes on narrating the adventures one by one in a period which is unimaginable. The missing of a time machine, encounter with the future world creatures, the journey underground and confrontation with the Morlocks, and finally the escape, add a strange mystery to the story. Wells successfully creates a strange future world which is certainly not like ours. The Eloys and the Morlocks are the two species that had resulted due to the evolution of man. Wells, unlike Swift, takes help of science in his portrayal of the future world generation of man. He has based his conclusions on a law of science. Swift, on the other hand, takes help of morality and its depravity which is responsible for the reduction of mankind to such abjection. Wells takes the support of science. Hence he presents this picture of the future as a conclusion deduced from science.

As far as the time machine is concerned, it should be called the scientific part of the story. But, surprisingly enough, it is a figment of imagination. The author cleverly takes help of the theory of relativity to make the invention appear more convincing. The time machine, in fact, is a literary device. Its function is to make the imaginary experience appear plausible. With respect to the machine there is nothing of science except its jargon. Speaking about the function of the time machine, K.K Kemkar writes: "The science element in this fantasy consists in the demonstration of the working of the biological principle. In other words, the science element is not in the literary device but in the body of the imaginary experience which is based on scientific principle." (23)

It appears from reading Kemkar that the theory of evolution exercised tremendous influence on Wells. The publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) marked a dramatic turning point in scientific as well as social thought. Darwin argued that different environments encouraged the reproduction of those species whose varying traits best suited them to survive; their offspring, in turn, would be better adapted for the new environment.

Social Darwinism frequently abused this concept of 'natural selection.' Evolution does not lead to the 'perfectibility' of any species, as is generally perceived, but to the increasing adaptability and complexity of a species. Social Darwinism ignored this idea and contended that the social environment was much like the cutthroat natural environment and that those who succeeded were biologically destined to do so and to continue in their march



to human perfection. On the flip side, those who failed had inferior traits and deserved to do so.

But Wells spots the holes in these arguments. In *The Time Machine*, the beautiful Eloys seem, at first, to be the perfect inhabitants of an advanced age. But the time traveler soon discovers that the advancements of civilization have enfeebled them, they have become weak, lazy and stupid. In other words, evolution has problems in application to the world of mankind, since man changes his environment as he himself changes. Therefore, the changing environment may not always produce desirable changes in man, and social Darwinism's argument that those who succeed in a given environment are naturally superior, is not valid.

Whatever the case may be, it is strongly evident that Darwin exercised a strong influence on Wells as he had done on many other writers. Darwin provided a central metaphor for his age, and virtually no mode of thought— social, political, religious, aesthetic— was untouched by the concept of evolution. It also generated a convenient fictional vehicle for expressing anxieties about an increasingly urban industrial world and about the implications of evolutionary speculation itself. Wells' next novel *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) is a powerful reworking of *Frankenstein* with some strong scientific implications suited for our purpose. *The Time Machine* ends in a mood of doubt, in a cloud of gloom. This mood of doubt and gloom is further intensified in the present book.

The basic difference between these two stories is that of time and space. Otherwise the same theme is presented here in terms not of the future, but of the present. Dr. Moreau, a surgical expert hounded out of his country on account of his paper in which he advanced the suggestion that plastic surgery and grafting could not only change the shape but alter natural instincts as well. He chooses a tropical island where he has been surgically reworking various animals, making their physiques more human and enhancing their brains. These creations are 'monstrous' like that of Shelley's. Here, Dr. Moreau is like the God in the Garden of Eden prohibiting these strange creatures— not to taste the fruit of knowledge— but the human blood. But later on, these beast-men revert to their beastly origins. The story reminds us of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and has a strong suggestiveness of inherent evil in human nature. However, Wells' intention here is far more prophetic than moralistic. Wells has strongly suggested the gradual degradation of humanity in a science fictional idiom by using scientific rationalism.

Probably Wells' most famous novel is *The War of the Worlds* (1898). This Darwinian fable, depicting an interplanetary struggle for survival, is the most influential of all alien



contact stories. It is only here that we can see the aliens with absolute scientific rationalism with a feeble coloring of imagination. In this superbly built story, the Martians, with a strange kind of hatred for humans as if they are some obsolete race, land on the earth. The cylinder they ride in is a monstrous tripped with a towering height. These creatures have a peculiar appearance due to the evolutionary changes in their body. Their mouth is surrounded by the tentacles to suck the blood. Literally they are parasites who inject the blood of other creatures in their veins. They are without sex and depend on budding process for reproduction. In some respects, they are more resistant and more evolved than human beings. The peculiar sound they utter to communicate is 'Ulla', 'Ulla', 'Ulla'.

Tentacled Martians then climb out of the cylinder to wage war against humanity from towering mechanical tripods. They cause heavy destruction and finally drive human beings to the brink of defeat. But the Martians, eventually, are destroyed by putrefactive and disease bacteria, which their bodies are unable to resist. The terrific strangeness of the scenario completely baffles and makes one's blood go chill. What if such an invasion ensues from some unknown world? Basically the imagined catastrophe in *The War of the Worlds* is a symbolical representation of what can happen if we do not rouse from our complacency. Imperialism, racism, religion can cause annihilation to any nation, continent or sub-continent. The two world wars substantially proved this. If we carefully study the world politics today, we would come to know that all nations, big or small, are trying to achieve immense power either for self-protection or to threaten others. Consequently, the world has become restless and unstable.

Symbolically, Wells's Martians are imperialists who use superior technology to invade a nation, England, which had been accumulating its own empire in part because of a superior technological sophistication. In other words, Wells here slyly hints at the violence of Empire-building. According to Adam Roberts, Wells actually inhabits a subtly balanced position between expressing concern about the morality of European Imperialism in coded form, and "reinforcing exactly the ideological underpinnings of that Imperialism with a scare story about how easily a ruthless, racially distinct military threat might destroy an under-prepared Britain." (*Science Fiction*, 67) Further, Roberts goes on to state that there is something 'Eastern' about Wells's conception of his Martians. He feels that their cry of 'Ulla' resembles the Islamic cry of 'Allah'. In other words, Wells is against the European Imperial excesses when he codes the 'Eastern' threat against European Imperialism.



Adam Roberts' contention about the aliens in Wells' story can partially be accepted. The 9/11 attack in America, the bomb blasts in London and some other incidents in both these continents may be cited as examples. It should be noted that both, Europeans and Americans are largely responsible for these mishaps. America's excessive interference in the politics of Eastern countries, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan, financial support to Pakistan to check the Taliban and the Anti-India policy over Kashmir issue, is largely responsible for generating a strong wave of hatred for Americans in Asia. The ambition to retain the title of Super Power in America is so strong that they are trying all crooked ways to maintain unrest in Asia. The horrible result is the wars, being carried out stealthily by the Asians, which, most improperly are termed as 'Islamic Terrorism' in America.

The War of the Worlds is a prophetic work with a sly hint about the dangers of Imperialism. But his next novel, *The First Men in the Moon* (1901) is probably more prophetic than the previous one. The space-travel had been a favorite speculation of most of SF writers. Jules Verne and his predecessors in the line had been always concerned about the medium of space-travel, and they tried various devices from supernatural agency to gun-explosion. Their deep concern for the medium was natural, for without its plausibility the entire experience would have been turned to myth. Hence a medium, though fantastic it may be, should be given a scientific touch which is one of the requisites of an SF tale. In this story, Wells does not bother much about sending his men to moon by inventing a highly improbable medium. He simply makes Cavor, the scientist, to invent an antigravity substance to travel to the moon. Today, going to the moon is not a myth as human beings have already hoisted a flag there. But at that time it was indeed an idea which appeared a dream for many as time travel appears to us in twenty first century.

It was Konstantin Tsiolkovsky whose theoretical work on multistage liquid-fuel rockets laid the foundation for space travel. But Tsiolkovsky was laid to think in that specific way only by the imaginative tales of Jules Verne, who, he thinks, has sown the first seeds of space-travel which stimulated his mind. But Tsiolkovsky was not the only pioneer of astronautics to credit Verne as his inspiration. "Long before Neil Armstrong finally set foot on the moon in 1969, it had been conquered countless times in imagination." (Pierce, 39)

Here is this difference between Verne and Wells. But Wells deserves a special consideration for employing near about all SF icons except robotics, which is to be employed by Asimov in the Golden Age of SF. When we consider the immense contribution of Wells to the genre, we come to know why he has been called its father. The great strength of Wells as



a writer of SF and his great contribution to the tradition lay in his ability to combine the “fantastic with the plausible, the strange with the familiar, and the new with the old.” (Scholes and Rabkin, 23) The great achievement of Wells as an author of SF lay in his ability to hold together so many facets of this kind of fiction. He is a good story-teller and an artist of considerable stature. He is only a pioneer in the field.

References

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