Pride, Pestilence and Annihilation: Destruction of the Family Idyll in Mary Shelley’s The Last Man

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Mary Shelley, the talented wife of the visionary poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, was the progenitor of a new literary genre – science fiction. Into this genre falls her best known creation – Frankenstein, which fascinates one and all, down the ages, for its incredible yet frightening proposition of the product of one’s imagination and creation turning against its creator. However, the lesser-read and perhaps less-appreciated novel, The Last Man is the subject of discussion in the current essay, chiefly because it is also another of Shelley’s great, ironic commentary on the seamlessness of human ego and ambition which finds itself ultimately powerless when it confronts the uncontrollable, overwhelming forces of nature; something which the present generation can identify with due to its encounter with ecological shifts through unprecedented natural calamities. The Last Man constructs its fable around the uncontainable spread of the contagion of plague that finally wipes away the entire human race. Science-Fiction is the pivot around which the novel gravitates if we choose to underplay or gloss over the autobiographical elements and not read it as a roman a clef. The story is futuristic, set in the twenty-first century – a wide leap in thought and time from 1826 – with all the paraphernalia of politics, philosophy and family-life guided by the norms of an age far removed from the early nineteenth century. Thus, we are ushered into a Republican England with the House of Windsor brought into the helm of power and decadence, as it is in its contemporary condition. The history of the last man recreated through the sibylline prophecies, the brilliant description of the unnatural phenomenon of the ‘Black Sun’, the metaphorical spread of the plague through the human body and the body politic all stabilize the novel’s position as science-fiction. Mary Shelley loosely outlines evolutionary ideas much before Darwin’s publication of The Origin of Species, but for her this evolution works by a reverse process – with all mankind dying out to leave behind a single man without a mate – far-removed from the nineteenth century belief in the redemptive function of history, time and nature. The reader is left inconsolable on a bleak promontory with art offering no solace or promise of a millennium.

The Last Man, above all, is a paean to a lost generation, with its tender fictional cameos of Byron, Shelley and Claire Clairmont, created by Mary Shelley to pay tribute to the little band of the ‘Elect’ (as she termed them in a letter dated 3rd October, 1824) of which she was the sole survivor. Her novel is an epic saga of mankind’s travails of facing the vagaries of nature ‘red in tooth and claw’, set in the twenty-first century, where man, love, family, nation and class difference – are all meaningless and stand shorn of their significance. Under the threat from external attack and the enmity of nature, mankind instinctively turns to the comfortable refuge of the family. But Shelley’s purpose in building up an idyll of domestic bliss and harmony and security is only to destroy a myth and expose her characters and her readers to a frightening reality about nature; to an “apocalypse without millennium”. It has been argued that Shelley’s primary concern in
her novels has been the preservation of the family in the face of external odds – posed by nature and by man alike. Anne Mellor has even gone to the extent of saying that Shelley idealizes the family as the source of sustenance and emotional succour against the oddest of odds. Having had a turbulent family life in childhood, sharing her life with her strict stepmother and her daughter, Shelley’s idealization of the family could not be unqualified or absolute for an author whose own family had been lost to the altars of time and destiny. Also, as a member of the Shelley-Byron Circle she led a most unconventional family life; as a roving band of adventurers with no fixed roots or allegiances. The romanticized and sentimentalized family-unit that she so painstakingly builds up in The Last Man, Shelley cruelly lays waste – not only the family of Lionel or Raymond but the family of mankind, wiping away the human race from the face of the earth. Hence, Shelley’s vision, which renders the family – the fundamental unit of human society – incapable of providing refuge from the turbulent forces of the macrocosm, is as apocalyptic as it is ironic. This overpowering sense of pessimism stems from the realization that no matter how brilliant a creation mankind maybe, however magnificent his heroism or idealism, he is ultimately a puny speck in the vast and infinite scheme of nature; always at the mercy of its whims. The acute recognition of this vulnerability, insignificance and helplessness of man probably originates from Shelley’s close encounters with death, loss and bereavement – as the sole survivor of the Band of Elect, an extraordinary group tangled in unconventional emotional relationships.

Lionel Verney, the protagonist of the novel and indubitably an alter-ego of Mary Shelley herself, is initially a misanthrope, seeking revenge for the gradual annihilation of his family. His father pines away forsaken by the world of royal patronage and his mother too courts death in her struggle to support her two children. The impress of the family on the tender mind of young Lionel is not a healthy one – the memory of injustice, penury, the death of parents, turn him into an outlaw and a brutish power-seeker. We have the natural extinction of families on the one hand, on the other the voluntary opting out of men and women from family ties, to form new ties and fresh units. Adrian and Idris break away from their mother and the royal family by choice and set up an idyllic family with Lionel. On the other hand the ambitious, restless Raymond marries Perdita unite leaving behind their erstwhile attachments. Together the entire group forms a family-unit which, though unconventional, is projected as the very picture of perfect bliss and emotional fulfilment. Mary Shelley reveals the unconventional pattern of thoughts that we notice in her genius husband by suggesting the possibility for man to choose and create his own family. She uses picturesque language to heighten the idyllic qualities of their existence and exuberantly declares: ‘Others said, we might be happy – we said – we are’ (pp. 65)\textsuperscript{iv}. The pleasures of companionship, love and harmony are magnified by the introduction of children strengthening the bonds of oneness and love among the members of the family. Hence, before the end of the first volume of the novel itself, the characters – Adrian, Idris, Lionel, Perdita and Raymond – have found an ‘unparalleled domestic fulfilment, encompassing passionate love, children, friendship and intellectual stimulation” (Blumberg: 128). This unqualified projection of the bliss of family life would be inadequate for the bleak and pessimistic vision of the author and hence, even before the conclusion of the first volume this idyll of love and unity received its death blow. Ambition, with its devouring tentacles, enters as a destructive force, destroying the bonds of family. The foundations of the family are shaken by the demands of a public
life, the political exigency of electing a new Lord Protector of England. Raymond fired by latent ambition and a sense of justifiable claim to the office, for he would have legitimately been the Protector in his marriage with Idris had he not forsaken all for Perdita. Raymond had ‘exchanged a sceptre for a lute, a kingdom for Perdita’. Yet, Raymond had not been able to quell his ambitions completely and Perdita’s apprehensions and ‘presentiment of ill’ are not unfounded as she fears Raymond’s ambition will be the death of the family. Raymond is assisted by his friends who know very well Lord Raymond was not meant to be ‘a drone in the hive’ nor was he going to be content with a ‘pastoral life’, and his return to political life fulfils the prophecy of Perdita. She joins him in London as Lady Protectress, while her brother returns to Windsor. Raised to the zenith of political power the idyll of the family is lost forever, never to be restored. Political and personal ambition is projected by Shelley as the enemy of the survival of the family. Raymond’s engrossment with the public sphere leaves his wife and child languish in hope: ‘to count the long days, and months, and years which must elapse, before he would be restored to a private station, and unreservedly to her’ (p. 87). Raymond also deceives her through his liaison with Evadne and finally forsaken by Perdita’s love he goes away to Greece, humbled by his own sense of unworthiness and in the hope of attaining something glorious, something which can raise himself once more in the eyes of his family, hoping that time, and even absence, may restore Perdita to him.

While initial disruption of the domestic ideal is triggered off by the malicious contagion of ambition and the thirst for power, the real contagion – the Plague – enters the plot of the novel to finally annihilate the fabric of family. The devastation that personal ambition spreads is once more reiterated in the Fall of Constantinople – as Shelley singles out the war as the cause of the rise of the plague which spreads its fatal shadow gradually from the east to the west eclipsing civilization after civilization. The plague is introduced into the world of the novel not as a mere contagion but almost as an overwhelming antagonist against egoistic humankind. It falls into the class of such overpowering and superhuman settings like Egdon Heath which render the most heroic of human actions as puny and insignificant. The sway of the contagion is not localized or restricted to a few individuals but upon the entire race and that the plague is said to up rear its head and spread virulently in conjunction with the war between the Christians and the Moslems, shows that nature avenges itself whenever man tries to trespass her laws, of peaceful, fraternal coexistence between members of a race or species, by predating on its own kind for selfish self-aggrandizement.

The plague is symbolically the outwardly manifestation of the contagion or pestilence of mindlessness of the human hunger for power. Mary Shelley’s apocalyptic vision plunges the characters of the novel, as well as draws along the reader, into a dark world of moral nothingness and devalued of human love. In the end there is only a single soul left on earth to experience the pangs of loneliness as Shelley visualizes the end of humanity without any scope for the hope of Salvation or reward for earthly suffering to penetrate the pitch darkness of her world. One is shocked by the sudden loss of humanity’s value-systems, by the obliteration of the notion of redemption and by the proof of love’s ineffectualness. Nature and time are shown as acting in cohorts to lay low the idea of the Promethean man, the roof and crown of creation, and wipe his trace from the face of the earth. The institutions that man so painstakingly builds and egoistically flaunts – the nation, the government, the kingdom, the family do not spare him from
being face the reality of his utter insignificance – he is a mere speck – in the vastness of
the universe and there is no place for him to hide from the antagonism of nature, from the
virulence of the plague:

...one word alone fell, as it were involuntarily, from his convulsed lips: The
plague – ‘where?’ – ‘everywhere – we must fly – all fly – but wither? No man can
tell there is no refuge on earth, it comes on us like a thousand packs of wolves –
... where can any of us go?’ (p. 175)

These terrible realizations by the characters of the novel rise above its direct context and
echo in the ears of the reader, making him think how useless all the idealism of man is,
how vainglorious, in the face of nature’s fury! The ironic vision once again steeps the
novel into the nadir of pessimism as nature is shown as a brute force that takes no
account of human suffering. The untold deaths caused by pestilence and the progressive
annihilation of the population seem to leave no impress on nature who maintains her
implacable beauty:

The balmy air of spring, breathed from nature’s ambrosial home, invested the
lovely earth, which weakened as a young mother about to lead forth in pride her
beauteous offspring ... (p. 229)

The physical world remains plentiful and healthy burgeoning its stores of bounty and
perpetuating the cyclical change of seasons while the plague destroys the myth that man
so self-deceptively and complacently reared up – he was the paragon of creation – the
prophetic voice of the narrator says that the bounties of nature and the pestilence are both
the children of nature: ‘Plague is the companion of spring, of sunshine, and plenty’ (p.
230).

The plague is a superhuman force and one that Shelley uses as a weapon to
whittle away the fragile, which men fancy as enduring, idyll of domestic dream or family
edifice. The human family, the safest refuge of man, suffers from the twin forces of
ravenous ambition and indomitable pestilence. The plague however, for a while, draws
together the strands of the remaining family unit in the novel, as love and bonding seek to
hold together the strings that fell apart. The death of Raymond and Perdita in Greece, re-
establishes Adrian, Idris, Lionel and the children, including Raymond’s daughter Clara,
in Windsor for a while the ‘storm-driven bird[s]’ return to the nest. In the backdrop of the
spreading plague and the reports of the ‘black sun’, Lionel tries to recreate the bonding of
the family by fragile and brittle self-assurances, or better called, and self-deception: ‘such
miseries could never intrude upon the domestic circle left to me...’. Very soon this
complacent faith in the power of the family to withstand against the bitterest of external
onslaughts and protect the lonely human being against the cruel world is shaken, as
Adrian’s administration of the plague-ridden city of London makes the group acutely
aware of their ultimate vulnerability, which makes Lionel cry out in horror at the idea of
his family being extirpated by the contagion: ‘we must all die! The species of man must
perish; his frame of exquisite workmanship; the wondrous mechanism of his senses...his
mind, the throned king of these; must perish...’ (p. 300). Thus man is rendered
absolutely defenceless and powerless as the power of love and devotion prove to be
inadequate to combat the fierce attack of the plague. Lionel is ready to ‘walk barefoot
through the world, to find an uninfected spot’ to salvage his family but the plague
emerges as a force too overwhelming for humanity.
The plague on one hand destroys the atomized family but on the other leads to the levelling of society by uniting men into the larger family of the human race to work together to escape the clutches of the disease for as long as possible. The plague is impartial, unbiased in extending its venomous sway over all nations of the world – spreading from the Orient like a pitch darkness it eclipses the jubilant sun of prosperity shining over the imperialist England. Nobody is excused, nobody is exempted from its indiscriminate slaughter as all nations, all races and all religions suffer the same fate in its hands. Amidst the many injustices and inequalities of the world the plague emerges as a just force ravaging mankind from Asia to Africa, from Europe to America, leaving no place for man to hide; effacing all the boundaries of nationhood; forcing man to acknowledge a sole identity – that of being a human being – and to recognize a single enemy – Pestilence, thus uniting man at the far end of his reign on earth as he realizes:

There was one good and one evil in the world – life and death. The pomp of rank, the assumption of power, the possessions of wealth…one living, beggar had become of more worth than a…peerage of dead lords… (p. 196)

This closely reminds one of how the Romantics in general and the Shelley-Byron circle in particular, were averse to the ideals of nationhood or patriotism and their migratory life-style, extensive travels engendered the eclectic conception of the world as a single nation.

Adrian and Lionel are animated by schemes to work together for the local peasantry – now their extended family. As the taint of pestilence moves towards the countryside the family of citizens, led by Adrian realizing its vulnerability, takes to a life of vagabondism. The family gets diminished as days pass and the English peoples’ pride in their insular position:

These were questions of prudence; there was no immediate necessity for an earnest caution. England was still secure. France, Germany, Italy and Spain, were interposed, walls yet without breach, between us and the plague. (p. 168).

Is turned to mockery as the proud English can no longer feel pride in the sense of exclusiveness from the currents of continental disorder and their ‘splendid isolation’ changes from boon to bane:

The sea, late our defence, seems our prison bound; hemmed in by its gulphs, we shall die like the famished inhabitants of a besieged town. (p.180). The solidarity with the rest of world, with the rest of mankind, be it even in death, seems a better consolation, which is denied to the English, so proud of their insular status.

The sole survivors after the ravage of the plague are Clara, Adrian and Lionel, yet the author is reluctant to provide any such comfort to the reader as Adrian and Clara are drowned at sea, leaving Lionel to roam the earth alone – as the last man. The plague leaves behind a desolate landscape, where the relics of the erstwhile glory and vibes of humanity still linger on. In his lone ramblings over the desolate world, Lionel is reminded at each step of his family, of all human families, as he enters empty cottages and finds tables set for family meals, utensils ready to serve upon, and thinks once more of the brittle illusions that man nurtures about the security and endurance of the family unit, which nature can at any moment lay waste at its mere whim. ‘All about him the last man is tormented by the ghost of the family; his own family and the family of man’
(Blumberg:133). We are able to recognize the false security, with which we are raised by society, in the comfort that family and human love offers. Nature reckons no ties between men and the unleashing of the plague is the proof of its extreme nonchalance.

Thus, the narrative brings us back to the place from where we began. The creation of the family so painstakingly described in the early episodes of the novel, is destroyed. Annihilation of mankind, its values of love, and its hopes for redemption leaves behind a single man – the last man – a relic of a glorious race, to suffer alone. Shelley’s pessimistic vision of the future offers no final hope or consolation. Her concept of last ness is devoid of any scope for resurgence of new life. Her bleak vision of the world and human destiny renders The Last Man as the document of an apocalyptic imagination that conjures a present without any promise of a human resurgence.

Endnotes:

1 An extraordinary meteorological event of 1816 called the ‘year without a summer’ (see Byron’s ‘Darkness’).
2 Alfred Lord Tennyson. In Memoriam, Canto 56.
5 Egdon Heath is the fictional representation of Puddletown Heath, which Hardy uses as the setting of his novel The Return of the Native.

Works Cited: