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Research Paper

The Age of Enlightenment and Decline of Neo-Classicism in Europe

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Abstract

The age of enlightenment is a turning point in the movements of Neo-Classicism toward Romanticism. This period emerges after preparing the ground for the decline of neoclassicism in the first half of the eighteenth century in the areas of art, literature, etc. in Europe. It is considered as the beginning of a period of art and literature consisting of artistic creativity and intuitive perception. Three main principles of "unity of time", "unity of place", and "unity of subject" based on which the classical literature was founded become subject to change and transformation. England, Germany, and France were the primary manifestation points of this movement in European literature. Although the role of the literature of ancient east in the foundations of the characteristics of "Romanticism" and pre-romanticism cannot be overlooked, the social grounds of the emergence of this age can be summarized in the longings for change of society, getting tired of old criteria in the fields of art and literature, tendency toward platonic thoughts, and escape from modernity and inclination toward logical thoughts in the works of "Kant" and "Rousseau".

Keywords: *Enlightenment, Romanticism, Art, Social, Literature, Neo-Classicism*

Introduction

After paving the way for the decline of Neo-Classicism in the first half of the eighteenth century, the age of domination of wisdom and thought, and rigid inflexible system is being replaced by a new period with characteristics different from those of the past.

"Enlightenment, relying upon wisdom and science, reviewed everything and through a rational and calm process, questioned the old insight and the present condition founded on it"¹. During the first half of the eighteenth century new concepts such as "genius", "beauty", and "imagination" entered into the discussions of literature and aesthetics, while respecting the basic

¹The trend of Romanticism in Europe, page 57



principles of Neo-Classicism.² The power of Neo-Classicism diminished and the theory of imitation which was the foundation of Neo-Classicism was collapsed under the influence of emotional tendency of art and increasing emphasis upon self-expressiveness and narration of self-resulting from the creative imagination of the artist³.

However, it should be noted that the decline of this system was in no way abrupt; rather, it was gradually destabilized, and continued its life, even it was revitalized after romanticism, and its impacts remain until present. Lilian R. Furst in her book, "Romanticism", comments on the consequences of enlightenment:

"With its questioning, the Enlightenment achieved emancipation from the authoritarianism of the neoclassical creed. The advances were perhaps still only modest, but the trend is clear enough; away from the neat, finite, regular schemes of the old system towards a growing appreciation of the irregular beauties of the irrational imagination."⁴ In general, unlike the literary works of 17th century, the literature of the age of enlightenment was mainly concentrated on the content rather than format and method.⁵

The History of Romanticism

A. Pre-Romanticism

After Neo-Classicism which was the period of the power of wisdom and movement of thought, the windows of enlightenment were opened for the people bored with the rigid and inflexible principles of Classicism and Neo-Classicism, and three countries of England, Germany, France, and following them other European countries gradually kept distance from this wisdom-oriented movement and separated from it in their specific manner.

This movement commenced in England and Germany before France⁶; "So that in around the first half of the 18th century, the works of "William Shakespeare" became gradually famous worldwide, then people got acquainted with "Fielding" and "Richardson", after that, other works such as "Gray's" *elegy written in a country churchyard* and *the Thoughts* of "Hervey" emerged in England. These, besides promising the beginning of a new period in English literature, since they were translated into most live languages of the world, inspired poets and authors of France and other European countries.⁷

The years 1740 to 1790 were the years of decline of Neo-Classicism and still were considered as the beginning of the school of Romanticism.

This violent and agitated period has been called "Pre-Romanticism". Some writers believe that this term is unnecessary, but Renee Wolk has considered it as necessary.⁸

People tired of industry and urbanization which was excessively spreading at that time found a kind of feeling of escape from the "science-oriented" and "wisdom-oriented"⁹ society in themselves; and the rural life and the primitive, untamed nature as well as natural elements, as found in the world without human interference, were valued and became increasingly important.

² Ibid, page 54

³ Ibid, page 62

⁴ Romanticism, page 42

⁵ The history of the world literature, volume I,

⁶ Romanticism, its principle and its influence upon Iran contemporary poetry, page 216

⁷ Romanticism, its principle and its influence in Iran contemporary poetry, page 216-217

⁸ Romanticism trend in Europe, page 72

⁹ Ibid, page 73

In this way the age of reason was the name appropriate for the age of domination of Neo-Classicism, and the age of emotion was the most suitable name for the period of "Pre-Romanticism".¹⁰

The emergence of Pre-Romanticism was earlier in England than Germany and it began by novel. The growth of urbanization, empowering of the middle class, and expansion of literacy particularly among women were among the main factors contributing to change in this period. "Bertrand Russell" believes that people were tired of security at the time of Rousseau and inclined toward excitement.¹¹

It should be stated that the range of critics of philosophers expanded since 1750 and with growing number of sentimentalists the tradition of literary criticism through the tools of wisdom declined and sentimental criticism (*Critique de sentiment*) became prevalent.¹²

In general, emotional desires entered into literature in this period but authors offered these new feelings in archetypal pattern to the readers.¹³ "Gothic" or the novel of fright and horror (which starts with the novel of the castle of Otranto by "Walpole")¹⁴, Pietism (the grief of the inner life), and Methodism (relying upon the pure religious feelings) which together with social issues such as pessimism, thirty-year wars, deadly diseases resulted in the emergence of graveyard school of poetry, were the new-comers of European culture and society; they are harbingers of the entrance of a new school and style instead of the declining school of Neo-Classicism.

The sadness and depression of poems like *Night Thoughts* (Edward Young, 1742), *The Grave* (Robert Blair, 1743), *The elegy* (Gray, 1750), *Meditations among the Tombs* (James Harvey, 1748), and other works of Pre-Romanticism should be regarded as the primary forms of what is distinguished in the next period by the French term "*Maldu Siecle Weltschmerz*" and is changed into one of the essential indicators of Romanticism.¹⁵

Belief in the cleanliness of nature and country life and hatred from urban life which is considered as the symbol of corruption are some other features of this period. Even, William Cowper (1731 – 1800) argues:

"God made the country and man-made the town."¹⁶

Referring to primitivism, folklore, informal songs, legends and poems left from the far past of European countries¹⁷, were the source of new inspiration nourishing the bright mind of writers and poets of this period and relying upon individual talent and its originality is one of the other obvious characteristics of this period of literary history of Europe. According to Hugo, "the poet should rely on talents."¹⁸ In England poets such as Parnell, Blair, and Yung showed tendency towards solitude and depression and their most important topics were about night, solitude, death and grave.¹⁹

¹⁰ Ibid, page 76

¹¹ Romanticism, its principle and influence on iran contemporary poetry, page 218

¹² Literary schools, volume I, page 170

¹³ Ibid, page 175

¹⁴ Romanticism trend in Europe, page 83

¹⁵ Romanticism trend in Europe, pages 84-85

¹⁶ Ibid, page 86

¹⁷ Ibid, page 93

¹⁸ .Ghanimi, mohammad. Translated by ayatollahzade, morteza. *Comparative literature. Amirkabir publication, first edition, 1372*, page 75

¹⁹ The history of the world literature, volume II, page 1020

What should be considered in this paper is the role of ancient culture of India, Iran, and Arab in strengthening the foundations of Romanticism. As Seillere (French critic), one of the opponents of Romanticism, tried to show orient (east) as the source of romanticism (what he calls illness) and believes that Plato's heritage and Christianity (which is oriental as well) will be integrated and strengthened through neo-platonic school and will create the new age of Romanticism. Friedrich Schlegel, one of the great men of Romanticism also believes that the most elevated type of Romanticism should be found in the orient; in fact the orient which exists in the books of Zand, Avesta and Opanishadha.²⁰

In any case, the specific appeal of orient in writers and poets' attitude can't be concealed. For instance, Hugo, Lamartine, and Musset showed interest towards Persian literature and even Hugo is inspired with Persian literature in a part of his book "les orientales".²¹

Journey to orient, translation of oriental books (e.g. one thousand and one night) and also travelogues of the writers such as Bernie, Chardon, and Tavernier about Iran and India and publishing the books: Iranian tales, Turkish tales, Arabic legends of Vaseq 1786, etc are all proofs to this fact.²²

If we have a glance into the past oriental literature, we will understand that according to witnesses about Romanticism in oriental literature, perhaps the theory of obtaining the basis and elements of Romanticism from orient is not too farfetched.

Chinese poetry in middle ages, to some extent dwells on romantic love and is mostly about friendship, wine and the pleasure of solitude.²³ One of the poetic examples of ancient literature of china which seems to be fanciful is the long poem of Chu Yuan "encountering trouble" (about 350 BC) in which fanciful events such as journey by dragon's coach and visiting the galaxies happen.²⁴

Indian literature, especially in Vedae period that continued from 1500 till 200 B.C. generally includes religious and lyrical poetry.²⁵

This issue is also true about ancient literature of ancient Egyptians. "Ancient Egyptians wrote considerable number of love poems in different times. The theme of most of those poems was the love affair of brothers and sisters whose marriage was common at that time".

The major characteristics of these poems are their excitement, fineness and delicacy. For instance: "O beloved, it's only your breath" and "I throw myself on the bed".²⁶

Now, whether we consider orient the source of Romanticism from Seillere's point of view or seek its base inside Western and European literature, traces of romanticism can be found in oriental literature whose intensity and weakness would be different in various periods and nations.

²⁰ Bigdeloo, reza. *Archeology in contemporary history of Iran*. Markaz publication, Tehran, first edition, 1380, page 123

²¹ Honarmandi, Hasan. *Blank verse foundation in France and its connection with Persian poetry*. Zavar publication Tehran, first edition, 1350, page 28

²² Romanticism trend in Europe, pages 96-97

²³ The history of world literature, volume I, page 216

²⁴ The history of world literature, volume I, page 22

²⁵ Ibid, page 11

²⁶ Ibid, page 6

B. Toward Romanticism

"Romanticism is the weeping star; it is the sighing wind, the sudden beam, the greatest ecstasy, and illness".²⁷ (Alfred de Musset)

After the progress of the middle class and decline of feudalism traditions as well as classicism by the masses, the society needed writers and artists who could write by their own will and unrestrainedly.

Following the decline of the old system, industrial revolution, growth of urban life and middle class of society and expansion of education, the man becomes involved in a kind of meaning crisis²⁸ who could relieve his restless soul via sending it beyond the fancy, through a school which commenced since the middle of the eighteenth century and its anti-philosophical tendency made the rationalism unsteady²⁹, and it was evident that ancient classical procedures didn't work toward such method-abolishing current called Romanticism.

By the display of "Hernani", Victor Hugo's everlasting work, a new age appeared that noticeably penetrated in England, Germany, and other European countries in a short while, and great poets and writers such as Goethe, Schiller in Germany, Alexandre Dumas the father, Alfred de Musset, Saint Beaver in France, Gray and Richardson in England appeared. The aim of this movement contrary to classicism was destruction of literary rules, and propagation of individuality and imagination, tendency to the untamed nature seeking childhood and especially vivification of pure emotion of human being.³⁰

In this period national legends and verses, especially legends and myths of northern Europeans, the Scandinavians and the English, were collected and became the models of artists in creating works of art.³¹

In fact, Romanticism before being an artistic or literary movement, is a state of European sensitivity which occurs first in England by (William Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge), in Germany by (Goethe, Schiller, Holderlin) at the end of the eighteenth century and then in France by (Victor Hugo, Chateaubriand, Lamartine) in Italy by (Manzoni, Leopardi) in Spain by (Zorrilla) and in Scandinavia by (Oehlenschläger, Tegner, and Stagnelius) in the nineteenth century.³²

In this period the source of creativity is sought inside the poet and the writer, whereas in neo-classical period, talent was counted as the source of creativity and individuality of the artist was emphasized. Friedrich Schlegel wrote about this subject in his periodical *Athenäum*: "this is individuality and individualism that has originality..."³³.

C. Social Grounds

Some researchers have figured Romanticism basically as a bourgeoisie movement, whereas it is clear that some of the romantic social tendencies differ from new bourgeoisie system.³⁴ Some call this period, the period of passing from degenerate feudalism towards neo-capitalism.³⁵

²⁷ Literary schools, volume I, page 161

²⁸ Romanticism trend in Europe, page 160

²⁹ *Glossary of the art of poetry, Ketabe mahnaz publication second edition 1376 page 113, Mir Sadeghi, M.*

³⁰ Romanticism, its principles and influences in Iran contemporary poetry, page 215

³¹ Glossary of the art of poetry, page 76

³² Literary schools' volume I, page 161

³³ Romanticism trend in Europe page 277

³⁴ Ibid page 161

³⁵ Ibid page 164

Lilian Furst argues that in the eighteenth century a group of continuous tendencies and changes happened that had deep multilateral effects: decline of neo-classicism (Rousseau, Young, Mac Pherson, Bernardin de saint Piere were the pioneers of this school) led to uncertainty of enlightenment, and this condition gradually prepared a proper field for penetration and development of new attitudes which became epidemic in the second half of the century.³⁶

In fact, this new literary revolution created after decline of old system had its roots in enlightenment and pre-romanticism that had paved the way for this movement.

It should be mentioned that precious ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) is a great step toward the aims of this movement that influenced other European artists by his own literary, political, philosophical and religious ideas.³⁷

Jafari in his book “the trend of Romanticism in Europe” argues that social phenomena of Romanticism is a kind of world view which has come to existence with fall of feudalism and old cultural, social, and political system as well as birth of new society and growth of capitalism. It tries to collate the contrasts and heterogeneity of the new society through vague and contradictory ways and reliance upon pre-capitalist values.³⁸

Undoubtedly in this period aristocracy began to decline and society chaos in France led to great revolution (1789). In such situation, Romanticism was a liberal and progressive movement which was a sign of revolutionary thought and political outburst against classicism. Perhaps, the reason is that nowadays some critics recognize liberal and democratic thought as the consequence of Romanticism in literature and art as well as failure of French revolution and disappointment of artists of the society resulted in producing works on solitude, depression, and disgust at society, and describing the nature and the heroes of these works started denying the civilization most of whom are unsociable.³⁹

Modernization of society and turning to deception in order to exploit others and vanishing human sentiments and individual destruction by industry led to depression and appealing to plain and pure life of the country and tendency to the untamed nature. Besides, individuality and human’s personality received honor and respect in the works and the poets and artists chose self-determination and evading the rules as the foundation of their works. Deconstruction might be the most important dimension of Romanticism. (That’s what Hugo called freedom from irrelevant qualification.)⁴⁰

As implied previously, each literary revolution happens after a social revolution and social deconstruction is the main point of Romanticism. In this part, it is not the passive romanticism; rather, the second attitude of romanticism which is an active movement that is considered.

From among various classifications done by Seier and Lowey about Romanticism such as conservative, fascistic, liberal, melancholic, revivalist, revolutionary and utopian, the most important ones are revivalist, revolutionary, utopian⁴¹; the latter seeking idealistic future and playing an effective role in political and social changes. Major writers of this period are Blake,

³⁶ Romanticism, page 29

³⁷ The glossary of the art of poetry, page 113

³⁸ The romanticism trend in Europe, page 165

³⁹ The glossary of the art of poetry, 115

⁴⁰ Vazin poor Nader, *Bar samand sokhan*, foroghi publication, first edition ,1366, page 388

⁴¹ Romanticism trend in Europe, pages 168-169

Shelley, and Byron in England, Heine, and Holderlin in Germany, Musset, Hugo, and George Sand in France.⁴²

Return to primitive society or to the nature is one of Rousseau's suggestions to escape from a civilization which causes injustice. Many were searching for such kind of society in the remote places of the world, abroad and past history.⁴³

However, the deviating society of the eighteenth century prepared the ground for important changes in the old structure of those days for the people who were interested in excitement and freedom, and after a short while it spread all over the world; even after the fall it survived and its influence has been remained on Europe and the world literature.

From philosophical and intellectual point of view, it should be mentioned that contrary to classicism which is based on Aristotelian ideas and originates from rational, realistic and objective thought in which object and real is valuable, romanticism is based on platonic and neo-platonic thoughts. Despite Aristotelian philosophy, this philosophy admires ideal and subjective matters; there's no place for objective and real matters in romanticism and Plato's theory of ideas which recognizes the world creatures as a shadow of the truth, is an evidence of the theory. Shelley believes that each use of imagination that causes individual's contact with hidden platonic idea experienced beyond the common phenomena is poetry.⁴⁴

Romantic thought is very close to neo-Platonists' thoughts and philosophy whose origin is platonic philosophy; therefore, this philosophy has influenced romanticism.⁴⁵ Antony Burgess says: "when wisdom is accepted as the superior talent, human being does not need the extrinsic rules to say the truth or falseness. Therefore, the rules and religions become unnecessary and anarchism – the essence of romanticism – emerges."⁴⁶ David Hume stated that the wisdom depends on emotions and feelings and it should be.⁴⁷

Considering the words of great thinkers reveals Romanticism's complete rejection of neo-classicism. In his famous sentence "I think, therefore I am" Descartes like Pope who considered wisdom a suitable replacement for all talents and abilities, supposed entity to depend on wisdom and thought.⁴⁸ The wisdom called common sense and being the equivalent of social etiquette was the result of human compatibility with imitations and social structure.⁴⁹ Europe and its literary method were concerned with this idea, thought and wisdom until Rousseau's announcement of philosophical results about capabilities of imagination and feelings and valuing the sensitivity.⁵⁰ Kant is one of the prominent thinkers and philosophers whose ideas were the foundation of Romanticism as well as some other schools. In this regard, Zarrinkoob wrote: "in fact, most of the philosophical schools which became the intellectual source after Kant in Europe had a minor or major role in his thought. Romantic period which began following the decline of Kant's idea about European art and thought definitely owed to Kant and sentiments which was exciting for

⁴² Romanticism trend in Europe, page 173

⁴³ Romanticism page 55

⁴⁴ Daiches, david Literary criticism method, translated by Mohammadtaghi Sedighiiani, Gholamhossein Yosefi, Elmi publications first edition, 1366, page 185

⁴⁵ Romanticism trend in Europe, page 131

⁴⁶ The trend of Romanticism in Europe, page 114

⁴⁷ Romanticism trend in Europe, page 115

⁴⁸ Literary schools' volume I, page 167

⁴⁹ Comparative literature, page 491

⁵⁰ Literary schools, volume I, page 167

Romanticism was beholden to practical wisdom criticism as much as works of Jean Jacque Rousseau." ⁵¹

The other important point regarding Romanticism is its relationship with religion. Although Friedrich von Schlegel stated that "romanticism is based on Christian devotion and feeling" and the fact that romantic poetry is influenced by religious sentiments is undeniable, it should be noticed that romanticism is not a religious period of real piety. The reason is that romantics deal with religion from an emotional and sentimental viewpoint and rationale and reasoning is irrelevant.⁵² As a matter of fact romantics look at religion from an artistic point of view and treat it artistically.

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⁵¹ Zarincoob Abdolhossein, *ba karevane andishe*. amirkabir publications, Tehran first edition .1363, page 331

⁵² The trend of Romanticism in Europe, page 142