

## CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SHELLEY'S PROMETHEUS UNBOUND IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF EXISTENTIALISM

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### ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to reconsider Shelley's Prometheus Unbound in the light of Existentialism as applied in literature. In this regard the paper has taken help of Bob Corbett's discussion on what is Existentialism. Bob Corbett (1985), in his discussion, is of the opinion that life is very difficult and it does not have an "objective" or "universally" known value, and thus it could not be lived by merely talking about, rather an individual must create value by affirming it and living it. The current research analyzes Shelley's lyric drama Prometheus Unbound (1820) in the frame of the above mentioned existentialistic outlook. Prometheus Unbound, the hero, suffers all sorts of social, religious, political and economic pain with optimism that one day from nothingness, from this inhumanity, from this never ending pain; a new life, a new being will arise giving a new color to life and world at large. This optimistic view of Shelley's hero is beautifully justified by Ghadeer Al-Hassan and Shadi Neimneh when they in their research article contended "it is a new Eden illuminated by Prometheus's fire, which enables man to master the world and govern himself without relying on some external forces" (2012,p.24). The paradigm of the research for this paper is qualitative, the research ontology constructivist and content analysis is being used as a research tool. This research discovers Prometheus Unbound as an existentialist fighter who as a hero considers himself responsible for the essence of his existence and holds himself accountable for every choice and chance in life and prefers to conquer himself rather than the world. In the end this research finally comes to the conclusion that Prometheus Unbound is an existentialist lyric drama where the protagonist through his actions proves that life has no pre-existing meaning rather an individual through his freedom has to create an essence for existence and has to give a purpose to his own life.

**Key Words:** Revolution; Hopelessness; Existence; Nothingness; Essence; Optimism:

### INTRODUCTION

**The main objective of this critical study is to evaluate.** P.B. Shelley's Prometheus Unbound in the light of Existentialism theory as applied in Literature. And as such this research first discusses the existentialist thought as expressed by Bob Corbett in his discussion titled as "What is Existentialism?" And then it discusses Percy Bushy Shelley as one of the greatest romantic poets and revolutionary forces, who as a matter of fact, was

highly inspired by the slogans of French revolution of 1789. This study further explores why his heart bled profusely at the slaughtering and bloodshed caused by French revolution in the end and why this pain of failure at French revolution made him shift his poetic force into a revolution within rather than a revolution without. This study also looks at the horrible results of the most desired French revolution, and the reasons why Shelley preferred

to make himself a man of faith, who as such, could create a world from nothingness, a man of love who could change the world of hatred into a world of love, a man of hope who could see hope even in the pit of never ending hopelessness. This study takes the help of Shelley's world famous work Prometheus Unbound (1820), where slaughtering, inhumanity, pain, hopelessness, torture abound, yet in all this pain and horror, the hero Prometheus becomes a strong force, a revolution, a power of strong self-identity, and an existence. He, in spite of torture and pain, becomes so powerful that for him pain becomes pleasure, depression becomes happiness and death becomes life. He suffers all sorts of social, religious, political and economic pains with optimism that one day from nothingness, from this inhumanity, from this never ending pain, will arise a new dawn, a new life, a new being, thus replacing hopelessness with hope, hatred with love and doubt with faith. This study through critical interpretation of Prometheus Unbound shows that Shelley's Prometheus stands as an existentialist fighter or hero who believes in living without certainty and with personal responsibility for his acts and decisions, and this thought of hero is appropriately justified by few lines from Sartre's lecture on existentialism and humanism in 1945 where he said: "man is free, man is freedom.....you are free, therefore choose that is to say invent. No rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do: no signs are vouchsafed in this world" (p.38). He believes that one can only create a change if one becomes and keep becoming an existence with its ontological responsibility out of the world of nothingness, absurdity and hopelessness, and this thought is aptly supported by Sartre when he said; "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world...and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him, is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself (1945, p.28).

### **Literature Review**

Shelley, for his unconventional life style, for his radical political thoughts and for his stubborn passion for reform, has always remained under the focus of critics in one way or other. In the first half of the 20th century one of the modern critics T.S. Eliot passed this judgment on this great romantic

mind: "Shelley is a poet of adolescence by whom I was intoxicated at the age of fifteen and later on found him unreadable" (1933). On his death, a Tory newspaper, the courier, by reporting his watery end, published these lines for him: "writer of some infidel poetry....now he knows whether there is a God or not". The same intensity of views we also find in some other critics when they even went to the extent of calling him "vile wretch", "A man, weak in genius and character", "an affront to God", "and a hideous blasphemer who incited pages of raving atheism". William Baxter also expected him to be "an ignorant, silly, half-witted enthusiast with morals that fitted him only for a brothel." Matthew Arnold labeled him as "an ineffective star in the firmament". Though these above views by critics label him as a very different sort, but a certain number of critics believe that complexity of Shelley's thought and images, the flow of his lines, and his abstract views as well as his idealistic world and his propagation of utopianism really deserve a full-fledged reconsideration, reinterpretation as well as better understanding. As Byron said at one place: "you were brutally mistaken about Shelley, who was, without exception, the best and least selfish man I ever knew. I never knew anyone who was not a beast in comparison". William Wordsworth is of the view that "Shelley is one of the best artists of us all: I mean in workmanship and style". Hazlitt (1824) is of the opinion that "no one was ever wiser or better for reading Shelley". George Bernard Shaw in 1892 on hundredth anniversary of Shelley's birth gave following comments: "problem was not that he was an atheist, atheism had after all been a well-known private pastime amongst the aristocracy for centuries.....but that he actually called himself one and urged others to follow his example. His offence was not that he doubted the existence of God. Very few Christians believed in God, especially in England: what they believed in was the Bible, and to them atheism was simply a failure to hold their book in proper esteem..... He was a deist rather than an atheist" After these comments of critics in this context, an attempt has been made to reconsider Shelley's world famous lyric drama Prometheus Unbound through one of the great revolutionary outlook known as Existentialism.

Existentialism as a theory or approach started in 19<sup>th</sup> century with Soren Kierkegaard who believed

that individuals are not victims of circumstances because we are what we have chosen to be. So it emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining his own development through acts of the will, as at one place Sartre in his famous discussion on Existentialism and Humanism (1945) said “man is free, man is freedom” (p.34). So, this revolt considers man as the absolute power with regard to existence and its purpose. After Soren Kierkegaard, Fredric Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger and Albert Camus became world class existentialists and took this revolt to its peak in 1940’s. These all existentialists were of the opinion that our existence is not dependent on any external power rather it is the result of choices, we make, the acts we do, the decisions we make and the responsibilities we take charge of, is what life or existence is all about. In simple words, the whole juice of this revolt is in points as under:

Firstly, these existentialists are obsessed with how to live one’s life, and in the same above context they also believe that this question of how to live one’s life can be helped by psychological inquiry. Secondly, these existentialists believe that if we take human life seriously then there are certain questions which every one of us must be concerned about. And these questions are, as death, meaning of human existence, the place of human existence, the meaning of value, interpersonal relationship, the place of self-reflective conscious knowledge of one’s self in existing. Thirdly, they are of the view that life is very difficult and that it doesn’t have an “objective” or “universally” known value, and as such it could not be lived by merely talking about it, rather an individual must create value by affirming it and living it.

Fourthly, these Existentialists give importance to actions over words, for them everyday life and in it choices, decisions and actions are far more meaningful than abstract versions of philosophy. Doing or not doing is more important than knowing or not knowing. So, their choices and values are demonstrated in Acts not in words. They focus on individual existence and the existential struggles. Fifthly; they consider freedom of the will and the human power to do or not to do as absolutely obvious. Sixthly, as Sartre has beautifully said: “when I choose I choose for the whole world. It means when I choose and act I change the world in some iota. It has ramifications because ripples of

actions are like ripples on the sea; they go on and on and on.” It means that when we act we also begin to define and create the self we are, which is also to some extent public self. Thus, these existentialists believe that life doesn’t have any “objective” or universally known values, but that an individual must create value by affirming it and living it, not by talking about it. (Bob Corbett, 1985). Living a meaningful life increases Eudaimonic well-being, gratitude and emotional intelligence reduces aggressive tendencies leading to effective sense of self and existence. Further, moral injury causes distress and religious coping improves wellbeing (Javaid et al., 2024 ).

Reading these points about existentialism, we are basically reminded of one truth, which is; the world of man has always been under influence either by one philosophical thought or by another. Sometimes it was influenced by fatalism and sometimes it was influenced by atheism, sometimes by long-established hierarchies and sometimes by slogans of equality, fraternity and liberty which were main tenets of French revolution (1789). French revolution is considered a milestone in the history of Romantic English Literature, which created a stubborn faith in Romantic minds for a possibility of change in long-established hierarchies. This revolution in 1789 took the whole of France in a thunderous manner, kindling hopes in the bosom of under privileged classes for a golden era and for times of equal opportunity. But this thunderous storm of under privileged classes on 14<sup>th</sup> July, 1789 raising slogans of liberty, equality, and fraternity became an immediate nightmare when rather than bringing a soothing relief to many weary eyes it brought more destruction as well as the replacement of aristocrats’ treachery with the earth shaking treachery of revolutionary leaders. It rather than demolishing the concept of system, replaced one system of weakness with another system of inherent weaknesses. Thus, resulting into human blood and slaughtering rather than peace and happiness, leaving all those hope harboring young souls dejected and desolate. Initially, in fact, all the romantic poets were greatly inspired by those slogans of Rousseau in French revolution and as such we find much of the romantic poetry marked with by this romantic fervor. And the continuity of this above fervor takes us to Percy Bysshe Shelley, who as being one of the great Romantic cum

rebellious minds, espouses the same romantic fervor that is to free man from the shackles of inherited beliefs and values. And it is also this spirit that we find in Shelley's Prometheus unbound (1820), which stands as an attempt to raise a rebellion for change in inherited beliefs and values. Shelley through Prometheus unbound has tried to liberate the man and mankind from concept of pre-established universally known values and morals. The framework which Shelley used for the ventilation of his this romantic spirit was Aeschylus's Prometheus Bound. He rewrote that well known Greek myth by Aeschylus with a new life and spirit in it. His Prometheus was unbound and free from all sorts of bondage. He suffers for three thousand years, pain and oppression and then realizes that "attaining liberty cannot be achieved only by breaking free from Jupiter's chains, which bind him to the precipice, but also by breaking the manacles of evil that tighten their grip on his soul" Ghadeer Al-Hassan; Shadi Neimneh(2012: P.22)

#### **Plight of Prometheus Unbound and his tussle with Jupiter:**

Ah me! Alas, Pain, Pain, ever, forever!  
No change, no pause, no hope! Yet I endure (,Act: 1, lines.22-23)

Prometheus Unbound is found nailed to a rocky precipice for three thousand years, where he is afflicted by cold, heat, torture, pain and an eagle that keeps eating at his heart. These all torments are given to Prometheus Unbound by Jupiter who is not only his archenemy. Jupiter being all in all powerful still considers Prometheus Unbound more powerful and effective. And it is this effectiveness of power due to which he has punished him by nailing him to mountain, a place which Prometheus describes as "Black, Wintry, Dead, Unmeasured: Without herb, insect, or beast or shape or sound of life." This shows that he is surrounded by furies, death, despair, desolation, dejection and soul torturing nightmares, yet he defies Jupiter and prefers to suffer than to succumb or compromise. Because, he believes that there always comes dawn after dusk, and is of the opinion that his endurance is his stronghold and victory against the tyrant who outwardly is in power but inwardly happens to be getting rusted and feeble due to the constant defiance of Prometheus Unbound of his exploitative rule and

throne. Maurice Bowra(1950) wrote that "Jupiter is the incarnation of all that Shelley regards as an evil, of those destructive forces which take many forms but all arise from the denial of good" (p.108). This shows that Prometheus considers Jupiter just an evil force and his endurance of that evil force as the best weapon against all sorts of tyrannies of corrupt authorities. The plight of Prometheus and his endurance of that, in fact, give us the message that an evil is nothing but an imperfection in human nature and it is this imperfection in human nature which always leads to misery and macabre revolt. As Shelley himself at once place said: "that mankind had only to will that there should be no evil and there would be none." From this it is clear that endurance of Prometheus Unbound in such desolation and despair is a picture of ideal rebellion against the established concept of destiny and luck where we believe that we are chained and cannot enjoy freedom and free play of impulse because we bring a script with us when we are born and keep living according to that heavenly written script. Prometheus Unbound does not consider his plight and the tyranny of Jupiter as his luck or destiny, nor he shows any kind of restlessness and revolt against the tyrant, rather he believes that he is thrown into a situation which is irrational and absurd and in this irrational situation what option Prometheus unbound had: to sink in the world of nihilism? To murder Jupiter? Or to put an end to his own life? Or think that life is not worth living? He does not do any such sort of thing. What he decides is to raise a rebellion and be a rebel and thus acquire a universally known value. Because all beliefs or universally known values or ideas in one way or other in past were rebellion and through constant efforts they became known and valuable to others. So he rebels against the tyranny of Jupiter through his endurance, and his endurance has created an essence for his existence. He exists, he suffers day and night, pain is everywhere yet he calls himself Unbound because he thinks that living a life and then giving a meaning to life and creating a place for himself in black wintry space is his task, is his responsibility not of Jupiter or of any tyrant. Thus, he has become a rebel having a feeling that he is right. In this regard the opinion of Carlos Baker in his notorious essay "the Heart of cosmos: Prometheus Unbound", stands well justified when he said: "Shelley's drama provides poetic affirmation for his belief in a kind of optimism in

which we are our own gods". This view of carols Baker about Shelley's Prometheus Unbound reminds us of Sisyphus who was condemned to eternity of futile and hopeless work. Sisyphus keeps rolling stone up the mountain to find it rolling back to the valley. Apparently his effort and his strength are hopeless yet he is determined to do. It is this determination of Sisyphus which silenced the gods because his determination is a rebel which through his consciousness of his torments and its hopelessness has made Sisyphus superior. His constant rolling of the stone up the mountain is a kind of rebel; he is happy in that work and his happiness negates the punishment thus becoming a challenge to those who have imposed this punishment on him, the constant effort of Sisyphus has become more valuable universally than those gods who imposed this punishment on him. This plight of Prometheus unbound also reminds us of Antoine Roquentin, a character in Nausea a novel by Jean Paul Sartre (1949). Antoine Roquentin is found living in a city known as Bounville, where he has gone to do research on the Marquis de Rollebon who was a French aristocrat during the times of French revolution. For ten years he keeps himself busy in research and finally gets the feeling of nausea. This nausea gives him a feeling that he is no more Antoine Roquentin rather when he stands in front of the mirror he finds Marquis de Rollebon in him, and feels that Rollebon is alive. He in fact realizes that he had been using Rollebon and the past to justify his own existence. So after knowing this truth, he resolves to free himself from the past by embracing his existence in the present. In the same way Prometheus unbound also realizes that for three thousand years he had been fighting with Jupiter only and kept spending his time in cursing him to utmost abject misery and horror, and kept expecting his kingdom being overthrown one day. But with the passage of time after some pondering he becomes wise and decides that his own individual self is more important than the existence of Jupiter. Thus he forgets what hateful words he uttered and what kind of torments Jupiter has given to him. He like Sisyphus keeps standing happy in black wintry space and as such his happiness negates the punishment of Jupiter who, by looking at satisfactory attitude of Prometheus Unbound, sends more and more furies to torture Prometheus. Jupiter even being all in all gets jealous of Prometheus and cannot withstand the

optimistic behavior of Prometheus in black wintry space where there is no hope and sign of life. Continuing the flow of above comparative tone we also find that, like Antoine Roquentin in Nausea (1949), Prometheus has also realized that for three thousand years he just kept thinking about Jupiter and his fall. What did he do for himself? How much he thought about himself? What purpose or meaning he tried to give to his self? What rebel he raised against the tyranny of Jupiter? It is this self-analysis of Prometheus which leads him to a certain intellectual and moral regeneration and transformation.

### **Intellectual and moral transformation of Prometheus Unbound:**

Disdain! Ah no! I pity thee. What ruin will hunt thee undefended through wide Heaven!

How will thy soul, cloven to its depth with terror.

Gape like a hell within! I speak in grief,

Not exultation, for I hate no more, As then ere misery made me wise. (Act: I.lines.51-55)

Prometheus Unbound after three thousand years of suffering has forgotten his hateful words and asks to hear them once more. The curse he utters calls for Jupiter to sink to even deeper levels of depravity, to exceed the utmost extremes of violent tyranny imaginable, to then perceive himself clearly for the first time, and to self-destruct in abject horror at that perception. Prometheus cannot reconcile the hateful prophecy he uttered long ago with his sense of self. As is clear from the following lines:

It doth repent me: words are quick and vain;

Grief for a while is blind, and so was mine.

I wish no living thing to suffer pain.(Act: 1, lines.301-305)

Pain and misery for three thousand years has transformed the perception and emotion of Prometheus Unbound. He will no longer enact violence even against his greatest enemy. He does not hate anymore violent and senselessly self-destructing universe of Jupiter. Prometheus transcends the cycle of violence and hatred. He has purified his soul from all base feelings of hate, revenge, and disdain and in spite of so much torture he pities Jupiter, and retracts the curse he has cast on him because he realizes that evil breeds evil and in desiring vengeance, his spirit will continue to be enslaved to evil. So, he finally becomes morally and intellectually superior to his arch enemy. As

Mary Shelley remarked that “evil is not inherited in the system of creation, but an accident that might be expelled..... That man could be so perfectionized as to be able to expel evil from his own nature.....” Thus, Prometheus Unbound through the process of self-purification has defeated the tyrannical god, the principle of evil. Shelley also at one place contends that “----- and Prometheus is, in my judgment, a more poetical character than Satan, because in addition to courage, and majesty and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force, he is susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandizement which in the hero of Paradise lost, interfere with the interest-----

Prometheus is, as it were, the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends”. Prometheus through his suffering has undergone a change and believes that it is the want of true love, hope and faith which has brought the race of mankind to such a sorry pass where one man does not mind sucking the blood of another man and starts representing the bestial elements more than human qualities. And this regeneration of Prometheus unbound also reminds us of a situation in the Plague by Camus (1947), a world famous existentialist writer, who in his above novel takes us to an Algerian city known as Oran which is hit by an epidemic. The disease is caused by death of rats. The whole city is segregated from the rest of the world and the inhabitants are not allowed to move out of the city and resultantly violence and looting breaks out. In such plight all the citizens after some resistance surrender themselves to the luck and just keep living their lives as if they are ready to be the next victim of the plague. But, in this city of Oran there is Dr. Bernard Rieux, who is of different thought and remains optimistic, making every possible effort as to fight the plague and his constant effort finally brings the success; and he emerges as the hero. Dr. Bernard Rieux, in fact, shows that we do not live in a rational universe rather it is an irrational universe where we have to create a rational meaning for our life. We are like Sisyphus who keeps rolling the stone up the mountain to see it coming down again which means he is doing the hopeless, but the greatness of the Sisyphus is his consciousness of torments and his constant effort

in the face of hopelessness. Which shows that he created a new life from the situation in which he was thrown and became a hero, known and valuable in the eyes of those who consider plague or rolling of stone as punishment for their sins. In the same way Prometheus Unbound also takes the responsibility of his life, actions and decisions without blaming any external force or authority. And this optimistic view of Shelley’s hero is beautifully justified by Ghadeer Al-Hassan and Shadi Neimneh when they in their research article contended that “it is a new Eden illuminated by Prometheus’s fire , which enables man to master the world and govern himself without relying on some external forces” (2012,p.24). Thus, in the wake of Prometheus’s existentialist effort he comes across certain new forces which are as; Love, Hope, and Faith. And these forces in his new found world serve as his best principles.

### (3) New principles of Prometheus Unbound

We come from the mind of human kind  
Which was late so dusk, and obscene, and blind  
Now it’s an ocean

Of clear emotion

A heaven serene and mighty (Act: IV, lines.90-95)

Prometheus after moral and intellectual transformation considers above forces to be the essential ingredients to his Prometheus revolution. He believes that standing erect and steadfast in the face of unimaginable tortures and sufferings is equal to creating an identity, a public value and a name and purpose to your existence. For which he has made company with Love, Hope and Faith, he sees these three qualities as his weapons against the seemingly unending monopoly of Jupiter which stands as a representation of evil forces, thwarting the positive movement of a human soul. From the new principles of Prometheus: to have the company of Love, Hope and Faith rather than to compromise with evil force, we are basically reminded of one existentialist thought, i.e. the freedom of the will and human power to do or not to do as absolutely obvious; that is choices, decisions and actions are an individual’s own responsibility by taking of which he defines, and creates the self what he is and what he wants to be. So, the decisions and choices of Prometheus unbound for love, hope and faith in the time of crisis where he is surrounded by threatening power

of evil forces, is nothing but an effort on the part of Prometheus to create a meaning for his existence, to define his self and give an essence to his existence. So, Prometheus unbound through his suffering, endurance cum intellectual regeneration has defined himself and has created an essence which is clear from following lines

Our spoil is won,  
Our task is done,  
We are to dive, or soar, or run;  
Beyond and around,  
Or within the bound  
Which clips the world with darkness round.  
We will pass the eyes  
Of starry skies  
Into the hoar deep to colonize;  
Death, chaos, and night,  
From the sound of our flight,  
Shall flee, like mist from a tempest might.  
And earth, Air, and light,  
And the spirit of might,  
Which drives round the stars in their fiery flight;  
And love, Thought, and Breath,  
The powers that quell Death,  
Where ever we soar shall assemble beneath.  
And our singing shall build  
In the void's loose field  
A world for the spirit of wisdom to wield;  
We will take our plan  
From the new world of men,  
And our work shall be called the promethean. (Act:  
IV.lines.135-155).

From these above lines it seems that Prometheus Unbound has created a meaning out of inherent meaninglessness of life in the absurd world. Now through his rebellion he has created Promethean values which, like all other rebellions in the past, will get converted into a public asset or universally known values or ethics.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, after this whole discussion we just take a little pause and ask one very important question at the end of the day; that is through Prometheus Unbound what sort of change Shelley wanted to bring about in human history? What change! A bloody one? A rowdy one? An atheist one? Or the one by which he wanted to create a change in the long established thoughts of human mind which always kept deviating a thinking mind from the real path? Then one without taking any time would

stand up to say that yes Shelley through his poetic power gave us Prometheus Unbound, a man of rebellion, who being chained to a black wintry space, considers himself free. Who being in shackles of pain and miseries raises the slogan of Love, Hope and Faith. He has love for existence that is, whatever the situation he is in or whatever the situation he is thrown in he enjoys it to the utmost and emerges out of it reborn having a new life and spirit, because he believes that after dusk there comes dawn. He suffers for three thousand years with patience and remains steadfast as if he was seriously working as to find a meaning of his existence, and to give it a purpose it deserved. He created an essence which gave message to others of intellectual light that is we are born with no chains around rather even in never ending pit of darkness one can hope for a ray of life, he further promoted that man by reducing imperfection in his nature can acquire an unbeatable liberty by which the man “masters the world and governs himself, without relying on some external forces”. Thus, summing up, with due reverence to the already existing critical thought with regard to Prometheus Unbound, Shelley's this lyrical drama is an annihilation of the previous world order and the birth of a new thought where moral illness disappears, where truth replaces the hypocrisy, where love and hope reign supreme, where human mind is liberated emotionally and intellectually from the structures of long established hierarchies, customs and ignorance. It is a world where Prometheus Unbound boldly pronounces “I think therefore I am” (Rene Descartes, 1641.Meditation: II).

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