

B.A (English - Hons)

Part - II

Paper - IV

Topic :- Swift as a Satirist

Satire may be defined as the holding to ridicule some human folly, weakness or vice or the lampooning of individuals. The essence of satire is the perception of incongruity between what is and what ought to be, between the real and the ideal. A satirist is an ideal who is conscious of this discrepancy between the actual and the ideal and so seeks to improve the 'actual' by exposing its weakness. A satirist may laugh at others merely for his personal gratification, merely to satisfy his malice, but more usually he does so for reforming the corruptions of the age. The laughter may be bitter and sardonic or it may be mild and gentle. The satire may be general, it may be aimed at some particular section or institution of society or even at the whole of mankind - or it may be personal and the satirist may merely make fun of some personal enemy against whom he has some grudge.

Swift is one of the greatest writers of English prose. He is known as the prince of English satirists. In the Preface to 'The Battle of the Books', Swift admits that "Satire is a sort of glass, where in beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own: which is the chief reason for that kind reception it meets within the world, and that so

Very few are offended with it.'

Jonathan Swift is a great satirist. In his satires he lashes with rare zeal at all kinds of aberrations and departures from the normal. Every kind of affectation, hypocrisy, sham, cant, folly, pretension etc. comes under his lash. Thus in a 'Tale of a Tub' he lashes at the follies and corruptions of religion and in the 'Battle of the Books', it is the literary affectations and hypocrisy that come under his lash. In the Gulliver's Travels he strips the whole of humanity with a mad glee and shows that man is a filthy creature filled all over with excrements. Swift himself tells in one of his letters, his aims in writing satires was 'to wax the world' rather than to entertain it.

Swift uses all the known stylistic devices, allegory, digression, fable, irony etc. as instruments of his satire. He knew that satire conveyed indirectly is more effective than the direct one, and so often invests it with a double meaning. An apparently interesting tale is narrated, and the real meaning are hidden beneath it in the garb of allegory. In the 'Tale of a Tub' the story of the three brothers dividing their father's coat is a brilliant allegorical cloak to hide the satire on religious intolerance and pretention. In 'Battle of Books' there is a long digression in the form of the allegory of the spider and the bee, which is an indictment of the literary practices of the moderns who depend upon themselves entirely for their productions and so spin out only cobwebs. The book ends with the humorous Wotton-Bentley episode in which the two friends are transfixed by a lance thrown by Boyle.

An interesting story of the war between two types of books

has been narrated and the narration is fascinating, but in reality it is all an exposition of the folly and pretention of the moderns who considered themselves superior to the ancients. The whole of the Gulliver's Tale is a story with a double meaning. Swift is a master of the art of story telling and it is a measure of his greatness that the greatest of the children's classics is also one of the greatest and bitterest satires in the language.

Irony is another important weapon of satire in the armoury of Jonathan Swift. Irony may be defined as the use of language with an opposite or at least different tendency. Thus, in the Battle of the Books, Swift does not tell us that Bentley, the keeper of the King's Library, was very rude to Boyle. Rather he praises him for his courtesy and writes; "The guardian of the regal library, a person of great valour, but chiefly renowned for his humanity, had been a fierce champion of the moderns", etc. In the Gulliver's Travels every aspect of English life, English professions, politics, religion, habits, institutions has been ironically treated. Thus the religious conflicts of the day are obliquely glanced at in the quarrel between the big-endians and the small endians. In the earlier works, Swift's irony is light and playful, but by the end of the Gulliver's Travels, in the Yahoo part of it, it becomes bitter and sardonic. Swift's best satire is Gulliver's Travels, which is on its face a book of travels to strange lands of pygmies, giants, and horses. Swift's purpose was to expose the vices and follies of mankind by ridiculing them. Man is reduced to the shortness of the Lilliputians, or magnified in to the gross Brobdingnagians, or contrasted with the equine virtues of the Houyhnhnms. The effectiveness of such satire depends on the invention with which

these strange worlds are made plausible, and the precision with which the irony makes evident the likeness, between the real world and the imaginary.

So successful was Swift's invention that, ever since the book was published, children have read the voyages to Lilliput and Brobdingnag as fairy stories, without worrying about the satire. So effective is the irony that Gulliver's Travels remains one of the most appalling exposures of human weakness.

Thus, the works of Swift's satire and its quality make him undoubtedly the prince of English satirists.