

**POPE THE MAN AND POPE THE SATIRIST
AS REVEALED IN AN EPISTLE TO DR. ARBUTHNOT
(An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot as a key to the understanding of Pope the man and Pope the artist.)**

Sri Lalit Kumar Deo, Assistant Professor

Deoghar College, Deoghar, SKMU, Dumka

An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot is the most autobiographical of all Pope's poetic composition, a kind of Apologia pro vita sua. It is a brilliant piece of satire combined with autobiography, a poem made of many fragments welded into a coherent whole. It provides us with a key to the understanding of pope the man and pope the artist.

Leslie Stephen characterized the poem in this way: "To enjoy Pope, first learn An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot by heart." Within just 400 lines, he has squeezed in more of his thoughts and feelings than would normally be found in an autobiography. The poem was actually written in his self – defence against his enemies who subjected him and his writings to bitter and merciless criticism, sparing neither his family nor his physical deformities. In it he vindicates his own character, defends his parents and exposes those who in some way or other, were instrumental in stigmatizing his character, his morals and his family. But the picture that he presents of himself in self-defence is so exaggerated, so deceptive and misleading that it cannot be accepted by most of his readers. He exaggerated his merits and protests too much about the perfection of his own character. The poem, therefore, becomes a strange mixture of honesty and hypocrisy. It presents the picture of pope not as he was but as he wanted others to see him. In it Pope indulges in self-laudation by depicting himself above ambition, greed, fashion and servility.

He calls himself -

Not fortune's worshipper, nor fashion's fool

Not Lucre's madman, nor ambition's tool

Nor proud, nor servile;

Then he speaks of his many ways, and says - „That if he pleased, he pleased by many ways“ It seems strange and astonishing for a poet of such an irritable temperament to have many ways. His merciless attack on Philip and Hervey in this poem gives lie to this assertion. He calls sporus (Lord Hervey) a bug with gilded wings, a painted child of dirt that stinks and stings, a toad and finally a reptile. In short he presents him as evil incarnate, a true satanic figure. In his indignant, scurrilous, malicious and bitter attack on this writer, Pope rejects all the demands of politeness and social discretion. It falsifies his claim to be called a harmless and innocent man.

I sometimes think about the reason so many were keen to abuse such a harmless man? It can be acknowledged that having an intense sensitivity isn't ideal for a person in public service. A person who doesn't protect themselves from trouble in the competition will feel every pain and be even more upset if they respond with anger.

One cannot deny that if we look at Pope's character through literature, it often appears ravaged by contradictions and his effort to hide his personal facts and facts about his parentage along with editing his letters only adds to the difficulty of understanding the truth. It is really clear that his concerns and daily moods were impacted a great deal by his old age and the many insults from those who opposed him. A lot of this can explain his sensitivity to being insulted and his harsh approach when making or reacting to attacks. Presenting a picture of Pope's life Albert aptly observes " His life was a series of skirmishes with rivals for poetic fame , many of whom , though beneath his contempt , he treated with a coarseness and violence , which though typical of their age , is none the less objectionable „". As all biographical records show that Pope, as a result of his supersensitiveness to criticism indulged in better and merciless attack on his enemies and even on some harmless persons whom he believed to cherish designs against him. Can such a man have a lawful claim to be called a harmless man?

Again his claim to be a perfect man above flattery or sycophancy affects like a mere pretention. How can a poet, who is super sensitive to references made of him by others and who himself indulges in self-praise, keep himself aloof from flattery?

There is however, some truth and sincerity in his claim to be a friend in distress. Again there is some sincerity in the final section of the poem in which he displays his filial devotion and defends his parents. Pope was given to affection as doubt, but there is no affection in his lines on his parents, for all witnesses testify to his great respect for his father and the tender care he had for his widowed mother. No one can possibly doubt his sincerity when he expresses his desire in the following words;

Me, let the tenders office long engage

To rock the cradle of reposing Age

With lenient arts extend a mother's breath?

Make languor smile, and smooth the bed of death.

Commenting on the above lines Leslie Stephen aptly says; „ If there are any sort of lines more tender or gracefully written, I do not know where they are; and yet even so, I am happy not to be reminded of the sad note that poor Mrs. Pope's death had taken place two years before the poem was written, being as it never happened so near to her, for its style was that of dramatic tenderness.

Thus, there is a strange mixture of both honesty and hypocrisy in whatever Pope says in his self-defence in this poem. As in all the poems where Pope is autobiographical he does no doubt protest too much about the perfection of his own character, but that is permissible only a fool washes his own dirty linen in public when allowance has been made for some pardonable exaggeration, it must be admitted that Pope has drawn a recognisable self-portrait.

But if we pay attention only to the self-portrait, we shall miss an even more important point to be noted in this poem. The „I“ of the poem is not only Alexander Pope; he is also the representative of all the great satirists of past like Horace and Juvenal. He has tried to show what the character of an ideal satirist ought to be. With this reason he has liked to represent himself as an honest man, concerned to see the depravity of the times and anxious to enlist the help of other honest man in preventing standards from stepping any further. He defends his own satirical writings that have often been denounced as spiteful and inhuman, and at the same shatters the popular conception of the satirist as a malevolent man and of satire as an inferior work of art. He makes an apologia for his whole career and defends himself against poetasters, critics and personal enemies whole expressing his affection for his parents and friends, especially for Dr. Arbuthnot who was learned, witty and good. He represents himself as an honest man among the knaves, so plagued by their attacks that at last he is forced to reply while indicating his own character and justifying his own satire writings, he goes on to justify satirical for a man of peace. He asserts that it is not spiteful or inhuman to slap a mosquito or beat off a mad dog. A great satirist; according to him, is an honest man, an ingenuous fellow, soft by nature. He suffers fools with great patience and restraint, but when stung beyond endurance, he is forced to cry out. We may enquire how faithfully Pope's poetical character resembles his real character, but we must take care not to overlook the fact that Pope's picture of himself is more general than particular. In this connection R.A Bower aptly remarks, "An epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot is the life of a poet, not of an individual poet, but the epitome of a satirist's career as Pope saw it." In this way a universal slant is sought to be given by the poet to some aspects of his personal life. The speaker of the poem is more a literary persona than particular individual Pope. When Pope wrote „An epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot, the lines in the final section of the poem, in which he sets out his relationship with his mother, were no longer applicable. Pope's picture of himself in this fiction may seem to have a taint of dramatic affection, but we must take care not to ignore the fact that the poet has included this section for its literary truth and not for its literal truth. He tries to provide a positive background against which to expose the deficiencies of these being satirised. The personal affection and filial devotion he is portraying is the proper antithesis for the coldness and emptiness of such figures as Sporus and Bufo. Therefore, Pope's picture of himself may or may not be literally accurate, but it is artistically significant. It is in this way that we can defend the poet's personal picture from the charge of self-aggrandisement, affection and hypocrisy.

There is no denying the fact that by religion and physical deformity a social outcast, Pope saw literature as his only way to greatness. For it, and for poetry in particular that he lived everything he wrote was stamped with the joy of creation and his desire for artistic perfection. Therefore, it is as an artist that he should be finally judged.

Let us now see what light this epistle throws on Pope the satirist and the artist. There is no denying the fact this epistle is a pastiche, incorporating several fragments written at various times for various occasion. The fragmentary origin of the poem is indeed apparent, but the greatness of the Pope the artist lies in welding his fragments into a coherent whole. A.C ward aptly calls it „one of the most finished of all Pope“s poetic compositions“. There is some truth in A.C ward“s observation which no sensible reader can possibly deny. The poem has a delightful rhythmic structure, a great verbal beauty with touches of deep feeling which are really moving. On it the poet moves from one subject to another with remarkable ease, but the inner continuity is preserved throughout.

It highlights something about Pope's approach and conduct when he wrote his satires. Since Pope's satire is mixed with so much kindness and anger, it is tough to make a general comment on his satirical approach. F.R Leavis believes, „one can easily comment on how Dryden satirizes, but Pope's way of satire is more complicated and hard to express. It's noticeable that almost every Pope book tends to tell its story in a special way.

An epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot will reveal the truth of this observation. In this poem we notice sudden and swift changes in the method and manner of satirical portraiture, so much so that each satirical portrait demands a special approach.

Let us take only two important satirical portraits from this epistle to see the remarkable change in the method and manner of satirical portrait;

The portrait of Atticus (i.e. Addition) and that of Sporus, i.e Hervey. The portrait of addition in the Atticus passage may be unfair, but it is pre-eminently polite.

F.R Leavis aptly observes “In this Atticus passage there is no apparent animus; Pope is saying what he might have said in any company, provided Addition were not present. As an account of addition the character may be unfair, but for us it is a piece of observation.” Although the famous Atticus passage was written as a satire on a specific person but it turned out to be an eternal type of a jealous man of letters. It is more than the portrait of an individual. It becomes a satire on insincerity, hypocrisy, deceptive friendship, Inkewarmness and pride. Ian Jack aptly says; “Here Addition becomes Atticus, and what began as an attack on a personal enemy is transformed into an eternal type of the petty jealousy of a man letters „“. While drawing the character of Addition Pope takes both his merits and weakness into account, and skillfully balances his faults against his merit as Dryden did earlier while rendering his attack on Shaftesbury in Absalom and Achitophel. By taking both his merits and weaknesses into account, the poet gives an illusion of impartiality.

But the method and manners of Pope's satire suddenly changes in the sporus passage in which the character of Lord Hervey has been bitterly and mercilessly attacked by Pope. In this indignant, scurrilous, malicious and bitter satire against Hervey Pope seems to be actually screaming with malignant fury. He calls sporus, i.e. Hervey a gilded bug that stinks and stings; a painted child of dirt, a fawning spaniel. In a state of malignant fury he says;

„Yet let me flap this bug with gilded wings, This painted child of dirt that stinks and stings.“

The poet's fury mounts up still further. Therefore, He goes to the extent of calling him an ugly, filth-spitting toad an importunate malicious today like Satan „Close at the ears of Eve“, and finally a snake Stan on his belly in the dirt. Thus, this passage offers a sharp contrast with The Atticus passage which is pre-eminently polite commenting on

Pope's bitter satire in the sporus passage, F.R Leavis aptly says;

“It is frankly an indulgence in personal feeling, the effect depending upon a rejection of all the demands of politeness and discretion - for the time is not that of polite society but of the intimate tete-a-tete.”

But this passage has a remarkable poetic beauty which cannot possibly be ignored. Its beauty lies in a vivacious play of imagery. Commenting on the nature of Pope's imagery, Lord Byren aptly says; “I will show imagery in twenty lines of Pope than in any equal length of quotation in English poetry”. He shows twenty-three images from the portrait of sporus on the poem and declares;

“Now, is there a line of all the passage without the most forcible imagery? Look at the variety at poetry of the passage - at the imagination: there is hardly a line from which painting might not be made and is”

Apart from the vivacious play of images in the whole poem, the Epistle also reveals Pope's masterly use of the heroic couplet. His couplets are characterized by epigrammatic neatness and brilliance. They are well-cut, well-condensed and well-polished. They beautifully reveal the poets meticulous sense of the right word in its right places.

Thus, this poem provides us with a key to the understanding of Pope the man and Pope the satirist as an artist in general. It shows that Pope was as capable of bitter resentment as of warm affection. To the readers he seems to be a bundle of contradictions, a peculiar blending of honesty and hypocrisy of politeness and bitterness. He seems to be an artist about whom the contraries are true. This seems to give the true key to Pope's poetical as well as personal characteristics.

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