

Nature vs. Arts: A study of philosophy of Samuel Johnson

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ABSTRACT

The present paper entitled :Nature VS. Arts : A Study of Philosophy of Samuel Johnson, focuses on the idea of nature and art. Dr. Johnson is a prominent figure in a whole range of English literature. The English poet, critic, essayist and lexicographer, he became famous not only for his writings but also for his forceful stylistics and witty conversation. Herationalises literature and discalls the emotionalism. He revives the rules laid down for the poets by the Greeks and Roman critics. He intelligently applies those theories on literature available at the time. In his critical paper Rambler he spells out the functions and objectives of the poets. He states that basic functions of writer is to highlight morality which are to be Universal therefore it can be said that Johnson believes in writing about species instead of individual. He appreciates Shakespeare because Shakespeare's characters are men not English or Romans. Johnson appreciates him for depicting the basic characteristics of a man which can be found anywhere in the world. Johnson opines that no writer can portray life if he eliminates the fortuitous. The great writers of the past investigated literature and art as social phenomena of importance in the dynamic interrelationship with man's social and moral existence. A thorough understanding of the relationship of art to life is basic comprehensive and Johnson says that Shakespeare follows the rules of life for art. It is life which sets rules for art. Dr. Johnson is of the view that it is the presence of general truth that gives permanence to a work of art. The main purpose of all art is to discover the principles of truth not to imitate nature.

Dr. Samuel Johnson is a prominent figure in the whole range of English literature. Dr. Johnson is an English poet, critic, essayist and lexicographer, he became famous not only for his writings but also for his forceful, stylistic and witty conversation. After William Shakespeare, he is perhaps the best known figure and the most frequently quoted in the English literature. Born on September 18, 1709, at the village of Lichfield in England, Johnson, like Pope, became invalid since his birth. He got scraphula, a tubercular infection in the glands of the neck which made him disabled in an unsound body. Like Pope he had very sound mind and created a history in literature and literary criticism.

Johnson's more permanent didactic poem "The vanity of Human Wishes" was published in 1749. It was his great poem. Although he declared plan to publish a dictionary of the English language yet it could not be completed before 1750. He contributed for *The Rambler* from 1750-52 and in 1753 he had written some articles for *The Adventure*, a prestigious literary magazine. He undertook to contribute a weekly essay, to be entitled *The Idler* to *The Universal Chronicle*. Every week for two years with a few exceptions, he delivered his 'Idler' essay to the printer. In 1765 he wrote *Preface to Shakespeare* which was considered a manifesto of Neo-classical critical credo. The Lives of the English Poets, published in 1781, was the work of his maturity. The work established its author as a critic of higher rank in the whole range of English literature. He states that basic function of writer is to highlight morality which ought to be universal. Therefore, it can be said that Johnson believes in writing about species instead of individual. He appreciates Shakespeare because Shakespeare's characters are men not English or Romans. Johnson appreciates him for depicting the basic characteristics of a man which can be found anywhere in

the world. *Preface to Shakespeare* is a remarkable critical commentary on Shakespeare. He places Shakespeare in literature where no other critic was able to place him. It is he who compelled critics to study Shakespeare by various new angles. Angles provided by Johnson even today are relevant. It will be apt to say that Johnson makes Shakespeare immortal by highlighting Shakespeare's works in a right perspective.

'*The Vanity of Human Wishes*' is more personal than his poem 'London'. It contains deeper emotions because the poet is criticising not one town or one man but human life itself. The title of the poem clearly indicates its subject matter. The poem represents Johnson's religious belief. For him life on this earth is essentially a conflict which gives no comfort but pains and sufferings. Its purpose is to prepare man for the life which is coming. Johnson's philosophy of life takes various shades in the poem. The essence of literature for poetry is life which cannot be changed although there are some dimensions which seem to be different but they are the same.

Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* was published in 1765. The Preface is remarkable for its honesty in recognising Shakespeare's faults, and is remarkable as it defends him against the charge of ignoring Neo-classical unities. All the Neo-classicist were very particular about the rules of writing literature. But Johnson enlarged his attitude about rules. Johnson tries to justify Shakespeare on the ground of nature and common life. Ben Johnson also opines that Shakespeare was not of an age but for all time. The basis of Johnson's high estimate of Shakespeare is that he does not emphasis the qualities of one place or time but concentrates on what men have in common. It is because of his knowledge of general human nature that Shakespeare is able to show in his works

especially in dramas with practical axioms and domestic wisdom. Further Johnson praises Shakespeare's scheme of mixing the comic scenes with the tragic. This mingling of the tragic and comic scenes was condemned by the strict Neo-Classical theory. But Johnson defends Shakespeare's plan by saying that the imitation of general human nature demanded the mingling of comic and tragic because life is both smile and tear.

Johnson has given the vivid description of the lives of poets. Johnson took four years to complete his *Lives of the Poets*. It was published in 1781. It is a historical document of criticism written by the great representation of human life. *The Lives of the Poets* shows Johnson's vigour of judgement as a critic of life and letters at its zenith. Johnson brilliantly displays the common subjects which have been taken from human life. The work has its literary value because it proves to be a work of higher rank. There are many goods saying or you can say general observations which are worth to quote. For example in his 'Life of Cowley' he opines "Language is the dress of though" (p.39) His criticism is based on truth, if there is truth in literary work, the work is good otherwise it has no value at all.

The planning of the work is marvellous. Johnson divides every life into three parts. In the first part, he begins with severely chronological account of the poet's life – ancestry, birth education and so on. This part is generally the largest section. In the second part he gives brief character of the poet – his appearance and temperament. The third part is purely critical and usually of middling length. Individually every life of a poet is a biography in miniature which gives glimpses of poet's life. Moreover as a picture of eighteenth century literary life, it is incomparable. As a literary critic his best lives are those of John Dryden and Alexander Pope. Johnson himself regarded his 'Life of Cowley' as the best because it contains a dissertation on the metaphysical poets and poetry. Dryden and Pope were the poets whom he admired much for their technical achievements. They are regarded good masters of the art of versification. Johnson was not fair in the judgement of John Milton and Thomas Grey. Milton's *Lycidas* and Gray's *Odes* have provoked much more severe criticism of his critical standards.

Johnson's works appear to be influenced by Greek and Roman critics. The influence can also be traced in his works of his contemporary critics and writers. Pope, Dryden and Cowley influenced Johnson's writings not only critical but also creative directly. However Johnson follows Aristotle in the method of representation. Representation in literature must be based on truth, general truth and at the same time it should instruct us by pleasing. He is of the view that it is the presence of general truth that gives permanence to a work of art. He declares "Nothing can please many and please long but just representations of general nature." (p.69) He points out in *Rasselas* that poet's sole function is to examine species not individual. He writes "the business of a poet is to examine, not the individual but the species, to mark general properties and large appearances." (p.23) Thus Johnson widens the scope of a poet and does not limit it.

Johnson declares that Shakespeare is a great poet of nature because he represents the common stuff of life in his writings. 'Preface to Shakespeare' speaks the bundle of philosophy of life. In Preface to Shakespeare, Johnson rightly observes that Shakespeare is, above all writers. Johnson, therefore appreciates Shakespeare for portraying common stuff in life in his plays which makes him a universal and permanent poet of the world. The above mentioned statement throws light on Johnson's philosophy of literature. At first, it reveals the truth that literature is a mirror of life i.e. the poet takes his subject matter for his composition from life. It is life which is another form of nature. Life is called human nature also.

To portray the life of common people, Johnson calls this common passion or real passion general nature. Similarly Shakespeare is one who represents common life of common people. Shakespeare depicts men and not kings and queens, princes and princesses who have common follies. Similarly a modern novelist and critic Virginia Woolf also believes that life is not arranged. She opines, "Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged, life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end." (p.88)

Johnson says that the main purpose of all art is to discover the principles of truth not to imitate nature. These principles which are embedded in imperfect nature is the destination of art, Shaftesbury's view of art is the platonic view according to him all beauty is truth. True features make the beauty of a face. Beauty and grace cannot be achieved by nature alone but only by art and knowledge. He writes: "The idea of order existed in the mind, and the mind was 'in nature' in the sense that it was part of the great chain of being. Yet if man looked around him he could see that nature, in the sense of the material world, was untidy and imperfect, and it was difficult to understand the source of an idea which was not apparent in nature." (p.93)

Johnson opines that no writer can portray life if he eliminates the fortuitous. The great writers of the past investigated literature and art as social phenomena of importance in the dynamic interrelationship with man's social and moral existence. A thorough understanding of the relationship of art to life is basic comprehensive and Johnson says that Shakespeare follows the rules of life for art. It is life which sets rules for art. The writer or a poet only selects scenes of human life which please him and compel his aesthetic sense to reproduce an exact picture of his ideas and feelings. Johnson as a stoic, declares that there is in the world little to be enjoyed and a lot to be endured. It is a stoic way of life. Shakespeare also follows Epicurean when he allows things to happen on the stage, a big stage that is life. So he does not separate pain and gain, sorrow and happiness from life.

There is inter-relationship between art and nature. They are complementary to each other. Man also plays an important role in the process of representation of nature. In fact, man is the prominent part of this process. He takes everything from nature. And with the help of his power of imagination he gives

new shade. In order to create a work of art, he feels that this world is not useless and purposeless. His aim of living on the earth is to get pleasure which leads to a moral life. It is the morality which is the balance scale for a poet or a critic. That is why Johnson says that there is no difference between man and

nature, and nature and man. The basic nature never changes. He finds the human nature same from China to Peru. In this regard, the mutual relationship between art and nature is quite complex.

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