RESEARCH REVIEW JOURNALS
Volume-04
Issue-06
June-2019

ISSN: 2455-3085 (Online)
RESEARCH REVIEW International Journal of Multidisciplinary
www.rrjournals.com[UGC Listed Journal]

Samuel Butler's Satirical Presentation of the Victorian Age

Dr. Mrityunjay Kumar

Assistant Teacher, Middle School Mednidih, Mohanpur, Deoghar (India)

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History
Published Online: 12 June 2019

Keywords
Samuel Butler, satire, bourgeois, Erewhon, The Way of All Flesh.

***Corresponding Author**
Email: mrityunjaycalling[at]gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Satire was unfurling its wings for higher flights, and even developing new ones in self-complacent and industrially dominated Victorian times. The boldest rebel and the harshest critic of the Victorian age, Samuel Butler (1835-1902) added a new dimension to this art by his cheerfulness, unorthodoxy, irreverence towards the social, ecclesiastical and educational institutions of the age. Though he often seems wayward and paradoxical, he stood for the ideals of humanism. He was decidedly a modern thinker applying his common sense to point out the deficiencies of the civilization of Europe. The planted errors and absurdities in the English life made him react vehemently. Butler as a true satirist carried the assault into the citadel of entrenched respectability. Modern civilization, parental tyranny, the worship of machinery, orthodox beliefs and religious ideologies, uncongenial family atmosphere, ruthless exploitation of hypocritical church institutions, the treatment of crime and sickness were aspects of contemporary society which Butler dealt and satirized with shrewd and penetrating irony.

1. Society and Literary Artist

Since the dawn of human civilization both society and literature have been inseparable from each other. Literature cannot sustain without society, likewise society cannot be unnoticed in literary works in one way or the other. Literary artists are not apart from society; rather a part of the society. Society, in every age, can never be a perfect one. Human beings, too, can never be perfect. The imperfection and the inconsistencies in every walk of life and in every one characterize all the institutions and establishments. A realistic writer comes to grip with these deteriorating predicaments with an edifying zeal.

A creative writer reacts to the contemporary situations in many ways. The medium may be either poetic or prosaic. The spirit of revolt can be registered in any literary genre. As the sole purpose of this writing is corrective, the sole method adopted in any medium may be comic, humorous, or satiric.

2. What is a Satire?

Satire can be described as a literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards it attitudes of amusements, contempt, scorn or indignation. It is a comical piece of writing in which the author attacks vehemently some silly ideas, behavior, foolishness, corruption of an individual or society by means of his wit, humor, irony, exaggeration or ridicule. Its lack of tolerance for folly or human imperfection distinguishes it from other literary genre. Satire actually serves as a mediator between two perceptions- the disillusioned perception of man as he actually is, and the ideal perception, or, vision of man as he ought to be. A satirist is nearly a man who is abnormally sensitive to the gulf between what might be and what actually is. The underlying motive of a satirist is to restore balance, to correct folly, to correct or dissuade the wrongdoer and ultimately to improve humanity. Deliberately some authors have chosen satire as their instrument to unmask the follies of their contemporary society. Jonathan Swift in the preface to *The Battle of Books* (1704) writes,

> "Satire is a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own, which is the chief reason for that kind of reception it meets in the world, and that so very few are offended with it."

The most important of all the satirist's weapons is his ability to amuse and entertain the reader. Without this satire becomes merely tedious and bad tempered. The satirical method employs two weapons to attack on the wickedness and foolishness of mankind. The simplest method is invective, defined in dictionary as 'a violent attack in words'. It is the most direct of satirist's weapons. Irony is less direct, but no less effective. Irony is defined as 'the expression of one's meaning by language of opposite or different tendency, especially the adoption of another's view or tone'. Butler's case as a satirist is very complex one. Kingsley Amis puts it so well:-

> "Butler's life came to be built on saying one thing, meaning another, and doing a third".

3. Samuel Butler as an iconoclast

Samuel Butler was an iconoclast. An expert in demolition, he was wholly successful in demolishing the repressive Low Church, middle class Victorian family. The modern world hears much of Samuel Butler the iconoclast. It is indeed upon his iconoclasm that his reputation mainly rests. It was Samuel Butler who first laughed at the gods of Victorian England; it was Samuel Butler who thawed that first tiny whole in the icy crust of Victorian morality, through which were soon to pour the floods of Shavian invective; it was Samuel Butler who first took the portentous lay figure of Victorian complacency by the throat and shook it until the stuffing came out. Butler's surgical operation of the Darwin's theory gave birth to the twentieth century theory of 'creative evolution'.

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It is quite clear that an aspect of the Victorian age- the opposite of stability – is strikingly expressed in Butler's writing. He is, even to a casual glance, novelist of disintegration, rebel and critic, crying out against the sanctities and ethics of the Victorian bourgeois world.

4. Samuel Butler and Victorian Age

Samuel Butler was born in a typical family of the comfortable middle classes of the Victorian epoch. The orthodoxy and spotless respectability of the family in the estimations of the other constituted the backbone of the English social system. He detested the system of education prevalent in the school and college where he studied. From his boyhood onwards he was in silent and then open revolt against a social order and the discipline imposed by one's family as well as one's society.

Butler felt that Victorian age had been undermined by a form of religious mania, in response to the awesome changes in society and technology. Novelists before Butler, such as George Eliot, had undermined religion, and the most popular novelist of the era, Charles Dickens had little to say about the benefits of organized faith. But Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* aggressively portrayed religion as sustaining Victorian hypocrisy. No writer in the latter half of the nineteenth century articulates social radicalism better than Butler or illustrates better the reaction against early Victorian values. As with John Stuart Mill in the generation before him – and Bentham in the generation before Mill- he advanced secularization in the contemporary mind, stripping away religious bigotries, prejudices and superstitions seen as a brake on progress. However, whereas the utilitarians used rationalism to combat God, Butler used a mixture of bitter satire and hostility. His deconstruction and demolition of the Victorian religious mindset was effective, but not entirely rational, which was largely true of the other aspects of Butler's life and character. He was deeply cynical, including about himself. Butler was a novelist of disintegration, a rebel and a critic waging a war against the sanctities and morals, rigid and cruel mentality of the clerical Victorian bourgeois world.

5. Samuel Butler's satirical Presentation of the Victorian Age

Butler represents in his works the various virtue and vices of the Victorian society. His works hold a person or society to ridicule the foolishness and wickedness of received ideas or customs expressing false and hypocritical pretentions. Modern civilization, parental tyranny, the worship of machinery, orthodox beliefs and religious ideologies, uncongenial family atmosphere, ruthless exploitation of hypocritical church institutions, the treatment of crime and sickness were aspects of contemporary society which Butler dealt and satirized with shrewd and penetrating irony.

Butler's best known books *Erewhon , Erewhon Revisited, and The Way of All Flesh* are outstanding as satirical manifesto of modern ideals in orthodox personal relationships. Butler's criticism of the Victorian society is based on his keen observation of the nineteenth century. He makes his criticism from his personal experiences in the cruel clerical family where he had a wretched boyhood under the almost crushing weight of parental expectations. Butler's thought was shaped by his rebellion against the hidebound orthodoxy of his clerical forefathers and the ferment of mid-nineteenth century scientific thought and religious revaluation. Butler's real enemy was never religion but only the cant, the self-righteousness and the hypocrisy with which a materialistic generation masked its worship of the idol of respectability.

Erewhon (anagram of Nowhere) is a satirical utopia placed in a remote part of New Zealand. It is a satire on European civilization. The hypocrisy of bourgeois morality is unmasked in this book. It is a telling satire on contemporary society. The most remarkable features of the land are the reversal of the roles of disease and crime. Disease was considered immoral and people suffering from physical ailments were stigmatized and punished for a condition they could not help. Crime, on the other hand, was regarded as a disease and criminals were blamed for factors beyond their control. The novel is a call for replacement of deterrent or retributive punishment by rehabilitation and a medical model. It was actually an attempt to popularize the attack on free will and deterrence and to propagandize for new discretionary penology.

Erewhonians revolted against machines. The machines had started to develop minds and wills of their own. There had been a revolution and a general destruction of all kinds of machinery. The condition of law-courts was peculiar and the education system was also different. The Erewhonians Musical Banks were caricatures of the English churches. *Erewhon* is an interesting book in which we come across a vast range of ideas, practices and customs of the Victorian England being ironically attacked by Samuel Butler.

The Way of All Flesh, published posthumously, is Butler's masterpiece. It is an attempt to explain an application of the theory of heredity. Much autobiographical reminiscence went into the making of the story of the house of Pontifex and most of Butler's ideas on life. Butler directs his satire principally at the tyranny of parental authority and incidentally at clerical discipline. The tyranny exercised by father on son is traced through several generations of the Pontifex family. This satire is a vindication of free will against Darwinian determinism, and an influencing attack on the shams and hypocrisy of Victorian family life. The motive- force behind the novel is to attack shams, to strike at the darling sanctities of the Victorian bourgeoisie. Butler's bold and righteous indignation against the cant of conventional bourgeois life gives this novel its unique and exhilarating flavor.

6. Conclusion

During Victorian era one was either a religionist or a Darwinian, but Samuel Butler was neither. He riddled the pretensions of both religion and science. He perceived what we are beginning to perceive today that science could not be the spiritual hope of the world. He saw that scientific atheism and the mechanization of life were leading to an abyss of despair, a despair that no scientifically minded person then foresaw, but which is expressed by many writers today.

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An acute and the original thinker upon social problems, Butler ranks as the greatest prose satirist since Swift. Shams and hypocrisies of all kinds whether religious, social or political , he exposed with a fearless honesty and a humour which often turns into the most biting satire. He considered himself to be primarily a thinker, but the artistic qualities of *The Way of All Flesh* are sufficient to assure him of fame when the views he expounded have all been abandoned or disproved, or absorbed as everyday commonplaces.

Artists are members of a wonderful society, a brotherhood vowed to the maintenance of their faith against the foolish business of the world. Great artists force this faith upon the world: others charm the World into listening, and others again keep the society informed as to what the world is about. These last are not the least of the brothers and among them must be counted Samuel Butler.

Butler, as a satirist and a revolutionary figure, may well be placed into the pantheon of modern thinkers and philosophers engaged in the study of the march of human civilization.

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