

SELECTIONS IN ENGLISH PROSE: A CRITICAL STUDY

Deepawali Joshi

Contract Faculty (English)
M.B.P.G. College, Haldwani,
Nainital (U.K.)

In western literary tradition one could find the “germs” of the “essay” in Plato, Cicero, Seneca and Plutarch respectively. Never-the-less, one has to wait till the sixteenth century to see the emergence of the genre “essay” as it is known in modern times. The credit of initiating and innovating authentic literary essay goes to the French writer Montaigne, who is known to have taken pride in declaring that he himself is the main subject of his essays. He made his prose composition a vehicle of self-expression or self-portraiture. In England Sir Francis Bacon is acknowledged to have transplanted the genre “essay” approximately 20 years after Montaigne. By common consensus, Bacon is called ‘the father of English essays’. However, some critics subscribe to the view that English essay took a wrong turn in Baconian practice. By composing impersonal, objective and subject-focused essays he is believed to have moved essay –writing on a divergent track.

A reader may broadly perceive a work of literature a fusion or interface of the two aspects: what is said and how that something is said. The former statement means the content or subject matter and the latter to that of the form, style and manner of presenting that subject, more precisely, the expression side of literature.

Prasad has recounted two ways of enjoying a work of literature. He says, “Literature – poetry, drama and fiction –can be enjoyed in two ways: haphazardly as a lay man enjoys it, and methodically as a trained man does. In the one case the impression of its worth is vague, in the other it is fully accounted for “(An Introduction to English Criticism)”. Apparently, the second method, which Prasad prescribes the approach of an ideal reader leading her/him to realize the potencies of a work of literature and gain thereby, aesthetic pleasure. This literary enterprise of reading, in popular expression, becomes a sort of “adventure of a soul among master pieces”.

In this research paper, accordingly 7 essays have randomly been selected from the H.N.B.G.U., publication entitled Selections in English Prose, prescribed for B.A I in partial fulfillment of the requirement of three years Bachelor degree course in Arts. The essays so chosen are as under :

1. Sir Francis Bacon : OF Love
2. Joseph Addison : Sir Roger at Church
3. Richard Steele: Art of Conversation
4. Samuel Johnson : Praises of Solitude
5. Oliver Goldsmith : National Prejudice
6. R.L. Stevenson: El Dorado
- 7..R.K.Narayan : A Snake in the Grass

As per design of the study, in this research paper it intends to analyze the critical study of the essay one by one, keeping in focus the two aspects of 'content' and 'expression', which integrate to give literary form to the essays. The perspective of the study is 'reader response', as it is in the act of the reading, a reader realizes the virtual dimensions of the visible, verbal text of a creative writing. Among the 'trio' of literary communication the reader has come to gain much significance in modern times.

In this essay "Of Love" Bacon has expressed his views on the universal subject of love. In the essay we have a rationalist speaking more on the negative side of love, than its positive side, taking a moralistic and a puritanical stance. The treatment of the subject is rather one-sided. In his opening sentence he makes a statement that literature is more indebted to love because it has provided ample subject matter for creative writings, but in practical human life it has no significant role to play. Love is damaging in real life. It is harmful like a siren, the enchantress or a fury, the Greek goddess of revenge. Then, Bacon cites examples of two great historic personalities—one Marcus Antony the triumvir of Roman empire, who lost his empire because of his voluptuous love for Cleopatra, and the other person being Appius Claudius, the decimvir and Roman law giver, who also met with the same fate because of his passion for Virginia, a beautiful girl.

Bacon gives these instances to prove his point that passion of love is so consuming and devastating that no individual, whether voluptuous or grave or serious natured, can escape the trap of love. Bacon, therefore, gives this counsel to his readers to remain alert and keep love at a distance, and not to allow it destroy their career prospects and business.

Bacon says that a man is the arch flatterer of himself, because everybody holds a high opinion of himself, but a lover in exaggerated flattery of his beloved excels one's flattery of one's self. Another important point about love is that an individual who passionately loves a beauty is more likely to lose wisdom, power and riches, thus spoiling his fortune. The essayist finds an individual hyper-sensitive and more responsive to the blind passion of love when he is at the zenith of his prosperity. To him love is 'the child of folly' so he considers it a wise policy to keep love within limits and not allow it to interfere with the practical of an individual's life.

The essayist perceives compensatory mechanism operating in marital man's great attraction towards wine and specially women, Bacon favours expansion of love, which makes men more humane and charitable, as we find in the love of monks, who loves everybody. Bacon approves only that type of love in human society which has matrimonial base, as it is essential for the perpetuation of mankind. He approved love between friends which give perfection to human life. He shows his strong aversion for a voluptuous love which corrupts and degrades human society.

From the point of view of his addressee Bacon writes for the intellectual readers, therefore. He aims at clarity, directness and precision. He composes direct and short sentences, avoiding long and involved sentences. His sentences tend to be aphoristic and epigrammatic in nature and characterized by point and balance. He commonly composes paratactic and periodic sentences, in which each member or clause of the sentence is balanced and integrated in sense units with each other. For example we may take two specimens of paratactic sentences, which occur at the beginning and end of his essay 'Of Love':

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

The stage is more beholding to love than the life of man. For as to stage, love is ever matter of comedies, and now and then of tragedies: but in life it doth much mischief: sometimes like a siren, sometimes like a fury.(2)

Bacon also uses metaphorical style to elaborate his thesis or view, so as to impress upon his point on his reader's memory, for example;.....Therefore it seems (though rarely) that love can find entrance not only into an open heart, but also into a heart well fortified, if watch be not well kept.(3) The above analogy is very precise and able to evoke a reader's power of visualization. Here we have the equations : the 'open heart' stands for 'fortress'; 'watch' and 'well fortified' stand for alert guard on vigil of the fort ;and love 'love' representing a 'foe' or 'enemy'.

Bacon essays contain worldly wisdom and subtle psychological insights, for example he comments that a man is the 'arch-flatterer' of himself ,because everybody has a high opinion of himself ,but compared to this a lover is a greater flatterer of his beloved than an individuals self flattery. (5) Bacon is not all the time correct in his opinion, for example Bacon considers love as the 'child folly' and he advises that it may be wise policy to keep love within limits and not to allow to it interfere with an individual's career and business. But the fact remains that the love is something grand and sublime, it is one of the most inspiring and ennobling passions of mankind, It often brings out the best that is in a man. Tennyson, therefore once said,'it is better to have loved and lost. than never to have loved at all.' A man who has never loved has missed one of the grandest experiences of life. Half of the literature of the world deals with joy and glory of love. However, the plus point of Bacon is his 'expression side'. He writes his essays in a highly condensed style, which is terse and epigrammatic. He is known for his aphoristic style.

The next essay "**Sir Roger at Church**" by Joseph Addison is one of the sequel of essays which were published in the periodical The Spectator, which was a joint literary enterprise of Addison and Steele, and essays were written to serve the declared aim of the periodical- "to enliven morality with wit and to temper wit with morality" The essayists succeeded in serving the stated social and moral purpose. Sir Roger represents Addisonian type of ideal country Squire, who has good qualities, such as the general good sense and sound character. His little singularities or oddities of manner highlight his good qualities of head and heart, than, tarnishing them.He looks lovelier in his weaknesses.

The stated aim of the author in The Spectator was to banish vice and ignorance from England and thus improve the general tone and standard of his countrymen. With the same in view the author made constant use of humour, irony and satire to make the text of his essays more appealing, amiable and effective, so that contemporary readers may be gravitated towards his writings.

Addison does not favour 'feuds of this nature', and he also gives subtle psychological insight when he comments that the high socio-economic status of an individual tends to influence the vary behavior pattern of the sub-ordinate persons. Addison comments,"the ordinary people; who are so used to be dazzled with riches, that they pay as much deference to the understanding of a man of an estate, as of a man of learning....when they know there are several men of five hundred year who do not believe it.(10)

Thus we observe that Addison prose style is lucid and precise like Swift's, but it has more polish, refinement and studied ease. He has the capacity to take his readers into confidence and share with him all the intimate and personal type of joys and sorrows they have experienced

during the course of their lives. Addison interacts his readers on an equal level. In this respect he is different from Bacon, who while interacting with his readers posits himself on a high pedestal and thereby keeping a distance between the two. Addison maintains confidentiality and intimacy of tones. Since, the stance of Addison is like a 'spectator', he freely mingles with all sorts of peoples. He mixes with them and yet keeps himself at a respectable distance. His language has the flavor of conversation. Dr. Johnson aptly called his style the middle style.

The essay next in order is **Art of Conversation** by Richard Steele and the subject of the essay concerns the dynamics of the art of conversation. Which is a sort of game of asking and listening in social intercourse, and not a monologue or soliloquy. The essay begins with an incident involving the son of a landlady named Jack Lizard, a new entrant to college, who is in his teens and has recently visited home to spend his vacations. The author shows him as 'a youth of a great deal fire' who is restless and very enthusiastic to make a display of his knowledge, therefore, we see him all the time speaking and teasing others by talking too much. The writer, being a frequent visitor to the lady's mansion, observed the energies and curiosities of the boy and decided, in sympathy and love for the lad, to give him lesson in the art of conversation. So one day when they were wandering together the author gives the first rule in the art of conversation: "To think with the wise, but talk with the vulgar" (15). This roused the curiosity of the boy, he introspected on his behavior, and desired to mend himself, and therefore, he requested the author to give him other rules in the art of conversation. The author agreed to it and next day supplied to him a list pertaining to successful conversation.

It is clear that Steele's prose style is differs from Addison. We notice that Steele's style is natural artless and vigorous. He possessed invention and inspiration in a greater measure and wrote in a vigorous and forceful style. The present essay concerns the dynamics of art of conversation, in which an interaction occurs between two parties: the speaker and the listener, and in the dynamics of conversational interaction the roles of speaking and listening go on rotating between the two parties. In role changing process the two parties go on 'turn- talking' and turn- yielding'. A successful conversation demands a balance and equal and open opportunity to everybody involved in a conversational situation. On this aspect through his typical, appealing and convincing style Steele has said so many precise things:

A man who talks of anything he is already famous for has little to get, but a great to loose. (17)

The next essay "**Praises of Solitude**" by Dr. Samuel Johnson is about 'solitude', which is a kind of withdrawal or escape from the world of activity and a certain class of individuals habit of speaking frequently in exaggerated terms about the praises of solitary retirement. Dr. Johnson being an intellectualist and lover of hustle and bustle of active urban life does not have any liking for solitary withdrawal or seclusion on the pretext of getting benefits of speculation or recreate one self from the sordid affairs of worldly life. The author describes various types of individuals and their divergent purposes for going to a solitary habitation, which he sees, more or less, self-oriented or self-centered, not serving any higher purpose. The author shows his reverence for the hermits or recluses, who love solitude to devote them to do higher contemplation or meditation to gain insights about the higher truths and knowledge about life, so as to benefit mankind and lead them to path of virtue. The author does not consider himself qualified to comment on the behavior of such saintly persons, because they are far above him. Non-the-less, he believes that

such person should not remain cut off from the world through their opting for a life of seclusion, as their presence is very much needed in the society for its guidance and more elevation.

As a writer of prose Johnson's expression side is influenced by the two facts of his personality, Johnson as a moralist and Johnson as a critic. Like Addison we find in Johnson the similar instinct to teach his readers through the medium of his essays, but their methods of instruction was different. Addison's method was tinged with 'good humour', while Johnson chose to be like a preacher and went upon moralizing seriously. Sometimes Johnson writes in an aphoristic manner and he composes his sentences like maxims. A few examples are given below:

Other considers solitude as the parent of philosophy and retire in expectation of greater intimacies with science, as Numa repaired to the groves when he conferred with Egeria. (22)

Piety practiced in solitude, like the flower that blooms in the desert, may give its fragrance to the winds of heaven....(23)

From the above specimen of extracts and general impression of the essay one may draw the impression about Dr. Johnson's style that it is most symmetrical as well as one of the most vigorous of the great prose styles in English. His style best illustrates the features as to how the devices of antithesis and balance can effectively express themselves through a literary form and energizes it.

National Prejudices by Oliver Goldsmith concerns the author's views on national prejudices from a humanitarian perspective. The author humourously describes him as a 'sauntering tribe of mortals' and then recounts incidents where he happens to fall in the company of a group of English gentlemen, who were discussing over the issue of different inferior characters traits or dispositions of people belonging to various European nations. The issue being undecided among them, they invited the author, who happened to come across them. So the author finds him compelled to participate in the discussion. And when the author gives them his point of view, which was contrary to their view, they (the so called gentleman) started to cast a look of disgust and disliking towards the author and expressed their disliking for him. So, the author was compelled to quit the place and think over the issue of national prejudices or biases, and what harm they are likely to do the good and integration of humankind. The author makes his stand clear on the issue nationalism versus internationalism. He conceives of two types of nationalism: pseudo-patriotism, which he explains as an access love for one's own nation and resultant hatred for people belonging to other nations, and genuine patriotism which refers to one's love for one's own country but similar love for the people belonging to other nations. The author opts to be a genuine patriot, but if he finds in his nation not a climate conducive to promotion of a genuine patriotism, then will prefer not to be a patriot, and quitting that stance would like to be called internationalist or humanitarian, as this tends to unify humanity as one whole and sees all humans as citizens of the world. He comments, "I should prefer the title of the ancient philosopher viz a citizen of the world to that of an Englishman, a Frenchman, A European, or to any other appellation whatever". (30)

Goldsmith is superb and he lies between two great essayists –Leigh Hunt and Addison. His essays blend sometimes quaint whimsicality with delicate fancy. Sometimes he satirically or sometimes humorously reflects upon the behavior of the society of the style, and appears as a critic of the manners or ideas of the people of England his time. Goldsmith's style lacks coldness and he avoids Johnson's practice of excessive heaviness of diction and balanced formality of

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

sentence structure. We notice grace, charm and amiability in his prose composition. He is somewhat an antithesis of Johnson. The following extracts from the Goldsmith's essay 'National Prejudices' highlight some of the salient features of his style of writings:

But my pseudo patriot had no mine to let me escape so easily. Not Satisfied that his opinion should pass without contradiction...he asked me if I was not of the same way of thinking. As I am forward in giving my opinion...so when I obliged to give it, I always hold it for a maxim to speak my real sentiments.(28)

The essay next in order is '**El Dorado**' is symbolic. Denotatively' El Dorado 'refers to a fabulous and legendary country or city of gold. Symbolically it connotes the optimal point of satiety or self complacency in human life. One will cease to take interest and pleasure in one's life the movement one finally achieves one's El Dorado in life. The author Percieves human life as composed of action leading to some end or result, which may either to be success or failure. Hopes and aspirations gives us joy and motivation to do something. Efforts directed to achieve something become a pleasurable activity.

In this process Satiety of achievement symbolically becomes one's El Dorado. The writer perceive 'desire' and 'curiosity' as the two eyes of an individuals, they keep his interest in life continuously. The author wants' the spires of El Dorado 'to remain Chimera (a fancy, fantasy or vain hope) for human beings, otherwise he/she is more likely to loose interest in life. That is why, the author concludes his essay with the comment, 'for to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive, and the true success is to labour. (41)

Stevenson's genius was temperamentally suited to essay writing and fiction. He is called the master of gay phrases and musical lines. For example: 'for to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive, and the true success is to labour (41). He followed the 'subjective 'vein of writing. In the citation Stevenson stresses the point that it is not only in finished undertakings that we ought to honour useful labour. A spirit goes out of the man who means execution,which outlives the most untimely ending. Stevenson was the champion of happiness in life and gave expression to optimistic sentiments in his essays, for example:

There is always a new horizon for onward looking men... we are so constituted that our hopes are inaccessible ,like stars and the term of hoping is prolonged until the term of life.(39)

Henry James has once commented about Stevenson that 'before all things he is a writer with a style'. He had the commands over words; he possessed a fine sense for the sound ,value ,meaning and association of individual words , and sense of harmony ,proportion and their effect in creative writing. It is with his sensitive capabilities and his command over content and expression that Stevenson exerted profound impact on the later generation of essayists.

The last and the most interesting one is a short story **Snake in the Grass** by R.K.Narayan. In which the story teller tells the event of a sunny afternoon when a cyclist rang his bell at the gate and told the owner of bungalow that a big cobra had entered into the compound of the building. The family of the big bungalow consisted of five members, the mother and her four sons. The old servant, Dasa was reputed to be the laziest of the servants. He did not take any interest in finding out the snake. He was irritated because his sweet sleep was disturbed because of this turmoil. But outwardly, he could not refuse to obey the orders by the owner of the house.

In the meantime neighbour also dropped in. All of them began to search out the snake. Dasa was rebuked by everybody for not weeding out and cutting the overgrown shrubs and grass in the compound. Dasa was shrewd to shoulder the blame on his head and he grudgingly complained his masters not to supply him cutting tools to make the garden tidy. The gathering asked him the cost of the grass-cutter. In between the son of the house dropped in and he tallied his tune of cursing and blaming Dasa along with the neighbours. To make a display of his knowledge the boy of the house made a display of his statistics about the death of people by snakebites. He told that he read, "in an American paper that 30,000 people die of snake – bite every year" (97). In the meantime a beggar appeared at the gate. The family members of the house asked her to go away as they were busy in a snake- hunt. At this beggar told the mother of the house that the snake was a "Nag Devta" and it should not be killed. She also told them that they were fortunate that it was a God Subramanya who has come to visit them. The mother agreed with the opinion of the old woman beggar. She also told the mother that she would immediately send a snake- charmer to catch the snake.

The mother gave her a coin and asked her to send the snake- charmer soon. The snake-charmer came in the house and told about his power over the snake and made a gesture to catch a "hypothetical" snake within his palm. He quitted the spot on the pretext that when they happened to exactly locate the snake then to call him at once and he will catch the snake.

Through this Narayana want to show the psychology of the Indian people. Now Dasa came with a pot and he told the gathering that the snake is in the pot and he caught it bravely. Everybody was full of praise for the servant who became the hero of the day because he had done a great work. The people were praising him for his ingenuity.

Dasa was extremely happy and there was the glow of triumph on his face. He told the gathering that they should not call him an idler or indolent in future "Don't call me an idler hereafter" (99). He warned them not to come near the pot because the snake was a poisonous one. The mother of the house now was happy with their servant and complimented him for his sharpness.

She was a religious woman so she told Dasa that she wanted to put some milk beside the pot for the snake to sip it as he represents lord Subramanyam. The servant was happy to hear it and he picked up the pot of the milk as well as the pot of the snake cautiously and went of from the house so that he would leave the snake and the pot of the milk with the snake charmer who was living nearby. At that time the youngest boy of the house told the people that he had seen a cobra in a hole of the compound. It was going towards the gate. The people were surprised to imagine two snakes in the compound. But the fact was that there was no snake in the pot of the servant. It was a cunning planning of Dasa, the servant. Dasa is an uneducated yet he succeeds in befooling the educated and superstitious people.

The story highlights various features of R. K. Narayan's style of writing. He possessed superb narrative skill and interprets Indian life aesthetically with unbiased objectivity. He absorbs contemporary life dispassionately without addressing the reader in his own person. He is free from ideological biases and prefers presenting a realistic picture of life without attempting to moralize or articulating his personal views. His approach to his characters is humane, large hearted and compassionate. In the true spirit of a humourist he is bemused and indulgence. He draws his characters, whether noble and ignoble or virtuous or wicked, with extra ordinary delicacy and tenderness. His prose style is charming, simple and engaging, which is the result of

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

his use of the very language of everyday life, and his adherence to the accepted the patterns of structure, and choice of words.

The essays as analyzed possess structural unity in the sense that they all have – a beginning, a body and a conclusion. The essayists employed various possible ways to begin their compositions to captivate interest of their readers and involve them in the act of reading.

To recapitulate what has been discussed in the present research paper we arrives at the following conclusions : A “ reader” is the third component of the triumvirs, the other two being the “author” and the “text”, and that it is in the “act of reading” that a literary text is realized or actualized. This being the case, a good essay must contain certain attributes to hold readers attention and please them aesthetically. The essays are capable of arresting readers attentions because they possess the following features.

The essayists based contents of their essays on their own thinking, feeling and experience, and expressed them in their own language. The essays possess organic unity and coherence. Careful planning is inherent behind their structural organicity. The essayists deftly used the devices of linking words and linking phrases, which assist to connect the strings of sentences together, thereby giving coherence to the structure and sense , syntactically and semantically.

The essays as analysed possess structural unity in the sense that they all have – a beginning, a body and a conclusion. The essayists employed various possible ways to begin their compositions to captivate interest of their readers and involve them in the act of reading. Like the beginning, the devices used to conclude an essay also varies from subject to subject. In the hands of great essayists the concluding part of their compositions end with suitable and striking notes , Strengthening the idea that a good essay is an organic whole.

To conclude, we may say that as anything can appear in our dreams so anything can go into an essay. Yet it ‘is not the matter ‘of an essay that makes it an essay but what the essayist makes of the matter. The prose selection brings the readers in the contact with some of the finest specimens of English essays, which not only illuminate and refine the minds of their readers but also develop in them sense and feel for the idiom of the language.

Works Cited:

- Anderson,F.H. Francis Bacon : His Career and His Thought. Los Angels : University of Southern California Press, 1962. (It gives an insight on Bacon’s life and works).
- Bate, Walter Jackson. The Achievement of Samuel Johnson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955.(A book worth reading on Dr.Samuel Johnson ,a multi-faceted literary figure).
- Cochrane , Robert . The English Essayists : Lord Bacon To John Ruskin . New Delhi : Deep and Deep Publications, 1989. (It is a simple guide which studies the authors positing them in the socio-historical perspective).
- Deo, S.S. Selections in English Prose. H.N.B.Garhwal University Pub.,2002. (All the references of the text have been cited from this source).
- Prasad ,B. An Introduction to English Criticism.(rpt.)Delhi : Macmillan, 1976.
- Sundaram, P.S. R.K.Narayan As a Novelist. Delhi : B.R.Publishing Corporation,1988.