Analyzing Satire with reference to Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift

Sangramsinh Hajari
Department of English, Fergusson College,
Pune: 411005, Maharashtra (India).

Abstract: Satire is a genre of literature in which vices, follies, abuses, and shortcomings are held up to ridicule, ideally with the intent of shaming individuals, and society itself, into improvement. Although satire is usually meant to be funny, its greater purpose is often constructive social criticism, using wit as a weapon. Writers of the Augustan Age were revered for their wit and satirical works as they managed to portray the ills of their period through it. Their masterful approach to satire ensured that the noblemen were not offended, while the message was clearly understood. The Rape of the Lock is one of the most famous English language examples of the mock-epic. Published when Pope was only 23 years old, the poem served to forge his reputation as a poet and remains his most frequently studied work. Whereas, Jonathan Swift’s satire is inspired by what seems to be a general hatred of mankind. His indignation was equalled by his wit. He told most ridiculous stories and made the most outrageous jokes while appearing serious.

Keywords: Satire, Augustan Age, constructive social criticism, expose, parody, burlesque, exaggeration, juxtaposition, comparison, analogy, double entendre

Alexander Pope

Alexander Pope was born in London in 1688. As a Roman Catholic living during a time of Protestant consolidation in England, he was largely excluded from the university system and from political life, and suffered certain social and economic disadvantages because of his religion as well. He was self-taught to a great extent, and was an assiduous scholar from a very early age. He learned several languages on his own, and his early verses were often imitations of poets he admired. His obvious talent found encouragement from his father, a linen-draper, as well as from literary-minded friends. At the age of twelve, Pope contracted a form of tuberculosis that settled in his spine, leaving him stunted and misshapen and causing him great pain for much of his life. He never married, though he formed a number of lifelong friendships in London’s literary circles, most notably with Jonathan Swift.

Pope wrote during what is often called the Augustan Age of English literature. During this time, the nation had recovered from the English Civil Wars and the Glorious Revolution, and the regained sense of political stability led to a resurgence of support for the arts. For this reason, many compared the period to the reign of Augustus in Rome, under whom both Virgil and Horace had found support for their work. The prevailing taste of the day was neoclassical, and 18th-century English writers tended to value poetry that was learned and allusive, setting less value on originality than the Romantics would in the next century. This literature also tended to be morally and often politically engaged, privileging satire as its dominant mode.

The Rape of the Lock is one of the most famous English-language examples of the mock-epic. Published in its first version in 1712, when Pope was only 23 years old, the poem served to forge his reputation as a poet and remains his most frequently studied work. The inspiration for the poem was an actual incident among Pope’s acquaintances in which Robert, Lord Petre, cut off a lock of Arabella Fermor’s hair, and the young people’s families fell into strife as a result. John Caryll, another member of this same circle of prominent Roman Catholics, asked Pope to write a light poem that would put the episode into a humorous perspective and reconcile the two families. The poem was originally published in a shorter version, which Pope later revised. In this later version he added the “machinery,” the retinue of supernaturals who influence the action as well as the moral of the tale.

After the publication of The Rape of the Lock, Pope spent many years translating the works of Homer. During the ten years he devoted to this arduous project, he produced very few new poems of his own but refined his taste in literature and his moral, social, and political opinions to an incredible degree. When he later recommended to write original poetry, Pope struck a more serious tone than the one he gave to The Rape of the Lock. These later poems are more severe in their moral judgments and more acid in their satire: Pope’s Essay on Man is a philosophical poem on metaphysics, ethics, and human nature, while in the Dunciad Pope writes a scathing exposé of the bad writers and pseudo-intellectuals of his day.

Jonathan Swift

His contemporary and the other great satirist dealt with in this paper, Jonathan Swift (30...
November 1667 – 19 October 1745) was an Anglo-Irish satirist, essayist, political pamphleteer, poet and cleric who became Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin.

He is remembered for works such as Gulliver's Travels, A Modest Proposal, A Journal to Stella, Drapier's Letters, The Battle of the Books, An Argument against Abolishing Christianity, and A Tale of a Tub. Swift is probably the foremost prose satirist in the English language, and is less well known for his poetry. Swift originally published all of his works under pseudonyms such as Lemuel Gulliver, Isaac Bickerstaff, MB Drapier – or anonymously. He is also known for being a master of two styles of satire: the Horatian and Juvenalian styles.

Among the great English satirists of the early 18th century, Jonathan Swift is far more remarkable. Born and educated in Ireland, Swift spent his early life in England. As a young man he felt resentment and bitterness towards the state of things in the English society. He took a degree of Master of Arts when he was in England, a degree that qualified him for church. Dissatisfied with his employment he returned to Ireland. There he opened his career as a writer with A Tale of a Tub and the Battle of the Books. These were followed by other grimly ironical publications, pamphlets and essays on religion and war, on political situation in England and Ireland.

Swift lays bare, with clarity, the close connection between religion, church and politics when he describes the history of the three churches, laying emphasis on their being used as efficient instruments by ruling classes for preservation and consolidation of their power. Jonathan Swift's satire is inspired by what seems to be a general hatred of mankind. He was, nevertheless known for his kindness and unselfish work for the poor. His indignation was equalled by his wit. He told most ridiculous stories and made the most outrageous jokes while appearing serious.

However, lest one think that Swift's satire is merely the weapon of exaggeration, it is important to note that exaggeration is only one facet of his satiric method. Swift uses mock seriousness and understatement; he parodies and burlesques; he presents a virtue and then turns it into a vice. He takes pot-shots at all sorts of sacred cows. Besides science, Swift debunks the whole sentimental attitude surrounding children.

Swift is also a name-caller. Mankind, as he has a Brobdingnagian remark, is “the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth.” Swift also inserted subtly hidden puns into some of his name-calling techniques.

Satire

Before moving on to the way these two great men used satire, let us look at what it really means. Satire is a genre of literature, and sometimes graphic and performing arts, in which vices, follies, abuses, and shortcomings are held up to ridicule, ideally with the intent of shaming individuals, and society itself, into improvement. Although satire is usually meant to be funny, its greater purpose is often constructive social criticism, using wit as a weapon.

A common feature of satire is strong irony or sarcasm “in satire, irony is militant” but parody, burlesque, exaggeration, juxtaposition, comparison, analogy, and double entendre are all frequently used in satirical speech and writing. This "militant" irony or sarcasm often professes to approve of or at least accept as natural the very things the satirist wishes to attack. Satire is nowadays found in many artistic forms of expression, including literature, plays, commentary, and media such as lyrics.

The word satire comes from the Latin word satur—lanxsatura literally means "a full dish of various kinds of fruits." The word satura as used by Quintilian, however, was used to denote only Roman verse satire, a strict genre that imposed hexameter form, a narrower genre than what would be later intended as satire. Laughter is not an essential component of satire; in fact there are types of satire that are not meant to be "funny" at all. Conversely, not all humour, even on such topics as politics, religion or art is necessarily "satirical", even when it uses the satirical tools of irony, parody, and burlesque.

Perhaps, each one of us is a satirist in a certain way. Each one of us bemoans the wickedness and wrongs in the society and from age to age the sting of the scornful satire on man, has been interpreted in different ways. The real satirist, however, expresses his wit in writing. The real satirist attacks the wickedness by laughing at it.

Satire and irony in some cases have been regarded as the most effective source to understand a society, the oldest form of social study. They provide the keenest insights into a group's collective psyche; reveal its deepest values and tastes, and the society's structures of power. Some authors have regarded satire as superior to non-comic and non-artistic disciplines like history or anthropology. For its nature and social role, Satire has enjoyed in many societies a special freedom. Irony or sarcasm are often constructive social criticism, using wit as a weapon.
Types of Satire

Satire is broadly divided into two types, Horatian and Juvenalian. Horatian satire is named after the Roman satirist Horace. Horatian satire playfully criticizes some social vice through gentle, mild, and light-hearted humour. It directs wit, exaggeration, and self-deprecating humour toward what it identifies as folly, rather than evil. It is a mild form of criticism that is used to correct wrongs in an amusing and polite manner.

Horatian satire is a literary term for lighthearted, gentle satire that points out general human failings. It is usually contrasted with Juvenalian satire, which offers barbed jabs at specific immoral and corrupt behaviour. Horatian satire is named after the Roman poet Horace, whose work has had a wide influence on Western culture. This form of satire is still practiced in modern times by cartoonists, comedians and comedy writers.

In literature, any bitter and ironic criticism of contemporary persons and institutions that is filled with personal invective, angry moral indignation, and pessimism is termed Juvenalian satire. The name alludes to the Latin satirist Juvenal, who, in the 1st century AD, brilliantly denounced Roman society, the rich and powerful, and the discomforts and dangers of city life. Juvenalian satire provokes a darker kind of laughter. It is often bitter and criticizes corruption or incompetence with scorn and outrage. Like the poems "Against Women", and it comes from the poet Juvenal. It is a formal satire in which the speaker attacks vice and error with contempt and indignation. Juvenalian satire in its realism and its harshness is in strong contrast to Horatian satire.

Juvenal wrote at least 16 poems in dactylic hexameter covering an encyclopaedic range of topics across the Roman world. While the Satires are a vital source for the study of ancient Rome from a vast number of perspectives, their hyperbolic, comedic mode of expression makes the use of statements found within them as simple fact problematic. The Satires could be read as a critique of pagan Rome.

Satire in Alexander Pope

Pope's satire is unique, intellectual and full of wit and epigram. Lowell rightly says that “Pope stands by himself in English verse as an intellectual observer and describer of personal weaknesses”. The true objective of satire, according to Pope, is moral. It amends vice by castigation.

The satirist, in the words of Dryden, “is no more an enemy to the offender than the physician to the patient when he prescribes harsh remedies to an invertebrate disease”. Pope's satire functions in somewhat the same manner. Even a cursory glance at his poetry reveals that the major part of it consists of satire. The Rape of the Lock, the Dunciad and Moral Essays are the best of his satires. In The Rape of the Lock, the whole panorama is limited to the 18th century aristocratic life. In the strange battle fought between the fashionable belles and the vain beau, the fall of Dapperwit and Sir Fopling is particularly demonstrative of the hollowness of the people of this age:

A beau and witling perished in the throng
One died in metaphor, and one in song

Even the Queen herself is satirized to produce a truly comical and witty effect.
Here thou, a great Anna whom three realms obey
Dost sometimes counsel take – and sometimes tea.

The satire in the Rape of the Lock is directed not against any individual, but against the follies and vanities in general of fashionable men and women. Pope started writing this poem to reconcile two quarrelling families but as the poem progressed, the poet forgot his original intention and satirized female follies and vanities. Belinda is not ArabellaFermot. She is the type of the fashionable ladies of the time and in her the follies and frivolities of the whole sex is satirized. The Baron represents not Petre alone but typifies the aristocratic gentleman of that age. The strange battle between the sexes shows what kind of people they are.

When bold Sir Plume had drawne Clarissa down,
Chloe stepped in, and killed him with a frown;
She smiled to see the doughty hero slain,  
But, at her smile, the beau revived again.

The poet has satirized the system of judges that they, at 4 o’clock, hurriedly sign the sentence so that they could have their dinner in time. Meanwhile, declining from the noon of day, The sun obliquely shoots his burning ray, The hungry judges soon the sentence sign, And wretches hand that jurymen may dine;

Even the concept of friendship has been attacked. Belinda’s friend Thalestris is as shallow as the age she lives in. As soon as Belinda’s reputation is gone, she doesn’t like to be called her friend. It doesn’t condemn like Swift, but simply and lightly exposes the frivolities and dandies of the people. It is in fact a satire on feminine dandies. Women are all frivolous beings, whose genuine interest lies in love-making. The same sentiment is really implied in the more playful lines of The Rape of the Lock. The sylphs are warned by omens that some misfortune impends; but they don’t know what. The poem is a reflection of the artificial and hollow life of the time, painted with a humorous and delicate satire. It paints the ideal life of the pleasure-seeking young men and women. It introduces to us a world of fashion and frivolities. These pleasures are petty – flirting, card-laying, driving in Hyde Park, visiting theatres and writing love-letters. Their whole day’s programme seems to be nothing but a waste.

Pope, well known for his sharply perceptive works, looked to rhetorical masters of the rational, classical past and their separate satirical archetypes for inspiration. Pope, in his The Rape of the Lock, is Horatian in tone, delicately chiding society in a sly but polished voice by holding up a mirror to the follies and vanities of the upper class. Pope presents the self-important pomp of British aristocracy in such a way that gives the reader a new perspective from which to easily view the actions in the story as foolish and ridiculous. The poem assimilates the masterful qualities of a heroic epic, yet is applied satirically to a seemingly petty egotistical elitist quarrel. Pope followed the grand form of Milton’s epics, ultimately achieving a whimsical mock epic through his mélange of the trifling and timeless. This work displays a light and playful tone, which illuminates the idiosyncratic nature of the poem’s central conflict, the Baron stealing, or “raping”, Belinda’s illustrious lock of hair.

The meeting points the sacred hair disserver from the fair head, forever and forever! Then flashed the living lightening from her eyes, And screams of horror rend the affrighted skies.

This embellished and exaggerated quotation is representative of the fundamental elements of Horatian satire used in this mock epic.

**Satire in Jonathan Swift**

Swift was born in Dublin from English parents and was educated in Ireland and England. While he was a student at Trinity College in Dublin, he was more interested in poetry than other subjects and he distinguished himself by failing in two or three subjects taken up for his degree of Bachelor of Arts. Eventually he managed to obtain it, only by a humiliating “special grace”. He worked near London at Moor Park, however the bitterness he felt because of his subordinate position drove him back to Ireland. The disappointment and frustration he experienced drove him to art.

Gulliver's Travels, which has been the subject of great debate among historians and literary critics, is an open political satire. It is directed against scientists, and it offers some of Swift’s fiery attacks on the acts performed by his country fellows. The book was published anonymously and became an instantaneous success. Gulliver's Travels was unique in its day; it was not written to woo or entertain. It was an indictment, and it was most popular among those who were indicted that is, politicians, scientists, philosophers, and Englishmen in general. Swift was roasting people, and they were eager for the banquet. Swift himself admitted to wanting to "vex" the world with his satire, and it is certainly in his tone, more than anything else, that one most feels his intentions. The tone of the original varies from mild wit to outright derision, but always present is a certain strata of ridicule.

Swift mocks blind devotion. Gulliver, leaving the Houyhnhnms, says that he “took a second leave of my master, but as I was going to prostrate myself to kiss his hoof, he did me the honour to raise it gently to my mouth.” Swift was indeed so thorough a satirist that many of his early readers misread the section on the Houyhnhnms. They were so enamoured of reason that they did not realize that Swift was metamorphosing a virtue into a vice. In Book IV, Gulliver has come to idealize the horses. They embody pure reason, but they are not human. Literally, of course, we know they are not, but figuratively they seem an ideal for humans until Swift exposes them as dull, unfeeling creatures, thoroughly unhuman. They take no pleasure in sex, nor do they ever overflow with either joy or melancholy. They are bloodless.

A Tale of a Tub reveals the peculiar position occupied by Swift in the early 18th century English literature in which his penetrating looks were not deceived by the optimistic picture of reality, which philosophers, moralists and writers were trying to build up and substantiate. Swift lays bare, with clarity the close connection between religion,
church and politics when he describes the history of the three churches, laying emphasis on their being used as efficient instruments by ruling classes for preservation and consolidation of their power. He is moved by a profound hostility against feudalism, which rested as much on the church as on the aristocracy. He saw in the religious enthusiasm and zeal a violation of reason and common sense.

A Tale of a Tub implies the chaotic structure of his satire in which the narrative is interrupted by long digressions. On the other hand, it has a deep significance. Like any other allegory A Tale of a Tub, is based on personification that is on the embodiment of ideas in human beings. It differs, though from other allegories by the achievement of a great number of concrete details. The story is also told in matter-of-fact terms of everyday life. The scene is laid in London and the tale abounds in all sorts of references to town life. A Tale of a Tub shows Swift as the greatest ironist of English letters. Sometimes bitter, but more than often biting and lashing, irony is the chief form assumed to his humour, and at the same time a stylistic device widely used throughout the book.

Swift’s A Modest Proposal, however, is a quintessential Juvenalian satire, shockingly revealing an often-looked over dimension of British colonialism with regards to the Irish through savage ridicule and disdainful contempt. A bitter attack, Swift’s morbid tale delineates an immoral and perverse solution to Ireland’s economic woes using bizarre yet brilliantly clear logic and a detached tone in order to attack indifference to the poor. Swift’s satirical tone, relying on realism and harshness to carry its message, is much more acerbic than his counterpart, perfectly displaying Juvenalian satire’s ability to shock and ridicule.

Gulliver's Travels was the work of a writer who had been using satire as his medium for over a quarter of a century. His life was one of continual disappointment, and satire was his complaint and his defence against his enemies and against humankind. People, he believed, were generally ridiculous and petty, greedy and proud; they were blind to the “ideal of the mean.” This ideal of the mean was present in one of Swift's first major satires, The Battle of the Books (1697). There, Swift took the side of the Ancients, but he showed their views to be ultimately as distorted as those of their adversaries, the Moderns. In Gulliver's last adventure, Swift again pointed to the ideal of the mean by positioning Gulliver between symbols of sterile reason and symbols of gross sensuality. To Swift, Man is a mixture of sense and nonsense; he had accomplished much but had fallen far short of what he could have been and what he could have done.

Ironically Gulliver's Travels a book thought by most people as a charming book of adventure popular with children, is one of the most powerful attacks ever made against man's wickedness and stupidity. Swift's book is full of personal, literary and political allusions. The modern reader might wonder sometimes at certain references that had a special meaning during Swift's time. Some of them are explained in the Notes, others require comment in case one is not familiar with the situation of the political life in England and Ireland during Swift's time. The interpretations also change with time, as well. Nevertheless, there is always something new to learn, something in which, one can see the ridicule and laugh at it.

Swift was a highly moral man and was shocked by his contemporaries' easy conversion to reason as the be-all and end-all of philosophy. To be so gullible amounted to non-reason in Swift's thinking. He therefore offered up the impractical scientists of Laputa and the impersonal, but absolutely reasonable, Houyhnhnms as embodiments of science and reason carried to ridiculous limits. Swift, in fact, created the whole of Gulliver's Travels in order to give the public a new moral lens.

Conclusion

As can be seen from the myriad works of both the master satirists discussed above, it can be said that both Pope and Swift were major proponents of satire. Though they employed different types of satire, Pope leaning towards the Horatian and Swift following the Juvenalian tradition, they used satire as a form of complaint and defence against a society that was uncompromising but fickle in its attitude.

Satire is still in vogue, be it for parodying a person, an institution or a school of thought. The fact that it enjoys a special freedom to ridicule the ills in society makes it a popular option for initiatives reforms, as shown by Pope and Swift before us.

References: