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Curing social maladies: Reading Juvenal's *Tenth Satire*

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Abstract

“Poetry is, at bottom, a criticism of life”, says Matthew Arnold. We know that literature is not only a faithful artistic representation of life but also a medicine which cures the maladies of society. The purpose of correcting the wrongs in society is taken by some litterateurs to be great responsibility. They cannot accept the wrong way life is going. That is why they try to amend the errors committed by people. This practice is seen mainly in satirical works. In all literatures of all ages, there are plenty of writers who satirises the unjust social life. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*; Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock, An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*; Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel, The Medal, Mac Flecknoe*; Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* — these are all satires representing critical commentaries on the follies and vices of the mentioned writers' respective times. However, this trend of writing satires is not a new. If we dig deep into literary history we shall discover that this practice had been there also in ancient literary jargon. The names of Juvenal, Horace and so on may be referred to in this connection. In fact the later satirists carry deep influences from these classical writers who flourished during the reign of Augustus Caesar, the nephew of Julius Caesar. Among the notable literary figures who enlightened the age of Augustus Caesar in Rome, the one whose contribution is unavoidable is Juvenal. In this paper, we are going to have an analytical study on Juvenal's *Tenth Satire*.

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Introduction

Juvenal is one of the towering literary figures in the Republican era. He may be regarded as a great observer of Rome. He may be regarded as a restless 'flâneur' who takes up a poetic venture of endlessly wandering through his city while exposing 'the fault lines of Roman self-definition.' His First Satire gives 'contemporary reciters and disclaimers their own medicine.' (Santorelli 2). Second and Sixth Satires shows the evil effects of the Romans' contact with the 'diseased' non-Romans which caused moral declination of Roman citizens. His "Satire X: The Vanity of Human Wishes", too, takes us back to the lowest points of the Republican era, at the beginning of the decay of the traditional ideals which is sharply scrutinised in his satires.

Discussion

It is in nature of people to have less belief in their oppositions. From Cadiz to the Ganges and the Dawn, we can see very few people in this world free 'of a cloud of errors.' (Juvenal 73). They can hardly recognise the good aspects of those whom they dislike. The speaker wonders why people are often afraid of something which is rational:

“What indeed do we wish for or fear that is Rational?” (Juvenal 73)

Do we really regret for achieving something in wrong way or with the help of wrong person? He wonders:

“How often is what we conceive so far from wrong-headed?

That we don't regret both the effort, and the fulfilment of our desire?” Too much gains bring too much pains. (Juvenal 73)

The speaker now goes on talking about the types of prayers. Most of the people pray to God for materialistic gains. ‘They ask for what harms them whether in peace / Or war...’ (Juvenal 73). Some people commit faults by speaking too much. This eloquence comes from their extreme pride or boastfulness. And this habit of excessive eloquence is deadly or ‘fatal’ for them. He says:

“To many people their own torrential flood of speech and their own eloquence is fatal” (Juvenal 73)

To emphasise his argument, the speaker now refers to Milo, a famous ancient Greek athlete from the Greek colony of Croton in Magna Graecia. Milo was very strong and powerful athlete. He was a six times Olympic victor. His historicity attracted the attention of many classical authors. He has become a legendary figure. One day he was travelling by a countryside and saw a villager trying to split a stump with hammer and wedges. He asked the man whether the latter had sufficient strength to split the wood without using any tool. The man felt honoured but could not do so and then went to fetch food. Meanwhile, Milo started trying to pull the stump apart by putting his fingers into the crack. As he pulled the stump apart with the help of his fingers, the wedges fell out and he got trapped. He could not pull his fingers out of the cleft of the trunk and kept waiting for the villager to come. But, fortune did not accompany him. He got attacked and preyed by wild beasts. In this way, “Milo of Croton ... perished from / Relying on his own strength, and his awe-inspiring show of muscle...” (Juvenal 73). Thus, the poet warns his readers not to be boastful.

The world has become so materialistic that there are some people who are too much monetarily competitive. They aim at hoarding more wealth than others. They want to possess more fortunes than others do. They become so arrogant that they do not hesitate to underestimate others. In this context, we have a reference to Cassius. Cassius was a Roman Senator and general. He is one of those leading conspirators for assassination of Julius Caesar. He was the brother-in-law of Brutus who was Caesar's best friend. He instigated Brutus against Caesar. Moreover, he is one of the major characters in William

Shakespeare's famous historical play Julius Caesar which depicts the assassination of Caesar and its aftermath. He is also shown in the lowest circle of Hell in Dante's Inferno as punishment for betraying and killing Caesar. He was captured and punished by Nero, the final emperor of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, ‘by an entire cohort.’ (Juvenal 73).

Too much fortune may lead to misfortune. To prove this, Juvenal refers to the sufferings gone through by Seneca, Nero's tutor and advisor. He served as Nero's advisor for four years. It is said that he was wrongly accused by Nero for running a business of usury. He used to charge high interest on loans throughout Italy and the provinces, and thus acquired a vast personal fortune of about three hundred million sestertii. He lived in ‘the splendid mansion / Of the Laterani.’ (Juvenal 73). He was arrested and sentenced by Nero to commit suicide. Juvenal actually talks about the insecurity of having too much money and wealth. A rich

person is always afraid of loosing wealth to thieves and robbers whereas, on the contrary, a poor person is always free from such feelings of insecurity. He says:

“Though you might only be carrying a few items of plain silver, When you set out to travel at night, you'll still be afraid of swords And sticks, panic at the shadow of a reed stirring in the moonlight; While an empty-handed traveller can whistle in the robber's face.” (Juvenal 73)

Most people are hungry for wealth. They go to temples to pray not for spiritual gains but for materialistic gains. They pray to God so that their wealth can be increased, so that they can be the richest family in their areas: “The most popular prayer, as noted in all temples, is for cash...” (Juvenal 73). But, Juvenal says, too much fortunes comes with more chances of danger. He says that the rich people have more chances of getting killed by greedy people whereas the poor ones are always safe from such danger:

“You'll never imbibe”

Poison from earthenware; the time to fear it is when you lift a cup Studded with gems...” (Juvenal 73)

Thus, he suggests his readers to control greed and hunger for wealth.

He then goes on to satirise the people of Rome who, coming in contact with the non-Romans, were loosing their values. He refers to the famous Greek philosopher Democritus. Democritus famously discovered that all material bodies are made up of invisibly small atoms. He was also known as ‘the laughing philosopher’ as he propagated that cheerfulness should be a goal to be pursued in life. He always ‘laughed at the human race.’ (Juvenal 73). On the contrary, there is another famous Greek philosopher Heraclitus who discovered that fire forms the basic material principle of the universe. He was, however, known as the weeping philosopher. He was not happy with the way the world went. Juvenal refers to these two philosophers for certain purposes. By using the name of Heraclitus, Juvenal seems to indicate that he was extremely unhappy with the pathetic condition of contemporary Roman society. The name of Democritus is used to satirise all contemporary Roman people who, coming in contact with the non-Romans, were losing their traditions, customs and values. Biagio Santorelli, in “Juvenal's Satires and the Context of Rome”, a review published in the famous journal *The Classical Review*, comments: “The crucial point in the process of Roman moral decline is seen in the contact with the ‘diseased’ non-Roman.” (Santorelli 2).

The Romans no longer wore togas with purple borders and togas with purple stripes which were their traditional attires. Their leaders lacked proper administrative capabilities — ‘rods of office, litters and tribunals.’ (Juvenal 73). It would be really pathetic to see an eminent praetor wearing a sleeveless loose garment like Jupiter's and standing in high chariot in the midst of dust in the Circus. An ornamented toga well fits him. But it would be greatly pathetic if he refuse to wear such traditional apron. Juvenal satirises the excessive value-giving on outward decoration of monarchy than on real socio-cultural identity. It is ridiculous to see the crown being bigger in size than the head of the ruler.

A ruler's main duty is to sustain peace in his kingdom. Juvenal uses 'bird' as a symbol for peace and 'the horn / Players' as that for war. It is really pathetic to see 'the bird that soars from his ivory septre' and 'the horn / Players over here.' (Juvenal 74). Satires Thirteen, Fourteen and Fifteen show a further dreadful view of such degradation. "The corrosive view of life deployed in Satires 13 and 14 does not spare the sacred statues or the imagines of the ancestors, no longer bearers of shared memories but fellow-victims of the general decay; finally, the imagery of the gladiatorial combat explodes again in Satire 15, in a dramatic description of a mob violence in the Egyptian desert." (Santorelli 2). However, Democritus, says Juvenal, found laughter even amid such chaos. His shrewdness proved that:

"Men of excellence, great exemplars,"

May yet be born in a dull climate, in a land of castrated sheep." (Juvenal 74)

He laughed at people's greed for fortunes, their anxieties and fears, their sadness and tears. He challenged fortune's menaces.

Conclusion

Juvenal was a great satirist. However, unlike those of Alexander Pope or Jonathan Swift, his satires are quite light satires. These were written not for the purpose of blaming the wrongs but for the purpose of correcting the wrongs of the contemporary society. His satire seems to be like a medicine which should be used to cure the society's people from their follies and vices. However, the themes dealt in this poem find relevance in all time. Although it was composed during the time of Augustus in Rome, it is still contextual to our times as well. This is an important mark of great poetry.

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