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**MATTHEW ARNOLD: "POETRY AS A CRITICISM OF LIFE"**

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**Abstract:-**

Arnold's significance in the history of English Literature and literary criticism is acknowledged by everyone. He had a definite objective or function in writing poetry and his greatness lies in this fact. He most prominently and clearly elaborated his objective. Ultimately the objective of his poetry was a "a criticism of life." The phrase, "criticism of life" is elaborated by Arnold with the help of phrase "application of ideas to life." The poetry will be greater if the application of ideas is more powerful. Now the question arises how to recognize great or high poetry. Arnold does not lay down any specific features of a great poetry. It is much better to study concrete examples of highest poetry. According to Arnold in order to judge a poets work properly, a critic should compare it to passages taken from works of great masters of poetry and that these passages should be applied as touchstones to other poetry. However, this touchstone method of judgment has its own limitations. The method of comparing passage with a passage is not a sufficient test for determining the value of a work as a whole. Edward Caird stated that literature is a criticism of life exactly in the sense that a good man is criticism of a bad one. Arnold reveals that the grand works of literary genius is a work of synthesis and exposition. It is not analysis and discovery. The two attributes of great poetry are natural magic and moral profundity. The present paper attempts to explore Arnold's poetry as a criticism of life. It also highlights his high conception of poetry, his touchstone method to judge high poetry, its limitations, his disinterestedness of critics and future of poetry.

**Keywords:-** Arnold, criticism, touchstone, judge, disinterestedness, delightful.

Arnold's significance in the history of English Literature and literary criticism is acknowledged by everyone. He had a definite objective or function in writing poetry and his greatness lies in this fact. He most prominently and clearly elaborated his objective. Ultimately the objective of his poetry was a "a criticism of life." By criticism of life he meant to propound and explain noble and profound application of ideas to life. His approach towards the function or objective of poetry has been well elaborated in his 'Study of poetry' with greater emphasis. He has a high conception of his own calling. He is confident that good poetry has an immense future. Arnold very confidently declared, "In poetry as a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty, the spirit of our race will find, as time goes on and as other helps fail, its consolation and stay." The extract explains Arnolds trust and faith in the power of poetry, its high density, and it contains his famous definition of poetry. In the later part, he elaborates his definition and then illustrates it by applying it to a number of English poets. "It is in poetry which is a criticism of life that the spirit of our race will find its last source of consolation and stay. Arnold himself explains criticism of life, "as the noble and profound application of ideas to life," and 'laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty,' as truth and seriousness of substance and matter, and felicity and perfection of diction and manner."<sup>1</sup> Arnold believes that poetry does not reflect life as it is, rather the poet adds something to it from his own noble nature, and this something contributes and his criticism of life. Poetry has that amazing capacity to make men moral, better, and nobler, but it does so, not through direct preaching, or by appealing to reason like science, but by appeal to the soul, to the whole of man. The poet expresses in his poetry what he seriously believes in. He expresses in his poetry from the depth of his soul. He expresses it in his poetry so beautifully and wonderfully that he creates a thing of beauty. As we know a thing of beauty is a permanent source of joy. Such sort of high poetry makes our

life richer. It has the poetry of sustaining and delighting us. The matter of fact about Arnold is that he is against direct moral teaching, and he regards didactic poetry as the lowest. So we come to the point that Arnold's poetry provides the answer to our question, "How to live?" His poetry, however, does so indirectly and not directly like men of religions.

The phrase, "criticism of life" is elaborated by Arnold with the help of phrase "application of ideas to life." The poetry will be greater if the application of ideas are more powerful. According to Arnold poetry is an interpretation of life as the poet experiences it. However, poetry is not merely an intellectual exercise, it is subject to the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty. Criticism means how a creative artist reacts to his experiences and gives expression to his ideal attitude to those experiences. Arnold is of the opinion that the qualities of high serious poetry can be found in its matter (substance) and manner (style). The poetry, to Arnold's mind, meets some fundamental human needs in three ways. First, poetry has the capacity to interpret the meaning of human existence. In this sense, poetry is found as the mirror of human condition, thus, it consists of a powerful tool to criticize the problems in society that infringe on spiritual elevation, Secondly, poetry is alone capable of satisfying our spiritual need. Poetry helps us to understand the world as well as ourselves better. Finally, poetry may also be a source of sheer pleasure to the reader. Arnold explains that the criticism of life consists principally of "the superior character of truth and seriousness" encountered in great poems. It is this virtue that gives to our spirits what they can rest upon. Incidentally like Aristotle, he reminds us that it is in this particular quality that the superiority of poetry over history lies."<sup>2</sup> In a nutshell, criticism of life is Arnold's belief that great poetry does not present life as it is, rather the poet adds something to it of his own noble nature, and this something is prominent which contributes to his criticism of life.

Now the question arises how to recognize great or high poetry. Arnold does not lay down any specific features of a great poetry. It is much better to study concrete examples of highest poetry. "We will recognize highest and greatest poetry from the fact that it has something of perennial interest, something which appeals to the primary human affections and instincts. He writes in this connection: "It is much better simply to have recourse to concrete examples, to take specimens of poetry of the high, the very highest quality, and to say, 'The characters of a high quality of poetry are what is expressed there.'"<sup>3</sup> Arnold suggests us to avoid the false valuations of the historic estimate and the personnel estimate. He advises us to learn to feel and enjoy the best work of the real classics and appreciate the wide difference between the highest work and all lesser work. If we have a query to identify the best work, he reveals that it is enough to exclaim, "It is there and there." But even though it is not enough, he adds that the high qualities lie both in the matter and substance of poetry and in its manner and style, "and these have a mark, an accent of high beauty, worth and power;" the substance and matter will possess, in an eminent degree, truth and seriousness, and this character is, "inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement," prominently marking the style and manner.

According to Arnold in order to judge a poet's work properly, a critic should compare it to passages taken from works of great masters of poetry and that these passages should be applied as touchstones to other poetry. "Touchstone method is a short quotation from a recognized poetic masterpiece 'The Study of Poetry,' employed as a standard of instant comparisons for judging the value of other works. Here Arnold recommends certain lines of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton as touchstone for testing 'the presence or absence of high poetic quality' in samples chosen from other poets."<sup>4</sup> Even a single line or selected quotation will serve the purpose. In 'The Study of Poetry,' he no longer uses the acid test of action and architectonics. He becomes an advocate of touchstone method. He states that there can be no more useful method and help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of truly excellent, and can, therefore, do us most good, than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry. Arnold's view of the greatness in poetry and what a literary critic should look for are summarized as, 'it is important, therefore, to hold fast to this; that poetry is at bottom a

criticism of life; that the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful applications of ideals to life, to the question; how to live.' Here we find a sort of manifesto for the criticism of the early Victorians as well as an indictment of the critical creed, 'art for art's sake' as propounded by the later Victorians.

However, this touchstone method of judgment has its own limitations. The method of comparing passage with a passage is not a sufficient test for determining the value of a work as a whole. Arnold himself insisted that we must judge a poem by the total impression and not by its fragments. But we can extend this method of comparison from passages to the poems as whole units. The comparative method is an invaluable aid to appreciate of any kind of art. It is helpful not merely to compare the masterpiece and the lesser work, but the good with the not so good, the sincere with the not quite sincere, and so on. Those who do not agree with this theory of comparative criticism say that Arnold is too austere, too exacting in comparing a simple modern poet with the ancient master poet. It is, of course, not fair to expect that all hills may be Alps. "By this method we can set apart the alive, the vital, the sincere from the shoddy, the snowy and the insincere."<sup>5</sup> The touchstone method is prominently an invaluable aid to appreciation in approaching any kind of art. This may be as true of fiction as of poetry, of painting as of literature.

Edward Caird stated that literature is a criticism of life exactly in the sense that a good man is criticism of a bad one. This brings Arnold's phrase close to Sir Philip Sidney's golden world of art which is a model for the brazen world; and in that sense music presents us with a golden world, so does dancing. Arnold meant something more literal by his words than this, something which justifies Eliot's protest that his definition of poetry is frigid to anyone who has felt the surprise and elevation of a new experience of poetry. "He is writing of Joubert when he first uses the phrase and Joubert was no architect of a golden world but a critic, in a very literal sense, of this brazen world ; Arnold simply meant that Joubert put his finger on aspect of life and judged "good or bad."<sup>6</sup> According to Arnold poetry sometimes by accident or by implication but sometimes by intent is good or bad. Arnold states the function of poetry or he considers criticism to be its chief function. Criticism is not what poetry is; it is what poetry does.

How it does it is another matter. Poetry helps us to live. It helps us not merely by occupying us or by delighting us, but by clarifying us with delight, and it is a criticism of life. The task of the critic is threefold in character. First duty of the critic is to learn and understand. He must 'see things as they really are.' Second task is to hand over his ideas to others to convert the world, to make the best ideals prevail. In that sense, he has been missionary. Third task is to prepare an atmosphere favorable for the creative genius of the future by promoting a current of ideas in the highest degree animating and nourishing to the creative power. As we know, Arnold has a high conception of poetry and function of criticism. The critic is himself cultured. He knows the best that has been thought and known in the world. He also helps others to become cultured. He also makes prominent literary activities possible by establishing a current of fresh and noble ideas. For Arnold, it is the critic who discovers the ideas. It is he who propagates them. A powerful critic, no doubt, performs his role in fertilizing the soil and in watering the sapling.

Arnold reveals that the grand works of literary genius is a work of synthesis and exposition. It is not analysis and discovery. Its gift lies in the inspiration of intellectual and spiritual atmosphere of divine ideas and presenting them in the most effective and attractive combinations and making beautiful works with them. The synthetic and expository character of literature is against the analytical and exploratory character of philosophy or science as they belong to the different spheres. Simply poetry is the interpretation of the natural world, as well as of the moral world. Hence, it is linked with science. However, it does what science cannot do. It is because the interpretations of science do not give us this intimate sense of objects as the interpretation of poetry give it; they appeal to a limited faculty, and not to the whole man.

The two attributes of great poetry are natural magic and moral profundity. But the influence of moral ideas is immediate rather than the stimulus of natural magic. We may find and observe it in the greatest poets like Shakespeare and Lucretius that the sensuous diminishes as the moral increases. As we know, Arnold urged that the critic should be free from ignoble interests, but in doing so he has asked for his certain other interest which may be the more subtle because they are noble. Arnold ties the critics to the notion of moral perfection which are likely to color his judgment and make him over praise some and be unfair to others. In this way, the apostle of disinterestedness becomes the prophet of moral perfection. Arnold said that poetry deals with ideas and not facts and without poetry science will remain incomplete. Much of religion and philosophy may be replaced by poetry. He believes that highest poetry must deal with moral ideas. The moral is applied in its widest sense. The question, how to live, is according to Arnold a moral idea. He declares that moral should not be interpreted in a narrow sense. It is a code of conduct or a system of thought. Arnold holds the view that poetry of revolt against moral is a poetry of revolt against life; a poetry of indifference towards moral idea is a poetry of indifference towards life. We may say that poetry is a criticism of life and critics duty is to examine poetry and life simultaneously. Arnold had a high and broad conception of criticism including religion, culture and education as well as poetry.

In this wider perspective the function of criticism is in all branches of knowledge – theology, philosophy, history, science and humanity. The grand power of poetry is not a power of drawing out in black and white an explanation of the mystery of the universe. It is the power of poetry to deal with things as to awaken in us a wonderfully, fresh, new and intimate sense of them and of our relations with them.

#### **Conclusion:**

To sum up, it may be concluded that Arnold believes that poetry does not present life as it is, rather the poet adds something to it from his own noble nature and this something contributes to his criticism of life. Poetry makes men moral, better and nobler, but it does so, not through direct preaching, or by appealing to reason like science, but by appeal to the soul, to the whole of man. The poet gives in his poetry what he really believes in, he speaks from the depth of his soul and speaks it so beautifully that he creates and thing of beauty, a perennial source of joy. Such high poetry makes life richer, and has the power of sustaining and delighting us, as nothing else can. Such high poetry answers the question, “How to live?”

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