

Page - (01) B.A. Part I (English Honours)

Date: 10.04.2021

Chaucer as a Satirist and an Ironist  
Satirist is found in the world of Chaucer, but it is always gentle, hardly severe, and never savage. His humour was not tinged with fierce and ~~biting~~ biting satire. Milk of human kindness flowed in the veins of Chaucer which made him a friend rather than a foe of humanity. Emile Legouis remarks, "Of all writers of genius, Chaucer is the one with whom it is easiest to have a sense of comradeship." He was willing to depict a world in which the sun shone upon the just and the unjust and the latter seemed to have a liberal share of the umbrella to save himself from the scorching heat of the sun. For the pleasure and amusement of the people of the world Chaucer like Shakespeare and Fielding had the keenest sense of the ludicrous, the incongruous and the comical in life, manners and circumstances. He seldom took recourse to bitter and

Savage Satire to chastise people stained with spots. The severe Savage Satire which is like a cold, biting and freezing wind can be discerned not in sympathetic Chaucer but in rabid Castigator's like Ben Jonson, Swift and Pope. The aim of Ben Jonson was to the follies of the time as he himself said:-

"I'll strip the ragged follies of the time,  
Naked, as at their birth, and  
With a whip of steel  
Print wounding lashes in  
their iron ribs!"

Pope was also a bitter satirist. He was proud of his power of Satire as he said:-

"Yes I am proud, I must be  
proud to see,  
Men not afraid of God, afr-  
aid of me,  
Safe from the Bar, the  
pulpit and Throne  
yet touch'd and shame'd by  
Ridicule alone!"

But Chaucer was not a rabid

castigator of the evils that were running rampant in every nook and corner of his society, especially in the church and the court. He did not lash the stronghold of corruption mercilessly, he simply laughed at them and made us laugh. Bitter or satire, in fact, did not ~~penetrate~~ penetrate the sympathetic and genial outlook of Chaucer. "His interest lies in portraiture rather than in exposure!" "His object is to paint life as he sees it, to hold up mirror to nature and as he has justly been said 'a mirror has no tendency? It reflects, but it does not or should not distort!'"

There is a place in the world for anger, as there is a place in literature for satire and the savage condemnation of wickedness, but anger and satire are far removed from the serene and sunny irony of Chaucer. Not satire but irony is the forte of Chaucer and irony and humour are so pervasive and

pervading in 'The Prologue' and Chaucer's work as a whole that with out-continual watchfulness and vigilance one is in the danger of missing its elusive flame. "It is like summer lightning which" says Selincourt, "flickering all round the horizon, is as often as not behind one's back, so that one wonders if the sense of light upon the eye was a flash indeed, or the memory of a flash!" "The Chaucerian irony is sometimes so large that it is too large to be seen" says G.K. Chesterton, 'The Rime of Sir Topas' has been wrongly considered as a parody of certain bad romantic verses of Chaucer's Age. In reality the joke is not that Chaucer is joking at the expense of bad ballad mongers, but the joke is too broad to be seen by jaded mind Chaucer is making fun of not only bad poets but also of good poets. But the parody says Chesterton, "is not the point. The point is in the admirable irony of the whole conception of the dumb or

doggerel rhymers who is nevertheless the author of all the other rhymes, nay even the author or their authors." Among all pilgrims the poet is the only person who knows no poetry. The Prologue is replete with Chaucerian irony. We have the description of Madame Eglantyne's French which was not the correct French as spoken at Paris but the French of an English finishing school which of course was a very different matter:

"And frenssh she ~~speak~~  
 spakful faire and fetisly,  
 After the scole of Startford-  
 atte-Bowe,  
 For frenssh of Parys was  
 to hire unknowe."

The monk who had deserted his ecclesiastical duties came under the province of irony:

"He gaf not of that tent a  
 pulled hur,  
 That seith that hunters  
 beth nat hoodly men,"  
 Chaucer's jest is obvious in the

Case of the merchant who was always thinking about his profits!

" This worthy man ful wel  
his wit beset,

Ther wiste no wight that  
he was in dette "

Chaucer's irony is crystal clear when he says that the lawyer was the busiest man in England 'and he seemed busier than he was'. Chaucer's remarks about the Doctor of Physic are equally ironical:

" For gold in phisik is a  
cordial,

Therefore he lovede gold  
in special! "

Grony is visible in the much-married wife of Bath. She had enjoyed happiness with five husbands and she was quite prepared for the sixth. There is an ironical remark about her:

" His cover chief's full fyne  
weren of ground, -

I dorste swere they wey-  
eden ten pound! "

The use of irony can also be seen in the hypocritical Reeve

"His lord wel koude he  
plese subtilly  
to yere and lene hym of  
his owene good  
And have a thank and  
yet a gowne and hood!"

Irony has passed through the whole gallery of portraits. Each of the portraits contains subtle fun or friendly mockery. "A roughish playful irony is one of his commonest weapons, satire and serious admiration help, but good humour is always in his right hand."

The end.

Munir Bhustan Sinker  
Deptt. of English  
S.S. College, Jhansi