

Sem III

Paper: CC 7(British Poetry and Drama: 17th and 18th Century)

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A Short Note on Alexander Pope's "The Rape of the Lock"(with reference to Canto I and II)

"The Rape of the Lock" (published between 1712 and 1717), the most popular poem of Alexander Pope is a mock-epic/mock-heroic poem written in five cantos. The poem is a faithful representation of the frivolity and fashion, pomp and artificiality with all its pleasures, dressing, flirting, card-playing of the then or contemporary 18th century aristocratic urban society of England. Leslie Stephen has rightly opined that "no writer reflects so clearly and completely the spirit of his own day as Pope does." In this poem Pope has satirized the lifestyle of the fashionable belles and beaux of the upper-middle class society of England whose life centred only around the futile pleasures of life without any moral and intellectual depth to it.

Notably, Pope's art of social banter reaches its height/perfection in the portrayal of the characters of Belinda and the Baron, typical representative figures of the 18th century England. This poem is based on a real-life incident that took place between Miss Arabella Fermor and Baron, members of two Roman Catholic families who were close acquaintances of Pope's friend, John Caryll. It depicts a trivial incident of a scandalous nature where the handsome young gallant chopped off a lock of hair of the beautiful lady which led to a mighty conflict between the families. This poem was then written by Pope on the request of his friend Caryll to bring about a reconciliation between the families and thereby highlight the hollowness of the entire episode. Alexander Pope using the mock-epic convention has dexterously ridiculed the hypocrisy and vanity of these so-called refined and elite people. These people lived a life of pleasure and revelry with regular visits at midnight masquerades, courtly balls, enjoying rides at Hyde Park and playing game of cards. For these young men and women, feelings/emotions of love, loyalty and commitment were of no value, rather they indulged in frivolous forms of relationships:

"With varying vanities from every part,
They shift the moving toyshop of their heart;"

Pope has criticized this sense of vanity and hypocrisy throughout the poem using the mock-heroic tradition. In mock-heroic style, "the heroic manner is adopted to make a trivial subject seem grand in such a way as to satirize the style, and it is therefore commonly used in burlesque and parody" (Cuddon 514).

The description of Belinda's toilette scene in Canto I is the epitome of the mock-heroic style. This whole episode is a true representation of Pope's exquisite wit, humour and satire. Interestingly, the performance of toilette, the art of make-up or dressing for a party is a slight and trivial affair but Pope endows it with mock-seriousness and makes the dressing up of a fashionable lady as sacred as a religious rite. In this entire episode, little is made great and the great is belittled—

Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bible, billet-doux.

The heroes too are depicted and derided in a similar light. They are parodies of Homeric heroes but have only one aim in their life, that is to flirt with beautiful young women. They are all well-versed in French Romances and experts in writing love letters.

Following the tradition of mock-epic, Pope has also made use of the 'supernatural machinery' by projecting the characters of the sylphs, 'the light militia of the air' and Ariel, the guardian angel of Belinda. These 'bright inhabitants of the air' have played a vital role in the treatment of the commonplace, ordinary events as extraordinary and grave ones.

Alexander Pope through these representations and descriptions has effectively portrayed the artificial age with all its outward splendour and inner emptiness.