

Re- Inventing British English Literature : R. L. Stevenson's Views on 'Happiness'

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Abstract :- British Literature is a rich treasure trove of literary expressions in various forms. It is considered as one of the prolific and extensive literatures of the world. It has influenced not just the Europe but also the rest of the world with its vibrant nature, persistence and the distinctive drive. Amongst the litterateurs who contributed to the wealth of British literature, the name of R. L. Stevenson (1850 – 1894) shines luminously. Apart from his novels and poems, it is his brilliant optimistic essays which breathe a new life into dull and dreary minds. Hence an attempt has been made to re- invent and explore R. L. Stevenson's views 'Happiness' as reflected in his highly popular essays.

Key Words :- *British literature, R.L. Stevenson, Art, literature, happiness, courage, optimism*

I. INTRODUCTION :-

Being an invalid, constantly living in the pen- umbra of death, life of Stevenson was an arduous odyssey. Still, being an optimist to his fingertips, Stevenson attaches utmost importance to 'being happy'. It sounds strange on the background of his suffering and ill-health. Yet the truth is that it is his happy mind that faced bravely all the suffering, Happiness, according to him depends more upon the internal frame of a person's mind than on the externals in the word. Cheerfulness, in his opinion is the best kind of virtue as he is strictly against allowing the spirit to be dampened by gloomy thoughts. The happy mind of Stevenson finds its reflection in his essays like 'An Apology for Idlers' Walking Tours, Memoirs of an Islet and 'The Manse'. Being a staunch optimist, almost all of Stevenson's essays reflect his positive attitude and happy mind. 'A happy man or woman is a better thing to find than a five pound note' (An Apology for Idlers, Verginibus Puerisque., p. 72).

Stevenson attaches utmost importance to 'being happy'. It sounds strange on the background of Stevenson's suffering and ill-health. Yet the truth is that it is his happy mind that faced bravely all the sufferings. He yet again proved that happiness depends more upon the internal frame of a person's mind than on the external situation in the world. The happiest people on earth are those who are emotionally involved in what they are doing. Stevenson played truant in his youth and enjoyed the days of truancy. He remained idle and did nothing but even 'doing nothing' gave him immense happiness. When he was feeling depressed he went on walking tours and nature soothed and embalmed his weary mind. In his childhood he always accompanied his father on his business tours. For months together they used to live a life of seclusion in the island surrounded by ocean. Even then he experienced a strange happiness combined with philosophic thoughts about the human existence. He also gathered happiness during his visit to his maternal grandfathers house 'the Manse'.

Stevenson's '*An Apology for Idlers*' is based on the theme of 'happiness'. It is in the quest of happiness that he preferred to remain idle. "Stevenson wrote to his friend Mrs. Sitwell that this defence of idleness was 'really a defence of R.L.S.' An idler in quest for happiness is R.L.S. himself who from his own experience tells the world how to achieve that mental harmony called happiness. Idleness or 'doing nothing' has its own blessings. Stevenson juxtaposes the extremely busy people to idle people and finds that idleness does not consist in doing nothing but 'doing a great deal not recognized in the dogmatic formularies of the ruling class. In his opinion idleness is an industry in itself. Extremely busy people are always in a race for sixpenny pieces. True happiness eludes them as they fail to enjoy the pleasures around them. Full, vivid and instructive hours of truancy provide immense joy and happiness. Instead of wasting time in formal education, the truant learns in the street,

in gardened suburbs, near the bed of lilacs or 'while smoking innumerable pipes to the tune of the water on the stones' (An Apology for Idlers, VP., p. 67). He learns to see things in a new perspective and gets satisfaction and happiness. In the opinion of Stevenson the books are 'mighty bloodless substitute to life' whereas the knowledge gained in the lap of nature is vibrant and throbbing. All have a role to play in the theatre of life. Everyone must try to derive as much happiness as possible. He honestly feels that pleasures are more beneficial than duties, so man's yearning for pleasures to get happiness is just. In apt words Stevenson reveals the importance of happiness: "There is no duty we so much underrate as the duty of being happy. By being happy we sow anonymous benefits upon the world, which remain unknown even to ourselves, or when they are disclosed, surprise nobody so much as the benefactor". (An Apology for Idlers, VP., p. 73) Stevenson knows it very well as to how rare it is to find a happy man or woman in these days of hurry and worry. He aptly describes how the presence of a happy person changes the atmosphere around him. "He or she is a radiating focus of good will; and their entrance into room is as though another candle had been lighted". (An Apology for Idlers, VP., p. 73) Stevenson's extreme emphasis on happiness is expressed in a single statement:

"If a person cannot be happy without remaining idle, idle he should remain". (An Apology for Idlers, VP., p. 74). Stevenson finds the condition of all work and no play quite pitiable. Though the busy people outwardly appear to be happy they 'sow hurry and reap indigestion', their 'snuff box is empty' and 'they sit with lamentable eyes'. Stevenson is unwilling to call such men successful in their profession. Whatever they have achieved is at the cost of happiness. In his opinion, the idle person or the truant has very well realized the importance of happiness in human life. Hence by remaining idle they try to gain as much happiness as possible and as the happiness is infectious, they should spread it everywhere in the world. If getting happiness is the end, there cannot be the better means than going on a walking tour. Stevenson himself derived immense joy and contentment from the walking tours he had undertaken quite often. Nature inspires creative minds. The influence of Hazlitt's '*On Going a Journey*' is quite discernible on Stevenson's '*Walking Tours*'. According to Stevenson the joy that walking tour gives is incomparable. At the time of departure and arrival the mind of the walker is filled with happiness and contentment. Putting his knapsack on, when the walker sets on the walking tour, 'pleasure leads on to pleasure in an endless chain'. How much joy the walker will derive from the walking tour depends entirely upon what type of walker he is. Stevenson's wit and minute observation enable him to distinguish between the over walker and the temperate walker. He proves successfully how the over walker wastes his energy in merely covering the distance and does not get anything in return. Whereas for a temperate walker it is 'the mild and luminous evening' that fills his mind with happiness he derived from the experience.

To seek true happiness and 'to be properly enjoyed, a walking tour should be gone upon alone' (Walking Tours, VP., p. 148). Stevenson offers this precious advice and also adds that a pipe or a book of Hazlitt would be the best companion. Those who walk fast cannot meditate upon the nature. They are lost in their own world. Some behave strangely as if they have just been freed from the jail. They fail to absorb the beautiful forms around. Stevenson's own experience prompts him to offer an advice to the effect that the walker should avoid uneven walking as it 'is not so agreeable to the body, and it distracts and irritates the mind'. The happiness that the walker derives by falling into equable strides, enjoying the landscape around is better than all the joys of the heaven:

"A man does not make so many articles towards the end, nor does he laugh aloud; but the purely animal pleasures, the sense of physical well-being, the delight of every inhalation, of every time the muscles tighten down the thigh, console him for the absence of the others, and bring him to his destination still content". (Walking Tours, VP., p. 152). Stevenson beautifully explains the sense of happiness and contentment that the mind of the walker experiences when he takes rest in the shade of a tree, smoking a pipe: "You sink into yourself, and the birds come round and look at you; and your smoke dissipates upon the afternoon under the blue dome of heaven and the sun lies warm upon your feet, and the cool air visits your neck and turns aside your open shirt. If you are not happy, you must have an evil conscience". (Walking Tours, VP., p. 152) The experienced walker in Stevenson opines that the best hour for a walker comes after dinner. All the senses are content and happy: "If the evening be fine and warm, there is nothing better in life than to lounge before the inn door in the sunset, or lean over the parapet of the bridge, to watch the weeds and the quick fishes. It is then, if

ever, that you taste Joviality to the full significance of that audacious word".Stevenson opines that the happiness derived from the tour is more valuable than the Roman Empire or a million of money. For a moment you look down upon all the kingdoms on the earth. But a single tour is not sufficient. The happiness and the joy are to be renewed again and again. So the walker gets ready to travel yet again, 'body and mind, into some different parish of the infinite' (Walking Tours, VP., p. 156). 'Memories are a fairy gift which cannot be worn out in using;', writes Stevenson. (Memories of an Islet, Memories & Portraits ., p.120)

Indeed, the happy memories offer immense joy and happiness an opportunity to relive the past moment. Stevenson's stay at the little isle of Earraid with his father is full of happy memories. Stevenson wishes to share the moments of happiness and contemplation with his readers.

In *'Memoirs of an Islet'*, Stevenson describes how he visited the isle with his engineer father who was assigned the job of building a lighthouse for the conduct of seamen. Stevenson paints a beautiful word-picture of the activities of workers using their tools and their engineering skills. The beauty of the labour of man is in perfect harmony with the beauty of nature in the background. The first impression that island created on Stevenson's mind is unforgettable. The memories of it still fills his mind with happiness and joy: "I first saw it, or first remember seeing it, framed in the round bull's eye of a cabin port, the sea lying smooth along its shores like the waters of a lake, the colourless, clear light of the early morning making plain its heathery and rocky hummocks". (Memories of an Islet, MP., p. 123) Stevenson paints a beautiful word-picture of the nature and the sea-shore of the Island and states: "It was in Earraid itself that I delighted chiefly. The lighthouse settlement scarce encroached beyond its fences; over the top of the first brae the ground was all virgin, the world all shut out, the face of things unchanged by any of man's doings" (Memories of an Islet, MP., p.128).

When man is thus happy, quite often the contemplative mood overtakes him and he thinks of the world around- the man and his struggle to survive, competitions and slavery, grief and sorrow. Stevenson was far away from his home, sitting on the shore with his companion, experiencing the tranquility and the perfect peace of mind in the company of beautiful nature. It is in happy but contemplative mood that he writes: "I met my old companion but the other day; I cannot tell of course what he was thinking; but upon my part, I was wondering to see us both so much at home, and so composed and sedentary in the world; and how much we had gained and how much we had lost, to attain to that composure; and which had been upon the whole our best estate: when we sat there parting sensibly like men of some experience, or when we shared our timorous and hopeful counsels in a western islet" (Memoirs of an Islet, MP., p. 131) Thus, Stevenson's memories give a message that man's best estate is in the lap of nature and the perfect composure can be attained by being one with the nature. 'The Manse' – Stevenson's maternal grandfather's house is deeply embedded in his mind. So many happy memories are attached with the place that Stevenson writes about it: "It was a place in that time like no other" (The Manse, MP., p. 107). The garden around the house, the terrace, laurel and yew trees, smell of water, sound of mills and the Manse in the midst of this have made Stevenson's childhood bright with happiness and love. The large and roomy house with many inmates offered him many moments of happiness and joy.

The fond memory of his old grandfather is still cherished by him. Stevenson gives an apt word-picture of his loving grandfather and his habits. He still remembers how his grandfather sat 'by the dining-room fire, with his white hair, pale face and bloodshot eyes'. Stevenson takes pride in certain things or habits that are common in him and his grandfather. Thus tracing his roots to his ancestors offers him a moment of happiness. He broods upon the strange history of mankind and his mind is filled with wonder to think about some part of him that was active in every age in the form of his ancestors. While enjoying the every moment of being alive, Stevenson advises us to be indebted to the ancestors, for "Our conscious years are but a moment in the history of the elements that build us" (The Manse, MP., p. 117) In the moments of joy and happiness, Stevenson feels, that he was also with them sharing every bit of their existence. In him, is the combination of all the traits of his ancestors. The very thought feels his mind with pride and great joy: "Yes, parts of me have seen life, and met adventures and sometimes met them well. And away in the still cloudier past, the threads that make me up can be traced by fancy into the bosoms of thousands and millions of ascendants" (The Manse, MP., p. 118). Thus an old house of his grandfather not only revives the happy memories of his childhood but also compels him to contemplate upon his distant past, wondering 'what sleeper in green tree-tops, what muncher of nuts, concludes my

pedigree?' (The Manse, MP., p. 118). Stevenson's happiness and hopefulness is all-pervading. Happiness is reflected in most of his essays. Himself a happy soul, Stevenson is often found engaged in an attempt to make others happy by spreading positive thoughts and narrating happy memories. His cheerfulness despite his sufferings touches the heart and also encourages the reader to come out of the dark den of depressive thoughts and embrace the shining virtue- cheerfulness. To quote Nathaniel Hawthorne: "Happiness is a butterfly which, when pursued, is always just beyond your grasp, but which, if you will sit down quietly, may alight upon you". Stevenson did exactly that, Instead of chasing the happiness; he himself became the embodiment of cheerfulness and happiness. His happy disposition is infectious. The reflection of Stevenson's happy disposition in his essays serve as a common theme having the potential to instill the same amount of cheerfulness and happiness in the minds of the readers.

II. CONCLUSION

Thus, every aspect that touches human life finds mention in Stevenson's most agreeable essays. The stages of human life, and the problems that accompany them attract his attention. He contemplates on them and offers perfect solutions. Art and Literature enriches human life. Stevenson's sensitive mind appreciates the good and gives his own view to improve the quality. The famous as well as the lowly, and humble persons attract his attention and he immortalises them by sketching their portraits in the most sensible manner. Valour, courage, goodness, happiness, optimism are the virtues that are ingrained in himself. He upholds these virtues and appeals to the world to embrace them. His Philosophy is as simple as this - if death is inevitable, it is of no use spoiling the present with the thoughts of uncertain death. This attitude reminds one of the stanza Edward Fitzgerald wrote when translating the Persian "Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam"

" Ah fill the cup what boots it to repeat How time is slipping underneath our feet.
Unborn tomorrow and dead yesterday Why fret about them if today be sweet."

. The simple philosophy of Stevenson, thus, teaches human beings to live life cheerfully and face death with perfect equanimity.

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