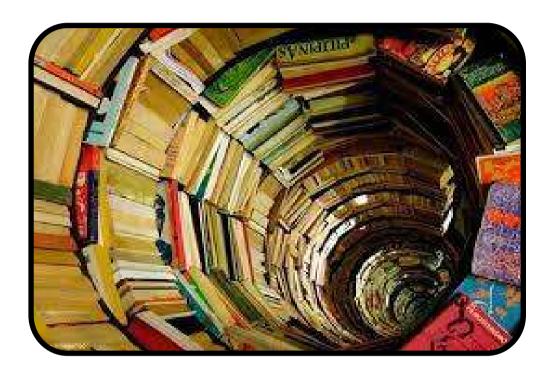# 'TOUCHSTONE' AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

Abaji Yeshwant Shinde

Associate Professor & Head, Department of English, Mudhoji College,
Phaltan Tal-Phaltan, Dist- Satara Maharashtra,

Abstract:-Through his *The Study of Poetry*, Arnold innovated a method of literary analysis popularly known as the 'touchstone method' where by a text is compared with classical text or some part of it to judge the worth of the present text in analysis. The method has its advantages and disadvantages in the field of literary analysis. This paper attempts to explore connections between Arnold's Touchstone Method and the process of production of literature. The paper also attempts to focus on different aspects which influence the author and ultimately his/ her writing.

Keywords: Touchstone, Literary Interface, Comparative Literature, Influence, Intertext.

INTRODUCTION :-

Matthew Arnold in his essay *Function of Criticism* says, 'the grand work of literary genius is a work of synthesis and exposition, not of analysis and discovery; its gift lies in the faculty of being happily inspired by a certain intellectual and spiritual atmosphere, by a certain order of ideas, when it finds itself in them; of dealing divinely with these ideas, presenting them in the most effective and attractive combinations,- making beautiful works with them (1914, p. 12). He uses several words which create questions in our minds. The first two are *synthesis* and *combinations*. First question is *synthesis* and *combination of what*? Both the words posit existence of some prior elements, what Arnold calls 'ideas' and 'order of ideas'. Next two obvious questions are *where to find those prior ideas*? and *what is the appropriate order*? In continuation to the above statement, Arnold says, 'it must have the atmosphere, it must find itself amidst the order of ideas in order to work freely; and these it is not so easy to command. This is why great creative epochs in literature are so rare; this is why there is so much that is unsatisfactory in the productions of many men of real genius; because for the creation of a master-work of literature two powers must concur, the power of the man and the power of the moment, and the man is not enough without the moment; the creative power has, for its happy exercise, appointed elements, and those elements are not in its control (Ibid, p. 12).

Probably he answers the above questions in his essay *The Study of Poetry* (1889) later in which he recommends the famous Touchstone Method whereby one is assigned with the task of rigorous reading of all literature which existed before him or at least the 'master-works'. He suggested a way of reading poetry written by recent poets in the light of poetry written by the predecessors, the poetry that flows through generations in the form of stories, rhymes, verses, used here and used there for different reasons, sometimes to make one's erudition explicit, sometimes to simplify a complex phenomenon, sometimes to exemplify ways of life in the ancient world, sometimes to show adoration for the faculty possessed by our wise ancestors, sometimes to prove superiority of the ancient lifestyle over the present ones and so on. There is no limit as such whereby we can stop using references from those poems. The poetry, in one way or the other, influences our life, standards used in society for identifying and remembering individuals, assigning tasks adequate to the capacities of individuals, addressing problems created by individuals while interpreting the social standards for personal advantages. Arnold argues, 'More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry' (Arnold, p.65). In a way, he explains functions of poetry in our life.

Throughout the essay, Arnold elaborates rather demonstrates a method of reading poetry, reading one poem in the light of another, reading some lines of a poem comparing them with the relevant lines in the poems of the great masters or sometimes even in the poems which have been entertaining and enlightening the human race. He recommends direct comparison of poetic lines which have similar, near similar, opposite or near opposite presentation. To be precise, he, knowingly or unknowingly, leads author into the territory of comparative literature where his work would be compared with the works of others for its interpretation and evaluation.

By recommending the touchstone method for analysis and interpretation of poetry, he expects the reader to be familiar with great literary works. However, when looked at it from author's point of view, an author's knowledge of all the great literary works written prior to his is an advantage for the themes, genres, styles, characters, settings, dialogues, passages, methods of narration, and some other cues would be available for him as a ready material in the form of the raw data, and what he needs for his own creation is proper processing of this data into a final product which appears to be different from what has already been produced. Imperatively, for being an author one needs to have the faculty to process the raw data that is made available to him through reading not only the great literary works but also the works which might not have been recognised as great but they exist around and inspire a person to write. Secondly, an author needs the ability to synthesise his reading experiences with the real life experiences which would direct him and his literary piece towards greatness. It is here the area of interface, particularly the area of *literary interface* *be*gins.

Contact of a text or some of its elements with a new context create possibilities of a new product which may or may not be like the original text as it may undergo alterations suitable to the situation. When a work imitates the style or content of another work, it directly refers to or quotes the previous examples. This gives scope to both, the writer of the new work and the person analysing it to play with inherent meanings. Sometimes this relationship may take the form of a pastiche or a parody, destabilising the original form and creating a new, often socio-political and critical set of meanings.

'To proceed to a more intelligible exposition of the relation of the poet to the past: he can neither take the past as a lump, an indiscriminate bolus, nor can he form himself wholly on one or two private

admirations, nor can he form himself wholly on preferred period.... The poet must be very conscious of the main current, which does not at all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations' (Eliot 1920, p.27). Interface is a line of contacts between boundaries. The writer's connections are three dimensional, vertically downward (contacts with the past), horizontal (contacts in his own period) and vertically upwards (his imaginative lingering in the future). His interactions are not restricted to the chronology of happenings. He imprints the experience, whether direct or indirect, on his memory storing all those experiences to be used as and when required. Creative faculty of an individual is not an instantaneous output but an outcome of a prolonged meditation on the experiences taken or heard about. The subject matter for a creative work is taken from all the known sources. He may create something which is beyond the arena known to majority, but its connections can be traced in the interactions that he has processed into experiences since the time he came across something strange or unknown to people. However, it is not a direct borrowing or piracy for it is processed by the creative mind taking cues from all possible sources around. A lot of his work depends on the exercise he has undertaken while working on the past, the present and his imaginations about the predictable and unpredictable future actions.

'Any serious study or analysis of any author includes consideration of the component parts of his work, their meaning and relationship, how they were suggested to the author, and what they mean to him and to his work' (Stallknecht and Frenz 1961, p. 59). Texts are interconnected with endless selections from other texts and different ways of representing this selection. Intertext is an outcome of exchange of elements of one text with other texts. The writer may do it with several purposes, which are known to him only and are expressed occasionally. 'A text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological meaning' (the message of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture….the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such way as never to rest on any one of them' (Barthes, 1977, p.146). This power to imitate and arrange the borrowed material is conferred on him by the interface, to be more specific by literary interface.

An individual when brought in touch with a masterpiece receives inspiration which may be presented in the form of 'swerving' or 'misprision' (Bloom 1973, preface xii). The personal fallacy occurs when our personal affinities, likings, or circumstances have great power to influence our estimate of this or that poet's wok and make us give more importance to it as poetry than in itself it really possesses, because to us it is, or has been of high importance. "There are two ways in which a writer may lead us to profit by the work of dead writers. One is by isolating the essential, by pointing out the most intense in various kinds and separating it from the accidents of environment" (Eliot 1920, p.20). In this way, he entertains a few intelligent people who are capable of enjoying unique expressions. He attempts to present whatever content he has borrowed effectively so that it appeals a particular class of readers who would profess the work to others. He may profit us by communicating 'a taste for the period- and for the best of the period so far as it is of that period' (Eliot 1920, p.20). This is possible when he is able to take the reader back to the period by setting the narration in the suitable atmosphere and without forgetting the socio-economic and cultural changes the society has undergone. A pure fiction does not demand context but for being convincing and highly entertaining, the reader expect development of a plot in the proper historical context. The author contextualises his plot by adequately studying the works of his masters.

Emerson in one of his essays about biography says that we always come up with the emphatic facts of history in our private experience and attempt to verify them. All the known past becomes subjective. Every mind takes a lesson from it by going over the whole ground. For knowing something one has to see and live it (Emerson, Essays: First Series). His living makes him gather cues from socio-political and economic changes in different ages and literary productions in those ages. He perceives tendencies and interests of people in a particular age and exploits them for understanding the fashion in literary works which was accepted by people of the age. Jakobson says, 'The synchronic description envisages not only the literary production of any given stage but also that part of the literary tradition which for the stage in question has remained vital or has been revived' (Jakobson, Linguistics and poetics, in Lodge, p. 34). A writer's study is diachronic, based on synchronic, beginning with the ancients up to his own age. This chronology avails for him the 'tradition' in the creative literary production and his own product appears to be novel as he processes the data according to the needs and tastes of people. People accept novelty with enthusiasm as long as the newness persists. This novelty is an effect of the space provided to a writer for writing his work. When an author experiences something, individually or as a part of some group, he interacts with the context, and while interacting relates the experience to other existing experiences (which may be once, twice or thrice removed from the original one).

'There are universal themes which are or seem to be the property of all artists and writers, and such themes reveal themselves in images and techniques sometimes thought to be unconnected with the 'matter'

handled' (Remak in Comparative Literature: Methods and Perspectives, p.6). The themes that explore relationships among human beings beginning with the very personal up to the ultimate social have always been discussed with their different aspects by different authors barring the cultural and geographical, socio-economic and political boundaries. They appeal to everybody because they are related to everybody. However, the difference is made by presentation of an individual author. He directs our perception by presenting the plot differently, different from what others have said. The author suffers from anxiety, as it is said by Bloom, because there are links between the two works or more or can be discovered when placed together for at a certain level of human experience there will always be links connecting works of art to one another. 'In perusing the works of this race of author, the mind is exercised either by recollection or enquiry: something already learned is to be retrieved, or something new is to be examined. If the imagination is not always gratified, at least the powers of reflection and comparison are employed; and in the mass of materials which ingenious absurdity has thrown together, genuine wit and useful knowledge may be sometimes found buried perhaps in grossness of expression but useful to those who know their value; and such as when they are expanded to perspicuity, and polished to elegance, may give lustre to works which have more propriety though less copiousness of sentiment' (Johnson, Life of Cowley).

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