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class-B.A. I

Paper-I

Topic - Neo-classical
Poetry of Augustan Age

The death of Dryden in 1700 closed the Restoration period and opened a new one. When Dryden died, the apparent state of English literature seemed somewhat rotten to a Hamlet, considerably less hypochondriacal than the actual Prince of Denmark. Swift, Addison, Steele, Defoe and Pope with their meagre achievements could not fill the vacuum caused by Dryden's death. But Dryden and the Restoration period had left behind a rich heritage, which gradually developed into a full-fledged literary tendency. The period from 1700 to 1798, that is the whole of 18th century, is called the Augustan Age. The poets of this age, namely Pope, and Samuel Johnson grounded their claim on classicism, just as the great Roman poets of the golden age of Latin poetry in the reign of Emperor Augustus had done. The authors of this period thought, felt and wrote as Virgil, Ovid and Horace. Hence the period is known as Augustan Period.

The Augustan Age is known as the Neo-classical Age in English literature. The writers of this period wanted to create a literature. The writers of this period wanted to create a literature that was polished, rational and perfect. The stress was always on balance and discipline, neatness and clarity, simplicity and perfection - the classical ideal was, after all, a natural result of the Renaissance. The Romantic spirit had been aroused among other things by a study of Greek and Roman classics. But the weakness of Romanticism lay in its lack of form, its proneness to extravagance. None saw it more clearly than Ben Jonson and his influence was thrown on the classical side. The classicism was fostered and encouraged by the political needs of the age. In the meantime the French writers of the same period exerted as profound classical influence upon the literature of Europe. Psychologically, the new spirit involved the substitution of the critical

for the imaginative spirit. Elizabethan Romantic literature depended on imagination for its source, it moved on the plane of primal human qualities and it was concerned with the interpretation of human nature. The new classical spirit was above all critical and analytic, not creative and sympathetic. It brings the intellect rather than the poetic imagination into play. This change was adapted for a kind of literature which aimed specially at clearness, consciousness and concentrated force. The less attractive aspect of this ideal was seen in the verse of the day; the figure and more valuable aspects in its prose. The object of the leading writers of the time was to avoid extravagance and emotionalism. Hence in a way it may be said that the Augustan period was maskedly set in reaction against the Elizabethan Age.

The Augustan Age may be truly said to be the Neo-classic Age in English literature. But classicism in England hardly shows itself in a stage of absolute purity. Neither from the aesthetic point of view nor from the psychological point of view can it be said that the Augustan Age was in conformity with the orthodox ideals of the classical writers of Greece and Rome. Certain temperaments and certain individuals came to the fore in time for the complete realisation of all the ideals. Writers are found to illustrate the tendencies brilliantly and in diverse ways. The age was diversified and fraught with internal dissidence; yet it is a relatively coherent and ordered phase. It approximates the classical idea to a very great extent, if it does not completely attain the ideal.

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24.07.2020