



Samuel Johnson's "London" as a Satire

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ABSTRACT

Samuel Johnson, one of the most eclipsed prolific writers with all his dogmatic prejudice, his stoical courage, his profound melancholy, his hatred of sentimental palliatives, his fits of narrowness, his tenderness to all human frailty and his impudent, scholastic intellectuality writes this longest non-dramatic satiric poem 'London' in imitation of Juvenal's 3rd satire, where the poet's friend Umbricius leaves for Cumae from Rome to keep himself away from the moral vices and social ills of the city. Similarly, in 'London', the poet's friend Thales (apparently alter-ego of poet) leaves London, "the needy villain's general Home" for Wales (Cambria) to lead a life of seclusion. Disgusted with the growing social, moral and human degeneration, Thales prays to God to let him find a place--

"Where Honesty and sense are no Disgrace;

Some pleasing Bank where verdant Osiers play,

Some peaceful vale with Nature's paintings gay"

Malice, materialism, accident, conspiracy, violent protests and arson afflict London and vitiate the atmosphere of the city. London has become a place where relentless ruffians have a field day; they mug and inflict injuries on unsuspecting innocent people; unscrupulous lawyers prey upon their clients; house crumbles and a female atheist (Caroline, the wife of George II) Bombards people with her relentless propaganda. The cursed walls of London are infested with vice and personal aggrandisement. Where learning and learned have no place; where there is no beacon light of hope, only frustration; widespread corruption with its masquerades and debauchery has brought down the nation's morale.

KEYWORDS: Materialistic, sycophants, immoral, excise, atheist, propaganda.

INTRODUCTION

In addition to being a biting social satire on the prevailing modes and manners of life in England in 18th century, Johnson's 'London' is a critique of the current political situation in the country under Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole. Through the cue of the poet's friend's (Thales) departure, Johnson depicts a picturesque description of morally rotten and corrupted London, a 'city of vice'. Sir Robert Walpole was leading Minister (1721-1742) of George I and George II and taking the chance of inability of King's English speaking Walpole got considerable freedom and established his supremacy, chairing the preceding on the king's behalf with Cabinet. The poet through his daring jugglery of words vehemently attacks on Robert Walpole's regime. The poet appreciates Thales's choice for choosing the 'Cambria's solitary shore' where there is no hunger as against the vices--malice, materialism, accident, conspiracy, violent protests and arson---that afflict London and vitiate the atmosphere of the city. London has become a place where

'relentless Ruffians' have a field day; they mug and inflict injuries on unsuspecting innocent people; unscrupulous lawyers prey upon their clients; house crumbles and a female atheist (Caroline, the wife of George II) bombards people with her relentless propaganda. Where in the then golden era Elizabeth I's 'Cross triumphant' was the 'Dread of Spain', but now under the ruling Government of Walpole widespread corruption in royal court with masquerades and debauchery has brought down the Nation's morale and the traditional honour and prestige of the Englishmen has become a standing joke. The cursed walls of London are infested with vice and personal aggrandisement. London, 'the needy villain's general Home' has become a 'monstrous city' where learning and learned have no place; where there is no beacon light of hope, only frustration; where only flattery and "empty praise" help a person to make way in the world; where the ruling elite have done to the country with their pusillanimity and misguided policies; where the flatterers and sycophants sell their sensation and personality to gain masters' favour; where depraved persons enrich



themselves, collect taxes from the peasantry, start lotteries; where politicians proclaim their illogical prattling; where the thoughtless youth watch vulgar Italian operas where male sopranos sing; where the hangers-on with their 'divine harmony' adore their master's weakness, folly including the taste in snuff and assessment of a prostitute; where everyone is sycophantic, deceitful and gregarious; where virtuous and meritorious people like Thales are depressed by grinding poverty, was outcast as a beggar and dubbed a spy and doomed to live unhonoured and die unsung. London is, in fact, a sewer with the pernicious influence of the French. Avarice, greed and malice rule the roost, eating at the vitals of the state.

'LONDON' AS A SOCIAL SATIRE

Eighteenth Century has been called the "Golden Age of English Satire". A materialistic age, it rigorously upheld "Genteel taste" and "correctness" and "Good sense" were the order of the day. Also called the Age of Reason, it encouraged rational thinking and correct observation of rules in both literature and social life. Since the Restoration was a revolt against Puritan austerity, the religious and the devout were considered hypocrites. The mode and manners of the royal court, influenced by the French were satirised. It was aided and supplemented by the imitation of the classics-Horace, Juvenal and Persius.

Dr. Johnson's 'London' satirises the French influence on life in England and the English way of life after the Restoration of Charles II to the throne in 1660(written in imitation of **Juvenal's** Third Satire that censured the way of life of Romans in 2nd Century AD). The Puritan regime of Oliver Cromwell had been too severe. With the restoration there was violent reaction against the puritan restraints. Now released from restraint, society abandoned the decencies of life and the reverence for law itself. It seems as if "England lay sick of a fever". The king was a thorough rake, had a large number of mistresses and numerous illegitimate children, but no legal heir to the throne from his wife, Catherine of Braganza. Even the king had no redeeming patriotism, no sense of responsibility to his country. He allotted high office to blackguards, stole from exchequer like a common thief, played off Catholics against Protestants, and betrayed the country for French money for self-pleasure—such continued well into the days of George II. The poet satirised this class in 'London'. This immorality and the levity of the age is reflected in literature.

England had become a nation of parasites, flatterers and sycophants of the rich and mighty. In this materialistic age, everyone sought self-aggrandisement by pandering to the whims and fancies to their rich patrons. Merit and virtue had no place in such a suffocating set-up. This explains why Thales wants to leave London and go to Wales in Ireland. He recalls the glories and reputation of the nation from the days of Alfred, the Great Edward III, Henry V and Queen Elizabeth I when the English had subjugated the French. But now

the French influence dominates English life and manners, flattery and sycophancy dominate everyday life. Favourites are granted pensions, rewards and high meritorious poets suffer in poverty and neglect. Warriors have turned dandies or fops. High officers have amassed untold wealth by plundering the nation.

'And flattery subdues when arms are in vain'

Flatterers and sycophants are encouraged and patronised. Even the countryside was not safe from these neo-rich landlords who disturbed the peace and quiet of the simple country folk by their ostentations living, bawdiness and revelry. Ways and means are constantly found to exploit the poor; excise duties and taxes are introduced to enrich and fill the pockets of the ruling elite. Upright and honest persons like Thales have no place in such fevered London; they are scorned, ridiculed, insulted and humiliated at every step. That's why he has to leave London and seek the 'Solitary shore' of Wales to breath the pure fresh air of 'distant Fields'.

'LONDON' AS A POLITICAL SATIRE

In addition to being a biting social satire on the prevailing modes and manners of life in England in the 18th century, Johnson's 'London' is a critique of the current political situation in the country under Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole. In this Jonson's follows the precedent set by Dryden in **Absalom and Achitophel and McFlecknoe**.

Sir Robert Walpole, a leading Minister (1721-42) of George I and II was made secretary for war and treasurers of the Navy but sent to the Tower of London for alleged corruption during the Tory Government. He was recalled by George I and made a privy councillor and Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1715. After the collapse of the South Sea Scheme, he, shrewd manipulator of men, again became Chancellor(with the help of the Duchess of Kendal, George I's mistress) and widely recognised as "Prime Minister". Following policies of low taxation designed to win the backbench MP's favour and seeking the inability of George I's English speaking Walpole got considerable freedom and discretion as a leader of the Government to lead the country. Gradually Walpole established his supremacy and made the king a puppet of his hand creating a small group of ministers which was the fore-runner of the present-day cabinet. Through Walpole's foreign policy was based on a determination to maintain peace, he did not fully recover from the out-break of the so called war of **Jenkins's Ear** (war between Britain and Spain) and the war of Austrian Succession due to some of the violent anti-Spanish indignation in Britain that provoked the war as captain Robert Jenkins had claimed to have had an ear cut off by Spanish coastguards in the Caribbean.

Recalling Queen Elizabeth I's victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588, Johnson, '**suffering Giant**'(**John Bailey**) takes up cudgels agent the Walpole Government for allowing free access to Spanish ships in England's waters as Thales waits

for his boat to take him to Wales on the shore of Greenwich, where the great Elizabeth I was born. In the domestic sphere, the poem attacks certain measures taken by the Whig Government in the matter of the **excise duty** (Walpole's attempt to increase excise taxes in 1733 prompted a concerted opposition campaign that led to significant reduction of his majority in the House of Commons in the election of 1734), **the stage licensing Act** and **political pension**. The Bribery of the political pension is utterly dangerous as leading to a system of administrations encouraging sycophancy.

'Here let those reign, whom pensions can incite

To vote a patriot black, a courtier while.'

The comment is here sharp and scathing revealing the glaring errors in administration. The poet is very much frank in revealing the fact that London (actually Britain) has lost its own traditional heritage, moral and social value and French influence has turned it a land of social chaos. The people of London have already started to imitate the French culture, manner and corruption. In the then time, rich and powerful persons often 'bought' and 'sold' parliamentary boroughs. They led lavish, extravagant lives and were fawned upon by numerous flatterers and sycophants eager to curry favour with then by pandering to their whims and fancies for self-aggrandisement. Even the countryside was not safe from these

neo-rich landlords who disturbed the peace and quiet of the simple country folk by their ostentations living, bawdiness and revelry. It was a city of malice, rapine, conspiracy, irate mob, conflagration---dreamland of ruffians---city of-wicked attorney---a city where a female Atheist (Caroline, George II's wife) bombards people with her relentless propaganda. It was thus in fitness of things that the poor, virtuous and meritorious "resolved at length" to leave this "monstrous city" of London and sail for Wales in Ireland.

CONCLUSION

Literary stalwart Samuel Johnson through the daring jugglery of words and phrases upholds the pusillanimity, folly, sycophants, deceitful and gregarious nature of the "monstrous city"— London. Samuel Johnson's "London" is an inflicting social and political satire with humorous concordance.

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