

## CHAUCER AS A MODERN POET

A critic observes:

**“Chaucer is a modern among the medieval and medieval among the moderns.”**

Chaucer is the father of English poetry and the earliest of the great modern writers and poets. When Chaucer started writing poetry, the light of modernism was not visible at that time. It was Chaucer who finished the chapter of old traditions and introduced a new era of great modern period of English literature. Just like Dante, he is a bridge between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. He is romantic as well as a realist. His modernism consists of the following themes.

First element of modern poetry is ***observation and realism***. This element of modernism is one of the important features of Chaucer's poetry. This quality has made him the first great observer and realist of English poetry. “**With him is born our real poetry**” says Mathew Arnold. He was a great observer and a painter in portraying his life-like characters. He had the great power to analyze and observe keenly and minutely to depict what he observed around him. In “**The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales**”, the details of each character show as if his eyes were wandering here and there noticing each and every detail. He depicts each pilgrim's appearance, dressing, manners and the qualities of head and heart root and branch. He notices that the Franklin's beard is “**white as daisy**” and he has a “**syngywnn**” complexion. Similarly, he observes the yellow hair of the Pardoner, the ulcer on the Cook's skin and the nose of “**The wife of the Bath**” which is “**of fyn scarlet reed**”. These details clearly show that the pilgrims depicted by Chaucer were real human beings and no other literary work of his age has this quality of realism. “**No other literary work before Chaucer portrays the society so clearly as he does.**”

Second major quality of modern poetry is ***objectivity and detachment***. He does not show any partiality or prejudice in portraying his characters. He observes the flaws, frailties, and foibles of the people with his intellect, detachment and penetration and shares their feelings and is ready to become one with them for the time being. He does not try to describe them according to his own thinking, rather he describes them as they really are. The characters like the wife of Bath, the Summoner and the Pardoner are contemptible members of

society of his time because of their follies but neither he hates them nor has the zeal to reform his society. A critic observes: “Chaucer has a philosophy of universal tolerance.”

Third main quality of modern literature is **Renaissance**. Renaissance gives great consideration to the individual characterization. The characterization of individual character is the trait of Chaucer’s poetry and it makes him a modern poet. That’s why, even when he criticizes, his attack is on the individuals not the institutions. He gives the details of each and every character separately and distinguishes them through their dresses, gestures, physical appearances and feelings.

Fourth main feature of modern writings is **use of humour**. “Chaucer is the first great English humorist in English literature” says a renowned critic. It is Chaucer who first time wrote human comedy and introduced it in the form of poetry. His humour is free of any partiality, prejudice, bitter ridicule, sneer, biting sarcasm or corrosive satire. He exposes the vanities and absurdities of the Prioress, the worldly interests of the Monk and the Friar, the lucrative attitude of the Summoner and the double standard of the Pardoner. He ironically portrays the Doctor’s deep love for gold. “For gold in medicine is a cordial.” This quality of humour is also the main characteristic of great English writers like Shakespeare and Fielding. That’s why, Chaucer becomes a modern poet. E. Albert says: “In the literature of his time, when so few poets seem to have any perception of the fun in life, the humour of Chaucer is invigorating and delightful.”

Fifth main feature of modern writings is that they emphasize on **human emotions**. Chaucer is also distinguished and **uncrowned monarch** in this field. We know that human emotions haven’t got any change even after the lapse of so many years, Chaucer’s poetry also contains touches of emotions. That’s why, his portraits are the portraits belonging to all the ages, groups and nations. We come across the characters which think and feel as we do. In this sense, he can be called the forerunner of modern novel of character. G.K. Chesterton calls him, “The Grand-father of the English Novel.”

Another quality of modern writings is the **dramatic element**. Chaucer’s works are replete with dramatic elements. We all know that he has never written a drama or a novel, but his works have the touches of dramatic elements which are introduced in drama and novel. These elements include story, dialogues, conflict,

characterization and settings, etc. Further, there is no use of personification and allegory in his writings. He enlivens an old story to expose the complexities and complications of sentiments by his soft touches as a dramatic observer. One of the most sustained dramatic characters is of *the Host*. Further, some stories can be culled to perform on the stage. A.C. Ward calls Chaucer “A Born Dramatist.” According to him, “He is not only a superb narrator but a dramatic genius as well.”

To sum up, no doubt Chaucer is rightly called “The Evening Star” of the medieval day and “The Morning Star” of the Renaissance. He is truly a modern poet because his works have all the elements of modern writings. He has realism, catholicity, humour, Renaissance spirit, and style which are the prominent features of modernism. We fully agree with the remarks of a critic who observes: “If we take 30 percent of Goldsmith, 50 percent of Fielding and 20 percent of Walter Scott and vitalize this compound with the spirit of 14<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps we should get fairly near to another Chaucer.” (Words: 993)