



THOMAS MORE'S UTOPIA: A CRITICISM OF LIFE

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Thomas More [1478-1535] was an English lawyer and scholar whose writings became famous throughout Europe in early sixteenth century. In 1516, the first edition of More's Utopia was published, it criticized many aspects of life in contemporary Europe and established a whole new type of writing and outlook on life.

He (More) attaches due importance to beauty, strength and agility. These three gifts of Nature provide honour and delight to people. It means that they are conscious of the role of Nature in human life:

The pleasures of sound, sight and smell they also pursue as the agreeable seasonings of life, recognizing that Nature intended them to be the particular province of man. No other kind of animal contemplates with delight the shape and loveliness of the universe, or enjoys odours (except) in the way of searching for food, or distinguishes harmonious from dissonant sounds. But in all their pleasures, they observe this rule, that the lesser shall not interfere with the greater, and that no pleasure shall carry pain with it as a consequence. If a pleasure is dishonourable, they think it will inevitably lead to pain. (U 74)

They fail to understand-Why do the people despise beauty? Why do they impair their strength? Why do they exhaust their body with fasts? For them reason is the revelation from heaven as it inspires people for holier notions. Hence they are nimble and vigorous physically. As people are not most greedy, they are cheerful by nature. However, some of them have studied Greek authors as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristotle etc. Being an advocate of renaissance learning More says:

They picked up the forms of letters so easily. Pronounced the language so aptly, memorized it so quickly, and began to recite so accurately, that it seemed like a miracle. Most of our pupils were established scholars, of course, packed for their unusual ability and mature minds; and they studied with us, nor just of their own free will, but at the command of the senate. Thus in less than three years they had perfect control of the language, and could read the best authors fluently, unless the text was corrupt. I have a feeling they picked up Greek more easily.... (U 75)

Due to new intellectual waves, people were interested in learning the ancient classics. In Book II of Utopia, More refers to the books of Plato, Aristotle, Theophrastus, Theodorus, Plutarch, Lucian, Aristophanes, Homer, Herodotus, Herodian etc. They had books on medicine as written by Hippocrates and Galen. All possible attempts are



made to make life agreeable. Regarding the interest of Utopians in new learning, paper, printing and other intellectual deeds More says:

Their first attempts were not altogether successful, but with practice they soon mastered both arts. They became so proficient that, if they had the texts of the Greek authors, they would have no lack of volumes. But now they have no more than those I mentioned-which, however, they have reprinted in thousand of copies. (U 77)

Due to their love for adventure some Utopian travellers know a lot about other countries. Quite often they carry their own cargoes there. They never allow their navigational skills to get rusted. It is strange that these Utopians are harsh towards their own people when the latter commit crimes-Why do the people fail to learn ethical values in spite of moral training? When they find somebody's sickness incurable, they want to get rid of him. Life becomes a burden for such persons. They ask him to die of his own or allow others to put an end to his agony. But this is not forced upon the sick people. However, suicide is never encouraged in natural circumstances. Women are badly punished if they enjoy intercourse before marriage.

Guilty parties can't marry for their whole lives unless the governor pardons them.

In Laws Plato asserts that people should get through information of the body of the partner when they are going to make a choice. This system is followed in Utopia without any secret, but this system is not accepted in modern society in the world at large. Character is important but the virtues of the mind are valued highly in Utopia. People punish the life of partner for adultery and moral lapses. Old age is regarded as a sickness in itself. The serious crimes are punished with slavery. Same is the case with those who violate in marriage affairs. It saves revolt for nothing, they are put to death as they can't be reformed. Cosmetics are regarded as items of affectation. The virtuous and sincere people are admired for their noble deeds and often their status are respected for their integrity:

They are called fathers, and that indeed is the way they behave. Because officials never extort respect from the people against their will, the people respect them spontaneously, as they should. The governor himself is distinguished from his fellow citizens not by a robe or a crown but only by the sheaf of grain he bears, as the sign of the high priest is a wax candle carried before him. (U 82)

These Utopians have no faith in heavy volumes of law. They allow each person to plead his own case without the help of lawyers as the latter use complicated and complex languages. Naturally the judges feel easy in such situations and protect the virtuous people. In other words, each Utopian is a legal expert in himself-Why to have endless disputes with the help of obscure language? More admires the 'Utopian virtues' and the character of officials as they can be corrupted with money. He believes that greed and wickedness spoil justice. It is strange that other nations make a lot of treaties and then break them. Many Europeans are famous for this practice. But the Utopians never make treaties as their problems are solved with wisdom and understanding. As treaties are not trusted by them, due importance is attached to justice. Dignity of kings depends upon fair justice.



Thomas More describes the war activities of Utopians in details. As a matter of fact, they don't like the glory of victory. Yet they have to defend their territories from enemies. Vigorous military training goes on in the kingdom. They have every desire to liberate the oppressed people. They are serious when their friends have been plundered. However, they believe that wars have brought a lot of destruction already. As a matter of fact they protect their citizens at every cost and not to mind minor losses. Kings don't tolerate any neighbour if that prince is plotting against them. They know that many wars are encouraged by the madness of princes. To protect their citizens from injuries, they appoint rough and bold people of Zapoteles. These people are bold enough to face the terrible enemies. They fight for those who pay them well. Worst people are hired for wrong deeds and proper soldiers are appointed for deeds of war. Yet they involve the bold Utopians as generals and commanders in times of war. There are Utopians who volunteer themselves for war. It is noteworthy here that women join their husbands in military service and encourage them for brave deeds. Here More admires the boldness of Utopian generals as they are fierce and terrible in the battlefield. When war is won, the defeated soldiers are caught, not murdered:

At the height of the battle, a band of the bravest young men, who have taken a special oath, devote themselves to seeking out the opposing general. They assail him directly, they lay secret traps for him, they hit at him from near and far. A long and continuous wedge of fresh men keep up the assault as the exhausted drop out. It rarely happens that they fail to kill or capture him, unless he takes flight. (U 90)

When fugitives are chased, code of conduct is observed. Plans are prepared even to capture the crafty soldiers. A few Utopians are always kept in reserve. Night proves terrible as fugitives run away at night. The armour of Utopians is pretty strong and yet loose so that they may make movements of the body. They use arrows for long-range fighting. Quite often they use battle-axes and not swords. However, they continue to invent new tools for war. Being humanitarian by nature, they never ravage the territory of enemies. Here More answers the question-How to live? At the same time, one can easily trace the influence of Christian humanism here-Love thy neighbour as thou lovest thyself. These Utopians are gentle even when they collect the cost of war from defeated countries:

After a war is ended they collect the cost of it, not from the allies for whose sake they undertook it, but from the conquered. They take as indemnity not only money, which they set aside to finance future wars, but also landed estates, from which they may enjoy forever a substantial annual income. They now have revenues of this sort in many different countries, acquired little by little in various ways, which have mounted to over seven hundred thousand ducats a year. (U 95)

Then Thomas More describes the religious tendencies of the Utopians. Decent and noble ancestors are considered gods. But the wise Utopians believe in single divinity and regard Him eternal, infinite and 'diffused'. They accept Him as their creator and also responsible for changes and progress. As they have heard the name of Christ, they take inspiration from His miracles and sermons. Now christianity is spreading among them as they believe in 'spirit of light'. Christ's concept of life is accepted by the



Utopians. Utopus came to know that these people previously quarrelled on minor issues. However, the people have learnt the merits of secularism. They follow their faith without quarrelling with others on religious differences. Regarding Utopus More remarks:

...he was uncertain whether God likes diverse and manifold forms of worship and hence inspires different people with different views. On the other hand, he was quite sure that it was arrogant folly for anyone to force conformity with his own beliefs on everyone else by threats or violence. He easily foresaw that if one religion is really true and the rest are false, the truth will sooner or later emerge and prevail by its own natural strength, if men will only consider the matter reasonably and moderately. (U 95)

The ethical aspect of Utopia can't be ignored at any cost. There is no denying the fact that More admires virtuous conduct and condemns vices. Secondly, he believes that there is one divine and eternal force. Thirdly, he admires Utopians as they never impose their ideas upon others. Actually this Utopia is the harbinger of Protestantism in Europe. Like Hindu saints, the Utopians believed in the bliss of next life. Let the people die gladly when their sickness is incurable. Their hope is important at the time of death:

...they suppose God can hardly be well pleased with the coming of one who, when he is summoned, does not come gladly, but is dragged off reluctantly and against his will. Such as death fills the onlookers with horror, and they carry the corpse out of burial in melancholy silence. Then, after begging God to have mercy on his spirit and to pardon his infirmities, they cover the body with earth. But when du someone dies blithely and full of good hope, they do not mourn for him but carry the body cheerfully away, singing and commending the dead man's soul to God. (U 96)

On certain columns they inscribed the good deeds of the dead people. Being kind by nature they believed that dead forefathers were present with them spiritually. They recollected their memories though the latter were invisible physically. They were charitable by nature and hoped to be rewarded for their charity in the next birth. As mentioned earlier, some of them believed in miracles. A few people are contemplative by nature. Some Utopians are highly religious by temperament. However, they believe in the reward of hard labour and hence engage themselves in humanitarian works. Work is regarded dignified by most of them:

They think that this remembrance of the dead person's probity inspires the living to behave virtuously and is the most acceptable form of honour to the dead. For they think toge that dead people are actually resent among us, and hear what we say about them, though through the dullness of human sight they remain invisible. Given their state of bliss, the dead must be able to travel freely where they please and it would be unkind of them to cast off every y desire of seeing those friends to whom in life.... (U 96-97)

Some of them wish that others enjoy leisure after working hours. Due to their good nature they never boast of their deeds. People are of two kinds in this Utopian land-



first, they abstain from sex and eat simple food. Physical pleasures have no meaning for them as they want to enjoy in the next life. But the second kind of people lead a life of comforts and enjoy the pleasures of marriage. However, they are active and loyal to their children:

The Utopians regard the second sort as more sensible, but the first sort as holier. If they chose celibacy over pod marriage and a hard life over a comfortable one on grounds of reason alone, they would be laughed at; but as these people profess to be motivated by religion, the Utopians respect and revere them. On no subject are they wariier of jumping to conclusions than in this matter of religion. Such, then, are the people whom in their own language they call Buthrescas, a term which can be translated as 'the religious'. (U 98)

There are few priests in this kingdom. Some of them join the war. These priests are elected by the people and perform noble deeds in general interest. Hythloday fails to understand as to why the priests of other nations wear costly garments embroidered with gold and silver. There is a provision for excommunication as well as confession in this kingdom. Following the practice of many nations, the Utopian priests teach the children and young people. Virtues and ethics are taught to the pupils so as to strengthen the commonwealth. But women are not allowed to become bishops and cardinals. It is rarely that a widow of advanced age is engaged in the Church. But the priests get the best honour in this kingdom. If they commit follies or crimes, it is supposed that God will punish them. When they join the soldiers, they offer regular prayers for peace. They don't forget to pray for the victory of their own soldiers. After getting victory they request their officers to be merciful towards the defeated soldiers. More admires this noble zeal of the priest and remarks:

This custom has brought them such veneration among all peoples, and given them such genuine authority, that they have saved Utopians from the rage of enemy as often as they have protected the enemy from Utopians. For it is well to established that on some occasion, when the Utopian line had buckled, when the field was lost, and the enemy was rushing in to kill and plunder, the priests have intervened, stop the carnage and separate the armies, and an equitable peace has been devised and concluded. (U 100)

The Utopians celebrate the first and last day of the year as it is done even now. They measure time with the course of the moon and the sun as Hindus and Muslims still do in many countries. The churches are beautifully decorated as Christians still follow this practice. There are many religions in Utopia yet nobody compels others to follow one particular sect. God is invoked with the term Mythra. As people are asked to form their own image of God, there are no statues inside the churches. When men and women enter the church, the former go to their right side and the latter to the left. All the people are dressed in white dresses when they come to the churches. But animals are not killed to please God. The burn incense sticks to elevate the mind. Church service is remarkable for stillness. However, sweet tones are produced for the divine pleasure. People are prepared to follow the voice of God. Like Hindus and Muslims, they prostrate themselves on the ground during prayers.



Still Hythloday feels that he is in the Utopian land and there is perfect justice there. Its law and order is unique. There is equal distribution of goods here and no beggars are found in the kingdom:

But here, where everything belongs to everybody, no one need fear that, so long as the public warehouses are filled, anyone will ever lack for anything for his own use. For the distribution of goods is not niggardly; no one is poor there, there are no beggars, and though no one owns anything, everyone is rich. (U 103)

People work regularly and then lead a carefree life:

For what can be greater riches than to live joyfully and peacefully, free from all anxieties, and without worries about making a living? No man is bothered by his wife's querulous complaints, no man fears poverty for his son, or worries about a dowry for his daughter. Everyone can feel secure of his own livelihood and happiness, and of his whole family's as well; wife, sons, grandsons, great-grandsons, great-great-grandsons, and that whole long line of descendants that the gentry are so fond of contemplating. Indeed, even those who once worked but can no longer do so are cared for just as well as those who are still working. (U 104)

It is sad that other nations don't have the atmosphere of peace and prosperity. In other nations even the rich people are jealous of the king and make conspiracies against him. People are greedy and lustful and hence lead a life of tensions and anxieties. There is a wide gap between the rich and the poor in other nations and Hythloday laments all these facts. On the contrary, the Utopians have never been victims of famine and flood. Russell Annes studied More's Utopia and felt that the latter has the legislative system of Parliament in his mind while writing Utopia. There has never been any shortage of food grains here. It is true that they don't work together superfluities in their kingdom. Towards the end of Book II More blames people for possessing pride as it is responsible for jealousy, war, tension, inequalities etc. In The Divine Comedy, Dante condemns pride as Milton does not spare Satan for his pride:

Pride is too deeply fixed in human nature to be easily plucked out. So I am glad that the Utopians at least have been lucky enough to achieve this republic which I wish all mankind would imitate. Through the plan of living which they have adopted, they have laid the foundations of a commonwealth that is not only very happy but also, so far as human prescience can tell, likely to last forever. Now that they have torn up the seeds of ambition and faction at home, along with most other vices, they are in no danger from internal strife, which alone has destroyed the prosperity of many cities that seemed eminently secure. As long as they preserve harmony at home, and keep their institutions healthy, they can never be overcome or even shaken by all the envious princes of neighbouring countries, who have often attempted their ruin, but always in vain. (U106)

Thus, Thomas More takes inspiration from Plato's The Republic for writing his Utopia and yet remains original on many grounds. More describes the role of priests in details



and refers to the popularity of Christianity in Utopian land. He asserts that Utopians had great respect for books and possessed several books written by ancient scholars. However, the Utopians had enough means of income and hence did not torture their enemies and the defeated soldiers. Like Plato, More also respects the philosopher-king and yet does not classify society on the pattern of Plato. Like Aristotle, he justifies slavery and yet respects their emotions, feelings and human ambitions. There is no denying the fact that Thomas More feels indebted to Plato for writing Utopia. As mentioned earlier, Utopia is a criticism of life and a safe guide to the contemporary political thinkers. There is firm mingling of fact and fancy in this sublime book. Many critics accept that More does not ignore the wicked and negative aspects of human personality. The learned author asserts here that virtuous conduct makes the state a happy place to live.

WORK CITED:

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