

Neo-Classic Criticism - John Dryden as a literary Critic or Dryden as the father of English literary Criticism.

Introduction - John Dryden (1631-1700) was a versatile and voluminous writer to produce works of outstanding merit in this field. He left no branch of literature untouched. He was a great poet, a great dramatist and a great prose writer. He is regarded as founder of modern prose style. Dr. Samuel Johnson was justified in calling him "The Father of English Criticism". His only formal work of criticism is his "Essay on Dramatic poesy". This very work is the unofficial manifesto of his Critical Creed and a significant landmark in the history of literary Criticism of England.

R.A. Scott James quotes, "On reading his essays and prefaces, we find him aware of poetry in its three fold Capacity - as the proper business of the poet, as the objective of Critics' appreciation of and for Society, as a force operating in this midst.

Above all, Dryden's Critical writings in prose are of Capital importance as a Commentary upon the tastes and ideals of the rising Classical School of literature."

As the Father of English Criticism:-

Dr. Johnson, in his literary masterpiece "The lives of the English poets" says, "Dryden may be properly considered as the Father of English Criticism, as the writer who first thought us to determine upon principles of the merit of Composition." His Estimate of Dryden appears to be perfectly right. He was the first critic who took to criticism, seriously and pondered over the problems of literature. It was Dryden who first of all took a Comprehensive view of

literature. His critical pronouncement of the essay on dramatic poesy covers every aspect of literature - Drama, Epic, Tragedy, Comedy, Tragic Comedy, nature and function of poetry.

Dryden's Descriptive Criticism :-

It is Dryden who inaugurated the era of descriptive criticism. He was qualified for this function by his wide reading and learning. He had not only read and digested, Sophocles, Euripides, Theocritus and Virgil but also Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Fletcher and several ancient and modern writers. It is in his criticism that the literary analysis and the dominant concern of the modern critic emerge for the first time. It is in Dryden's "Examens of the Silent Woman" that we get the first elaborate critical analysis of a literary work in English. He affirms at the right moment, the native element in literature. Examine in something quite new in the history of English literary criticism. His enthusiasm and living appreciations of Shakespeare, Fletcher, Beaumont and Ben Jonson are unique.

Dryden's Historical Criticism :-

Dryden is also a great pioneer in the historical criticism. Of course, he is the first English critic to use the historical method of English criticism. He regarded it as a mirror of society reflecting characteristics of the age. He viewed literature's dynamic force changing with the spirit of each succeeding generation and varying with the taste of each nation. He recognises that the genius and temperament differ from

age to age, and this literature in different periods of history is found to be different. It is his view that the Elizabethan drama and the Restoration drama are governed by diverse literary convention. We must be children before we grow. In this way, Dryden recognises the truth that literature is not static but a dynamic process.

Dryden's Comparative Criticism:-

Dryden recognises that the temperament of the French and the English differ and hence the literatures of the two countries are bound to be different. In the 'Essay on dramatic poesy' there is constantly weighing and balancing of the qualities of the English drama as against the French drama. George Saintsbury points out that Dryden was the greatest man of letters of the time in his country as well as in all Europe. His strong obvious common sense and argument suited him to the task of the comparative criticism. He is the first critic in England to analyse English and foreign plays and examine their comparative merits and demerits.

Dryden's liberal criticism :-

Dryden is also a pioneer of liberal criticism. He has great honour for classical rules. His changing tastes and interests helped to make him responsive to different kinds of literary schemes and artistic conventions. He was a keen admirer of the classical achievement. He was highly sensitive to the changing tastes of people and to the requirements of his own age.

Dryden's free critical disposition shows

in his reaction of all arbitrary bands upon freedom of Composition or freedom of Judgement. According to Saintsbury, "Dryden never can help considering the individual works of literature almost without regard to those rules and principles and simple on the board, the bound and the unshakable ground of the impression, they make upon him!"

Dryden's Judicious Criticism :-

Dryden was the first judical critic. In fact, his criticism is perfectly judicious. It is quite unexaggerated and unprejudiced. His chief critical works include "An essay of dramatic poesy", 'preface' Epistles and his brilliant appreciation of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Beaumont, Fletcher, and Ben Jonson. According to Saintsbury, "It is in criticism that Dryden best shows that original Faculty which has often been denied to him elsewhere".

Conclusion :-

His criticism suffers from marked faults. He is guilty of several inconsistencies, and is often vague and desultory. His judgement as a critic is at its best, both in theorising and appreciating rationally. According to Atkin regarding Dryden's achievement as a critic, "By his enlightened Docton his literary appreciation and his critical method, he reg enable readers not only to perceive fresh view of literature, but also to understand more clearly excellences which they had hither to but vaguely valued, and these after all were the Supreme tasks of Criticism in all the ages".