

**AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL EXPRESSION IN THE ESSAYS OF
CHARLES LAMB AND M.K. GANDHI : A SPECIAL STUDY OF AT
SCHOOL AND DREAM CHILDREN – A REVERIE**

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Abstract

This research paper attempts to show an autobiographical expression in the essay of Charles Lamb and M.K.Gandhi. In this research paper, accordingly 2 essays have randomly been selected from the H.N.B.G.U., publication entitled Selections in English Prose, prescribed for B.A I in partial fulfillment of the requirement of three years Bachelor degree course in Arts. The essays so chosen are as under :

1. Charles Lamb – Dream Children
2. M.k. Gandhi – At School

Key words : homespun philosopher, blemishes , reminiscences , *involuntary*, conviction, mediocre, theoretical

In western literary tradition one could find the “germs” of the “essay” in Plato, Cicero, Seneca and Plutarch respectively. Never-the-less, one has to wait till the sixteenth century to see the emergence of the genre “essay” as it is known in modern times. The credit of initiating and innovating authentic literary essay goes to the French writer Montaigne, who is known to have taken pride in declaring that he himself is the main subject of his essays. He made his prose composition a vehicle of self-expression or self-portraiture. In England Sir Francis Bacon is acknowledged to have transplanted the genre “essay” approximately 20 years after Montaigne. By common consensus, Bacon is called ‘the father of English essays’. However, some critics subscribe to the view that English essay took a wrong turn in Baconian practice. By composing impersonal, objective and subject-focused essays he is believed to have moved essay –writing on a divergent track. However, there is no denying the fact this “homespun philosopher”, as Bacon was popularly known by the native English gave “essay” a firm rooting on the English soil.

Dream Children –a reverie is an essay by Charles Lamb, who is called the prince of English essays’ and wrote under his pen-name Elia. This essay is a superb specimen of personal or subjective essay, which has blended ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’, on the one hand, and interfaces, is a sort of day-dream or fantasy, in which we find the author becoming a big nostalgic about his early life in the past and remembers his dear and near relations. The author is imaginatively and emotively transported to the nostalgic world of his past, and his day dream trance is broken when the essayist reaches the end of his essay, which articulates in the words, “....and immediately

awakening, I found myself quietly seated in my bachelor armchair, where I had fallen asleep, with the faithful Bridget unchanged by my side- but John (or James Elia) was gone for ever” (36). These concluding lines contain a blending of humour and pathos.

As far the expression side of the essay ‘Dream Children- a reverie’ is concerned, it can safely be said that here we have a superb example of poetic –prose. This is to be noted that Lamb started his literary career as a poet, but he could not achieve the desired success in poetic enterprise, therefore, he was impelled to switch over to prose compositions especially, essays in which he succeeded tremendously and came to earn the title prince of the English essayists, Lamb’s style is known for exquisite humour, which arises out of whimsical use of puns, word play, conceits, frequent archaisms and metaphors. The following examples are which highlight various literary features of Lamb’s style :

Children love to listen to stories about their elders, when they were children; to stretch their imagination to the conception of a traditional great-uncle and granddame, whom they never saw.(33)

Then I told what a tall, upright, graceful person their great-grandmother field once and how in her youth she was esteemed the best dancer- here Alice’s little right foot played an involuntary movement, till, upon my looking grave, it desisted, the best dancer,.....(34)

.....having us to the great house in the holidays, where I in particular use to spend many hours by myself, in gazing upon the old busts of the twelve Caesars who had been Emperors of Rome till the old marble heads seem to live again or I to be turned into marble with them...(ibid)

The above specimen throw light on various features of Lamb’s writings: The first specimen shows that Lamb possessed psychological insight of child psychology; The second example shows how observant Lamb was, he could make out the sense and attitude out an individual through her/his non-verbal behavior. The example 3 gives us a hint about the hyper sensitive disposition of the essayist. He possessed the attribute called ‘negative capability’, which in simple words mean to imaginatively and emotively negate one’s self and assume other self.

Lamb was able to establish ‘empathetic bond’ between himself and the person, place or thing which he described. Lamb contained in ample measure the very faculty of ‘negative Capability’, which he found in Shakespeare in amplitude. The following are other examples underscoring various literary features of Lamb as an essayist :

...or in watching the days that darted to and fro in the fish-pond, at the bottom of the garden, with here and there a great sulky pike hanging midway down the water in the silent state, as if it mocked at their impertinent frisking.(35)

The above extract shows how Lamb plays with the sound stratum of the word and is able to reinforce the very sense of expression. In the fish pond the agile movement of the small fish dace is reinforced by the alliterative sound of the letter ‘d’ ‘r’ ‘n’ ‘t’ and similarly the slow and sulky movement of the mocking fish pike is communicated by manipulating the sound potential of the words, he used to describe its movement in the pond.

Here John slyly deposited back upon the plate a bunch of grapes, which not unobserved by Alice, he had meditated dividing with her, and both seemed willing to relinquish them for the present as irrelevant.(35)

The above extract gives an amusing example generating humour. Here we see the two (dream) kids of the author attracted towards taking a relish of the bunch of grapes, which the boy has stolen unobserved by the father, but when the father declares that he was an obedient boy in his childhood and did not like to pluck and relish the fruits in the garden without permission, the very comment of the father inwardly compels them to mend themselves and become obedient like their fathers. Therefore, as a gesture of amendment John deposit the stolen bunch of grapes back to the plate. This aspect of child psychology is demonstrated by the author through the non-verbal behavior of his kids John and little Alice.

Then I told how for seven long years, in hope sometimes, sometimes in despair, yet persisting ever, I courted the fair Alice W-n; and much as children could understand, I explain to them what coyness, and difficulty, and denial, meant in maidens.....(36)

The above extract touches the heart of the readers, as it is nostalgic, highly emotive and shows how deeply Lamb was attached to Mrs. Ann Simmons, whom he courted for seven years, who refused his love and married to some Mr. Bartrum. This is one of the example of pathos, along with a couple of other examples in this essay. In Lamb's essay we find the high incidence of the expression 'I' 'me' 'my' and 'you' and his habit of arresting his opinions and speculations in the first person, this is a characteristic example of 'egotism', which the 'personal' or 'subjective' essayists end to possess.

The essay next in order is **At School** composed by M.K. Gandhi a great Indian leader. He fought against the British rule for the civil-rights of the native in Africa. He was a great spiritual leader, speaker and writer and a social reformer. Essentially he was a saint politician of modern India. The present essay is an extract from Mahatma Gandhi's famous autobiography My Experiment with Truth. In the essay he tells about his early education. He was only seven when his father left Porbandar for Rajkot to become a a member of the Rajasthanik court. He was given admission in a primary school. Gandhi has written about his personal experiences when he was a common student at school.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was neither a dull nor a very intelligent student. He rated himself as mediocre student, but he was very honest and loved 'truth'. He was a very shy student. He did not mix up with other students and used to take a very long time to open up. He always tried to keep himself busy in his books and in his lessons and tried to skip the company of other students. He always reached the school at the right time. The school closing bell having rung, he used to run back home because he feared to mix up with other student and so avoided to be snubbed and teased by them. This was his daily routine. He was not a bright student but he gave more importance to moral values. He was very honest and did not believe in adopting unfair means to get success in examination.

When Gandhi ji was at first year of highschool, Mr. Giles visited the school for inspection. He wanted to test the status of knowledge of the students, so he gave five words for spelling exercise. Gandhi ji mis-spelt one word 'kettle'. His teacher indirectly insinuated and hinted him to copy the correct spelling from the boy sitting before him, but Gandhi ji was determined not to do so, therefore, he was later on reprimanded by his teacher, but Gandhi ji remained intact in his stance with due reverence for the teacher.

He was blind to the weaknesses and blemishes of his teachers, for whom his reverence never diminished. This incident shows that Gandhi Ji was very honest

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and followed the path of truth. He used to imitate the merits of elders and never found fault with them, “For I had learnt to carry out the orders of elders, not to scan their actions” (70).

His school certificates were never bad. Later on, he was also successful in getting merit scholarship. As he writes in An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiment with Truth that :
My own recollection is that I had not any high regard for my ability. I used to be astonished wherever I won prizes and scholarships. But I very jealousy guarded my character. The least little blemish drew tears from my eyes. (72)

There happened two incidents which influenced him very much. One of the books, which he read was “Shravana Pitrabhakti Nataka”. It was purchased by his father. The book on Shravana’s Pitrabhakti impressed him very much. It was a play about Shravana’s devotion to his blind parents. He himself was very much devoted to his parents. He also saw the pictures. He wanted to imitate the example of Shravana in his own life.

He was also impressed with the truthfulness of Harish Chandra. He saw this play many times with the permission of his father. He wanted to imitate the truthfulness in his whole life. He wanted to follow the path of truth and also to face all the ordeals for the sake of ‘truth’ like Harish Chandra. His love for truth made him confess his mistakes frankly. He made new experiments in the sphere of truth and Ahimsa and ultimately become the apostle of truth. The impact or impression of Harish Chandra and Shravana Kumar on the mind of Gandhi Ji is indelible. He himself says, “But for me , Both Harish Chandra and Shravana Kumar are living realities and I am sure I should be touched as before if I were to read again those plays today.(71)

There are two more reminiscences of his school days. In his time English medium was compulsory from fourth class. But he was not very strong in it. His interest was in the Geometry but Sanskrit was a harder subject for him. So he preferred Persian in the place of Sanskrit . The Sanskrit teacher was very sad then he called him and reminded him that he was the son of a Vaishnava father so he should take interest in Sanskrit. The words of the teacher melted the thought of Gandhi ji. He joined back to the class and began to learn Sanskrit.

Another incident which Gandhi ji the rated in his autobiography concerns the age when he was in the seventh standard. Mr. Dorab ji Edul ji Gimi made gymnasium compulsory, Gandhi Ji did not like it. He was never interested in games. He always thought that games and sports have nothing to do with education. But later on he came to realize that he was wrong and that physical exercise is as much a necessary part of education as mental exercise.

Gandhi ji also came to realize later on in his life the significance of good handwriting, when he happened to be abroad in England for the purpose of further education, and insist that it should be considered as an integral part of education.

From the expression point of view the prose style of Gandhi contains the features of simplicity, lucidity; his expressions are well able to carry ‘conviction’ and ‘incontrovertible arguments’ along with them, which are quick to appeal and impress its readers. The following extracts exhibits the features of style of writing by Gandhi:

I used to very shy and avoided all company. My books and my lessons were my sole companions. To be at school at the stroke of the hour and to run back home as soon as the school closed – that was my daily habit. I literally ran back ...I was even afraid lest anyone should poke fun at me. (70)

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One of the word was ‘kettle’ I had mis- spelt it. The teacher tried to prompt me with the point of his boot, but I would not be prompted...I never could learn the art of ‘copying’ (ibid)

This play – Harishchandra – captured my heart. It haunted me and I must have acted Harishchandra to myself times without number. ‘Why should not all be truthful like Harishchandra? Was the question I asked myself day and night. (71)

...I very jealously guarded my character. The least little blemish drew tears from my eyes. When I merited or seemed to the teacher to merit, a rebuke, it was unbearable for me. I did not so much mind the punishment, as the fact that it was considered my desert. I wept piteously. (72)

I do not know whence I got the notion that good handwriting was not a necessary part of education, but I retained it until I went to England. I then saw that bad handwriting should be regarded as a sign of an imperfect education. Let every man and woman understand that good handwriting is a necessary part of education. In fact I deeply regret that I was not able to acquire a more thorough knowledge of the language, because I have since realized that every Hindu boy and girl should possess sound Sanskrit learning. (73)

The above extracts make a display of Gandhian style of writing, which mirrors is personality. From each and every line, which he puts on the page, a reader is able to have a glimpse into a pious mind and benign heart of the author.

The essays as analysed possess structural unity in the sense that they all have – a beginning, a body and a conclusion. The essayists employed various possible ways to begin their compositions to captivate interest of their readers and involve them in the act of reading. For example, Lamb begins his essay “ Dream Children – A Reverie” by stating a psychological fact about children’s disposition and then stretches his imagination to move into the fictional world of a day- dream, blending bit of facts with his fantasy. His opening statement is : “Children love to listen to stories about their elders, when they were children; to stretch their imagination to the conception of a traditionary great-uncle and granddame, whom they never saw”(33). In the essay “At School”, Gandhi ji’s views on the teacher’s remark also very pathetic when he says, “For I had learnt to carry out the orders of elders, not to scan their actions” (70).

Lamb and Gandhi ji both wrote in autobiographical style and tried to give the real experience of their life. One one hand Lamb description of about his imaginary childrens gets the sympathy of the readers, on the other hand the life- experiences of Gandhi ji touched the nerves of the audience. Both the essays have a similiarity i.e both the essayists shared the part of their life with their readers without any hesitation.

Like the beginning, the devices used to conclude an essay also varies from subject to subject. In the hands of great essayists the concluding part of their compositions end with suitable and striking notes, strengthening the idea that a good essay is an organic hole. For example, Lamb’s esay closes with a striking humours statement announcing the breach of his “reverie” of day dream in his composition, “Dream Children – A Reverie”,.... And immediately awaking, I found myself quietly seated in my bachelor armchair, where I had fallen asleep, with the faithful Bridget unchanged by my side- But John (James Elia) was gone for ever” (36). Thus a temporary escape and stay in his nostalgic and romantic world of the past having been over the

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author comes back to his present real world, which no individual can escape for longer till he/she survives. The reader is emotively swept off his feet throughout the course of the subjective – essay and moves back to reality with a mixed feeling of pathos and humour.

Similarly, the following diagram presents a simplified view concerning the differences between the two prominent modes of essays:

Personal Essay	Impersonal Essays
Author –Centered ,Self- Portraiture	Subject Centric
Intimacy between author and reader	Distance between author and reader
Informal ,confidential tone	Formal ,neutral tone
Reader enjoys equal status with the author	Superiority of the author ,positing him on a higher pedestal
High incidence of expressions such as I, Me, My, You	Written in the third person
Fires imagination and emotive appeal ,and hence touches heart like a lyric	Cognitive appeal, pleases intellectually

The above broad division between a ‘personal and impersonal ‘essay is not absolute but relative. A ‘subjective ‘essay is actually ‘subjectively objective ‘, and an impersonal essay is ‘objectively subjective’. It is also important to note that the most effective English essay is the one which has persuasive appeal and thereby capable to force the reader to a new kind of awareness about things which she/he is used to and takes for granted, and impels us to accepts new ways of perception. The good reader is an open minded reader who will allow the text to question her/his preconceptions and beliefs and we willing to accept new perceptions and thoughts.

The following tabular statement consists of a parallel classification, which as a theoretical format researcher has used to avoid confusion and misconception about the terms humour, wit ,satire and irony and as a help in identifying these as literary devices used by the authors in their essays, analyzed in the present:

Term	Motive or Aim	Province	Method or Means	Audience or Reader
Humour	Discovery	Human Nature	Observation	The sympathetic
Wit	Throwing light	Words and ideas	Surprise	The intellect
Satire	Amusement	Morals and Manners	Accentuation	the self-satisfied
Irony	Exclusiveness	Statement of fact	Mystification	an inner circle

(After Fowler 241)

To conclude, we may say that as anything can appear in our dreams so anything can go into an essay. Yet it ‘is not the matter ‘of an essay that makes it an essay but what the essayist

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makes of the matter. The prose selection brings the readers in the contact with some of the finest specimens of English essays, which not only illuminate and refine the minds of their readers but also develop in them sense and feel for the idiom of the language.

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