

E-ISSN: 2581-8868

Volume-04, Issue-03, pp-166-169

www.theajhssr.com

Research Paper

Open Access

Understanding Matthew Arnold and His Idea of Culture and Education: A 21st Century Response

Anasuya Adhikari¹ & Dr. Birbal Saha²¹Independent Scholar & Former AT, TIGPS, Jalpaiguri, WB, India²Professor, Department of Education, SKB University, Purulia, WB, India

ABSTRACT

History has witnessed great masters of education, among whom Matthew Arnold, the classicist-conservative, glorifies the list. Matthew Arnold found himself moderately in forefront on the strip. This research article will analyse Arnold as a pristine instructor of education and a critic and designer of British culture. This article will also canvass the twin aspects of Arnold's idea of education and culture. Arnold, while sharing his ideas on education and culture, turns out to be one of the biggest critics of the British culture, which was submerged into its self-glorification of material exorbitance. This appraisal will be a 21st century rejoinder of Arnold both as an educationist and as a cultural hero.

KEYWORDS: Arnold's Idea of Education, Arnold's Idea of Culture, 21st Century Response

I. INTRODUCTION

"What actions are the most excellent? Those, certainly, which most powerfully appeal to the great primary human affections: to those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time." Preface To Poems (1853) - Matthew Arnold

Ben Johnson, one of England's greatest critic, was complimented saying, wherever he saw chaos he attempted to eliminate them, creating order. The same can be said for Matthew Arnold. Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution shook many. Arnold still remained as a tree with a single leg. It is a truth universally confessed that Arnold, the poet and the critic had been successful uniformly as Arnold, the master of education and the organizer of British culture. He was equally conscious of the idea of culture, which is associated with education and its further culmination in a prosperous social order. When the Victorian soil smelled the air of doubt and faith, Arnold came with an enormous prospect of advancement in the field of educational system. This paper will meditate all such issues keeping the reception of Arnold in the 21st century.

II. ARNOLD'S IDEA OF EDUCATION

Matthew Arnold has been labeled a classicist, an unnerved conservative and a persistent critic, every name, whether derogatory or complimentary, that advocate standards, unity, order and impersonality in criticism. Therefore, it is assuredly feasible to establish with some certitude that Arnold asserted in order, admired unity, invoked standards and reiterated on impersonality. According to Matthew Arnold, education is the procurement of culture, while culture is the pursuit and study of perfection. Perfection dwells in the absolute development of a man; and when man has matured morally, politically, intellectually and socially to the summit of his potentialities, he may be labeled as an educated. Arnold follows this notion of the craving for perfection buttoned up in all his works. Interestingly enough, when his poetic career just took motion, we find him enunciating his craving for perfection. Doing so, he discovered that nature alone cannot provide him with the same. Consequently, he digs out an answer to his yearning for perfection. Although he rivals against believing it, he finally concedes that the law of God administers the human race, and only in abiding to this law, man walks evenly on the road to perfection. It is under this shade of acceptance of God's supremacy and dominion that the State, society, as well as the moral life of an individual, discovers its means of perfection. This accountability to toil willingly towards perfection must not hold back a man isolated and confined. The will of God must master, not only in every individuals but also in the state, and it is only by mutual help and cooperation that mankind will attain the results for which they must endeavour, and will attain true greatness. This notion of greatness, Arnold very well knew, would hardly be acceptable and feasible to the England of his time, which had already submerged itself into the pride of its material prosperity.

Arnold feared that England would become so satisfied and contented with the mechanical civilization in which it gloried, that the desired culture would be completely lost sight of. It was not that Arnold could not witness the vitality of material prosperity as a massive factor contributing to the national good, but he also stressed that this consciousness of mechanical overpower should not be possessed. Arnold's reception to the vital school legislation of his century is considered as a vehicle of recognising him with the massive movement of democracy. His attitudes, as shown in his educational writings, will be set up for comparison with generally acknowledged criteria for democratic education. These criteria will be taken from a variety of fields. An analysis of Arnold's writings makes it feasible to break down his interpretations of education into six arbitrary groups. These interpretations of education are concerned with:

- a definition of education;
- the kind of education needed for different classes;
- the content of education;
- methods;
- administration, and;
- training of teachers.

III. POSITIONING BRITISH CULTURE WITH ARNOLDIAN PARAMETER

Arnold was conscious of the fact that England, in spite of her rapid development in political democracy, had no or little social democracy. If we are to rely on the present day critics, this similar condition still exists, although in a lesser degree. He was able to see the conditions in a clear light and attempted to remedy the existing evils. According to him, the upper class was impoverished of a considerably large deal of its hereditary earnings and prestige, yearned for a practical education. With its increasing power, the middle class was in much need of a more constructed culture and discipline pattern, and the lower class needed an introduction to and an accomplishment in the fundamentals of learning. For the upper class, he placed a trust in its heritage and promoted enlightenment in the human side of life. His ideal interest lay in the middle and lower class. Arnold worked in the midst of a budding democracy, both socially and politically. It must be kept in mind, then, that those practices were considered to be the apotheosis of this massive movement, can at present be viewed upon only as feeble gripping under the dark shadow. It is not difficult to observe the great influence that Arnold exerted upon the entire educational system of England by means of his position in the school system of his time, and by means of his insistence upon cultural education, in his writings. Even in our present century, the colossal advancement which England has achieved along the lines of education, might be pursued to Arnold's prompt and influence, and we witness now that his educational theories and researches have become an integral chunk and factor of his literary and cultural idealism.

IV. CULTURE AS DEFINED BY ARNOLD AND ITS EFFECTIVE END TOWARDS EDUCATION:

Arnold's part in developing the modern usage of the term '*culture*', which has become ubiquitous in literary and sociopolitical discourse, is one of his most important contributions as a man of letters, and it is intimately tied to his own growth and development as a writer. Use of the term was already fairly common among English writers and intellectuals in the 1850s, but it was closely associated with the German word '*Bildung*' and its English equivalents, self-cultivation and self-development. That is, '*culture*' usually meant '*self-culture*', and for many it had negative connotations of egoism, amorality and an unhealthy aestheticism. In his last lecture at Oxford, Arnold was reluctant to define exactly what he meant by '*culture*', but it was crystal clear that he did not mean a precise body of art or knowledge, but rather a psychological attitude of mental freedom, driven by the motive of intellectual inquisitiveness. Arnold's basic egalitarianism is apparently clear here. Culture '*seeks to do away with classes*' and '*make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere*' - Culture and Anarchy, Introduction, p. xxii

The '*enemies*' of culture are a '*mechanical and material civilisation*' that stifles the inner life of the individual, an unsympathetic spirit of competition, and an '*intense energetic absorption*' in specialized pursuits. If we place Arnold's view of culture in a row, we will find three chief elements in culture: Firstly, an inward condition of mind in opposition to dependence upon external and mechanical appliances, Secondly, a harmonious expansion of all our powers in contrast to one-sidedness of thoughts and over absorption in some special pursuit, and Thirdly, a social conception aiming at the improvement of society as a whole and requiring the subordination of individualistic traditions and aims. Hence, after learning Arnold's views we can understand why he was interested in spreading the whole of culture over the whole society. It was Arnold who taught the Victorians that culture is a study of perfection, and that one strata of society cannot attain perfection unless the other social groups are carried along in seeking of this goal.

Arnold's last lecture at Oxford, 'Culture and its Enemies', was in its published form and was his foremost unambiguous essay in political and social criticism. While writing this sort of criticism during the troubled period, prior to the Second Reform Bill in 1867, he was considering the paradigm of Carlyle, whose first political and social essay, 'Signs of the Times', published in the Edinburgh Review of June 1829. This was also the very period of social disturbance, slight prior to the First Reform Bill of 1832. Carlyle's initial critique of the 'Age of Machinery' served Arnold, with one of the fundamental metaphors of 'Culture and Anarchy', the Englishman's unjustifiable acceptance of institutional machinery. Carlyle's impression in England had long been corrupted by his curmudgeonly authoritarianism and stylistic excesses, while Arnold's early pine for the great sage had largely faded by 1850.

Arnold could see that, 'culture' as he conceived, would not be granted as a necessary, or even a beneficial quality into the political world. It would have to be by long discipline and training that the nation would be made to see any practical relation between culture and politics. Nevertheless, he thought that by a gradual process and progress of reformation by culture, the welfare of the State would shift from the hands of unscrupulous Party leaders, and would be safer under the direction of public-spirited and sincere men who would be potentially capable of inspiring men with higher and newer motives for political action. It was in this way that he intended that culture should reform politics. Much in the same way, Arnold hoped that culture would add what was wanting in all phases of society, especially in that of the middle class, and subsequently, would mould the two classes with fundamental education. He had great hopes for this branch of English society, because he thought that these people were easier for new ideas, and were full of energy and self-reliance. He thought that the possession of these qualities was a sufficient guarantee, that, with the right education, the middle class would become a group of thinkers, as well as doers. Arnold realized that the teachers of the elementary school should receive the first attention of those interested in the furthering of the culture of the middle classes, and he lent his efforts towards giving them all possible assistance. He was deeply in sympathy with them, and felt the difficulty of their task. He says;

"No one feels more than I do how laborious is their work, how trying at times of the health and spirit, how full of difficulty even for the best; how much fuller for those, whom I too often see attempting the work of a schoolmaster--men of weak health and purely studious habits, who betake themselves to this profession, as affording the means to continue their favourite pursuits; not knowing, alas, that for all but men of the most singular and exceptional vigour and energy, there are no pursuits more irreconcilable than those of the student and of the schoolmaster. Still, the quantity of work actually done at present by teachers is immense; the sincerity and devotedness of much of it is even affecting. They themselves will be the greatest gainers by a system of reporting which clearly states what they do and what they fail to do; not one which drowns alike success and failure, the able and inefficient, in a common flood of vague approbation." - Reports on Elementary Schools, 1854, p.34

As is shown in his official reports, Arnold insisted that the opening of the soul and the imagination of children should be entrusted to none but to proficient and cultured teachers who are interested in the welfare of the pupils. *"The teacher will open the children's soul and imagination the better, the more he has opened his own: so he will also clear their understanding the better, the more he has cleared his own."* Reports On Elementary Schools 1878, p.190

Arnold thus positively brought out the idea of appropriately educating the individual in line with his aptitudes, so he shows in his sarcastic attack on the English educational system in 'Friendship's Garland' the chaos that has come about by lack of specific professional training. Here Arnold argues with Arminius, his scholar friend that, *"it is rather in training and bracing the mind for future acquisition, a course of mental gymnastics we call it, than in teaching any set things, that the classical curriculum is so valuable."* - Friendship's Garland. Letter VI. p.49

It was via the medium of these sort of writings and simultaneously many other passages, that Arnold solicited to pull the attention of the general people to the state of the educational institutions of his nation. Arnold's poetry has constituted a vast following for him, among those of his own and those of our present age whose reverence for the classics and culture are in agreement with his own. Arnold, as an educator, held that the humanities had the greatest educating power. It was to these studies that Arnold looked for the formative force in the educational system.

V. TWENTY FIRST CENTURY RESPONSES

Arnold has in common with several other 20th and 21st century educationalist that there is a much need for a child centred school. When Arnold said of the German schools that the children in them were human, he was leveling a criticism at the English system of class room conduct. Arnold's message to the teachers was to

abridge everything that was possible. Arnold guided them referring to Wolf, “*Wolf’s great rule in all these lessons was that rule which all masters in the art of teaching have followed – to take as little part as possible in the lesson himself; merely to start it, guide it and sum it up, and to let quite the main part in it be borne by the learners.*” Higher Schools and Universities in Germany, p.73. These very words are indeed the heart of the method of the modern democratic educational theory.

VI. CONCLUSION

The greatest poets and philosophers of all ages have believed that the ethical view of life is the essential view of life and Arnold also believed the same. It had become all the more important in his own age when materialism had dominated the life of people, and when religious values were crushed due to the development of science, Arnold knew the melody of his age and therefore, protested vigorously against it. He wanted to renew the permanent ethical values of life and reconstruct art on its time basis. He believed that poetry embodied in ethical values will save man from meeting disasters resulting into hollowness of life. He wanted to preserve culture, since culture had a lot to do with education. He always felt that culture and education were interwoven, and if intelligibly used can save the mankind, pushing it from the unwanted custody of materialism.

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