

“Gulliver’s Travels” as a satire

“Gulliver’s Travels” is indeed the one of the very few satires written in English, which is vast and cut across both the domains of human and non-human. It is a satire that leaves no space untouched or unscathed from its piercing analysis. Satires generally have certain definite points of critiques. Accordingly, they are divided between ‘Juvenalian’ and ‘Horatian’ varieties, other than the ‘Menippean’ ones. While the ‘Juvenalian’ satires are known for their merciless treatment of objects of satire by often resorting to a moralist overtone, ‘Horatian’ satires are lighter in tone and meant for evoking laughter and mirth. “Gulliver’s Travels”, in the mold of ostensibly narrating separate tales of wonder and exploration, presents a grand narrative within which different segments deal with different objects of satire. Jonathan Swift, the author, has adopted utopia and dystopia as distinct literary techniques to intensify the satiric effect, which importantly undermines any division between Juvenalian-Horatian varieties. It is very difficult to decide where the laughter ends, and where the satire turns ‘Juvenile’. This indistinction, in part, makes this narrative a grand one, a sui generis of its kind.

In the first part, ‘Voyage to Lilliput’, Gulliver arrives at the land of Lilliputians. He first faced a shipwreck, and then was imprisoned by the King as a prisoner in Lilliput. From this position of a prisoner, an outsider who is looked up as an object of wonder and suspicion, Gulliver could see the vanity of man, the pompous nature and the trappings of monstrous ego. His observation closely relates to the condition of his own nation, the artificial nature of civilization, the unnecessary importance given to ceremony and convention over genuine feeling for the fellow citizen. Men are essentially basking in ego, and living in tombs of inflated self-perception. Gulliver was made to stand with legs apart, so that the king could parade down in between his legs and feel like doing the same through a colossal gate, the symbol of human pride. The quarrel between Blefuscu and Lilliput is regarding from which end to break an egg, the big end or the small end. Could this be a reason for quarrel? Don’t we indulge in war mongering in the name of religion, in the name of whose blood is purer? This is a sheer attack on warfare, violence, on people who are the prisoner of their imagined world. These situations eerily relate to the contemporary Whig/Tory animosity back in England in the 18th century. The satire is both centrifugal and centripetal as it first attacks ‘several remote nation of the world’ and then immediately recoils and turns its attention to the criticism of English custom, protocol and

ceremony. This is illustrated with the King of Brobdingnag's concluding comment on European society, "I cannot but conclude- hate Bulk of your Natives to be the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin". The satire is double-edged that refuses to find any position which can morally or socially sets standard. This is where the suspicion regarding misanthropy as an important thematic of the text becomes pertinent. Except the relation with Glumdalclitch, the satire in this second travel, titled as 'Voyage to Brobdingnag', is filled with irony to indict the women body as a source of tremendous duplicity and detestation. Did Gulliver sound patriarchal here in his indirect attack on female body and the associated notion of virtue?

Further, these two books can be read as two contrasting images of human sociality. If in the first part, Gulliver stands tall, towering over the entire Lilliput race, thus could better see to what extent humans can be absurd in their pretention, in the Brobdingnag section, the same Gulliver is reduced to the position of a dwarf. He is so small that even a caterpillar can trample him down and he can hide behind women's petticoat to save him from falling down. He is sold like a caged creature, and is hauled up for being too presumptuous by the King of Brobdingnag who expressed his tremendous dissatisfaction with the English state, their instrumental approach and the excessive emphasis on reason. Brobdingnag, in contrast, believes in primitive modes of living, in anticipation of socialist and communitarian ideals of life. In all these, it is the British pride, which is put under scanner. Gulliver, as a representative of this race, is pushed to self-introspection.

So, overall, this satire, in scope, is much expansive and sprawling. It shares various affinities with what we now recognize as science fiction. In fact, the absurdist mode of narrative in Kafka's "Metamorphosis" bears ample similarities with Gulliver's distention and contraction in physical size. This comparison, on the final count, makes this massively powerful narrative into a political satire, which precariously borders on misanthropy.