

ISSN : 2395-4132

# THE EXPRESSION

An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

**Bimonthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal**



Impact Factor 6.4

**Vol. 9 Issue 1 February 2023**

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

Email : [editor@expressionjournal.com](mailto:editor@expressionjournal.com)

[www.expressionjournal.com](http://www.expressionjournal.com)

# The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 6.4)

[www.expressionjournal.com](http://www.expressionjournal.com) ISSN: 2395-4132



## **FANTASY OR REALITY: A READING OF SWIFT'S *GULLIVER'S TRAVELS***

**SHRI RAJARSHI MUKHERJEE**

**Assistant Professor**

**Department of English**

**Shyampur Siddheshwari Mahavidyalay**

.....

### **Abstract**

Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* has fascinated readers for centuries, as it employs subversive metaphors and symbolisms to blur the boundaries between fantasy and reality. This literary technique has not only made the text a cultural icon, but has also raised questions about the nature of the story. Like any artist, Swift drew upon inspiration to create his masterpiece. This paper examines the four books of *Gulliver's Travels* in the context of fantasy and reality, and attempts to uncover the sources of Swift's inspiration for the portrayal of the four seemingly fantastical lands in the text. The paper explores how Swift used the travel narrative as a tool to satirize the social and political conditions of his time. The four lands, Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Laputa, and the land of the Houyhnhnms, are analyzed in detail to understand how Swift used fantasy to reflect on reality. The paper also discusses the contemporary influences on Swift, such as the rise of empiricism and rationalism, the colonization of the New World, and the social and political changes in England. Through an analysis of the text, the paper concludes that Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is a complex work that challenges readers to consider the relationship between fantasy and reality. The text uses fantasy to reveal the absurdities of reality, and to expose the flaws in human nature. Swift's work is a masterpiece of satire, and continues to be relevant to modern readers who are grappling with similar issues of social and political corruption, imperialism, and the human condition.

### **Keywords**

Travelogue, Fictional Narrative, Lilliputians, Puppet Show, Machinae Gesticulantes, Bartholomew Fair, Brobdingnag, Houyhnhnms, Laputa, Yahoos.

.....

**Vol. 9 Issue 1 (February 2023)**

**Editor-in-Chief: Dr. Bijender Singh**



## **FANTASY OR REALITY: A READING OF SWIFT'S *GULLIVER'S TRAVELS***

**SHRI RAJARSHI MUKHERJEE**

**Assistant Professor**

**Department of English**

**Shyampur Siddheshwari Mahavidyalay**

.....

The general idea of *Gulliver's Travels* is unquestionably borrowed from the *True History of Lucian*, a fictitious journey through imaginary countries, prefaced by an introduction, in an exquisite vein of irony, upon the art of writing history. Swift's recounting of imaginary places and people in *Gulliver's Travels*, in the manner of contemporary travelogues, is a thrust to demonstrate what the realism and pseudo-factuality of contemporary travel accounts and fictional narratives comes to at last. The form of *Gulliver's Travels* is double: it is a parody of travel books, and it is a group of allegorical fictions. When we begin to read Part I, we may easily believe it is a true autobiography until the description of the Lilliputians; and even after this part some readers might remain in doubt so late as Chapter II, when the author's humour and irony become too obvious. Still he keeps up the pretense of place-names, exact-dates, imaginary languages, and purely descriptive details to the very end of the four voyages. But inside this shell of a travel book, the actions are more or less fantastic, comic, and allegorical. Swift secretly goes over bits of the history of England and Ireland by means of stories told in Parts I, II and III.

The most obvious irony in the title of Swift's *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World* is that what purports to be a chronicle of several excursions to remote nations turns out to be a satiric anatomy of specifically English attitudes and values. But there is a second joke. Many of the supposedly familiar and exotic sights Gulliver sees in his sixteen years and seven months of wandering in remote nations, and even the radically altered perspectives from which he sees them (as diminutive landscapes, giant people, intelligent animals, etc.), could have been seen or experienced in a few days by anyone at the tourist sights, public entertainments, shows, spectacles, and exhibitions in the streets and at the fairs of London. Or, in other words, Swift transforms the shows and sights of London into an imaginative centre of *Gulliver's Travels*.

Gulliver himself senses that the wonders he sees in remote nations resemble popular entertainments back home in England when he notes that the capital city of Lilliput looked like the painted scene of a city in a theatre. The miniature figures as well as the miniature landscapes could be seen daily in the London puppet shows. Indeed, the Lilliputians are introduced to as if they were puppets, for they first address Gulliver in their "shrill" voices from

“a Stage erected about a Foot and a half from the Ground, capable of holding four of the Inhabitants” (Swift 3). And in less obvious ways, the entire episode in Lilliput recalls a puppet show simply by the virtue of the fact that human actions are mimicked so accurately by such inconsiderable mechanisms. The mock-heroic, always implicitly present in Book I, is a tacit dimension of any puppet show simply by the virtue of the fact that human actions are mimicked so accurately by such inconsiderable mechanisms. Addison had already exploited this mock- heroic potential in his poem ‘Machinae Gesticulantes’, where he satirized human self- importance by describing puppets practicing court manners and engaging in wars, much as Swift does in his description of the Lilliputian court.

Along with the giants and dwarfs, the third popular attraction at Bartholomew Fair were creatures that blurred the distinction between man and beast. Apes and monkeys were taught to mimic human actions, and other animals were trained so that they appeared to have the skills or intelligence of man: an elephant that could raise a flag and shoot a gun, a troop of dancing dogs dressed in newest French fashions etc. On the other hand, there were shows where human beings seemed to have degenerated into animals: The Northumberland Monster, who had the head, the maine, neck and forefeet exactly like a horse, all the rest of the body directly like a man; a fresh lively country lad who is covered all over his Body with Bristles like a Hedge Hog as hard as horn. It is quite evident that all of these were Swift’s sources for drawing the Yahoos and Houyhnhnms. Swift like all ‘men of taste’ deplored the mindlessness of popular diversions, which they found epitomized in the fair. Catering to the eye’s demand for spectacle, the fair provided dazzling sights void of thought.

In Part I, ‘A Voyage to Lilliput’, Swift’s moral argument lies generally under a translucent cover—his parody of travel books, his detailed fantasy of life among the little people, the allusions to political history, and the funny incongruities of the man mountain’s relations with the Lilliputians. But even so early as the first chapter the author reveals the dark side of human nature. Gulliver suddenly and unaccountably feels like snatching forty or fifty of the little people climbing over his body and smashing them against the ground. Meanwhile the Emperor of Lilliput and his ministers are considering whether they should not get rid of Gulliver by starving him to death or else shooting him with poisoned arrows. In Chapter III we find the sinister account of how ambitious statesmen are advanced in Lilliput by leaping, creeping and risking their necks as they go through acrobatic exercises to amuse their ruler. Soon after, we learn about the history of the country, with its terrible series of civil wars, religious delusions and fears of invasion. In Chapter V, the ugly side of human nature pushes itself forward. The Emperor turns ungratefully against Gulliver for refusing to crush Blefuscu; a clique of politicians begins scheming to destroy the saviour of their nation; and Swift speaks through Gulliver in a bitter generalization: “Of so little Weight are the greatest Services to Princes, when put into the Balance with a Refusal to gratify their Passions” (Swift 89).

Most readers do concentrate on the spectacle Swift provides: the ingenious illustration of the Lilliputian tiny size, the humour of many passages and the coarseness of others. Many readers therefore see the voyage as a charming fantasy. This aspect of the book is an overwhelming virtue, for it heightens realism through fantasy. Popular entertainments are present in *Gulliver’s Travels* as evidence of man’s thoughtlessness. Literal-minded and superficial, Gulliver travels through the world like the stereotypic tourist, staring at everything, seeing nothing: “The great Oven [in Brobdingnag] is not so wide by ten paces as the Cupola at St. Paul’s: For I measured

the latter on purpose after my Return" (Swift 113). So much for St. Paul's: dwindled to a mere sight, its religious significance has evaporated. "Diverted by the sights he sees around him, Gulliver empties his experience of meaning", comments Dennis Todd. The moral efficacy of public executions, even the value of human life, becomes lost in the sheer entertaining spectacle of a beheading: "The Veins and Arteries spouted up such a prodigious Quantity of Blood, and so high in the Air, that the great Jet d'Eau at Versailles was not equal for the Time it lasted" (Swift 114).

"In *Gulliver's Travels* many figures which seem to be imaginary are meant to depict real personages, or at all events are drawn from them", claims Charles Firth. Some of the characters can be recognized as famous statesmen, or even as Swift himself. For instance, the emperor of the land of Lilliputs and his court in Part I, is a satire on George I and his court and ministry; Lord Treasurer Flimnap is generally found to correspond with Sir Robert Walpole; the rivalry between the Tramecksans and Slamecksans is symbolic of that between the Tories and the Whigs. In Part II, the portrait of the Queen of Brobdingnag, who is represented as amiable and inquisitive, the protectress of the pigmy stranger, whom Gulliver in return tries to please, is unquestionably designed as a compliment to Queen Caroline, whom Swift was then desirous to gratify. These political allegories in turn are mixed with episodes illustrating what Swift thought the basic principles of human nature.

In Part III, The Land of Laputa, obsessed with music and mathematics, is a satire on the Hanoverian court (since George I was a patron of music and Italian opera) and Walpolean ministry. The Academy of Lagado with its scientific experiments is a satire on the Royal Society in London. Thus in chapter 2 of Book III, having established that the Laputans make the demonstrative sciences of mathematics and music the measures of all things, Swift proceeds to survey their failures and ignorance, producing what any humanist reader would recognize as a catalogue of the arts of prudence. The Laputans fail not only in what we would call fine arts, but also in "practical Geometry"—tailoring and building, "which they despise as vulgar and mechanick"; they fail in all the arts which should guide "the Common Actions and Behavior of Life" (Swift 148).

In Part IV, Swift invents a fable where hypothetical horse species are rational animals endowed with human intelligence (Houyhnhnms) and humans generally worse than unreasoning brutes (Yahoos). The Houyhnhnms have an absolute self-assurance in the completeness of their knowledge and experience. But their intellectual limitations and arrogance are divertingly illustrated in the passage wherein the Houyhnhnms criticizes the human form. In every point wherein man and horse differ, the Houyhnhnms automatically and even absurdly assumes that the advantage lies obviously with the horse; for example, "the flatness" of Gulliver's face, the prominence of his nose, his eyes placed directly in front, that four legs are better than two, or that the human anatomy is defective since Gulliver cannot eat without lifting one of his "fore feet" to his mouth. Though at first portrayed idealistically, the Houyhnhnms are no less disgusting than the Yahoos. The dispassionate arguments of the assembly, for instance, about the nature and future fate of Gulliver and the Yahoos, show the characteristic and unpleasant coldness of the Houyhnhnm race. Swift has the horses, with more ruthlessness than benevolence, order Gulliver to leave the island and swim back to the place whence he came.

The function of the Houyhnhnms is, maybe, to present an ideal of the true life of reason, to be admired even if unattainable, and to be contrasted with the Yahoos to chasten the pride of man, by showing him the vanity of his pretensions. Samuel Taylor Coleridge opines, "Swift's

great object was to prove that it is Reason and Conscience which will give all the loveliness and dignity not only to Man, but to the shape of Man; deprived of these, and yet retaining the Understanding, he would be the most loathsome and hateful of all animals; that his understanding would manifest itself only as malignant cunning, his free will as obstinacy and unteachableness". By the end of this journey, Gulliver has gone deep off humanity and cannot recover himself from the nightmare view of Yahoo-man.

"Swift's portrait of Gulliver neighing quietly to himself in his stable, unable to stand the company of his wife and children, stands in stark contrast to Crusoe's homecoming (who is quite happy to have been reconciled with his family & friends), and tacitly reminds us realistically of historical figures like Selkirk and of civilization and its discontents", comments J. Paul Hunter. "By the end of Book IV, we have long been aware that the extravagant worlds which we have been encountering were not primarily on display for their extravagance, as parodies of untruthfulness, but in order to allegorize and drive home what are represented as devastating home-truths, perceived in terms not of visual resemblance but of moral exposure."

Therefore, it would be misleading to say that Swift evokes an absurd world in which men try to support a moral code that has nothing to do with external reality. Swift's employing of the imagery of dwarfs and giants, and animals have a special purpose. The fact is, a pygmy or a giant or an animal endowed with human faculty would be exactly as interesting / disgusting as a being of normal stature. Or in other words, the external condition of size and shape is superfluous and irrelevant and essence of a being is not dependent upon that. Rather, it depends upon how we act and react, and how we treat fellow beings.

Swift chose fictitious nations and people to reveal the properties underlying the behaviour of all mankind. The four voyages suggest the four points of the compass. As part of the action, this element belongs to the travel books and implies that the author has sailed around the world, and is the most experienced traveller the reader could hope to light upon. As part of the commentary it implies that the author is giving us an inductive account of common human nature, a universal picture.

*Gulliver's Travels* is undoubtedly Swift's greatest work. A consummately skillful blend of fantasy and realism make *Gulliver's Travels* by turns hilarious, frightening, and profound. Travel books, philosophical voyages, scientific translations, beast fables, children's fantasies, and a host of other formal and informal "kinds" play their part in Swift's act of imagination, and play a prominent role for readers in their ability to receive and perceive the text.

## References:

- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *A Book I Value: Selected Marginalia*. Edited by H. J. Jackson. Princeton U P, 2003.
- Hunter, J. Paul. *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth Century English Fiction*. W.W. Norton, 1990.
- Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*. Penguin Classics, 2003.
- Todd, Dennis. "The Hairy Mid at the Harpsichord: Some Speculations on the Meaning of *Gulliver's Travels*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 34, no. 2, 1992, pp. 239-83, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40754979>.