

SAMUEL BUTLER-THE ULTIMATE VICTORIAN**Dr.(Mrs.)Nivedita LAL**Associate Professor,Department of Applied Science(English)
Institute Of Technology and Management,Gida ,Gorakhpur**Abstract:**

SAMUEL BUTLER, (December 1835-June 1902), the much criticised novelist of the Victorian era always saw himself as the free thinker. It seems after going through his writings that his mission was to challenge, by argument and irony, the conventional wisdom of his time. Above all his insight into the extent to which human beliefs are the products of social environment is impressive indeed. With the contemporary critics he is not very popular. He is admitted to have talent but it is generally considered to be of queer, unpractical kind. No matter how serious he is, he is always accused of being in jest. This paper reinterprets his writings, bringing out the man from his 'Inside'. It establishes that he was not an Anti Victorian, as most of his contemporary critics have tried to establish but as an Unlimate Victorian .He was not at all a contradictory personality in him self but a man whom Victorian people could not understand in the right sense of the word. Samuel Butler was a person who had nothing negative about him, a person with extremely original ideas, which People could not gather up due to his vague method of depicting his ideas. These are the main point which I have tried to 'reinterpret' in this paper

Keywords: *Conventional wisdom, Queer, Victorian, Reinterprets*

BUTLER, SAMUEL, Philosophical and miscellaneous writer, was born on December,1835 at langar Rectory, near Bingham, Nottinghamshire. He was the eldest son of the Rev. Thomas Butler, Rector of Langar and later Canon of Lincoln, and Fanny Butler, daughter of P.J. Worsley, sugar refiner, of Bristol. He was the grandson of Dr. Samuel Butler, Headmaster of Shrewsbury School, and later Bishop of Lichfield and Coventry.

The childhood of 'Ernest Pontifex' in his novel *The way of all Flesh*,¹ is a portrait of his own : and nearly all its characters are drawn directly from his relatives. At the age of eight he was taken to Italy. In 1848, after two years at a preparatory school at Allesley, he was sent to Shrewsbury. At about the age of thirteen he first heard the music of Handel, a composer, whom he worshipped whole heartedly all his life. Thus the foundations of his two great enthusiasms- for Italy and for Handel – were both early laid.

In the autumn of 1854 Butler went to St. John's College, Cambridge, graduating in 1858. His family took it as a matter of course that he should proceed to ordination in the Church of England , and he did go far enough to become a law assistant . But his was a mind that could

take nothing on trust. It is characteristic of his practical mentality that what finally determined him to refuse ordination. He discovered that a large number of unbaptized boys in his class seemed to be no worse in manners or morals than those who had been baptized. His father was deeply shocked and grieved. Butler returned to Cambridge to seek pupils: and kept up his musical studies and learned drawing. By May 1859 Canon Butler had flatly refused to allow his son either to remain at Cambridge or to adopt art as a profession. It was decided that he should be a sheep – farmer in New Zealand, and early in 1860 he took up residence on a sheep-run in the Rangitata district of Canterbury Island.

His work as a sheep – farmer was very successful, and in the period of nearly five years during which he was in New Zealand he practically doubled the \$ 4,500 capital with which he had started. Nor were his intellectual interests neglected. He read the origin of Species soon after its appearance in 1859, and in December 1862 published a “Dialogue” thereon in The press of Christ-church. In the same journal (June 1863) he published “Darwin Among the Machines”, a paper containing a basic idea afterwards developed in Erewhon. His letters to his father were converted by Canon into a book called The First year in Canterbury Settlement(1863),².

It was in New Zealand that he met Charles Paine Pauli, who so greatly impressed him that Butler offered him \$ 200 a year for three years while he studied for the Bar. Matters sorted themselves, in fact, that Butler continued to make Pauli this allowance until the latter’s death in 1897 : and it was only then after twenty- three years, that he discovered that the barrister had been for long earning from \$ 500 to \$ 900 a year by his profession . Back in London in 1864, his fortune safely invested, Butler took up residence at 15, Clifford’s Inn, Fleet Street, and remained the tenant of these rooms for the rest of his life.

He now settled down to painting, writing and music: and took lessons at Heatherley’s famous art- school in Newman Street . In 1865 he published anonymously a pamphlet, The Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ As given by the Four Evangelists. After a critical examination of the facts, he came to the conclusion that Jesus had not died on the cross, but swooned, and had been revived by Joseph of Arimathea. A copy was sent to Charles Darwin, and a friendly correspondence ensued.

Though painting was his main business, Butler began, before 1870, to weave certain articles and sketches in to a connected narrative which was published anonymously, at his own expense, in 1872, as Erewhon : or, over the Range. This , the most famous of all his books attracted a good deal of attention at the time, and since Butler’s death , had taken a high place as the wittiest and most penetrating satire in English since the days of Swift . Its main theme is the discovery of a country wherein manners are the reverse of those in England; where poverty and ill- health are prosecuted as crimes and theft is met by hospital treatment. The inhabitants had abolished all machines, lest machines should become their masters; and the chapter called “The book of the Machines” is a masterly exercise in specious and persuasive argument purposely

vitiated by a logical flaw. The book's chief weakness is its lack of coherence, caused by the manner of its composition.

In 1873 he published *The Fair Haven*,³ which purported to be by "John Pickard Owen". Written with the tongue in the cheek, this book professes to be an account of a mind assailed by religious doubt and eventually overcoming it. It was widely accepted as an exercise in apologetics, and was read in many pious households in to which it would never have been admitted if its rationalistic tendency had been suspected.

The same year he began his novel *The Way of All Flesh*. He also transferred his \$ 8,000 from New Zealand and invested it in various companies promoted by one Henry Hoare. By March 1874 Hoare had failed and most of Butler's money was in the debacle. He made two journeys to Canada to try to save something from the ruin, but his financial embarrassment remained very great until the death of his father in 1886. Before crossing the Atlantic he saw his picture, "Mr. Heratherley's Holiday" hung on the line at the Royal Academy: it is now in the Tata Gallery. While in Montreal he wrote the lacerating Psalm of Montreal which amazingly enough was later printed in *The Spectator* (May 18, 1878).

Life and Habit (1877) was the first of a series of books in which Butler applied his critical and constructive powers to the theory of evolution. The others were *Evolution: Old and New* (1879), *Unconscious Memory* (1880), and *Luck or cunning As the main Means of Organic Modification ?* (1886). Broadly speaking the theme developed in these works were that the Darwinian theory of evolution was too mechanistic, that it gave insufficient credit to such predecessor as Buffon, Lamarck, and Erasmus Darwin and that "unconscious memory" was in itself a prime factor in the production of organic change and in the modification of behaviour. The quarrel which arose between Butler and Darwin was not the direct outcome of the former's expression of these views, there had been disingenuousness in controversy,⁴.

In his last years Butler turned his attention to the homeric problem, on which he left (as on everything he touched) the impression of a fresh and unconventional outlook. Not only did he produce prose versions of the *Iliad* (1898) and the *Odyssey* (1900), but he believed that in Trapani and mount Eryx in Sicily, he had discovered the true setting of the *Odyssey*,⁵. The views put forward in *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (1897) is indicated by its title. The identification of Sicily as the site of the odyssey had already been advanced in the *Rassegna Della Letteratura Siciliana* in 1893, and the year before he had delivered a lecture on "The Humour of Homer".

Concurrently with his Homeric studies, Butler was turning his mind to the mystery of Shakespeare's Sonnets, and in 1899 he issued *Shakespeare's Sonnets Reconsidered*. The last book published during his life-time was *Erewhon Revisited* (1901), a more connected story than *Erewhon*, chiefly existing to show how easily a religious cult may grow out of a supposed miracle. It has far less tang and force than the other work.

Butler died on June 18, 1902. The next year was published *The Way of all Flesh*, a novel dealing with his own childhood and youth. It ranks among the great novels of the period, and remains a blistering indictment of the worst kind of Victorian religiosity. In 1912 appeared selections from his copious Note-Books, pungent and witty commentary on diversified subjects. Further extracts were published in 1934,⁶.

No account of Butler could be considered complete without a word on his friendships. His amazing generosity to the worthless Pauli has been recorded. Two other friends, of a very different order, were Miss E.M.A savage and Henry Festing Jones. Butler never married. He met Miss Savage at Heatherley's in 1870, and their correspondence up to her death in 1885 is spirited and friendly. But on Butler's side at least there was never any question of more than friendship. Festing Jones, a solicitor, he met in 1876, and the two became good companions to the day of Butler's death,⁷. Among their many common interests was a devotion to music (and especially to Handel) and they Jointly published several musical composition including Gavottes, Minuets, Fugues (1885). Jones wrote Butler's biography in 1919.

Butler's grudge against his father was, at bottom a grudge at never being encouraged or allowed, either to follow his natural bent or to think things out fairly and objectively for himself. He felt this the more strongly because Canon Butler simply took it for granted from his schooldays, that he was to become a parson, without any attempt either to measure his fitness for the priestly calling or to give him any change of weighing up the evidence for and against those things in which persons are supposed to profess belief. The Canon himself was clearly not of a speculative temper and had never been visited by any religious doubts. Like Theobald in the novel he might have doubted, whether he had any liking for the priesthood and possibly like him yielded when his father forced him to be ordained. Like Theobald again he settled down very thoroughly to the life of a country clergyman. He felt no qualms about sending his son into the same vocation. He had all the assurance of the timid that questions are dangerous and trodden paths best. Samuel, on the other hand, seems to have been always asking questions to which he expected reasoned answers. Curiously enough, during his undergraduate years at Cambridge he seems to have given the problem hardly any thought. He explained this later: "When I was at Cambridge the Evangelical movement had become a matter of ancient history: Tractarianism had spent its force and had subsided into a nine day's wonder; The Vestiges of Creation had long since ceased to be talked about; the Catholic aggression had lost its terrors; Ritualism was still unnoticed by the general public; the Gorham and Hampden controversies were buried beneath Time's horizon; Dissent was not spreading; the Crimean war was the engrossing subject in men's thoughts, and there was no enemy to the faith which could secure even a languid interest; at no time probably, in the century could an ordinary observer have detected less sign of coming disturbance than at the date of which I am writing"⁶,

Angered as Canon Butler was by his son's refusal to be ordained, there was no final breach between them on that account. Indeed, the Canon sent his son off well supplied with

money, and they were probably on better terms during the first year or two at Butler's residence in New Zealand than at any other time in their life. The gulf, however, had been opened up again before Butler come back- by his father's failure to let him have some additional capital which he had promised in a generous mood . On the evidence of Butler's letter it seems pretty clear that his return from New Zealand was not relished by his father. Canon Butler had advanced capital in order to enable his son to establish himself as a sheep-former. It was not expected that he would sell out at a profit after five years abroad and use the augmented capital to become an artist, the very career which his father had most emphatically rejected for him before he went away. This however, was precisely what Butler, on his return from new Zealand in 1864 proceeded to do , in the confidence that he would be able to do it without needing any further help from his father .

The other thing was the loss of most of his capital in imprudent speculation, in to which he was led by his friend Henry Hoare, a member of the famous banking house. Hoare, in a series of wild business ventures, reined himself as well as most of his friends. For Butler the disaster was severe. It occurred in 1874, and for the next five years he and Pauli were living on what was left of his capital and on a legacy which come to him on his mother's death in 1873. By 1879 there was nothing left, and he had to go to his father for help. Canon Butler after a good deal of acrimonious discussion which confirmed his son's views about his character, agreed to allow him \$300 a year, but only on condition that he stopped financing Pouli⁷. At that stage, Canon Butler refused to allow his son to anticipate his interest in the reversion already mentioned , which would have made him comfortably off; and this added to Butler's annoyance. But two years later, for reasons connected with Samuel's Brother Tom, the Canon changed his mind .Butler got the capital due to him under the reversion , and his more pressing financial difficulties come to an end⁸. He celebrated his freedom by resuming the allowance to Pauli which he had been forced to suspend two years before.

Butler's financial difficulties left him with a great horror of speculation and a passion for secure investments. He made use of the lesson he had learnt in *The Way of All Flesh*, by making prayer speculate with Ernest Pontifex's money and loose it all. What concerns us here is the effect which his financial troubles had on his relations with his father .These two were usually at their worst when money was at issue. Canon Butler thought any financial help entitled him not only to attach conditions, but also to play the inquisitor without limit into his son's affairs; whereas Samuel held that his father ought to let him have when needed it most money which was due to come to him in any event later on; when he might need it much less , or not at all ⁹. Their standpoints were never modified, and every time they discussed money their tempers were sadly frayed.

In 1859 in New Zealand he came in possession of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. He was overwhelmed and become a zealous propagator of Darwinian scientific theory and altogether lost his faith in Christianity,⁸. For the next two decades religion and evolution become his central

themes. At first, he welcomed Darwinism because it helped him to do without the conventional God. Later, having found a god of his own, he rejected Darwinism itself because it had left God out. Thus he made both the Church and the orthodox Darwinism hostile to himself and spent his life as a lonely outsider or as Butler called himself after the Biblical outcast, “An Ishmael”.

Actually, Butler did for a time earn his living in New Zealand as a sheep –farmer, before he settled down first to painting and then to writing ; and his first book¹⁰, *A First Year in Canterbury Settlement* , was put together by his father out of his letters home. Canterbury was the new settlement, just being opened up for sheep –farming ,and Butler did well for himself. The yield of money was high and he started with the advantage of having enough capital advanced by his father to buy a farm, after he had learnt the trade. With this start, provided that he showed reasonable industry and competence, he had every chance to prosper. His property grew fast in value, besides yielding him an adequate income. But Butler had no intention of spending his life as a sheep-farmer; and after five years in New Zealand he felt rich enough to sell out and return home. He had made a sum which, invested in good securities, seemed likely to yield him as he wanted for the kind he had in mind to lead.

Butler’s ambition at this was to become a painter, and it was to painting that he gave his main attention for some time after his return to England in 1864. He took his art seriously, and from 1868 until 1876 was an occasional exhibitor at the Royal Academy and at other “shows”. Some of his paintings had a touch of genius. Even when he turned aside from painting to literature and published *Erewhon* in 1872 he still looked upon his writing as no more than a side-line. He had written squibs and essays at Cambridge as an undergraduate, and in New Zealand had contributed to *The Press* – a journal of some literary pretensions in the new colony. Indeed, the first chapter of *Erewhon* , later incorporated in the book of the *Machines*, made its original appearance in this journal. This writing, however, had been merely occasional, and it took the success of *Erewhon* to turn him towards regular book writing. *The Fair Haven*, which had its germ in an anonymous pamphlet which he had written some time before in the process of resolving his doubts about Christian evidences, appeared in 1873 – the year after *Erewhon*.

In 1864, Butler, returned to England and began living at clifford’s inn in London, which was to be his home for the rest of his life. In 1865 his *Erewhon* appeared anonymously. For a few years he studied painting at Heather’s art school and thought that this was his vocation. . Butler wrote in all sixteen books, including his translations and his addition of Shakespeare’s sonnets, but not the *Note-Books* and his various pamphlets and essays. Only three of these- *The way of all Flesh* and the two *Erewhon* are stories: four others set forth his theories on evolution and the mind of man: the rest make up a singularly miscellaneous and yet coherent collection. They are the record of literary life spent in an unending series of paper – chases or gains of the hunt. Butler was always chasing something – the truth about the gospel story of the Resurrection, the truth about the manner of human heredity, the truth about the authorship and geography of the *Odyssey* , the truth about Shakespeare ’s love- affair , the truth about Tabachetti, the Italian

sculptor whom he succeeded in proving to have been a Belgian, the truth about his own grandfather- but never, one feels, quite the truth about his father, and certainly never the whole truth about himself, He had in all these quests, a rich enjoyment of the chase itself; and when he had settled a thing to his satisfaction, it was done with as far as he was concerned.

Butler's contemporaries, therefore, knew Butler as a story-teller only by means of *Erewhon* to which he added¹³ *Erewhon Revisited* nearly thirty years later, the year before he died. They knew him mainly as *Erewhon* Butler, a curious, cranky writer who had produced, besides his successful satire, a strangely mixed collection of books in which he almost always appeared to be saying something wilfully perverse. G.D.H. Cole observes: "Butler was the man who had denied the story of the resurrection –not, as David Strauss had done in his life of Jesus, by attracting Christ's supposed reappearances after death to hallucination on the part of his disciples, but by denying the fact of Christ's death upon the Cross- or at any rate by denying that the death could be regarded as proved by the available evidence". Over and above this, Butler was the man who had denied the current scientific doctrine of evolution by natural selection. Not being a trained scientist he had ventured to oppose to it a theory of creative evolution which he professed to have found in the superceded work of Erasmus Darwin (Charles Darwin's grandfather), of Buffon, and of Lamarck. Yet again, Butler was the man who not being a professional scholar, had declared, not merely that the *Odyssey* was not composed by Homer, but that it had been written by a young woman, who had put herself into the poem as Nausicaa, the daughter of the Phaeacian King. Not content with all this unconventional assumptions Butler also set out to prove that the *Odyssey* had been composed at Trapani, in Sicily, that its geography was mostly taken from the area round Trapani, and that most of *Odyssey's* wanderings consisted of a voyage round Sicily. Besides all this Butler was the man who had put forward some very unorthodox views about Italian painting and about music. He even regarded Handel as the world's greatest composer, and had tried to compose music in Handel's style.

Butler's many sided talent was never fully recognized while he was alive, and he lost money on every book save *Erewhon*, but in the years just prior to the European war he reached a high pith of reputation. In the England of his day fresh consideration of ethical and philosophic problems from first principles was not encouraged; and the very moderation of his statement no doubt militated against his success. The British faculty for compromise is well exemplified by his attitude. In religion he quarreled with the orthodox without enlisting under the banner of Huxley In science he again fell out with Darwin, the high priest, and his acceptance of evolution was a qualified one. The very diversity of his interests made him suspect, as a dilettante in every camp. However, he has now taken his place among the major English satirists, and by virtue of his remarkable novels, as an important influence in modern fiction.

References

H.J. Daris: The Duplicity of Samuel Butler (Canadian forum, 1937)

G.D.H. Cole: The Essential Samuel Butler (London: 1950)

Abel Chevally: The Modern English Novel. (N.Y.: 1925)

Henry Testing Jones: Memoirs, 1954.

Desmond Maccarthy: (E.D) Life and Letters of Samuel Butler, 1937.

Ms R.S. Garnett: Samuel Butler and his family Relations, 1950.

P.N. Forbank: Samuel Butler, 1970.

G.D.H. Cole: Samuel Butler and the way of all Flesh, 1950.

H.F. Jones: Memoirs, 1954.