

Shiuli Bhattacharya, July 11

On Superstition

In his essay "On Superstition", Gardiner has explored the theme of fear that resides almost in every human mind in one form or the other. Superstitions have been a favourite subject for essays written by many great essayists in English belonging to the old school, for example, Francis Bacon and Aldous Huxley. Their essays on superstitions are thought provoking and full of cogent arguments on the genesis and nature of the Elizabethan and modern superstitions.

But Gardiner's essay "On Superstition" is a typically modern essay steeped in personal favour and whimsical moods. The essays of Alpha and the Plough are extremely readable and delightful. They are more concerned with the manner and less with the matter or as a critic has said -- "It is the coat that matters and not peg in a modern essay".

Gardiner's essay is a very fine peg to hang the coat on, yet they are quite impressive and they leave an indelible imprint on our mind because he knows the art of essay writing. Gardiner is not an encyclopedic genius as Huxley is, but then he is a very well-read man who ransacks the world of history, politics and literature and calls illuminating illustrations to enlighten the topic under discussion.

He opens many a window from various sides and leaves us spellbound. Gardiner, like Robert Lynd, can write delightfully even about a serious thing. He hardly preaches from a pulpit. His matter does not sit heavy on our stomach. Gardiner knows the art of smuggling a very serious topic into our brain persuasively.

In that way, "On Superstition" is a typical representative essay of Gardiner. Ours is an age of science, an age of enlightenment, yet the superstitious beliefs keep haunting our mind. Superstitious belief defies all logic, such beliefs and practices are expressions of certain age old tradition that still lingers at the back of our mind.

From time immemorial man is scared of the unknown and to alleviate this fear he assumes some ways which one may call superstitious practices. Superstitious beliefs are often prompted by some illogical ideas. Take for instance, the number 13: a "shadowy reminiscence of antique credulity", coming down to us from the Last Supper of Jesus Christ.

This superstition is so deep-rooted in our mind that the house number 13 or the hospital bed number 13 at once sends a shudder down our spine and keeps us guessing all the time. Physical recovery is also a matter of the mind, as Florence Nightingale strongly advocated. So it is not difficult to understand that "so fragile a hold of life may yield to the sudden death that you are lying in no. 13 bed".

People avoid walking underneath a ladder considering this inauspicious, so they prefer walking around the ladder. From the era of Cato till today, superstitious beliefs continue to haunt us. Though Gardiner has defied the number 13, yet in his own admission he accepts that whenever he sees the moon on his left side, he nervously turns over coins inside his pocket to drive away the ominous effects of sighting the moon on the wrong side.

Gardiner observes that it was no discredit to be superstitious when the functions were uncertain and men seemed to be a plaything into the hands of sinister forces. He gives an interesting reference as the battle being postponed due to the falling of a leaf and how Ciceso lost his life by trusting the "wisdom of crows". Even today mostly our good sense succumbs to our fears, our unwillingness to challenge the age old beliefs continues the superstitious practices in our life and society.

Despite the enlightenment and knowledge of science, the superstitions are here to stay. Though some of such beliefs have sensible origins like walking under the ladder, and the Jewish objection to pork as unclean, old superstitions which belong to a "creed out worn" are gone. But in their place there is a new set of beliefs that people follow without any logic.

"The forms change, but the substance remains", says Huxley. Regarding superstitions, Gardiner too nurses the same view. His essay exhibits his genial temper and rich humour. He writes with a scientific approach while critiquing the stupidity of superstitious beliefs, but is candid enough to admit that he himself is not wholly free from their clutches. Gardiner knows the art of essay writing. He has an easy style; and though he frequently uses illustrations from history, he does not sound heavy at all. Reading Gardiner is always a pleasure.