

The Elements Of Moderation And The Kaleidoscopic Nature Of Man And Universe In The Essay “Of Experience” By Michel Eyquem De Montaigne

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Abstract

The paper is an attempt to analyze closely the essay ‘Of Experience’ composed by Michel Eyquem de Montaigne and explore the elements of moderation and man’s changing attitude towards universe, nature and its changing pattern. The paper, though was written in the sixteenth century, is treated here with modern existential philosophical themes of how and why rules are so exorbitantly made (for 16th century France), which the writer derides, and what these inordinate laws suggest for the modern readers. The paper also discusses how to explore the connection between the changing pattern of Nature and the impact and response it engenders in man’s mind. Finally, the paper discusses man’s and the writer’s paradoxical nature, and the writer’s recommendation for the in-between values/elements to be adopted. In perspective of the overarching law and rules implemented in the France, Michel de Certeau’s The Practice of Everyday Life has been applied.

Key Words: Universe, Rules, Values, French Laws, Kaleidoscopic, Moderation, nature/Nature.

Background of The Study

Michel Eyquem de Montaigne is considered to be a great philosopher and thinker of his time. Most of his writings revolve around the intellectual sphere of his thoughts, partly maintaining balance between the outgrowing thoughts and those in centre, whereas some of his works do interfere in other hidden aspects of life, sharing cultural values, social legacy, human intellectual capacity and the rules where man is brought under a massive check of principles and overbearing panoptic rituals. Montaigne does however attach himself in the middle and oscillates between the extremes. His doctrines shift from one good value to another and remains although steadfast with the intermediate values. Therefore, he advocates a line that touches both extreme values and norms somewhere in middle, clouding the gap between them. Modern philosophers and those ascetic will recommend his thoughts on moderation and therefore, all collectively will propose something in-

between. Therefore, the essay prompts us to believe in what is being moderate, and hence even Nature is sometimes cruel, sometimes kind, and sometimes neutral or sparks in the middle point where it hijacks the fulcrum. As the paper clears a lot of misunderstanding about the essay and brings further light to its ability to clearly designate certain perpetual and overarching rules and tries to propose a diminishing strategy to mitigate or abate the intensity of rules which miff the lives and walks of inhabitants by applying elements from Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, in which he describes how rules with a serpentine and clandestine way cripple the lives of its inhabitants, and the same point is exactly corroborated and underpinned by Montaigne.

Introduction

I grope and plod through the middle way between church and tavern to reach Paradise¹.

- Ghani Khan, The Pilgrimage

Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, the sixteenth-century essay writer, thinker, philosopher and devout Catholic, wrote many essays that demonstrate a panoptic view of the world around and beyond. His experience, in writing essays, ranges from history to philosophy and from religion to general human conditions. In all of his essays, roughly, there is a blend of pathos and humour, voluptuousness and chastity, morality and immorality, divinity and fallible humanity, and seriousness and frivolity. Although he was a devout Catholic, there is an ample evidence to suggest that he was given over to hedonism and Epicureanism. Therefore, he seems to take umbrage at the inordinateness of human laws. Montaigne avoids extremes or, perhaps, believes in the saying; 'the excess of everything is bad'. He is neither a consistent church-goer nor a regular tavern attendant. Above all, he is one of the greatest humanists of the Renaissance—particularly of French literature. It is said that it was Montaigne who brought essays into a literary genre.

In "Of Experience", Montaigne sheds light on—interlaced, yet distinctive—three major themes: proposing and adopting moderate values, the frivolity of too many laws, and the kaleidoscopic nature of both the humans and the universe. However, this response paper intends to focus on the relation between the exuberance of laws and the extent to which they (laws) spoil our pleasure and liberty. The paper also discusses the apocalyptic nature of the universe which Montaigne prognosticates in the essay. The second portion of the paper briefly discusses the ways Montaigne suggests as to how to come to terms with Nature when she offers herself in the form of pleasures to us.

Research Objectives

1. To study the elements of moderation and explore what elements in the essay 'Of Experience' show human nature that is changing.
2. To find out the connection between man's nature and the Nature, and see what specific aspects of Nature has an overbearing impact on human nature.

3. To find out the direct relation of inordinate number of human laws and its impact on man's behavior, especially French's abundant human laws and its influence on man's whimsical mind.

Research Questions

1. What are the elements which are made moderate by the excessive amount of laws in the French cities in 'Of Experience' by Montaigne?
2. What is the impact of Nature on man's mind in 'Of Experience' by Montaigne?

Significance of the Study

Montaigne's essays are teemed with classical writing of the French and Renaissance elements, but he does not contain his writing to discuss only the discoveries that the age demonstrated, but he expanded onto the spiritual and philosophical themes of human capacity. This paper, although its capacity by date does not touch the modern aspect of technology, does not shy away from echoing its potential in the modern world of spirituality and anthropology. It saturates the gap left by modern technology and the sophisticated literature to attach values to human life and the competitiveness it vies for in the modern world. This study should play a reviving role to capacitate both academia and human life and fill the vacuum of research left unfinished by the contemporary researches that ignore human liberty and freedom by the incorporation of material culture and technology to our lives.

Statement of the Study

There is an ongoing debate researched and studied between material and spiritual values and Montaigne's works were composed during which the renaissance was making a headlines in the world through discoveries and particularly work on the implications it consequentially entailed. Elements which change man's mind and rules which control our lives are discussed here in Montaigne's essay 'Of Experience'. French rules, which are overburdened and which limit liberty, are discussed in the paper. And this narrative is contemporary and, Nature that makes us whimsical and re(appropriate) these values under such subtlety in Nature.

Delimitation of the Study

Montaigne's works get surrounded and are thematically haunted for chivalry, discovery and battlefield in the French territory. But he fundamentally attaches more values to human's abstract and spiritual values. Although mostly of his essays sing for and about these spiritual values but the scope and space of the paper does not afford to expand this study beyond his 'Of Experience'. Therefore, this paper's discussion is delimited to 'Of Experience' but its significance and impact may overreach.

Discussion and Analysis

Montaigne is displeased with the multiplicity of the laws, quoting Tacitus in his essay “Of Experience” (1580), he says, ‘[i]n past, we were’ miffed by crimes and transgressions— and now by the ever-increasing number of ‘laws’². Laws upon laws breed nothing but annoyance. The law, he says, intercepts our joys as ‘the death intermeddles itself with our lives’ (326). It divests us of both tranquility and ease of mind. He laughs at the multitudinous nature of operating laws in French cities. On the same page, he continues lightly but rather sarcastically that ‘in France, we alone have more laws than the rest of the ‘world needs’ [to regulate]. He censures even the very language of lawyers. For Montaigne, the register of the judiciary is fraught with recondite lexemes. The more they (lawyers) play with words, the more abstruse their phrases become. He uses the word ‘quiddity’ for their court language (319). It is through this abstruse and cunning language that the ordinary people are ensnared. The laws are incommensurate with the number of offences, he adds sardonically. Montaigne is in the favour of wholeness and entirety of things. He says, anything which is crumbled and pulverised, it loses its value and becomes further intricate. In his own words, ‘whatsoever is sliced into very powder is confused’ (319). He propagates a general and simple law that should regulate human affairs. The books contain commentaries upon commentaries but there is an extreme scarcity of genuine authors.

Montaigne points out the impact of customs and place on human nature. Human nature changes under customs or in response to customs. Our lives are grossly at the disposal of customs. These are the ‘hands of the custom to give our life whatever form it pleaseth’ (322). There is a continuous vagary in the universe, similarly, human nature is susceptible to such vagaries: both external as well as internal. No customs are alike. Cultural values are broadly geographical and every culture loses its values, beliefs, and validity when it is put to the test of time, place and space. No culture is universal enough to transcend the barriers of time and space.

He discusses a few cultures that keep entirely different beliefs from one another; like ‘the Germans get sick’ if they are asked to [sleep] on mattress (323). Man is heading towards collapse since he sustains an indomitable pursuit to acquire knowledge as well as an insatiable curiosity to possess power. The possession of power and wealth can be detrimental to the sustainability of a nation. This may seem paradoxical but Montaigne proves it in ‘Of Coaches’. There, he gives the historical example of two cities: Peru and Mexico were pillaged and plundered by the Spaniards under the pretext of goodwill. Spaniard’s ulterior motive, however, was to usurp the riches and gold they (Peru, Mexico) possessed (323). The cities perished along with kings. From customs, his narrative leads to human nature, in the sense that every man is idiosyncratic. Man is in a state of flux; his statements take different turns every time he speaks. Or in other sense, he does not stay the same person as he was a moment ago. Even his eating habits change dramatically. Eating habits are rigorously the part and parcel of a culture. As per Montaigne, ‘there are certain inconstant and unknown motions in us’ (327). He upbraids humans for their vanities and ignorance. As Sharpling puts it that Montaigne is less interested in ‘verbal subtleties. but he is immensely interested in

investigating ‘what man really is’³. This inquisition into man’s identity is a prominent Renaissance theme. Sharpling’s argument is not less valid here. As Montaigne probes the human nature, he concludes that man is weak in knowledge; he is suffering from short-sightedness and uncertainty. In the same way, Montaigne connects man’s uncertainty about the future of the universe which he foresees to be ominous. As he argues that the universe had already experienced its four earlier effacement/plagues; therefore, this, the fifth, he says, is the last of the catastrophes the universe will suffer. Similarly, our own physiology is under metamorphosis and each hour it advances towards inevitable decline. Montaigne speaks aright in this sense, ‘how many times do I say, I am no more the same (327).

Nature tempts and allures us to do certain things. The law—that interdicts us practising some practices—is generally annoying. Montaigne is neither the preacher of a too much indulgence in pleasures nor an advocate of utterly eschewing them. His stance is neither too puritanical nor too catholic. However, he does not balk at receiving a bowl of wine or a holy scripture presented by Nature herself. He oscillates between the two extremes of a pendulum. Montaigne is a moderator as he argues that, it is an equal injustice ‘either to take natural sensualities against the heart or to take them too [close] the heart (327). Montaigne is consistent with such moderation. There is no evidence in “Of Experience” where he prefers one over the other. In such case, it is not pretty easy to conclude his essay within a singular theme. He commends the all-around activities of human beings. He is pragmatic in his approach. As he appreciates the personality of Epaminondas who is unleashed to do any activity, from dancing and playing with children to engage himself in writing poetry and fighting in the battlefield. John Glover points out that Montaigne emphasizes ‘humans are composite; to deny our sensuality is to deny our humanity, but at the same time to deny our being rational is also to deny our humanity’⁴. Montaigne appreciates and corroborates Plato since he (Plato) declares both soul and bodily pleasures equally important (328).

Conclusion

It may be quite pertinently argued that in Montaigne’s essay there are solid examples of prevarication. The readers cannot afford to stick to a composite theme. “Of Experience” is full of paradoxes. Like at one place, he says, ‘[t]here is no cause of life so weak and sottish —as that which arranged by order and discipline’ (326). But at the conclusion of the essay he writes, ‘the best and [appreciable] lives are those which with order are fitted and with rules arranged’ (340). However, one point may confidently be made, his consistency with the moderation of values is thoroughly maintained. The rest of the features in his essay are digressive.

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