



John Ruskin's *The Crown of Wild Olive (Lecture I): A Critical Perspective*

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John Ruskin (1810-1900) is a famous Victorian critic, essayist, philosopher and social reformer. Ruskin was a skilled painter, and he painted various objects of nature. He is called 'an artist in prose'. Ruskin was very influential through his writings and his one of the greatest works *Unto this Last* inspired the father of the Indian nation, Mahatma Gandhi. Apart from American transcendentalist Henry Thoreau, he is another great author who inspired Gandhi. *Unto this Last* is a critical essay which deals with Christian Socialism - a rare combination of religion and socialism. This work affirms that Ruskin is a firm believer in religion and socialism. Tolstoy described him as "one of the most remarkable men not only of England and of our generation, but of all countries and times" (Eagles).

Apart from *Unto this Last*, Ruskin has written many other works which brought him name and fame. His first work *Modern Painters* (1843) was written in defence of J. M. W. Turner in which he laid emphasis on the role of the painter/artist. Ruskin was a major source of inspiration to Pre-Raphaelite poetry and art that developed in the middle of the 19th Century. Even after his death too, his ideas remained quite influential in the latter half of the 20th century and are even today. His very popular work *The Crown of Wild Olive* (1876) offers a critical insight into the socio-economic structure of society.

In the mid-19th century, Industrialization was at its peak in England, which gave a lot of freedom to the middle class. This resulted in proliferation of wealth in the hands of the middle class which turned them into bourgeoisie. Materialism gained precedence over virtues like industriousness, honesty, patience etc. The greed for wealth made European nations look for colonies. In brief, industrialization paved the path for colonization. The race for colonization got heated up by the end of the 19th century when even countries like Germany and the USA also started joining the bandwagon. In this context, the work of Karl Marx- *Das Capital*, which was published in 1867, must be studied to understand Ruskin's *The Crown of Wild Olive*.

Industrialization can be defined as the proliferation of goods because of mass production by machines instead of human labour. In other words, machines replaced human labour. This led to pathetic working conditions of the working class. In fact, exploitation of the workers by the bourgeoisie gained momentum. Consequently, the outrage in literary circles became evident in the works of writers such as Charles Dickens, Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin and many other Victorian writers.

John Ruskin's *The Crown of Wild Olive* deals with class conflict between the haves and have nots. The concept of labour is exemplified in the work of John Ruskin. The workers' labour hardly gets recognition because of its mundane nature, for example the work done by mind is given precedence over the work done by hand. This is elaborated by the author throughout the first section of *The Crown of Wild Olive*.

Ruskin makes various analogies in his *The Crown of Wild Olive*. Ruskin's socio-economic criticism is clearly reflected in the first part 'Work' of *The Crown of Wild Olive*. His satire is clearly noticeable in his work where he takes the issue of 'Rich and Poor' class in Victorian society and how Rich people keep getting richer and poor people keep getting poorer. Ruskin revolted against the classical school of mercantile economics which postulated 'economic man' without the social and moral elements in human nature. Thousands of acres of common land were in the possession of factory-owners. Poor people had to sell their little farms and become hired labourers at low wages. The bulk of the rural population migrated to towns in the hope of improving their economic status.

Ruskin was born in the middle of the Industrial revolution which changed the lives of people immensely. Material culture began to gain ground. The other adverse effect of the Industrial Revolution was the predominance of machines and mammon worship. *The Crown of Wild Olive* is a socio-economic criticism of European Industrialization and its consequences. It focuses on Ruskin's rage against the use of machines and dehumanization in Victorian England. Industrialization created class distinction. He advises eliminating class differences by doing justice and honesty with work.

John Ruskin's concern for the working population is evident in the opening section of the essay itself. As winds of change sweep across England, it is necessary for the working population to understand the changing scenario. One must understand the role of education in these changing times. He promotes education and says that its system should be improved in contemporary times and according to him with the help of education this class distinction can be effaced. He questions in the section 'Work' - "Whether you think the distinction heretofore drawn between working men and others, is truly or falsely founded. Do you accept it as it stands? Do you wish it to be modified? Or do you think the object of education is to efface it, and make us forget it forever?" (Ruskin). In this vein, John Ruskin broadly classifies society into two sections - working class and others. He says that the work done by an engine driver and the blacksmith in a furnace involves more labour as compared to office work. Though the engine driver and the blacksmith work for eight hours a day their wages remain much lower than an intellectual mind that works eight hours a day sitting in the safe confines of the room. According to Ruskin, the risky job of a blacksmith and an engine driver deserves more credit and appreciation than the work of an intellectual mind. Even within the family, differences arise due to the incorrect approach of elders. Ruskin cites the example of parents who pamper their children with costly presents and offer ordinary gifts to the children of their housemaids. He says that charity begins at home. When we buy many costly things for our children but buy only a few things for our maid's children out of sympathy the distinction begins there only. It should be effaced by giving equal things to all the children. Why shouldn't that little. . . child (Ruskin). Also send your child to sweep as a sweeper's child does to eliminate distinction (Ruskin). Differences that arise in the minds of the children continue in later years and develop dichotomies in society. The author wonders whether the working class itself wants to obliterate the existing differences or modify the same.

In both the sections of society, one can find busy and idle people. Still, the rich take great pride in calling the poor 'idle' and the poor use the term 'idle' for rich people. Ruskin comes down heavily on both the rich and the poor for not identifying the flawed elements in their respective sections. Instead, they take great delight in finding fault with the 'other.' According to Ruskin, if the rich criticize the 'idle rich' and the poor do the same for the 'idle poor' there won't be any problem as such in contemporary society. He raises the question - 'What is 'idle rich' and 'idle poor' class? He defines:

1. Idle poor and idle rich
2. Busy poor and busy rich (Ruskin)

If busy rich people rebuke idle rich and busy poor rebuke idle poor everything will be right, but the reality is reversed. The busy rich criticize idle poor and busy poor criticize idle rich for the accumulation of wealth. There is no point in talking about the 'idle' as they are 'mere nuisances' in society. It makes sense to talk about 'the industrious' as they are the real contributors to society. Unfortunately, there are differences among the industrious, which must be understood correctly.

In this section ‘Work’ Ruskin divides society based on four parameters:

1. Work to Play
2. Production to Consumption
3. Head to Hand
4. Sense to Nonsense (Ruskin)

According to Ruskin, there is a wide gulf existing between those who work and play. Similarly, there are differences between those who are indulging in the process of production and consumption. Further, there is disparity of income between those who do ‘rough work’ and ‘smart work.’ In addition, there is a big gap between ‘wise work’ and ‘foolish work.’ John Ruskin discusses all the differences threadbare in his landmark work *The Crown of Wild Olive*. The speaker gives the example of cricket to drive home the point that play is meant for entertainment only. On the contrary, work has a definite purpose. It also has a certain objective. Though cricket pleases so many, it is not essential for leading one’s life. Even the number of runs scored by a team in cricket has no great value. In the same way, Ruskin goes on to discuss so many other games that English society indulges in for mere pleasure. Few games are played only for profession and earning money such as he gives example of cricket that is played for amusement only (Ruskin). It has no purpose as you can only earn more money by playing more games (Ruskin). He gives examples of people who do hard work generously in fields, near the furnace or the jewel cutter. One thing brings happiness for one section of society but for the other section it brings sadness. So, justice is to be done to all the classes.

In his work, Ruskin considers the very act of making money a game only. According to the author, money makers themselves do not know the purpose behind making money. Even creating Literature based on imagination is a game. The sad fact of life is that for the happiness of few, many suffer. For instance, many toil to make stumps and wickets for the players to play a game of cricket. Similarly, a jewel-cutter even loses his eyesight as he makes an earnest attempt to come out with fine jewellery. Unfortunately, the fine jewellery is worn by a select few fashionable ladies, who have absolutely no concern for those coming from the underprivileged sections of society. Diamond cutters lose their lives in their attempt to please the upper strata of society. Even weavers and iron forgers suffer the same fate in their eagerness to make a few pounds. Ruskin concludes the first part of the section “Work” to a close by saying that class differences will cease to exist, only when every member of the society becomes a worker. In other words, class differences will thrive if one section of society works for giving pleasure to another section of society.

The second part of ‘Work’ starts on a rousing note as the writer embarks on a journey to probe the mindset of the royal class. Price-hiking seems to have no relevance for someone coming from a royal background. Ruskin makes use of an imaginary character named Count Teufelskine to put forth the view that the royal person is willing to shell out even fifteen francs for just two peaches. Price-hiking affects the poor, but it has no effect on the super-rich. The author elaborates on the same theme by using a fictitious name Shadwell Gap, High Street where a poor man is found lying dead with no one to attend to. The attitude of society towards the poorest of the poor is so abominable that he is allowed to rot unattended. The deceased did not get even a proper funeral due to the appalling attitude of society. The author now goes to the extent of giving a proper remedy to help the working class. The working class must be given freedom to use or save money as per their needs. This will serve as an incentive to put in the extra yards for doing work cheerfully. It is of paramount importance for society to ensure that the poor and idle are not allowed to covet the hard-earned money of the working class. Working class section should be paid commensurate with their work and they should have liberty over their possession. They may spend it today or save it for the future. “The lawful basis of wealth is, that a man who works should be paid the fair value of his work ((Ruskin)).” Those who produce must have liberty to consume also. This alone will enforce law and order and help in the creation of a just society.

Accumulation of wealth alone cannot become the sole objective of life. The author goes even to the extent of saying that only the uneducated class will indulge in mammon worship. Ruskin uses another analogy to throw light on the point mentioned above. Just like healthy people do not think about dinners all the time, educated ones cannot think about making money the prime focus of life. A good soldier derives joy in waging wars and so is the case with a clergy man who gets happiness through baptizing and preaching. In the same manner, a good doctor gets pleasure in curing a patient rather than earning a fee for his treatment. In a nutshell, work is primary, money is secondary.

Anyone who follows the rule considers God as his master. On the contrary, anyone who flouts the rule considers the Devil as his master. Ruskin brings a logical conclusion to the argument by driving home the point that one becomes king of kings by experiencing perfect freedom through one's relationship with God. Similarly, one remains slave of slaves by rendering one's service to the Devil.

The Biblical character of Judas Iscariot is mentioned in *The Crown of Wild Olive* to make readers understand the aftereffects of making money through illegal means. As per the story mentioned in *The Bible*, Judas Iscariot did not live long to enjoy his life after getting 30 pieces of silver for betraying Jesus Christ. In fact, his guilt conscience made him to return the money to the authorities and hang himself in a tree a few days after Christ's death. Ruskin launches a scathing attack on capitalism by talking about the power of capital. Capitalists take the entire profit for themselves and allow the laborers to have access to only the basic amenities. This is done with the objective of making laborers work for the capitalists throughout. According to Ruskin, one must spend everything before leaving this world. Ruskin's argument is that one must not leave wealth for the next generation as the importance of wealth is known only to those who have earned it through the right means.

When it comes to the matter of dealing with money, it is ridiculed by the author. Elders refuse to spend money for buying crackers to make their children merry, but the same people lend money to Russian and Austrian children who use that amount for getting cartridges and bayonets. The double standards of elders in using money to suit their convenience is brought out by the author. The role of money in society, how it flows in society and how the humans create differences among themselves through money forms the crux of the second part of the section titled 'Work.' Ruskin gives food for thought to the readers by articulating his views about the great lengths that the people go to sustain the differences in society for one's own selfish motives. Ruskin also cites examples from Scriptures to elaborate on the point that money makes people do strange things.

Having devoted the entire second part to the impact of money, Ruskin explores the concept of work in the third part. Ruskin starts this part with his discussion about 'work' by bringing out the differences between rough work and gentle work. Both 'rough work' and 'gentle work' must be given importance by humans. Work done by using hands and heads is equally important. Work done by using hands takes a toll on one's body. Ruskin gives the example of a man working in a furnace and a man driving a train to explain the effect of work on humans. On the other hand, work done in the cool confines of a room like painting, reading and sketching does not involve risks. It is the gentle work which he says is done with the head while the rough work is done with hands and demands more labour and effort, yet the gentle work gets more reward than rough work.

Rough work is not honorable as it is done in fields and gentle work is done in AC rooms. The man sitting in a quiet room with all the comforts will not have any idea what that man must face who has been heaving clay out of a ditch all day, or driver driving an express train against the north wind all night, or a person witting and whirling hot iron at a furnace mouth. Though tough work is honest and fine work is foolish but if fine work is done with honesty, it will be honorable. In the eyes of God, work done by hands is noble. Now, the question arises, who must do rough work and how people doing rough work must be rewarded. Ruskin leaves this issue at the hands of honest thinkers. Still, Ruskin firmly believes that rough work must be done by everyone and not dumped on a few individuals. Whatever work is done by people, it must be done in an orderly manner.

Ruskin also wants training to be given to workers just like soldiers. Everyone needs appreciation in some form or the other and so is the case with workers. Every now and then, Ruskin quotes from scriptures to buttress his argument. God has a special liking for those who do service rather than those who merely do prayer. The Almighty prefers workers to beggars. Another important thing is one must believe in fair work. The importance of justice over charity is emphasized by Ruskin in the third part of the essay titled 'Work.' Justice is the foundation on which the temple of charity must be built. Even charity must be done without partiality. Well-to-do people use different yardsticks to do charity for children. When it comes to their own children, parents go out of the way to get them decked up for going to Divine Service on Sundays. The same people give just a penny for children who perform the role of sweepers. Similarly, someone is made to clean the ditch for a paltry sum for the benefit of many. The word 'providence' is used to justify the actions of those who use others for their own profit. The author subtly talks about dignity of labour and how society must participate in labour to uplift those who belong to the lowest strata of society.

Ruskin's anger against members of society is because they pay more for amusement than actual work. He gives the examples of Homer and Dante to highlight the point that great writers who contributed to literature barely

got anything for their immense contribution. The author talks of an ideal scenario where a ploughman will be paid more than a lawyer and Peter the Fisherman gets paid more than Peter the Pope. In the words of the author, rest and leisure are extremely necessary for workers to recover and get on with life. Ruskin also wants entertainment to be streamlined. One must not derive pleasure from others' misery, but true pleasure must be derived by spending time in the lap of Nature and in the company of children. Happiness can be derived by reading good books and good books must be made accessible to working men by society.

John Ruskin throws light on the differences between wise work and foolish work in the final section titled 'Work' that constitutes the opening lecture of 'The Crown of Wild Olive.' Work done to uphold 'God's law of order' falls under the heading called wise work; work done against 'God's law of order' falls under the heading called foolish work. God expects justice to be enforced on all mankind and wise work is the step in the right direction. On the contrary, devils try to destabilize the work of God by bringing chaos. Those who side with the Devil become the root cause of disorder, and harbingers of death. The three essential characteristics of wise work are honesty, usefulness and happiness. In fact, the first and foremost characteristic of wise work - honesty must be strictly followed in both play and work. For instance, even in a contact sport like Boxing fairness is important. Fair play is an essential trait that Englishmen advocate in games. Foul Play is not acceptable in any game or sport. Just like in games, fairness is important in work. A gambler indulging in foul play is chucked out but a tradesman indulging in dishonest practice is allowed to flourish in business. Ruskin makes an earnest plea to tradesmen to be honest as dishonest practice like adulteration may even lead to death. Concern for humanity will make us listen to our conscience and do things in all fairness. False show and pretension should be avoided, and Real work should be done. Sensible/Real/Good work is like childhood, which is modest, faithful, loving and generous. Sensible work is Angelic and in it you serve God. Insensible work/False Work is devilish in which you serve demon.

The next important thing mentioned by the author is that work must be useful. In other words, work must be fruitful for mankind, and it must not go to waste. Ruskin gives the example of an adult who scolds his child for spilling milk on the floor and thereby allowing the cat to lap it up. On the contrary, the same adult is not perturbed for wasting the precious life of a fellow human being and allowing the devil to lick the blood that has spilled on the ground. The double standards of society are criticized by the author whose concerns for workers are clear in the lecture.

John Ruskin is a historical thinker, and he is famous for his composite style. His language is colloquial in his essays. With his writings, Victorian prose marks a distinct shift both thematically and stylistically. The change was mostly due to the difference in temperament and intellectual interests. Ruskin, through his writings, paves the way for future generations to think about equal opportunities and freedom to all in society.

Works Cited

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