Study material for Semester IV, Alternative English ( General course)

ON IDLENESS by Samuel Johnson

In his essay *On Idleness*, Samuel Johnson talks about the common human vice of idleness, its nature, how people indulge in it and how it is disguised. Some moralists consider pride to be greatest of human vices, which is present in a majority of people and manifested in a variety of forms. Pride like idleness is also disguised by many, but without success, because like the moon it shines brightly but at the same time it is not bright enough.

Some idle people regard idleness to be an asset and boast that they have nothing to do. Since they sleep off most of their life, they find no difference between the day and night. They hang up their windows with double curtains so that the sunlight does not disturb their slumber.

Johnson describes the idle person as one who wears a garland of poppies (the fragrance of the poppy flower puts one to sleep) and drinks from the cup of forgetfulness. Idle people, whose bodies and brains are inactive, are in a constant state of stupidity. When they die, people say that they have stopped breathing. Life for an idle person is as good as death.

The positive aspect of idleness is that it is harmless to others and also that it requires no gratification from others, the way pride does. It has a silent and peaceful quality without causing envy, hatred or fear in others. Idleness is often disguised by turbulence and hurry, just as pride is sometimes covered up by humility. Idle people are however anxious to show others and also prove to themselves that they are busy. But the kind of work they indulge in, is not beneficial either to themselves or to others. They are always in a state of preparation, like making plans and resolutions and accumulating materials. Their tools and paraphernalia are never handy and their devotion and diligence to work are lamentably lacking. They are eager to occupy their hours with useless activities but not with sincere labour that has far reaching effects.

Johnson cites the example of his friend Sober, who fits into this category of idle people, who indulges in useless activities. Sober’s chief pleasure is conversation. But when his friends cannot offer him company, he takes up the activities of a carpenter, shoe-maker, tin-man, plumber and potter. When he has failed in all these pursuits he took up a new interest in Chemistry. He lights a furnace in the laboratory and distills fluids. Such activities are trifle and worthless, because they are carried out to disguise his chief vice –which is idleness.

Study material for semester IV, Alternative English (General course)

Dream Children – A Reverie by Charles Lamb

Charles Lamb’s essay *Dream Children*, is a narrative about his childhood days spent in the house at Norfolk and about his associations with his loved ones. The narration is delivered to his imaginary children Alice and John. He begins by describing the huge mansion at Norfolk, where his grandmother Field was in charge. He also relates about how pious and affectionate his grandmother was; about his joyful experiences in the house at Norfolk and about his relationship with his brother John Lamb.

The house at Norfolk was massive and spacious with a large garden. The great hall had a fireplace where stories were engraved in the mantelpiece and the walls had oak paneling. The windows had fluttering tapestries and the large rooms were adorned with hangings. Among the decorations were also busts of the twelve Caesars, which fascinated the young Lamb. It was also believed that the house was haunted by harmless spirits of two infants, which grandmother Field had seen on many occasions.

The garden held more interest for the young Lamb and he explored it with joy. It was full of fruit trees like nectarines, peaches, oranges, fir apples etc. He would however never attempt to pluck any of them. Simply looking at the abundance of the fruits and flowers gave him pleasure. He would lie down on the fresh green grass and absorb the fine garden fragrances or sometimes he would take a stroll among the sad looking yew trees, with their drooping tender branches.He would also gaze at the fish pond and observe the movements of the small dace and the big pike.

Charles Lamb narrated to his children about his grandmother Field, who was a pious, loving and popular lady in the county. She took good care of the house as if it were her own. Her religious fervour kept her strong and steady and protected. She was a good dancer too, but later when she was afflicted with cancer, she could dance no longer, but her positive attitude to life kept her upright. When she died , her funeral was largely attended, especially by the poor, whom she had helped.

Lamb’s brother John was a handsome, brave and spirited youth, well loved by all. There was much affectionate bonding between the two brothers . Lamb recalls that John used to carry him on his back because he was a lame footed boy. Tragedy had set in when later John’s leg too had to be amputed, which was followed a premature death. The loss of his brother affected Lamb hugely.

The essay ends with the description of the children’s mother, Alice Winterton. Charles Lamb had courted her for seven long years and her responses had been of coyness, resistance and denial. He recalls her eyes of intent gaze and her bright hair , which he sees also in his little daughter. Suddenly, both his children fade out before him with the words “We are not of Alice, nor of thee, nor are we children at all. The children of Alice call Bartrum father.” At this Lamb jostles back to reality and becomes aware that he had been dreaming. Alice whom he had loved had married Bartrum and Lamb actually had no children. It was simply a reverie and the young Alice and John with whom he was sharing his past memories, were only dream children.