**Dr. BELMERABET Fatiha**

**Lecture one:**

**The Old English Period or the Anglo-Saxon Period (450-1066)**

**7.1 Introduction**

The history of English literature is associated with the history of English people. It started with the emergence of the English nation and kept on evolving alongside the social development of the country. Within the history of this nation, there had been several religious and political changes. Scientific discoveries and inventions also changed the mode of life from time to time of these historical changes caused significant changes in literature. Therefore, within the history of English literature, there have been different phases of progress. Each of these phases referred to as Age or Period has been given a specific name, sometimes after the name of the monarchs, sometimes after the name of an excellent writer, and sometimes consistent with the spirit of the time. A number of the ages have gotten quite one name because different historians have given them different names. Similarly, the duration of a specific age also differs consistent with the selection of historians. Aside from these, a number of the ages are subdivided into smaller ages. Though the names and periods of English literature differ amongst historians and literary critics, the subsequent list that is important to this lecture is adapted from M. H. Abrams (1996), and might be dependable:

1. 450-1066: The Old English Period or The Anglo-Saxon Period

2. 1066-1500: The Middle English Period

a) The Anglo-Norman Period (1066-1340)

b) The Age of Chaucer (1340-1400)

3. 1500-1660: The Renaissance Period

a) Elizabethan Age (1558- 1603)

b) Jacobean Age (1603-1625)

**7.2. The Old English Literature (450-1066)**

This age started in the fifth century when the Jutes, Angles, and Saxons came to England from Germany, defeated the English tribe (Celts), and started their reign. It ended in 1066 with the Norman Conquest.

**7.2.1. Influencing Factors of the Literature of this Period**

(1) Christianization of the pagan tribes began in England.

(2) The 7th century is marked by the establishment of monasteries by Christian authorities where written literature began since whatever had existed literature before that time was oral.

(3) Alfred the Great who ruled England from 871 to 901 encouraged education and supervised the compilation of The Anglo Saxon Chronicle.

(4) The presence of the Anglo- Saxon culture and folklore

**7.2.3. Major Literary Works of the Period**

*Beowulf* is the earliest English written epic of this period. “The Wanderer”, “The Seafarer”, “The Husband’s Message” and “The Wife’s Lament” are old English poems recorded in Exeter's book[[1]](#footnote-2) considered as the most remarkable literary works of the age. Moreover, The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle written in this age is the earliest prose of English literature.

**7.2.4. Prevailing Literary Features of the Age**

The following thematic and structural (content and form) features prevail in the literary works of this period and mainly in the epic poem *Beowulf*

1) Most of the literary works are anonymous.

2) Paganism dominates the literary spirit of the time though Christianity is also traceable.

3) Strong belief in Fate is reflected.

4) Evil is symbolized by monsters and good is promoted through heroes

5) Romantic love is absent. No presence of love stories as the core interest of poems

6) Attitude towards women is respectful.

7) Sea adventures, savagery, and heroic activities are honored.

8) Use of more metaphors and fewer similes is the practice of the time.

9) Alliteration is used as the main ornamental poetic device and all alliterative syllables are stressed. (Poems are called alliterative verses)

10) Kennings (compound words instead of single words) are widely used. Here are some examples: “whale-road” for the sea, “loaf-giver” for the king, “life-house” for the body, “soul-destroyer” for the monster, etc.

11) Verse lines do not have an equal number of syllables. Syllables in one line vary from six to fourteen.

12) End-rhyme is ignored.

1. Exeter book: is one of the four English famous anthologies. It records the old English poetry. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)