



*Journal of Advances and
Scholarly Researches in
Allied Education*

*Vol. VIII, Issue No. XV,
July-2014, ISSN 2230-7540*

SHAKESPEARE'S SUPERIORITY OVER HIS CONTEMPORARIES

AN
INTERNATIONALLY
INDEXED PEER
REVIEWED &
REFEREED JOURNAL

Shakespeare's Superiority over his Contemporaries

Amrita Devi

M.Phil. Research Scholar, Department of English, Jaipur National University (Rajasthan)

Abstract – William Shakespeare is considered as one of the most renowned writers of the Elizabethan age. The greatest of all Elizabethan Dramatists was Shakespeare in whose hands the Romantic drama reached its climax. As we do not know much about his life, and it is certain that he did not have proper training and education as other dramatist of the period had, his stupendous achievements are an enigma to all scholars up to the present day. The present research paper attempts to present the main features of Shakespeare's plays which account for his superiority over his contemporaries.

-----X-----

INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare was a celebrated literary figure and playwright, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's pre-eminent dramatist. He is often called England's national poet. His extant works, including some collaboration consist of about thirty eight plays, and one fifty four sonnets, two long narrative poems, and a few other verses. His plays have been translated into every major living language. Shakespeare produced most of his unknown work between 1580 and 1613. His early plays were mainly comedies and histories, genres he raised to the peak of sophistication and artistry by the end of the 16th century. He then wrote mainly tragedies until about 1608, including Hamlet, King Lear, Othello and Macbeth- considered some of the finest works in English language.

-----soul of the age!

The applause! delight! the wonder of our stage!

Triumph, my Britain! thou hast one to show,

To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe,

He was not of an age, but for all time.

This is the glowing tribute which Ben Johnson, Shakespeare's worthy rival and sometimes harsh critic, paid to him. Since Ben Johnson's age an unbroken line of critics ranging over four centuries have done the same. It will be tedious to recount the glowing panegyrics which have gone to the bard of Stratford. If one were to believe all of them, one would

be led to understand that Shakespeare was not a man but a phenomenon unamenable to any critical test whatever. Thus Pope, for instance, asserted that Shakespeare was not an imitator but an instrument of Nature. He did not speak for Nature; rather it was Nature who spoke through him.

In the Victorian age, the vogue of "Family Shakespeare" helped in nurturing a sentimental approach to Shakespeare. Fortunately, the critics of today have come to dissociate themselves from such lachrymose panegyrisation, and much of the cloud of incense which collects around a deity has been laid, enabling us to approach the real Shakespeare clearly and correctly. Shakespeare did out top his contemporaries, but he did not "out top Knowledge"- as Shakespeare who is ever fresh, and will surely last as long as books last. Dr. Johnson's words are very true:

"The stream of time, which is continually washing dissoluble fabrics of other poets, passes without injury by the adamant of Shakespeare."

SHAKESPEARE'S COMPREHENSIVENESS:

What primarily distinguishes Shakespeare from the host of his contemporaries is that, unlike them, he does not have only a narrow limited range within which his genius operates. What Shakespeare deals with is entire length and breadth of human life and character in all its complexity and variety. Which element of human experience and which segment of human sensibility has Shakespeare left untouched? "He", as a critic avers, "sweeps with the hand of a master and varied experiences of human life, from the lowest note to the very top of its compass, from the sportive childish treble of Mimilius and the pleading boyish tones of Prince Arthur up to the

sceptre-hunted terrors of Macbeth, the tropical passion of Othello, the agonised sense and tortured spirit of Hamlet, the sustaining and sustained titanic force and tragical pathos of king Lear.” With a rare critical acumen Dryden pointed out that Shakespeare “was the man, who of all modern and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul.”

Shakespeare's comprehensiveness has another manifestation too- his possession of varied dramatic gifts which we do not find concentrated in any of his contemporary dramatists many of whom are indeed masters of one or other of them, and perhaps better masters than Shakespeare. What is there in Shakespeare to match the architecture skill displayed by Ben Johnson in 'The Alchemist', the heart-wringing, terrifying pathos of the last scene of Marlowe's 'Doctor Faustus', the starkly touching quality of the death-scene of the king in Marlowe's 'Edward III' or that of the Dutchess in Webster's 'The Dutchess of Malfi', the skilful virtuosity of Beaumont and Fletcher's comedy 'The Knight of the Burning Pestle' or the ecstatic utterance of Dr. Faustus on his vision of Helen. Even then we have to admit that Shakespeare is superior to any of his contemporaries in that he combines all the gifts. There-in lies “comprehensiveness” and consequently, the secret of his continued appeal.

The most significant quality which distinguishes him from his contemporaries is his universality and his deep and profound understanding of human nature. Shakespeare's dramas are a great river of life and beauty. In the words of Dryden:

“Shakespeare was the man who of all modern and perhaps ancient poets had the largest and the most comprehensive soul.”

Shakespeare's appeal is universal and we may say that 'he is not of one land, but of all lands.' His characters recur in every generation, they remain individuals, but they are types. His dramas have an appeal to the human heart because his pen covers the whole gamut of experience of all kinds. He sweeps with the hand of a master of the varied experiences of human life.

SHAKESPEARE'S CHARACTERISATION:-

According to Compton-Rickett, “One of the two qualities which establish Shakespeare's superiority over his contemporaries is his insight into human nature.” Shakespeare's characters provide an abundance of psychological realism making them very convincing. Macbeth's ambition, Falstaff's light-hearted villainy, Lear's simplicity, Desdemona's native devotion, Shylock's greed and revengefulness and Iago's malignity, have all a ring of superb veracity. Myriads are the shapes of his characters, but all of them are so bright and so clear, all so true to life, that in the words of Pope: “It is a sort of injury to call

Shakespeare's characters by so distinct a name as copies of Nature.”

Other dramatist can only gain attention by hyperbolic or aggravated characters, by fabulous or unexampled excellence or depravity, as writers of barbarous romances invigorated the reader by a giant and a dwarf; and he that should form his expectations of human affairs from the play, or from the tale, would be equally deceived. Shakespeare has no heroes; his scenes are occupied only by men, who act and speak as a reader thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion: Even where the agency is supernatural the dialogue is level with life. Others writers disguise the most natural passions and most frequent incidents; so that he who contemplates them in the book will not know them in the world: Shakespeare approximates the remote, and familiarises the wonderful: the event which he represents will not happen, but if it were possible, its effects would probably be such as he has assigned; and it may be said that he has not only shown human nature as it acts in real exigencies, but as it would be found in trials, to which it cannot be exposed.

Compton - Rickett considers Shakespeare's “incomparable poetry” as one of the two characteristics which have rendered his work of universal interest. Shakespeare was a richer and more imaginative poet than any of his contemporaries. “He is”, says Compton-Rickett, “the supreme poet in an age of great poetry, because his poetry is wider in range and deeper in feeling than that of his contemporaries. He touches every mood of graceful sentiment, as in the romantic comedies; of delicate fantasy, as in the fairy plays; of philosophic meditation, as in the tragedies of the mid-period; and of poignant passion, as in the later tragedies. In the verse that bodies forth such primal things as love, hate, hope, despair, courage, endurance, Shakespeare towers above his fellows- when we think of Lear in his desolation, of Othello in his last anguish, Macbeth in his soul's agony, and the despair of Cleopatra- we think of English literature at its grandest.” Hazlitt talks about Shakespeare's “magic power over words”. They indeed come at his bidding and occupy the right places. Shakespeare has an almost instinctive knowledge of all the nuances of meaning and the art of their most effective arrangement. His interchanging of verse and prose for dramatic utterance too bespeaks his wonderful artistry and a kind of fidelity to nature. Romeo, a romantic lover, talks invariably in verse; Falstaff, an anti-romantic fellow, always talks in prose. The same character may talk sometime in verse and sometime in prose, depending upon the mood. Othello when moved by bestial thoughts, talks in prose even though normally he does in verse. Rosalind talks in prose when she is talking light-heartedly in a holiday humour.

CONCLUSION:-

To conclude, we can say that, Shakespeare's plays are of universal significance and highly superior to those of his contemporaries on account of his wonderful poetry, his sympathetic humanity and broad-mindedness, his superb mastery of his medium, and his mastery insight into human nature which ever remains the same. Human beings come and go but human nature remains the same. Shakespeare's heart beats in unison in all times and in all ages.

REFERENCES:-

- Singh, T: "A History of English Literature", Suneet Printers, Bareilly.2013.
- Dahiya, S. Bhim. "A New History of English Literature" DOABA Publication, Delhi. 2005.
- Gupta and Sharma. "Naveen Narendera Guide on English Literature". Narendera Publishing House Jalandhar. 2010.
- Paul, Rajinder. "Julius Caesar". Rama Brothers Pvt. Ltd. Delhi.2006.
- [http:// www.wikipedia.org/wiki](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki).