

William Shakespeare: A Telescopic Picture of the Society

Jyoti*

M.A. English, B.Ed., NET, Assistant Professor, Arya College, Panipat

Abstract – As an actor turned playwright, Shakespeare witnessed the people from the society. He studied the crowds, gave them what they wanted & simply reflected their own thoughts & feelings. His plays represent the society of his time but his criticism suits our society too. When we peep through the plays of Shakespeare written during the period 1604 to 1611, we come to know that he is a very objective critic of Human Nature. He perceived the people of his own society & criticized their follies in his plays. According to Dr. Johnson, Shakespeare is the best observer of Human Nature & holds a mirror on different persons in the society. Shakespeare wrote the great tragedies Othello (1604), King Lear (1605), Macbeth (1606) & last Play, a romance, The Tempest (1611) during this period. His tragedies introduced us to a dark & dismal world where evil Flourishes & good suffers, the meaninglessness of life. He poses the fundamental questions of life, of man's inhumanity to man, of the conflict of good & evil. He mocked at the tragic aspects of human life like hatred, jealousy, vanity, suspiciousness, plotting and the minute temperaments of the people from the society. His age was suffered from cruelty, plotting & suspicions. It had its full measure of cruelty, superstitions, beastliness, Bearbaiting, public floggings & executions which are the sources of Shakespeare's plays. The Poor, Dr. Lopez, a Portuguese Jew & the personal physician to the Queen Elizabeth, was hanged, drowned & quartered at Tyburn in public on 7th June 1594. He was accused of being in correspondence with Spain about a plot to poison the Queen. He was hanged; his body pulled down & cut in four. Of course he was guilty but his trial & execution aroused immense passions & waves of anti-Semitism in the society. There were other plots too, real or alleged, against the Queen.

Keyword – William Shakespeare, Elizabethan Attitudes, Women

-----X-----

William Shakespeare witnessed all these events & undoubtedly produced it in his plays, particularly in the tragedies like Othello, King Lear & Macbeth. As a wise reformer of society, he criticized the greed for wealth, plotting, seduction, suspiciousness, hatred, money mindedness as we see in his plays written during the period 1604 to 1611. With the help of the telescope he delineated the picture of the then existing society. But Shakespeare's intellectual power of criticizing is not only limited to his society but it is applicable to our society too. So, the characters that peopled his plays have become the familiar companions of our daily life, as real as the personalities that fill our television screens.

Othello is the best example of Shakespeare's criticism on his society as well our society. He criticized the Elizabethan attitudes, values on race & gender. Shakespeare had perhaps deliberately reflected the racial & gender attitudes inherent in his society. By the time Othello was written, relatively few blacks were living amongst them. The English were become more & more aware of the existence of the Blacks, who were used in Europe for the Slave-trade. During the time, the play was written, Queen

Elizabeth had banned all blacks from entering the city. She spoke of them as, "Negros & Moors which are crept into the realm of which kind of people there are already here too many" Shakespeare is almost mocking the Queen by characterizing Othello as a black man having a high ranking position in the army & who marries a white aristocratic woman against her father's will. It clearly shows us Shakespeare's humanistic approach about the racism. As it had been speculated by him, not only Elizabethan but our society too thought hierarchically, fair skin as an epitome of beauty & therefore dark skin ranked below it. The Elizabethans thought that the Dark colour is the punishment for sin. The term 'Black' was used in many texts to stand for sin, filth ugliness, evil & the Devil. Shakespeare reflects these attitudes of the people with the help of the characters like Iago, Roderigo, and Duke & Brabantio. Duke looked over Othello's colour & assigned him his position. Hostility is shown by Iago & Rodrigo. Iago describes Othello as the "black Moor" hinting at something other than just colour. The animal images, "you'll have your daughter covered with Barbary horse" (Act I, Scene I), "Old black ram convey the ideas of

someone less than human. The way race is portrayed reflects the Elizabethan society's attitudes to race.

The portrayal of women and their actions reveal the attitude of Shakespeare as well as his society towards women. Shakespeare satirizes his people, when Desdemona elopes with Othello without her father's consent which during that time would have been socially unacceptable. In the Elizabethan Era, marriage was not just a union but also a property transaction, the bride brought a dowry from her father & the grooms' father had to settle lands on her in return, as a jointure. Therefore to marry without the permission of bride's father is considered as an act of theft. But it seems that Shakespeare was against these views so he mocked his own society by reflecting his modern views in Othello. Due to feminist movement, today values given to women quiet change drastically than in Shakespeare's time. The 16th century girls tend to get married off rather young in their teens and their husbands were chosen by their parents. But in modern era girls are free to choose their partners in their late 20s as it had been reflected by Shakespeare in his plays.

Women are now considered as equal as the men. But in Shakespeare's Era women were considered as inferior to men. The three women in the play Desdemona, Emilia & Bianca, construct the well rounded views of the society. Iago's views on women are shown in Act II Scene I. He says,

"You are pictures out of doors, bells in your parlours, Wild cats in your kitchens, saints in your injuries, Players in your housewifery & hussies in your beds." He also presents a common view of that Era, when he says,

"You rise to play & go to bed to work."

It presents 16th century views of women who considered to be unchaste, unstable & morally frail. Their sexual desires were represented as unnatural appetites-

"Unstable sexual creatures, likely to betray men with Appetites never satisfied. Shakespeare probably mocks at these inferior views of society towards women by using the strong female character Emilia who is a realist, courageous, loyal & self-sacrificing In Act IV Scene III she delivers a feminist speech that questions the Elizabethan society as well as our contemporary modern society. "But I do think it is their husbands' faults if wives do fall. She has the feminist view of men. 'They are all but stomachs and we all but food; they eat us hungrily & when they are full, they belch us.'" She also scolds Othello bitterly, after killing Desdemona, at the end of the play. Though women were considered inferior into the patriarchal society of Shakespeare but in Othello their roles are more prominent than the male

characters which clearly reveals Shakespeare's feminist attitude.

King Lear poses the most fundamental questions of humanity. It reflects the fatalistic & stoical attitudes of Elizabethan period. The whirligig of time producing the mysterious & inexplicable turns of fortune has been a puzzle to the Elizabethans as it is to us. King Lear is the criticism of Shakespeare on Human life & its existence. It repeatedly makes us think the meaningless strife in life. Here we found, Shakespeare as a critic of existential approach. Existentialism as advocated by existential philosophers & literary writers like Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Camus & Sartre concentrates on man's predicament in this age of Anxiety. The meaning of human existence becomes a problem because the very existence of man on this earth is menaced. Living in a world of evil & violence, man is inclined to doubt everything, even the existence of God. In King Lear, Shakespeare too ponders over & criticized the basic questions of man's existence, his relationship with God, to what extent man was free or controlled by predestination. Lear found the world absurd. He realizes the futility of earthly longings & the meaninglessness of life in an absurd universe inhabited by pelican daughters full of filial ingratitude.

Shakespeare criticized the most important & prevalent question in King Lear. The treatment of the children to their parents. The parallel stories of Lear & Gloucester's sufferings at the hands of their own children reflect anxieties that have been close to home not only for Shakespeare's society but also for us. Elizabethan England was an extremely hierarchical society, demanding & respect be shown not only to the wealthy & powerful but also to parents & elderly. But Shakespeare reflects or criticized the few examples of vulnerable parents & their unscrupulous children with the help of the King Lear. It also reveals the fragile fabric of Elizabethan society as well as our society because this is the prevalent picture of our modern society too.

The adulterous relationship of Earl of Gloucester which led to the birth of his illegitimate son, Edmund also reflects Shakespeare's critical views on his society as well as ours. Gloucester has no remorse about it, just like the people of our society. By the customs of society, Edmund will not entitle to inherit any part of his father's estate. Shakespeare criticized this attitude with the help of the character Edmund who expresses his grievance against the society in Act1, Sc.2. He asks a question to the society, why should society not allow the illegitimate children a share in the paternal property? Why should society think them to be low & vile, when the proportions of their bodies are as harmonious as those of a legitimate child?

To prevent 'future strife', King Lear wishes to divide his kingdom equally among his daughters even

while he is living. Here Shakespeare criticized on such a people who abdicate their duties. In terms of aging, as Gerontology upholds, one should only bequeath & not divide his property while he is living. He also tells us each man has his appointed duties & must perform them without any expectations.

In Macbeth Shakespeare mocks at the human existence in the world which is a futile exercise, 'full of sound & fury, signifying nothing'. The absurdity lies in Macbeth's listening to the prophecy of the witches, which creates an alienated situation for him. He feels isolated & suffers from cosmic despair. Shakespeare criticized the evil, wicked people of his society with the help of the character Macbeth. We can compare Macbeth to the underworld people of our society, who sell their souls to the devil. Macbeth himself confessed that he has 'supped full with horrors' and has forgotten the 'taste of fears'. Macbeth's soul was in pursuit of his 'vaulting ambitions' so he lost his peace. Lady Macbeth leads & persuades Macbeth to do the Evil deeds. We always comment that women play an important role in the lives of their husbands to do good, bad or to achieve success. Shakespeare perhaps mocks at such a vicious, selfish women of the society through the character of Lady Macbeth, who compell their husbands to do evil deeds to obtain honour & power. Lady Macbeth's persuasion helps Macbeth in becoming more resolute in his wickedness. She is both 'the abetter and the alter ego of Macbeth'. Her taunting words, references to manliness and masculine vigour are purposely made to rouse the chivalrous element in Macbeth. Lady Macbeth for the time being assumes the role of a nagging wife determined to get things done, irrespective of any moral concern for the deed.

Shakespeare perhaps deliberately handles the supernatural element in this play to mock at his society. The blind belief of Elizabethans in supernaturalism is reflected in Macbeth who blindly believes the prophecy of the three witches & fulfill their demands which led him towards destruction. This criticism of Shakespeare is applicable to our Modern Era too. Though science & technology is flourished, superstitious beliefs are prevalent in our society too. Shakespeare's criticism on human nature reflects through the characters in Macbeth. All of them are the representatives of our society. We have many Macbeths, Lady Macbeth, Banquo, and Duncan in our society through which Shakespeare mocks at our lives.

His criticism of life is revealed in the last speech of Macbeth. It marks the culmination of Macbeth's spiritual tragedy & life has no meaning to him.

Tempest is the reflection of Shakespeare's Humanitarian approach. Humanitarianism indicates the narrow path of salvation. Dhammapada, Bhagwadgita says- 'The wise man is he who is without hatred, the mark of nobility is non-violence

towards all'. In Tempest Prospero forgives his brother, Antonio & Sebastian are dismissed without further punishment. Caliban & his companions are also let off without punishment. Ariel is set free. Here Shakespeare mocks at by telling the profound truth of life to his society as well as to the whole Mankind, that the world is an illusion. This illusoriness of human life is described by Prospero-

we are such stuff

As dreams are made on, & our little life

Is rounded with a sleep.(Act 4)

These lines reveals Shakespeare's wisdom & transitoriness of human life. The eternal sleep, the death, makes us forget the ills of life.

Shakespeare also criticized the paradox of his & ours civilized & uncivilized society. The 17th century was the age of exploration. The Tempest can be read as Shakespeare's commentary on European Exploration of new lands. Prospero lands on an island with a native inhabitant, Caliban, a being he considers savage & uncivilized. He teaches this "inative" his language & customs, but this nurturing does not affect the creature's nature. But Prospero does not drive Caliban away, rather he enslave him forcing him to do work beneath himself. Shakespeare perhaps realized the seeds of colonization of his people. As we know the colonialism of British Rule all over the Continent, whose treatment to the natives was very bad. Europeans were intrigued with the possibilities presented for new beginnings in these "New Lands". The Tempest provides 17th century attitudes of the people about imperialism. Prospero's treatment to the Caliban reveals this fact. Prospero regains his dukedom & gives back the island to the Caliban. Shakespeare mocks at the fact that colonization ultimately results in surrendering the land to the rightful owners. Shakespeare realized that the Europeans might wish to use the New World, Land, as an opportunity to create a new society. This is the familiar type of scene for us, British rule over Indian society. Shakespeare, with the help of Caliban, wants to criticize & fulfill his motive to reflect the English colonial desire for peopling. It also reflects Shakespeare's criticism on the attitudes of the civilized man towards the primitive man, the reactions of the native races. The Tempest is Shakespeare's realist criticism of the prevailing utopian hopes of Europeans about the new world exploration and civilization.

Shakespeare reveals the paradox of, his & ours, civilized & uncivilized society by reflecting the beliefs in supernatural & magical powers. In Elizabethan era, people believed that the fallen spirits had different inhabitants allotted to them at their expulsion & these habitations were in proportion to

the degree of their guilt. Some were confined to hell, some were dispersed in air, some on earth, some in water, others in caves or dens etc. the earth-bound spirits were considered to be the most depraved and the air-borne were least vicious. These spirits had the power to persuade human beings. Shakespeare used an abstract, un bodied creature 'Ariel', a creature of light and air who persuade Prospero to repent in the last scene. Elizabethans also believed that these spirits were free. If they could enslave, they served most unwillingly. So Ariel often begs for liberty. Elizabethans ideas about magic are confusing. A clear-cut distinction between black and white magic was maintained.

Shakespeare depicted Prospero as a man who has realized the importance of service of humanity and performance of duty. So at the end of the play, Prospero devotes himself to the service of his subjects to perform his public duty, which Shakespeare probably wants to tell every human being. Shakespeare too left the stage and returned to the quiet life of Stratford doing his duty as an ordinary citizen. Shakespeare's philosophy of life tells us, not to live in despair but to devote yourself to your duty. It is like the grand philosophy of Bhagwat Geeta.

Shakespeare has reflected his society into his plays. The characters in his comedies are typical young men and women of daily life. We have around us many Orlandos and quite number of Violas. But we have few Macbeths or Othello or King Lear's in the sphere of this earth. That is because these are unusual type of characters, possessing great complexity in mental makeup and personality. Shakespeare clearly observed it and reflected into his plays which reveal his omniscient knowledge of his society, applicable to every society, the whole Mankind.

REFERENCES:

- (1) Ali Amir, A Basic Introduction to Shakespeare, Oxford Uni. Press, Walton Street, Oxford.
- (2) Sarker Sunil Kumar, Shakespeare's Knowledge of Human Nature, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi.
- (3) Goodman W. R., A History of English Lit. Published by Doaba House, Delhi.
- (4) Sarma M. V. Rama, Studies in Shakespeare, Classical Publishing Company, New Delhi.
- (5) Bradley A. C., Shakespearean Tragedy, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi.
- (6) Varma R. S., Papers on Shakespeare, S. Chand and Company (Pvt) Ltd. New Delhi.

- (7) Turner W., Macbeth, S Chand and Company (Pvt) Ltd. Ram Nagar, New Delhi.
- (8) Bhatnagar M. K., Othello, Peacock Books, New Delhi.
- (9) Bhatnagar M. K., The Tempest, Peacock Books, New Delhi.
- (10) Abrams, M. H., A Glossary of Literary Terms, Seventh Edition.
- (11) Traversi Derek, Shakespeare's Last Plays, Pelican Guide to English Literature.
- (12) Alexander Peter, Studies in Shakespeare, OUP, London.
- (13) Tillyard E. M., The Elizabethans World Picture, Penguin Books.
- (14) Heillman Rebert B., Shakespeare; Modern Essays in Criticism edited By Leonard F. Dean.

Corresponding Author

Jyoti*

M.A. English, B.Ed., NET, Assistant Professor, Arya College, Panipat