



Shakespeare's Craftsmanship in the Portrayal of Characters

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➤ Abstract :-

A world famous playwright William Shakespeare is undoubted and unsurpassed master of dramatic world. An inborn extraordinary genius of high literary talent is referred as the most favourite and widely acclaimed dramatist of all times. Shakespeare write 37 plays and all his plays are characterized by his sense of indepth sympathy for human beings, demonstration of human psychology, surprising glorious and precise diction, highly metaphorical language and his unequalled craftsmanship in the picturisation of his characters. He touches almost all the surfaces of life and he has made his characters like Prince Hamlet (Hamlet), Portia (The Merchant of Venice), Lago (Othello), Lear (King Lear), Shylock, the Lew (The Merchant of Venice), Macbeth (Macbeth), Voila (Twelfth Night), Juliet (Romeo and Juliet), Antony (Antony and Cleopatra), Beatrice (Much Ado About Nothing), Edmund (King Lear) immortal and universal which stand the test of time and place. This research paper attempts to review Shakespeare's craftsmanship of characterization. The present paper also aims to understand the heterogeneity of human nature, complexity in human brain, entanglement in human relationships which are skillfully woven in his plays.

➤ **Keywords :** Characterization, diction, dramatist, metaphorical, play, psychology.

➤ Introduction :-

An exceptional genius and god gifted dramatist, William Shakespeare is a special product of Elizabethan age. This Everest personality in literature is alive even today in the form of his classic plays. Shakespeare was a multifaceted personality, an actor, a poet and a dramatist of high standard. He successfully tried his hand is poetic and dramatic genre in literature. He wrote several comedies, tragedies, romances, roman plays, historical plays, tragicomedies, melodrama that cross the limits of entertainment and compel the audience to think and rethink on existence of human beings, human nature, mind, behaviour and complexity of human life in nutshell and hence his plays stand the test of time and place. He has received a worldwide recognition as the most popular playwright since Elizabethan times and the subject of

many writer's and scholar's criticism and study. It is said that Shakespeare is the biggest employment scheme of the world which has given bread and butter to a number of actors, directors, producers, teachers, critics, translators, backstage professionals and so on.

Shakespeare's plays fall under the general category of poetic drama. He was genuinely great as a poet but as a playwright he was fully aware of the all technicalities of the stage performance of plays. A seldom found combination of literary merit and absolute knowledge of effective experimentation in theatre is seen in his dramatic writing. The most graceful and expensive gift that England has offered to the entire world and that is one and only Shakespeare. The miraculous writers like Shakespeare never belong to particular nation but they become the belonging of the worldwide people. Therefore a noted critic Lee Sidney puts it: "The exalted foreign estimate illustrates the fact Shakespeare contributes to the prestige of his nation a good beyond repute for his literary power. He is not merely a literary ornament of our British household. It is largely on his account that foreign nations honour his country as an intellectual and Spiritual Force."¹

➤ **Historical Characters :-**

As a dramatist Shakespeare was deeply influenced by his predecessors: Thomas Kyd (1557 – 1595) and Christopher Marlowe (1564 – 1593) and he admitted the literary guardianship of these two great playwrights of contemporary Elizabethan times. A majority of Shakespearean plays are historical plays. His series of historical plays begins with King John and ends with Henry VIII. The historical events and personalities during 1199 to 1547 were selected by Shakespeare for dramatic writing. After Henry VIII, his daughter Elizabeth came to the throne of England which proved to be the golden period for arts and literature. Shakespearean era witnessed the devastation of feudal system, inefficient aristocrats, consistent changes in the historical cycle and loss on account of madness of royal families and these are the themes of his plays. The dramatic world of Shakespeare is often crowded with the kings, princes, princesses, queens, knights, aristocrats. The Romans reigned England for a short duration and hence Shakespeare acquainted his audience with Roman history and wrote some plays which are considered as Roman plays.

It was the time for the fall of the Roman empire and the beginning of Christianity. Julius Caesar is a famous Roman play where Caesar's neice Octavius becomes a leader and ends the play. The last act witnesses the rise of Octavius. One can experience the real Shakespearean strength of characterization in the character of Octavius. Shakespeare creates his characters live by mingling his sense of contemporary issues with logical sense of history and precise, powerful diction. Octavius was a contemporary of Jesus Christ and then Cymbeline was the king of England and Shakespeare wrote a drama on his life as 'Cymbeline' in the last phase of his life. His 'Cymbeline' is rich in symbols and he has used a number of symbols to reveal spirituality, infidelity and corruption of the day. A romantic play 'Antony and Cleopatra' is a love story depicting adolescent indulgence of Antony with Cleopatra.

The conflict between a Roman empire of the west and the Egyptian empire of the east is the essence of many of his dramas. Struggle between the east and the west has ever been incessant phenomenon and this finds major theme in his plays. Like a scholar he studies history like a sculptor he recreates art, like a

scavenger he is ceaselessly in search of historical characters, he tries to see the seeds of future history cycle in the contemporary human transactions and like a skilled engineer joins the two ends of the bridge of history and present in an unexcelled way.

The historical plays deal with the account of events happened in the past but these plays as well relate the past events with the present day life and experiences. Marcus Brutus, Caius, Calpurnia, King Edward IV, Falstaff, Henry IV, Queen Isabel of France, Princess Katherine, Macbeth, Lear, Hamlet, Octavius Caesar, Duke of Orleans, Portia, Timen, Duchess of York etc. are the characters from history recreated artistically and gracefully without much distorting the actualities of history. As William Hazlitt quotes: ‘Shakespeare was scarcely more remarkable for the force and marked contrasts of his characters than for the truth and subtlety with which he has distinguished those which approached the nearest to each other. For instance, the soul of Othello is hardly more distinct from that of Lago than that of Desdemona is shewn to be from AEmilia’s, the ambition of ‘Macbeth is as district from the ambition of Richard III, as it is from the meekness of Duncan, the real madness of Lear is as different from the feigned madness of Edgar as from the babbling of the fool.’²

The scope of historical play is specified by the principles of human decisions, power, actions, logic of contemporary time etc. and so the conflicts between the personal and public life of great people take dramatic turns. Over confident and egoist characters fall victim to such conflicts, suffer tragedy and Shakespeare express this tragic sense very effectively through his characters. The play Henry IV is a brilliant comedy. He portrays the funny and witty world of Falstaff. Prince Hal (Henry IV’s son and later Henry V) disapproves Falstaff and banishes from his Kingdom. Shakespeare was full aware that idealism, fun and wit are the things which add spices to life but as far as power is concerned the fickle minded and feeble people like Falstaff should always be by passed.

➤ **Comic Characters :-**

Shakespeare was a product of Elizabethan and Jacobean period. As a creative and sensitive artist he brought the surrounding atmosphere of London in his dramas. The society and politics of the present day London, modes of people’s thinking ways of lifestyle of English people reflect in his plays. As curious in history, the ‘Chronicles’ supplied him raw material for writing dramas. An American critic John Palmer puts it: ‘Shakespeare had no experts in psychology to explain this difference, but he had observed it for himself in the people who filled the London streets of Tudor England and he had noted it in the chronicle which supplied him with his material.’³ The Englishmen and humour are often regarded as the two sides of a corn. The British have great affection for fun and wit and as a British, Shakespeare made humour a powerful instrument for writing his literature and this is frequently experienced in his dramas. Stage performance by the actors and visiting the theatres for watching their performances had become a fashion of the day. Audience of the Shakespearean era went to the theatres with their peculiar expectation. They loved the drams interwoven with the themes of romance, violence and humour. They expected pure entertainment and for this the spice of humour was indispensably added to the plays. In the hands of the talented writers like Shakespeare, fun and wit became more sharp and the quality of that humour was higher as compared to

the humour of today's theatrical performances. The comic situations and witty dialogues created by Shakespeare take his comedies to the higher level of merit and success.

Humour provides oxygen to Shakespearean plays. His comedies have humour and physical attraction at the centre. Shakespeare's most famous comedies include: 'As You Like It', 'Love's Labour's Lost', 'Measure for Measure', 'Twelfth Night', 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', 'The Merchant of Venice', 'Comedy of Errors', 'Merry Wives of Windsor', 'Much Ado About Nothing' etc. Beside these comedies, every play of Shakespeare may be tragedy or romance or historical play has a number of comic characters, clowns or fools. His dramas are generally categorized into 1) Tragedy, 2) Comedy and 3) Historical plays. But modern scholars have stamped most of his comedies as romances due to his comedies are abound in romantic and love making situations. Lover's love result into marriage at the end of every comedy and as marriage is a social gathering ceremony, all the characters enter on the stage to bless the newly wedded couple's marriage. Earlier strong opposition of the lover's families for marriage finishes and the lovers are finally accommodated in a huge society. The protagonists in tragedy feel isolated and are compelled to suffer the life of extreme solitariness. On the other hand, the lovers (protagonists usually) in comedy previously suffer struggles but their marriage at the end creates reconciliation and happy ending.

In 'As You Like It' when the courtiers enjoy a stay in the woods, a character asks a question: 'What's time?' Another character answers, 'There is no clock in the forest.' In the amidst of nature beauty, far away from the madding crowd of the people, time has no role to play. Shakespeare creates such comic and romantic scenes that lead to temporary escape from real life. To create a feel of relaxation and escape from reality is a peculiar characteristic of Shakespearean comedy.

It's a revolutionary thing that in patriarchal society where women suffer subordination Shakespeare created female centric dramas. The female characters are also responsible for resolving major problems. In his earlier and medieval comedies female characters play important roles but in later comedies Shakespeare weaves plot of drama around young and unmarried ladies where they gain more important position than the male characters. Young female characters like Miranda, Perdita, Portia, Rosalynd, Viola or Marina prove to be characters more important than the male characters. Apart from these female characters Shakespeare also made immortal the characters of fools or clowns in many plays. It is quite interesting to study the characters like John Falstaff (Henry IV), Feste, Malvolio, Sir Andrew Auguecheek (Twelfth Night), Rosberry, Beatrice (Much Ado About Nothing), Gravedigger (Hamlet), Mercutio (Romeo and Juliet), Touchstone (As You Like It), Nick Bottom, Oberon (A Midsummer Night's Dream) and wise fools / clowns are of special interest.

A noteworthy feature of his comic characters is that they make happy ending. Most appreciating fact is that these characters are ever fresh and have timeless appeal. Shakespeare's clever use of puns, wordplay and various comic devices witnessed influential across the centuries. It seems his comedies are specially designed for fulfilling the expectations of all categories of audience.

➤ Tragic Characters :-

Shakespeare's greatness and position as a dramatist rests on his four most discussed tragedies – 'King Lear', 'Hamlet', 'Othello' and 'Macbeth'. Major protagonists of his plays are historical characters. All these characters are extraordinary figures having some divine qualities and being human they have their own hamartia – tragic flaws on the part of their character which lead ruin, downfall resulting into their death. Noble indecision and delay in taking action in Hamlet the Prince of Denmark, vaulting ambition of Macbeth, arrogance and extreme proud nature of King Lear, extreme jealousy of Othello. These flaws of such main tragic characters lead to their destruction. Shakespeare is supposed to get inspiration for his historical plays and tragedies from 'Holinshed's Chronicles'. Not only Shakespeare but his predecessors like Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Kyd, George Daniel, Edmund Spenser used this 'Holinshed Chronicles' as a primary source for the writing their dramas. Shakespeare's characters are drawn from history and he never much distorted these characters but through an artist's eye he sketched them and stand them full forcibly by means of his power of creativity. He simply presents his characters before the audience, raise some questions through these characters and leave them unanswered for the audience. "Recently I spoke to a man whose job it was to teach the meaning of Shakespeare's writings to students at a university. He told me that Shakespeare had no opinions of his own, he could understand and retail everyone's opinion, he left it to others to judge."⁴

His tragedies have a number of specimens of human characters. Diversity of human nature, complexity of human relationships and variegated entanglement of motives are poetically dramatized in his characterization. Apart from strong will power, courage, ideology and sensitivity Shakespeare's heroes and heroines shine but destroy at the end. We can imagine the sensitivity, ideology and brilliance of Prince Hamlet after knowing the dilemma of his mind and hearing his world famous soliloquys we intensely feel his sad helplessness. Shakespeare portrayed a number of such tragic characters like Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, Caesar etc. but their behaviour like ordinary human beings, some wrong decisions taken in critical times lead their own and their near and dear one's absolute destruction. But their downfall tolls the death knell of some wrong span and symbolize the rise of some good to happen in future.

Shakespeare has sketched characters from different surfaces of life and of different nature and different temperament. His artistic management is experienced through abundant poetic dialogues, meaningful soliloquys, emotional songs. He uses all these features in portraying his characters. Bernadine, a drunkard carelessly babbling full aware of his death (Measure for Measure), Lear shouting loudly in a cruel storm, a fool concealing own miseries and trying to console mad Lear (King Lear), Othello killing his beloved Desdemona but his repentance on knowing she was truthful to him till the last breathe (Othello). Shakespeare identifies the character's then state of mind and builds the situations and makes a live presentation of their inner pathos. As Jamal Nafi puts it: "He approaches the great issues of human life from many angles, with different hypotheses and we have a resulting diversity in his plays. Shakespearean tragedy translates a moral vision into dramatic form and thus it is a way of knowing. That this way is

difficult from that of science is obvious, for tragedy deals with things of the imagination and its kind of truth must be emotionally experienced.”⁵

➤ **Conclusion :-**

Shakespeare is a towering personality in literature and it is said that he is not of an age but of all ages. He is the most celebrated artist since 400 years. This exceptional dramatist was primarily a poet but his dramatic achievements surpassed his poetry but it is poetic language which made his dramas immortal. Most of the characters of his drama are historical rather than individual and he got the inspiration for dramatic creation from ‘Holinshed’s Chronicles’. Shakespearean historical plays have been criticized for distorting the chronology and condensation of events. His comic plays are humorous with abundant use of puns, wits and the supernatural elements are a part and parcel of his comedies. His comic characters suffer separation at the beginning but at the end everything is happy and reconciled. In his tragedies fate and fortune make the heroes or heroines helpless victims. The hamartia on the part of tragic characters lead to the downfall of their own as well their nearest ones. These tragic characters are extraordinary, noble, kind hearted holding high social status but they are extremely sensitive, greedy, ambitious, jealous, over confident and due to these inherent faults or internal imperfection of the heroes they suffer complete devastation. Shakespeare has portrayed his immortal characters very effectively and he has greatly succeeded in presenting them lively through excellent dialogues, appropriate actions, emotional thoughts and the use of poetic images in speeches.

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