

Unit - V : General Shakespeare

(Shakespearean Theatre, Audience, Villains, Clowns & Fools; Women Characters etc.)

1. Shakespearean Theatre & Audience

There were no permanent playhouses in England until James Burbage built The Theatre in 1576. By the year 1592, two more playhouses came into existence namely, The Curtain and The Rose near Southwark Cathedral. G. B. Harrison says that the Elizabethan players had no permanent home. They were accustomed to act on a variety of stages. They gave private performances in the great halls of noblemen's houses or in one of the Queen's palaces, or the Inns of the Court and they acted in public Town Halls and inn yards or in any place where they could erect a stage and collect a crowd.

The external measurement of the Fortune Theatre where most Shakespeare's plays were composed to act was only eighty feet square and was erected in 1600. This playhouse was built only to rival the new Globe. The most popular theatres of Shakespeare's time were The Globe and The Blackfriars. The playhouses during the Elizabethan period were generally circular or octagonal. They had three tiers of galleries overlooking the yard or the pit, which was exposed to the sky. The stage was actually projected into the yard so that the actors practically intruded into the midst of the audience. There was roof over the stage and there were doors on the sides through which the players appeared or disappeared from view.

There was a gallery over the back of the stage, this was the upper stage with windows on both sides. This was used whenever an upper scene was shown to the audience, as it happens in *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo climbing up to Juliet's room. The space beneath the upper stage is tiring house hidden from the view of audience. There was no curtain for the whole stage. The ending of each scene was indicated by withdrawal or disappearance of characters from the stage.

Shakespearean stage was bare. There was not much painted scenery. The absence of scenery became an advantage in the hands of Shakespeare. He could cast a spell on his audience with his poetry and shift the scene from one country to another country. There were no actresses on the Shakespearean stage. The role of Women characters were played by young boys. The audience of Elizabethan time had varied tastes and expectation. Shakespeare, using his masterly skills, could successfully cater to the needs of all such audiences. There were the lords and courtly people, the upper class, the business men, the working lot, the groundlings.

These varied audiences had varied tastes. Some were nurturing crude tastes. They love scenes of violence and bloodshed. Shakespeare satisfies their expectations by presenting them plenty of such scenes in his tragedies. A sect of audience wanted to have an abundance of fun and frolic even in tragedies. The audience were lovers of music and so Shakespeare gave them ear-filling music in his comedies. The groundlings had a taste their own. Paying a

penny, they took an entry and stood there at the pit, just in front of the main stage. They loved vulgar jokes, jests and pun. They would express their wild joy by whistling out aloud. Shakespeare never failed catering their needs though such stuff affected the artistry of the plays.

2. Fools and Clowns in Shakespeare

The fool, the Clown or the Jester are practically synonymous terms in Shakespeare's plays who are employed to offer food for laughter to the audience. The Fool in Shakespeare is introduced into comedies as well as into tragedies, historical plays as well as romances. The main purpose of the Fool's appearance is to relieve the tragic tension by lending a grim, sarcastic tone to his humour or fooleries.

The fool is not merely humorist but a philosopher and a critic. He is not always necessarily a fool or an imbecile or a half-witted fellow, but on the other hand he is one of the wisest or the most learned character in the whole play. It is through the lips of the Fool that sometimes Shakespeare speaks or expresses his own mind.

The most remarkable Fool in Shakespeare's plays is the Fool in *King Lear*. He possesses considerable wit. He speaks many outrageous things, and yet Lear does not take any offence. For example, he reminds Lear of the ingratitude of his daughter when Lear himself is smarting under the very same wound. All the qualities of a jester and satirist are combined in Lear's Fool.

According to certain critics, Touchstone stands second amongst the Fools of Shakespeare. He talks more like a wise and learned person. Unlike the conventional fool, he does not play upon words, rather he hates punning. He believes more in logical or argumentative remarks which can appeal only to the intellect or the thinking power of his audience. The peculiarity of Touchstone's humour is that it is never malicious.

Feste of *Twelfth Night* is known for professional foolery rather than spontaneous humour. A man of intellect and character, Feste he entertains everyone by his singing as well as jesting. He is an accomplished musician and entrusted with the delightful songs of the play. Obviously, he is a man of some education as he is familiar with Greek history and Pythagorean philosophy. He is freely admitted to the revels of Sir Andrew Aguc cheek and Sir Toby Belch and is a special favourite to everyone on account of his mellifluous voice.

There are other Fools or Clowns in Shakespeare plays they are not as remarkable as the ones discussed above. These are Trinculo in *The Tempest*, Lancelot Gobo in *The Merchant of Venice*, Costard in *Love Labour's Lost*, the son of the old shepherd in the *Winter's Tale*, the grave-diggers in *Hamlet*, the Clown in *All's well that ends well*, and the jesters who appear in *Othello* and *Timon of Athens*.

3. Women characters in Shakespeare

John Ruskin has appropriately stated that Shakespeare has no heroes, he has only heroines. Shakespeare's women are more remarkable than his men. Shakespeare discovered the real mystery of woman's nature, caught her in very flesh and blood, and viewed her total personality in the light of earthly perfection and worldly limitation. Every woman in Shakespeare is so natural that she forms a single character, a distinct individual, unique by herself who has got her own heart and her own tongue.

In Shakespeare's women, there is no conflict of impulses, no mixture of motives, which lead to complexity of character and therefore they are mostly either good or bad. In *King Lear*, the characters of Goneril and Regan are very simple. They are wicked to the core from the beginning. With all their evil designs, they are out-spirited by their own jealousy, malice and hypocrisy. Cordelia is also equally simple, but she is a little foolish, highly innocent and loving.

Women, by nature are instinctive and Shakespeare has created them as such. Women's instinct relieves them from any conflict. Even Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth, Portia and others are not very much under the domination of their will. Their courage also fails, their heart breaks, but they remain confident maintaining tranquillity, calmness that is never disturbed by the storms of the mind even in the most traumatic moments. One can never compare Ophelia, Desdemona or Cordelia with Hamlet, Jacques or any other great male character.

The behaviour of Shakespeare's women is nothing but an impulsive response to the need of the moment. It could be particularly noticed in the character of Lady Macbeth, who acts only on failure, courage or nervousness, cruel temper or motherly tenderness. Some critics have remarked that Shakespeare's women are mostly timid, petty, shy, impulsive and without any independent personality of their own. It is true to some extent.

It is not true also of life that women are mostly sentimental, instinctive, slow and hesitating. They are so only when the situation is weak and initiated to evil, But the touch of good can make them equally sublime. Every reader of Shakespeare does know that Goneril and Regan are the most monstrous specimens of humanity and Ophelia, Desdemona and Cordelia are the sweetest dreams of womanhood.
