



EPIC AFFIRMATION IN THE LAST PLAYS OF SHAKESPEARE

SUNIL N. WATHORE

Asst. Prof. & Head, Dept. of English,
Arts & Science College, Pulgaon,
Tah. Deoli, Dist. Wardha- 442302 (M.S.) **INDIA**

ABSTRACT

William John Shakespeare, the world's greatest dramatist and best interpreter of the human nature, was born in the pleasant town of Stratford-on-Avon. The soft flowing Avon and the picturesque variety of the neighborhood must have made a deep impression on him. Surely, he has noted everything he saw, the hills, the dales, the meadows, the woods and their flora and fauna. He is regarded as the greatest dramatist of the world, one who towered head and shoulders above his contemporaries. Glowing tributes are paid to his genius and he is called, 'the world's immortal poet'. But he did not achieve this greatness and glory at once. He began his career by working as an actor, then he revised and modified existing plays and the plays so modified, proved to be more appealing than the original plays. It was in this way that he painstakingly acquired the requisite knowledge of stagecraft. It was in this way that he mastered his art.

INTRODUCTION

William John Shakespeare, the world's greatest dramatist and best interpreter of the human nature, was born in the pleasant town of Stratford-on-Avon. The soft flowing Avon and the picturesque variety of the neighborhood must have made a deep impression on him. Surely, he has noted everything he saw, the hills, the dales, the meadows, the woods and their flora and fauna. He is regarded as the greatest dramatist of the world, one who towered head and shoulders above his contemporaries. Glowing tributes are paid to his genius and he is called, 'the world's immortal poet'. But he did not achieve this greatness and glory at once. He began his career by working as an actor, then he revised and modified existing plays and the plays so modified, proved to be more appealing than the original plays. It was in this way that he painstakingly acquired the requisite knowledge of stagecraft. It was in this way that he mastered his art.

Shakespeare continued to write up to the end of his days and there was no falling of his powers. The plays of his last period (1608-1616) are group together as 'Last Plays' or 'Dramatic Romances'. They are different in spirit both form the earlier comedies and the

SUNIL N. WATHORE

1P a g e



great tragedies. They stand in a class by themselves. Shakespeare was now famous, rich and prosperous and he could write freely and indulge his whims. 'The Blackfriars' the first closed theatre had already been constructed and performances were now given at night by artificial light and this accounts for the spectacular characters of these plays. They are full of music, dancing, and scenic display, the style of these last plays is further development of the style of the great tragedies. The very syntax is the syntax of thought rather than of language.

Throughout his career Shakespeare worked hard under considerable pressure, which produced average two plays a year, leaving behind him 37 plays and 154 sonnets which are among the finest sonnets in the English language. He has also written two long narrative poems 'The Rape of Lucrece' and 'Venus and Adonis'. He borrowed freely from all possible sources, but what he borrowed made it entirely his own and transformed it by the alchemy of his genius. Whether in the early plays or the later ones the hand of the master is always at work.

Shakespeare's last plays are: 'Pericles', 'Cymbeline', 'The Winter's Tale' and 'The Tempest'. Constructions in these plays are mixed, grammatical links are dropped, the meaning of sentence is compressed into one hint and impressions count for as much as full blown propositions. These plays reflect calm of mind and tranquility of spirit. Like the Medieval and Renaissance Romances, their stories are really farfetched fantasies with love as a central concern.

The last plays are marked by the epic kind of affirmation of the universal values of life like truth speaking, love, purity and forgiveness etc. and shows that human life is worth living in spite of the occasional suffering and that even the ugliness, falsity and evil and so on come only to enhance and revitalize these affirmative values. The last plays affirm the meaningfulness of the life in spite of the transitory disturbances and blank spaces in it. They even go to the extent of showing that this worldly life is as much important as the other worldly life itself. In their words life of affirmation enables man to achieve spiritual immortality or heavenly happiness in this life itself. This is why many of the themes of the last plays follow the epic pattern. The themes of reunion, rebirth, regeneration and home coming are common to all the major epics of the world. But all these themes found in the last plays of Shakespeare are the part of the affirmative design of his epic vision. The last plays have been variously interpreted as birth plays, rebirth plays, and plays of illumination or regeneration or self discovery or as fables of immortality and so on. All these themes are epic themes which are rarely found in dramatic literature.

The last plays like the epic project have a very comprehensive and profound vision of life and attain a religious, mystical and even metaphysical quality. That is the reason why they are easily designated as secular scriptures or dramatic Bibles. Last plays present the cosmology of the culture of which they are a product. And the individual plays not only contain visions

SUNIL N. WATHORE

2P a g e



and dreams but are themselves extended visions or images. Derek Traverse considers them to be 'expanded images'. The visionary quality of these plays contributes to the epic atmosphere.

The dimension is achieved in Shakespeare's last plays through the creation of an illusion of variety, depth, complexity and multifacetedness of life. They aim at the presentation of the 'whole truth' by delineating life in all its variety and complexity. By offering a comprehensive picture of the multiversity. These plays suggest the metaphysical principles underlying the physical universe. In other words, the last plays suggest the essence by creating an illusion of existence in all its rich variety and multifacetedness. They point at universality of life by presenting the particularity of a period's events. The last plays create the illusion of the total life by depicting the principles of reconciliation of contradictions like the good and the evil; the ugly and the beautiful; the high and the low; the far and the near; the rural and the urban; the historical and the fantastic; the great and the mean; the profound and the profane. This presentation of the reconciliation of contradiction is the result of being able to see life steadily and whole. It is an account of such creation of a world in his poem that an epic poet is called a maker or a creator or a *shabda brahma* (in Indian aesthetics). Shakespeare has obviously created such a multiversity in his last plays that they are able to suggest the metaphysical principles of the reconciliation of contradictions.

Many Shakespearean critics have noticed this aspect, 'Shakespeare', says John Wayne 'was interested in long and dangerous voyages, unknown shores, miraculous escapes and encounters with original inhabitants not for their own sakes but for the sake of new perspective in which such reports could see the familiar problems of nature versus art, the rights and duties of governors and beyond them his own personal struggle to reconcile the discordant elements in human experience to imagine a reconciliation, powerful enough to being sin and evil under its sway and unite all life in a deeper harmony'. This harmony of life depicted in the last plays of Shakespeare is ascribable to an epic imagination which always sees the essential unity in the existential diversity.

The last plays of Shakespeare like the epics show the togetherness of natural, the sub natural and the supernatural levels of life and suggest the essential harmony between them. They see the human life as being in harmony with the wider universe. As the Elizabethan believed in the hierarchy or chain of being as essential to the harmony of the universe, Shakespeare has tried to suggest it in his last plays. Shakespeare's last plays show the harmony between the internal and the external and depict man as living in not only the company of other men but also that of ghosts or spirits, beasts, gods and goddesses etc. testify to the togetherness of things in the world at large.

Unlike the tragedies, the last plays of Shakespeare, present an epic pattern showing a balance between the metaphysical poles of good and evil. In the last plays of Shakespeare, the

SUNIL N. WATHORE

3P a g e



emphasis is on good. Many Shakespearean critics have noticed this aspect of the last plays, although their individual interpretations differ from one another. E. M. W. Tillyard calls it, 'a reverse of the tragic pattern'. E. C. Pettet attributes it to a profound spiritual growth. The fact is that the last plays achieve some sort of equilibrium between good and evil that is of the epic fashion. David Greene's view exemplifies such interpretations, since as pointed out by him, 'in both of the first two plays Cymbeline and The Winter's Tale, the design is the same. The first part is wicked old world where the original evil act is launched, the second shows a naturally good world existing somewhere else and sheltering persons who will eventually reform or replace the wrongdoers of the first; the third deals with the redress of the original evil and the purification of the old world in the light of the naturally good of that rural Arcadian image of the second type'. Although the last plays of Shakespeare achieve the balance between good and evil in the epic fashion, it should be remembered that they do not follow the same order that the epic follows on the contrary, Shakespeare takes liberties with the dramatic form and achieves the epic pattern, essentially rather than technically.

We have already seen how the last plays of Shakespeare depict the togetherness of the natural, sub natural and the supernatural levels of life. The supernatural plays an important role in these last plays as it does in the epics. Human life in them is constantly controlled by or affected by gods and godly creatures. Although gods do not appear in these last plays in the manner in which they do in the epics, proper gods make their presence felt in human life through oracles, prophesies, through dreams or visions of human beings. The gods like Jupiter, Apollo etc. act as moral referees in these plays and advice, animadvert the human beings and direct and rectify human actions. E. M. W. Tillyard says, 'the gods of Greece and Rome occur very frequently in the last plays of Shakespeare and are certainly more than mere embroidery'.

The epic technique of integrating the opposites can be seen in the last plays with regard to characterization, situations and philosophy. The characters and events are all affected by this principle. Characters like Pericles, Cymbeline, Hermione, Prospero, Ferdinand and Miranda are offshoots of combinations of realism and idealism, history and fantasy; the particular and universal; the contemporary and the remote. Likewise, the events affecting these characters are also infused with the synthesis of these opposites. Shakespeare has tried to combine these opposites with the sole aim of creating an illusion of the wholeness of life. That is the reason why the characters of these plays are more rounded and integrated than those of the tragedies and early comedies characters like Pericles, Cymbeline, Prospero are no doubt, integrated personalities and are more balanced than tragic characters like Hamlet, Othello and Macbeth etc.

Even as an epic expresses a total mind and a nation's culture, almost the entire range of contemporary thought finds its way into the plays, Shakespeare's last plays reproduce almost the entire conspectus of the vast life of the Elizabethan age and creates a whole universe. Just

SUNIL N. WATHORE

4P a g e



as epics use myths, both to intensify and to extend the epic suggestions, the last plays of Shakespeare have gathered from diverse sources such as Ovid's metamorphosis, Greene's Pandosto, Boccaccio's Decameron tidbits and oddments as illusions, references and verbal quotations are transformed echoes of thought. One may remember here that scholars like Geffery Bullough, Kenneth Muir and others have made an extensive study of these borrowings and their artistic use in Shakespeare's plays.

The last plays of Shakespeare furthermore are epic in nature as they are marked by the moral profundity which is not seen in the early plays of the same extent. They easily confirm to the Elizabethan concept of an epic which is required to teach through delight. The last plays of Shakespeare are didactic in nature for their governing moral thesis; one can see the sublime ethics practiced by a majority of characters in these plays. Shakespeare's last plays invite comparison with Bertold Brecht's total theatre on account of the presence of music, songs, prose and poetry, entertainment and didactics.

The last plays of Shakespeare contain a number of archetypal images which are very commonly found in the epics of the world. Archetypes obviously extend the frontiers of drama and communicate the epic concern with the ultimate of life. The archetypal happenings like pilgrimage, exile, war, victory, homecoming, reunion and the archetypal characters like men, gods, supermen, goddesses, like women, spirits and so on, which are the inevitable features of the epics are to be found in the last plays of Shakespeare. Similarly, certain archetypal images like tree, the islands, the sea, the ship, the tempest etc. can be seen occurring frequently in the last plays. All these archetypal images, characters and situations, needless to say, contribute to the epic magnitude of the last plays.

The language of the last plays of Shakespeare is marked by equilibrium between thought and expression. The language of these plays is free from turbulence and potentiality of that of the tragedies and become more placid, relaxed, meditative and philosophical than that of the early comedies and tragedies. The language of these plays achieves an epic intensity, profundity, balance and calmness that is missing in his earlier plays. Francis Berry rightly describes that, 'the final plays of Shakespeare are..laden with memories of senior characters like Pericles, Leontes, Polixeness and Prospero etc. these memories can be drawn from the dark backward of a time long anterior to the events now to be shown on the stage and that past that background, variously overcast will now exercise its power on the present foreground action'.

Conclusion:

The epic nature of the last plays make itself felt in its recognition of the interdependence and interrelationship of the past, the present and the future. Since it believes in a metaphysical order of the universe, the eternal law or logic of events and hence of experience

SUNIL N. WATHORE

5P a g e

is operative in life. It is therefore, that the present life derives its sustenance and lesson from the past; similarly it can also point to the future. The epic imagination of Shakespeare recognizes the harmony of experience. Shakespeare's prophetic vision is synonymous with epic vision, although he was not conscious of that, what A. C. Harwood says about great poet is undoubtedly applicable to the epic poets in general not excluding Shakespeare, says A. C. Harwood-

'A poet has a prophetic character and that the greater the poet, the more he prophesies. I do not mean that the prophesies actual events, though prophet and poet were combined in ancient bard or vates, and the Sortes' vigilance shows us that the middle ages chung to this old tradition. I mean he is prophetic in the sphere of consciousness. He lives intensely in those powers of feelings and apprehension which he has inherited from the past, he carries them into new form which influences and even create the experience of his day and (if he great enough) he leaves a seed dropping from the pipes of his powers which, like the fabled wheat in the pyramids, may only germinate after long centuries. This last is certainly true of Virgil in whom there is a power of painting with tones of suggesting by the tensions and sympathies between words, which is hardly to be found again before Shakespeare himself'.

Shakespeare's prophetic vision noticed by perceptive critics becomes a prominent feature of his last plays. The last plays, thus, can be designated as epical works.

REFERENCES

- 1) Tillyard, E. M. W. *Shakespeare's Last Plays*. Chatto & Windus: London, 1964.
- 2) Hallyday, Frank E. *Shakespeare and His Critics*. Gerald Cuckworth & Company: London, 1948.
- 3) Chambers, Edmund K. *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*. Oxford Press: London, 1930.
- 4) Chute, Marchette. *Shakespeare of London*. E. P. Dutton: New York, 1949.
- 5) Spurgeon, Caroline. *Shakespeare's Imagery and What it Tells us*. Cambridge University Press: London, 1935.
- 6) Traversi, D. A. *An Approach to Shakespeare*. Doubleday Author Books: New York, 1969.
- 7) Granville, Barkere, Harley. *Preface to Shakespeare*. Princeton University Press: London, 1947.
- 8) Quenell, Peter. *Shakespeare*. World Publishing Company: New York, 1963.

SUNIL N. WATHORE

6P a g e



- 9) Knight, G. *The Wheels of Fire*. Oxford University Press: London, 1930.
- 10) Bradley, A. C. *The Shakespearean Tragedy*. Oxford University Press: London, 1904.
- 11) Brooke, Stopford, A. *Ten More Plays of Shakespeare*. Kalyani Publication: New Delhi, 1988.
- 12) Long, J. Williams. *English Literature its History and Significance*. Ginn & Company: Boston, 1999.