Chapter: I

INTRODUCTION

Any new study on Christopher Marlowe finds itself in a rather defensive posture. Whether it’s a re-reading of his dramas or a reinterpretation of the same, whether it is upholding of some aspect or the contradicting of some accepted attribute, whether it is a revaluation of his plays or a reassignment of his literary status—it is difficult for the student to firmly define the purpose. Such a situation is not new for the students of literary studies and research. But at the same time there is a strong desire to study Marlowe’s life and his plays again in detail and to understand them in a ‘modern’ way, in a changed literary and personal context and to interpret accordingly. The conception of dramatic technique is changed beyond recognition between 1580 and 2002. A frank and rational debate on the sacredness of religion and god is not termed as atheism now, whereas such an activity was a blasphemy in the Elizabethan age. Cynicism is accepted as a personal trait and not necessarily anti-social and anti-religious. In a way all those negative qualities found in Marlowe are now common personal attributes, which are some times even deified. It may be even more fanciful to see Christopher Marlowe alive and writing now and if his plays shall be judged favourably or otherwise for the same characteristic qualities. Should a student of Marlowe be satisfied with these words of Dr. Harry Levin: “To read him (Marlowe) now is to be reminded of the exotic breeds and barbaric hordes that migrate across the poems of St. John Perce or of those half-forgotten civilisations whose emergence and declines have been so categorically passed in review by Arnold Toynbee?” Many students of Marlowe may find it difficult to accept this stand, even if they may not completely disagree with the statement. Because the
following statement of the same author stir the students to probe and to search for a stronger argument and illustration in favour of Marlowe. Harry Levin says, "His (Marlowe's) strongest claim is bound to be the fact that he did so much more than anyone else to bring that context into existence." That 'context' in the statement is the emergence and achievement of Shakespeare.

Christopher Marlowe is the greatest of the predecessors to Shakespeare, and he is duly credited with the moulding of the English drama into the modern shape. He is not only considered as a great dramatist, but also admired for his immense contribution to the development and consolidation of the English drama in general and the Elizabethan drama in particular. Before him the English drama was in a deplorable condition, and though it was freed from the religious dominance, it had not acquired the artistic stature that the moderns attribute to the literary form drama. It only dealt with the Biblical themes and incidents related to the lives of the Saints. They had no standard dramatic form and style, as they did not attract the intellectual and social dynamism. The English drama before Marlowe was content to provide moral sermons to the people besides giving some entertainment on the festive days. Even his contemporary dramatists like Greene, Kyd, Peele offered only the Greek mythology and some romantic stuff to the audience. But Marlowe entered the stagecraft with a dynamic and revolutionary manifesto. Marlowe promises to lead the English drama to the new flashing fields of the Renaissance. In this attempt he not only presented plays of new vigour tinged with the pigments of the dramatic technique but also brought intensity, admiration, and wonder into English drama. Tumberlaine made his intentions clear. He declared and decided to
lead the English drama from the moral and traditional mores to something startling and dazzling.

"From jiggiling veins of rhyming mother-wits,  
And such conceits as clownish keeps in day,  
We'll lead you to the stately tent of war,  
Where you shall hear the Scythian Tamburlaine  
Threatening the world with astounding terms.  
And scourging kingdoms with his conquering swords".  

As Legoues stated, "He was entirely without experience of the stage, but he compensated this lack by the extraordinary spirit of defiance and revolt which animated his dramatic work". The other dramatists were still talking of morality and traditional vengeance, but the new playwright dared to claim admiration for the most bloodthirsty of men, to make of him a sort of demigod.

The dramas of Marlowe are different in style and spirit from those of his contemporaries. They contained the high ambition and thirst for novelty, the love for the unknown and the curiosity for the undiscovered, the flavour of the local and the fragrance of the classical and the humanism and the passion for beauty:

"Ah, Fair Zenocrate, divine Zenocrate!  
Fair is too foul on epithet for thee  
That, in thy passion for the country's love  
And fear to see thy kingly father's harm,  
With hair dishevelled wip'st thy watery cheeks,  
And like to Flora in her morning's pride,  
Shaking her silver tresses in the air,  
Rain'st on the earth resolved pearl in showers  
And sprinklest sapphires on thy shining face  
Where Beauty, mother to the Muses, sits  
And comments volumes with her ivory pen".

(Tamburlaine Act V, scene I, lines 134-145)
Marlowe was the real child of the Renaissance and he was a ‘University wit’ in all its sense. Marlowe excelled not only in the daring novelty of subject but in the soaring imagination and lofty poetry in which he garbed his themes. He imagined a superman capable of facing and fighting gods and he presented this towering personality as the protagonist in his plays. In the annals of the English drama before Marlowe, there was never a hero of this stature and magnitude. Tumberlaine, Barabas, and Faustus are models of hero presented by Marlowe to the English drama. His admiration of physical beauty touches the Greek heights, though it touches the most sensual depth of the Elizabethan poetry in the Hero and Leander. Marlowe was a born poet and his plays were even castigated as lengthy poetical outbursts, but it was this poetic sensibility which moulded and perfected blank verse for the future use of the Elizabethans which was ultimately called the ‘Marlowe’s mighty line’. But it must be said that the English literature was poorer with the untimely and immature death of this great creative genius, for he died at a very young age of 29. In this Marlowe must be placed with Keats and Shelley whose premature death left English literature poorer. It is rightly pointed out, “Marlowe’s significance as a dramatist outweighs the smallness of the corpus of his work traditional criticism assigns for him historic rather than intrinsic greatness”.

Christopher Marlowe was the son of Canterbury shoemaker and he was born on February 26, 1564. The young Christopher was not very fortunate to enjoy the facilities of happy life. But he was fortunate to have university education with the help of a scholarship. He went to King’s School, Canterbury in 1579 and went up to Cambridge in
1581. In 1584 he obtained the B. A degree and M. A degree in 1587. During his college career Marlowe was frequently absent from his studies and classes, and it was speculated that he worked as a spy for the Queen. However his subsequent life in London was violent, riotous and bohemian. Marlowe loved a reckless and free life without caring for the social or ethical restraints and he spent his time in anti-social company of drunkards, vagabonds and criminals. Besides he was also attributed with atheistic and anti-religious views. It seems that he stated “There is no god” and he had to undergo the resultant punishment. Marlowe was also closely associated with Sir Walter Raleigh who was also suspected to be unorthodox and irreligious. The Elizabethan age was noted for its free, libertine life of licentiousness and immorality and yet Marlowe was far ahead in these aspects compared to his other countrymen. He lived a life clouded by suspicion and he was killed in a tavern brawl on May 13, 1593. It is now known that Marlowe was killed by a friend of his, one Ingram Frizer, a servant to Mr. Thomas Walsingham, in the presence of two witnesses Robert Poley and Nicholas Skeres. The testimony of these men before the Coroner’s jury was that Marlowe attacked Frizer from behind, and this account was borne out to the satisfaction of the jury by the evidence of two wounds on Frizer’s head. Frizer was pardoned, as having killed Marlowe in self-defence. It must be noted that Marlowe did not forfeit the graces of his employers, the Walsinghams, who were friends of the man who was killed by Marlowe. It is reported that Marlowe died instantly. There is also a passage in Francis Meres, which states that “Christopher Marlowe was stabbed to death by a bawdy serving man, a rival of his in his lewd love”.5 A life of great promise and remarkable performance was cut short at the age of thirty years. Marlowe’s
career, then, ends in a question mark. Many of the loose ends of his life and his work are being slowly and gradually resolved.

We now know more about Marlowe's life and his works than in the past. Marlowe was evidently a man who made enemies, and it may be suspected that he rather liked doing so. So we are likely to get a distorted picture of him if we try to piece an account together from the mostly hostile gossip of the day. But it is only fair to say that some of the most careful students of his work are much more confident about the possibility of knowing what Marlowe really thought.

As the first major Elizabethan dramatist, Marlowe has achieved the doubtful distinction of being regarded as a 'pioneer', alongside interesting minor dramatists such as Lyly and Kyd, and downright bad ones such as Greene. The intrinsic value of his plays, on the other hand, has often received with less justice. Hence it is better to confine to his work, considered as a series of remarkable and varied individual dramas.

Primarily Marlowe is acknowledged as the apostle of the English literary renaissance in poetry and drama. One is constrained to state that the life and work of Christopher Marlowe is a running commentary on the letter and spirit of the Renaissance. It was essentially a revival of intellectual liberty. It inculcated interest in curiosity and encouraged spirit of inquiry. The Renaissance man wished to explore the hitherto regions of knowledge. This intellectual movement released man from the age-old shackles and endowed him with full freedom. This helped him to get out of the rigid institutions of the
Middle Ages and to look for the new bright world in the ancient Greece and Rome. The Renaissance was “complex and many-sided movement” which brought a fundamental change in men’s attitude towards themselves and the world. In the words of Prof. Jebl, the Renaissance was “the whole process of transition in Europe from the medieval to the modern order”.

A short outline of the characteristics of the Renaissance would not be out of place here. The cause and the effect of this movement is the revival of the classical antiquity and ancient learning. This in a larger sense means an entire renewal of life in all its branches—“all men’s powers were reborn”. The nature of this new spirit called the renewal of life, is the spirit of emancipation. It was the revolt of the whole man—mind and body alike—against the despotism of creeds, traditions, and arbitrary authority. It was the assertion of the right of the individual to himself and his own life. It marked “the modern rebirth of the individual soul”.

During the Middle Ages the ethical accent was thrown not up on self-realisation but up on self-repression. He was cramped in on every side. Conditions rendered progress almost impossible. The dominant feature of the Renaissance was rebellion against this intellectual tyranny. The sense of liberty and the spirit of revolt effected a change of attitude to religion. The lay and secular attitude arose in vigorous protest against the priestly domination and asceticism thrust by the church. Secularisation was the new clarion call of the day. Now Beauty was no longer a snare, no pleasure sin, nor the world a temporary and fleeting show. Men went out into the world with a passionate
determination to clutch at everything it contained, to avail themselves of all its opportunities, drink deep of all its knowledge, enjoy all its pleasures, make the most of themselves. An eager desire to overstep all limitations and to master life at every point was a characteristic of this period of emancipation.

The Elizabethan age created in the minds of people an unbridled imagination by its achievements like the maritime explorations of Magellan, Vasco da Gama and Sir Walter Raleigh. The great explorers not only settled once and for all the controversy about the shape of the earth, but also proved that there were races of men not mentioned in the Scripture. As a result, the minds of men were quickened to a sense of vastness of the world, which they had deemed so little. A feeling of wider interests and a distinct heightening of consciousness inevitably followed. The writers like Sir Walter Raleigh made their pages blaze with promises of wealth vast enough to fire the lust of Sir Epicure Mammon.

“My meat shall all come in, in Indian shells,
Dishes of agate, set in gold, and studded
With emeralds, sapphires, hyacinths, and rubies.
The tongues of carps, dormice, and camels’ heels,
Boil’d I’ the spirit of Sol, and dissolv’d pearl,
Apicius’ diet, ‘gainst the epilepsy,
And I will eat these broths with spoons of amber,
Headed with diamond and carbuncle.”

Doctor Faustus declares this desire:

“I’ll have them fly to India for gold
Ransack the ocean for orient pearl
And search all corners of the new-found world
For pleasant fruits and princely delicacies;”
Similarly the New Astronomy brought unimaginable revelations, "with a reconstruction of the universe". Other discoveries like the maritime compass, gunpowder and the printing press created an atmosphere of incredible New World.

Of the importance of the invention of printing it would be difficult to speak extravagantly. Victor Hugo described as "the greatest event in history". More than any single agency, it was responsible for the great European transition from the medieval to the modern order. The history of the five centuries has amply proved that the printing press is the most democratic organ of the world has ever known, and in Symonds’s phrase "the most formidable instrument of the modern reason". The printing press enabled to popularise knowledge, discredit the medieval caste-system in scholarship, destroy the practical monopoly in learning and undermine the intellectual prestige of the privileged classes.

A barrier of ignorance and misunderstanding was erected between the medieval mind and the classic ages. But the study of the old classics opened the intellectual eyes of the generation and they discovered the new light of Humanism. In this whole cataclysm, Italy played a vital role, as described by Macaulay, that "during the gloomy and disastrous centuries which followed the downfall of the Roman empire, Italy had preserved, in a far greater degree than any other part of the Western Europe, the traces of the ancient civilisation. The night, which descended upon her was the night of an arctic summer. The dawn began to reappear before the last reflection of the preceding sunset had faded from the horizon".
The preceding short description of the Renaissance shall help any reader, who studies the life and the work of Marlowe, to understand and appreciate the remark that Marlowe is the beloved minion of the English literary Renaissance. The early life of poverty, the hard-earned academic career, the spirit of revolt, the unorthodox views, the courage, the bohemian style of life and the kind of his death are enough to illustrate that his life was a living commentary on the spirit of the Renaissance prevailing then in England. Even in his work the mighty heroes like Tamberlaine, Barabas, Faustus, are the models for the Renaissance attitude to life and the concept of humanism. “Who is himself is law, no law doth neede, Offends no Law, and is a King indeede.” The passionate outbursts of pride and arrogance, the declamatory passages of iconoclastic temper, the soaring lyrical admiration of beauty and the idea of man vying with God in power and authority are the living ingredients of his work to connect him organically with the Renaissance.

Any discussion of Marlowe’s dramatic achievement is also a discussion of the development of the English drama. When Marlowe came to write for the stage, the prevailing conditions were almost ignoble. Before the advent of the University wits and the advent of Shakespeare, the visible difference seems exclusively because of Christopher Marlowe. Even the traditional criticism accepted that Marlowe bestowed a dignified status to the drama, and he made drama as a special attraction and entertainment for the public, by infusing the spirit of humanism coupled with the popular sympathy. It may be his own self or the self of the Renaissance man that reflected in his plays, and in
any case that personality was the same as that of the Elizabethans. The theatre going audience and the readers in the cosy halls found the Marlowian hero as their favourite, just as Jimmy Porter was considered by the English generation of the 1950s.

Marlowe’s mind might have been formed in the intellectual insurgency during the Renaissance in the Cambridge University, under the influence of contemporary scholasticism and theological dogma.

It may seem a fanciful idea to reconstruct 'Marlowe's England' from his limited work. If such an attempt materialises the emerging picture of England shall be doubtless the same as it reflected in others works, and yet with what a difference? Because the issues and problems that interested him are not at all interesting to others. The flight of his fancy hovers upon the exact location of heaven and hell. His imagination shall play upon the nature of guilt and sin. His knowledge starts where others' stops. Taking ambition and aspiration as inherent and natural rights of man, he starts analysing their results and consequences. Breaking away from the established notions of religion and God he wishes to release the soul to its full liberty. And yet he tries to show the evil consequences of such liberated soul. Marlowe was an astute pupil of Machiavelli and he imbibed cardinal principles necessary to a materialistic life. He loved Machiavelli when the name of Machiavelli for his contemporaries, was a substitute for Devil. When atheism was a sin he adopted this thought for its deeper analysis in theory and practice. In personal and professional life he courageously expressed his views and opinions. Hence it is more profitable to study his plays, on the backdrop of the problems related to the
contemporary intellectual and imaginative world and the same with his dramatic technique also. To give an illustration, before Marlowe, dramas did not provide intellectual and spiritual issues for the reflection of audience. Even the plays like The Spanish Tragedy and the Arden of Faversham appealed to the senses rather than provoke them to think and reflect on the crucial problems of life like religion versus conscience, or morality versus individual ambition, or free will versus divine decree. The plays of Marlowe suddenly raised the level of drama where the audience were not only startled but also faced with mighty issues. For example, Marlowe presents in Tamburlaine the triumph of the will to power as against the triumph of the inevitable. On the precedent of Jupiter who ousted his father Saturn from the throne in order to reign himself; Tamburlaine regards ambition as the spontaneous act of human nature, and impresses upon us that there is nothing wrong in this. The same theme and the same tone of passionate emphasis recur endlessly.

Similarly the contemporary notions about drama as an art were not rigid and clearly defined. The theory of drama as presented by Aristotle and others was in the academic minds as in Sidney's 'Apologie for Poetry'. The most important aim of the dramatist was to please the audience. That is why the concept of dramatic art in relation to Marlowe has to be different. Almost all the judgements on Marlowe's work suffer from the application of the critical criteria with a retrospect effect, and also due to the comparison with Shakespeare and other succeeding dramatic artists. The subtle nuances of plot and the filigree delineation of character were not the need at that juncture. The Elizabethan 'groundlings' craved for something startling and dazzling and something
macabre and mighty, to satisfy their psychological demands, in tune with the fall of the Spanish Armada, the new wave of nationalism and patriotism and new curiosity and imagination. Marlowe fulfilled these demands with his Tamburlaine, Faustus, and Barabbas. It is also a fact that Marlowe, when it is needed, displayed his skill in plot construction as in Edward II and skilful delineation of character in Navarre.

Marlowe may be considered as the ‘Father of the English Poetic Drama’. It is not that he placed his ‘mighty line’ blank verse as the supreme voice of the English sensibility in 1590’s but he made poetic drama as the expression of the inner soul. The difference between the ‘verse drama’ and the ‘poetic drama’ was not only exhibited but also resolved by Marlowe. It is not merely the verse form given to a drama that makes it a poetic drama, but the emotional levels of the human experience are conceived and executed in poetic imagination and poetic utterance. The speeches of his heroes are not rant covered in verse, but they are emotional out bursts, the psychic energetic waves which could not have come out except in that form. The greatest and the most permanent contribution of Marlowe to the English drama, is this pattern of true poetic drama.

Marlowe’s attitude to religion has been a controversial topic, and his attitude has been taken as a criterion to evaluate his dramas. Some of his contemporaries like Richard Baines and William Vaughan circulated different stories about his bohemian and bawdy life and even dubbed him as an Atheist. Some of them even ascribed his violent and premature death to his anti-Christian views. Edmund Rudderde, wrote in 1616, “But the party perceiving his villainy prevented him with catching his hand, and turning his own
dagger into his braines and so blaspheming and cursing, he yielded up his stinking breath; mark this you Players, that live by playing fooles laugh at sin and wickedness."11 The personality of Marlowe is represented as the incarnation of loose morals, licentious way of living and the atheistic views. One wishes to study this aspect not only to comprehend the real personality of Marlowe but also to understand the extent of personal identity of Marlowe with his heroes’ attitudes. The subjects Marlowe borrowed and the heroes he moulded, it is claimed, were no more than his mouthpieces, voicing his exorbitant dreams. “Like him they sought the infinite and like him were never sated.” In the following chapters an attempt will be made to study his plays and explain some of these issues.
REFERENCES

1. Harry Levin: Shakespeare and the Revolution of the times: Perspectives and Commenting Reconsidering Marlowe (Contributed to a quadricentennial in the Tulane Drama Review, VIII, 4 (summer 1964)


(All the quotations used in the thesis are taken from this book)

3. Legouis and Cazamian : History of English Literature (Page 399)

4. Tamburlaine Act V, scene i, line 134-145)


7. Alchemist: Ben Jonson: Macmillan Annotated Classics (line 176-184)

8. Doctor Faustus: Act I, scene I (lines 84-87)


10. Ibid.