Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

(A) Religious and philosophical background
Around mid forties a group of American scholars, engaged in discovering the meaning of figures to the Elizabethan’s has pointed out that Shakespeare employed his figures according to the percept and full awareness of their philosophic implications. Consequently critics like Parker, Siegel, Ribner identified a kind of relationship between Elizabethan religious beliefs and Shakespearean drama. These critics maintained that the major tragedies manifested artist’s consciousness of the forces conditioning the contemporary life and this was projected through man’s relationship with the universe. The impact of this approach on modern criticism can be summed up in the words of Huston Diehl: “This recognition has led to a re-examination of the relation between religious culture of early modern England and the secular drama of the commercial, popular London stage. Scholars are beginning to consider among other things, how various religious discourses inform the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.” In a way this mythical approach has established a relationship between contemporary religious beliefs and Shakespearean drama. Hence, in order to identify the underlying pattern of redemption it is necessary to know the religious and philosophical culture of the age.

Certain religious and philosophical beliefs, concerned with the larger metaphysical issues within a framework, which placed man at the centre of the cosmos, were retained by the Elizabethan age in spite of several socio-ethical and ecclesiastical changes. Irrespective of the changes in several domains these beliefs, about the cosmos and man, were part and parcel of the Elizabethan consciousness. Skeptical thoughts and new developments could question these beliefs but could
not alter the basic structure of the cosmos that was theocentric. In spite of reduced ecclesiastical mediation, Bible was the only source of knowledge about the cosmos. The Elizabethan world-view can be summed up in the words of Tillyard: “Coming to the world picture itself, one can say dogmatically that it was still solidly theocentric and that it was a simplified version of a much more complicated medieval picture.” Their belief in general Providence, which manifested itself in the whole system of creation, was intact. For them their cosmos was a divine creation; God created the world and ordered it in a rational way. In a way Platonic ‘Perfection’ was Christian Providence. The following passage from du Bartas’ *Divine Weeks* sums up their notion of divinity and cosmos:

The World’s a Book in Folio, printed all
With God’s great works in letters Capital:
Each Creature is a Page; each Effect
A fair Character, void of all defect.

In sixteenth century England, various schools of thought and systems of philosophy revolved around these notions of Providence and cosmic order. Nevertheless the Elizabethan world-view was mainly Christian in spirit. Undoubtedly, it had combined elements of Aristotelianism, Neo-Platonism, and Stoicism: but the beliefs derived from these systems of philosophy never appeared in their original form; Christian believers modified the beliefs. According to Tillyard, “The fountain heads of general cosmic doctrines were the book of Genesis and Plato; but the material derived thence is handled and rehandled with infinite repetitions and small modifications till it becomes a kind of impersonal ballad lore, and the question of source is ridiculous.”
Hardin Craig is much more explicit about the origin of the Elizabethan world picture. He writes: “Aristotelian doctrine is of course the single constituent of the complex, but Aristotelianism never appears alone or in pure form. It may be mingled with Neo-Platonism, modified by Christian dogma, or blended with Stoicism.” The aim of each school of thought and system of philosophy was to understand and act in accordance with his cosmological structure because it was the basis of his survival. According to Theodore Spencer, “In the sixteenth century the combined elements of Aristotelianism, Platonism, Neo-Platonism, Stoicism and Christianity were almost indistinguishably woven into a pattern which was universally agreed upon.” Their worldview was like Einstein’s ‘cosmic religion’, it had little to do with Protestants or Catholics.

As far as the world picture is concerned, the Elizabethans perceived a relationship between human affairs and divine creation. The Elizabethan cosmos can be summed up in the words of Paul Davies, a scientist: “It was not a meaningless jumble of odds and of irrational juxtapositions, not one of Darwinian evolution but an example of the infinite wisdom of God.” The Elizabethan universe was governed by a general notion of order. This concept of order was of paramount interest because order was the basis of their survival. The importance of order can be summed up in the words of Richard Hooker: “See we not plainly that obedience of creatures unto the law of nature is the stay of the whole world.” Accordingly, it was believed that every created thing in the universe had a fixed place or ‘degree’ and particular set of duties to perform. It was firmly believed that only by maintaining one’s degree
and by performing one’s duties one could contribute to the harmony of the cosmic order.

This cosmic order was manifested in an imaginary chain i.e. ‘Great Chain of Being’. As a chain creation was imagined as a series of beings starting from the lowest of inanimate objects up to the throne of God. The chain was a hierarchical arrangement and a way to perceive the vast cosmological structure. The origin of the chain of being can be summed up in the words of M. H. Abrams: “The concept is grounded in ideas about the nature of God, or the first cause, found in Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, and was developed by later thinkers into an inclusive world view.” The chain of being was the basis of the Elizabethan concepts of unity and order. It was believed that every created being e.g. inanimate, animate, vegetative, sensitive, rational, angelic had a degree and a function to perform. “Broadly speaking, order (synonymously justice or natural law) was conceived of as the fundamental cohesive principle of the cosmological system, and similitude or correspondence as the means by which this principle was operative in the universe.”

The Elizabethans perceived a kind of relationship among all the created beings of the universe, which found manifestation in the doctrine of correspondence. According to this doctrine the creation was divided in several planes e.g. divine, macrocosm, body politic, man or microcosm, and lower creation. It was believed that all these planes were hierarchically arranged according to their merit and function and that all these planes were linked to one another through an ‘immense net
of correspondences’ i.e. whatever happened on one plane would be reflected on other planes as well. These plains were united as well as interrelated. This doctrine of correspondences answers to the small and wide-ranging chaos in Shakespearean tragedies. Consequently it was believed that the harmony of the cosmos depended on the harmony of these planes because each plane was interlinked with rest of the planes. Of all the created beings man alone was capable to disturb the harmonious pattern of order. On the basis of this approach, it can be assumed that Shakespeare grants the goodness of creation, a divine order in the universe and man’s responsibility to maintain that world order.

This notion of cosmic order and corresponding planes was the basis of Elizabethan ethics. The fundamental rules of living and functioning were derived from this cosmological structure. All their basic concepts e.g. order in human society, unity and proper functioning were based on their world picture. This view can be summed up in the words of Hardin Craig: “Order or justice is in the very nature of God. It is also in His nature to be all-powerful; He is the head and ruler of the entire harmonious universe. Harmony means the proper functioning of every part in the place designed for it.... The principle of headship and of obedient subordination, evident in the workings of the universe, must of course be the pattern for human societies.”12 Just as order and harmony was the basis of cosmological structure: it was also the basis for human survival.
Concept of Nature was another philosophic addition in the inherited world picture. It was believed that Nature ruled over the cosmic order. According to Plato, Nature had the power to shape and control the world. Hence he called it the ‘Soul of the World’. This Platonic concept of Nature was added in the orthodox worldview with slight modifications. According to the Platonists, Nature was not a created thing rather a created force e.g. ‘natura naturans’. The orthodoxy retained its creative power but made it an involuntary tool of God. Thus Nature was still a creative force in the world-picture e.g. Nature was ‘natura naturans’ but also an involuntary tool of God. It was not above God. Nature was either ‘God’s deputy’ or His ‘involuntary tool’. Being God’s deputy, Nature had a significant place in the Elizabethan theological beliefs, because it was believed that “Over this order, this unity, rules Nature.” The belief of George Hakewill i.e. Nature is nothing but the tool of God, was the common belief of the age. It was believed in general that Nature had its laws to work by and it ruled over the three domains e.g. cosmic order, social order, and the animal order. All the three orders were under Nature’s domain and for the perfect survival it was but necessary to obey Nature’s Law. Every Elizabethan knew well that only by obeying the laws of Nature one could preserve the harmonious pattern of Nature or what they called the cosmic order. The importance of the harmonious order can be understood in the words of Richard Hooker: “We see the whole world and each part thereof so compacted, that as long as each thing performeth only that work which is natural unto it, it thereby preserveth both other things and also itself.” For their survival it was but essential
to obey the laws of Nature. It was generally believed that Nature’s laws embraced heavens, created beings, and state and it was man’s business to comprehend that order and to maintain it. Since all the three domains e.g. cosmic, social and animal were united as well as interdependent, any act, good or bad, would be reflected on other planes as well. Transgression of Nature’s law was but the reversal of the harmonious order and this would inevitably result in consequent chaos.

As far as laws for human government were concerned, these can be summed up in the words of Theodore Spencer. He writes: “There are, roughly speaking, three kinds of temporal law for the government of men; there is the law of Nature itself, there is the law of Nations which derives from it and which is generally applicable to all countries, and there is civil law, which applies to the customs of particular communities.”

It was well known that harmony of their universe could only be maintained by observing certain rules and by performing their function in accordance with these laws. Hence it was but the duty of every created being in the cosmos to follow these laws so as to preserve the harmony of universe, which was ultimately governed, by ‘Eternal Law’ or divine Providence. Observation of these laws meant harmony and violation of the laws meant chaos.

Another belief that was of paramount interest was the concept of sin. The Elizabethan concept of order and sin was relative. In the Elizabethan age, sin was essentially a falling short, a failure to comply with the purpose and will of God. Hence, according to the religious and philosophical beliefs of the age, violation of order through any unnatural
and irrational act was a sin against God itself. If order was harmony: failure to work in compliance with that order was a sin, which would inevitably result into chaos. The Elizabethan fear at the reversal of order may be a guff to a modern, for them it meant the wholesale dissolution of their universe. According to their theological beliefs violation of order meant cosmic chaos. It was well known that violation of degree at any corresponding plane would inevitably lead to disorder at all other corresponding planes. The following passage from *Troilus and Cressida* foregrounds the idea of cosmic chaos:

> How could communities,  
> Degrees in schools and brotherhood in cities,  
> Peaceful commerce from dividable shores  
> The primogenitive and due of birth,  
> Prerogative of age, crowns sceptres, laurels,  
> But by degree stand in authentic place?  
> Take but degree away, untune that string,  
> And hark, what discord follows.  

(I. iii, 103-10)

If the Elizabethans believed in an ideal order from which all other social, political and religious orders were derived, they were equally afraid of its violation because, theoretically at least, it meant the dissolution of their universe. They knew that man’s harmonious existence depended on the harmony of the cosmic order. The meaning of ‘chaos’ can be understood in the words of Tillyard: “The educated Elizabethan at least would understood chaos in a more precise sense than we should naturally do. They would understand it as a parallel in the state to the primitive warring of the elements from which the universe was created and into which it would fall if the constant pressure of ordering and sustaining will were relaxed.” Hence, the Elizabethan
belief in order was directly related to their fear of chaos. Interestingly
the most immediate threat to the divine order of the created universe was
from man itself. Of all the created beings, man alone, under the sway of
passions, was capable of violating the normative pattern of nature.

Related to this concept of chaos was the concept of man. Man held an important position in the religious beliefs of the age. In a
way all systems of philosophy and schools of thought revolved around
man and his place in the universe. Man was called a little world or
microcosm because he possessed in him all the faculties e.g. elemental
as well as celestial. It was believed that the universe was benevolent and
man himself was created in God’s image. Irrespective of the fall man
was supposed to be the best creation in this created universe. Among all
the prevailing theological beliefs of the age, belief in man, in his dual
nature and in his earthly existence was very crucial and of paramount
interest to all and sundry. In its general outline it was believed that when
God created man in His image, he was perfect but his disobedience led
to his fall and he was subjected to sufferings and death. Hence, man’s
aim, in this earthly existence, was to regain his lost self and lost dignity.
It was firmly believed that man could rise above his imperfections and
could regain his virtues and glory of which he had been bereft in his
earthly existence. The Elizabethans knew that God did not abandon man
for He had made man for a purpose – to praise and glorify Him and to
love Him. Moreover they knew that God had made a provision for
man’s redemption. Man’s excellent position in the universe can be
recounted in the following words: “Man, thus compounded and formed
by God, was an abstract or model, or brief story of the universe in whom
God concluded the creation, and work of the world, and whom he made the last and most excellent of his creatures, being internally endued with a divine understanding, by which he might contemplate and serve his Creator. What made man's position crucial in the Elizabethan or in every preceding age was his dual nature. Philosophy as well as theology, both were equally vocal about this crucial position of man.

Coming to the philosophical and theological origin of these beliefs, Plato and Genesis both talked about man in most glorified terms. According to the Platonic doctrine this universe and man were the copy of divine idea: according to Genesis man was created after the image of Divinity. Both the systems of thought believed that man was bestowed with so many advantages and the whole creation especially the lowest order e.g. animal order was created for him. Romei, a Neo-Platonist, wrote in his Courtier's Academy: “That most excellent and great God, having with all beauty bedecked the celestial regions with angelic spirits, furnishing the heavenly spheres with souls eternal.... In the end made man, being of, all the worldly creatures the most miraculous.”

This was the general belief of the age. Hamlet's exalted words about man, in a way, summarize the Elizabethan concept of man:

What piece of work is a man,  
how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form  
and moving how express and admirable, in action  
how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god:  
the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals-  
(II.ii, 303-307)

The Genesis asserted that when God made the world he found it good and that he created man in his own image; but with the fall both
man and the universe were deprived of their original virtues. Genesis asserted that due to original sin, man was cursed to live a life of imperfection. Plato propounded similar view. According to the Platonists, man was but a copy of divine idea; hence he was, being a copy, imperfect. In a way, Plato and Genesis were unanimous about man's corrupt self, devoid of original virtues.

Related to the concept of fall was the belief in evil. According to their theological beliefs, evil was inherent in the world as well as within man because of man's disobedience of God's command. Their concept of evil was as real as any other concept. It was well known that the aim of subjective as well as objective evil was to destroy all that was good in society, to dissolve the harmonious pattern of the created universe. Man, in his post-fall state, was bound to live with evil. Nevertheless, church taught them to be optimistic and not to despair. According to their beliefs, one could save one's self from evil. According to the inherited beliefs, man had reason and the grace of God to guide him. Their belief in evil can be summed up in the words of Ribner, "Elizábetan humanism held that although good and evil are in the world together, the entire universe is ruled by a benevolent God whose plan is purposive and just."  

Nonetheless, it was believed in both the systems of thought, that irrespective of his imperfection, man could rise above his fallen self and achieve his lost glory and dignity. It was all in man's hands to corrupt his self further or to redeem his corrupt self. According to current theological belief, man had a specific purpose in his post-lepsarian
existence i.e. to know and love God. But the road to redemption was not an easy one. It was more so difficult because in his earthly existence, man was devoid of his original virtues and perfect understanding. Man was believed to be an amalgam of good and evil, and because of his imperfect understanding and corrupt will he was supposed to be naturally inclined towards evil. Though man alone was responsible for his fallen state and infected wit and will nevertheless orthodoxy maintained that man could acquire redemption from the fallen self.

As far as the possibilities of redemption were concerned, there were pessimistic as well as optimistic approaches. These two approaches can be well understood in the following words: "If the convention ridden man regards himself as an integral part of Nature with reason as his guide, the emergent man is entirely self-centered and the unity between man and nature is broken." Optimistic approaches maintained that man could rise above his fallen state irrespective of corrupt wit and will: whereas pessimistic approach maintained that man could never rise above his fallen state. The general inclination of the age was towards optimistic approach. It was all in man's hands to corrupt his self further or to redeem his already corrupt self.

This amalgam of good and evil, of spirit and matter in human personality can well be understood through the concept of the chain of being. If man was placed in the midst of the chain it was because he was neither purely spiritual nor animal, rather he was 'a half man, half animal', an amalgam of two. It was believed that man's 'purpose and conscience' were at odds with each other. He had a pull between his
conscience and purpose and the attainment of his purpose might lead him astray while conscience pulled him up. It was believed that man could be misguided by his ‘perverted will’ and hence needed to be aware of the potentialities of one’s free nature. Man’s ‘doubtful middle state’ made his position much more pathetic. He had a pull and ‘internal conflict’ within his nature and this internal conflict between good and evil impeded his way to progress. Pope in his *Essay on Man* (Epistle II) discoursed well about this dual conflict:

In doubt to act or rest,
In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast;
In doubt his Mind or Body to prefer;
Born but to die, and reas’ning but too err;

(Epistle II, Line 7-10)

In spite of flaws, each school of thought glorified man’s middle state. He was called a ‘little world’ or microcosm because he possessed all the faculties existing in the universe; this made him unique among all the crested beings. Tillyard glorifies this position of man in the following words: “He was the nodal point, and his double nature, though the source of internal conflict had the unique function of binding together, all creation, of bridging the greatest cosmic chasm, that between matter and spirit.” Nonetheless, it was this unique composition of man that made him ‘the frailest and most vulnerable of all creatures is man’. Irrespective of the pessimistic approaches, orthodoxy maintained that man’s existence was conditioned by divine Providence and a saving perspective despite man’s corrupt wit and will was available to man.
The Elizabethans very much believed in a larger force at the helm of human affairs. It was believed that the acquisition of the knowledge of self could redeem and save man from sufferings and pains. Irrespective of corrupt wit and will, it was believed that 'certain vestiges of original virtue' remained in man through which he could redeem himself.

It was believed that instead of ignorance, knowledge of self and of world could enlighten man's path to redemption because armed with this knowledge man could enjoy the union with divinity and left aside his bestiality which inspired him to sinful acts. Armed with the knowledge of self e.g. of animality and divinity man could move to attain the better of his self i.e. celestial self and this alone, it was believed, could restore him to his lost dignity and original position.

As far as, the way to salvation was concerned, several modes were prescribed by theology. These means can be categorized thus: salvation by divine aid e.g. through Christ's atonement for human sins, salvation through the grace of God and salvation through self-effort i.e. through the acquisition of the knowledge of self and of world. This knowledge was redemptive and man could acquire this knowledge in two ways: "God has given man two books, the Bible and the book of the universal order of things or nature." It was believed that "the soul was made for an end, and good, and therefore for a better than itself, therefore for God, therefore to enjoy union with him." Hence man could learn his better self either through God's 'word' or 'world'. Ironically, if the violation of the divine order of the created universe was
It was the contemplation of this divine order itself that could enlighten the true self of man and redeem his self. Hence “This double vision of world order and of the effects of sin was the great medieval achievement. Its origin like those of the world order considered separately, go back to Genesis and Plato’s Timeus as brought together by the hellenizing Jews of Alexandria.”

It was believed that by contemplating the divine order of the created universe man could regain his true self from whom he had alienated due to his fall. In the words of Raymond de Sabunde: “The poor wanderer wishing to return to himself, should first consider the order of the things created by the Almighty: secondly he should compare or contrast himself with these; thirdly by this comparison he can attain to his real self and then to God, lord of all things.”

Hence, by steps man could redeem himself and might ascend to God. The knowledge of self was not egoism but the gateway to all virtue. It was the great condition of success in the spiritual warfare. For the chief enemy was supposed to be within man and if he did not understand him he could never be victorious. Out of fate and external evil, which was but to test men’s virtue and human character, theology laid emphasis on human character and that too out of faith in human capabilities in spite of corrupt wit and will. It was believed in general that man had the power to curb the spherical influences as well as human passions. Related to their notion of evil was the concept of fate. But it was generally assumed that man could survive the blows of fortune as well as those of passions provided that he applied his ‘discursive reason’. Overall, it was affirmed that man could redeem his
fallen self by converging his reason with the divine ‘Reason’ and this he
could do only when he had the knowledge of self, of his dual nature.

Looking back at the Elizabethan age, one can compare it to the
cauldron of the preternatural powers in Macbeth, where medieval and
modern things were boiling together and it was difficult to predict which
way things would take shape. Like the mythical God Janus, the age was
looking backward as well as forward. ‘Change of guard’ was the biggest
change in sixteenth century England because the monarchical form of
government reduced omnipresent papal influence. This shift was
inevitably followed by social, economical and most significantly
religious changes. From then onwards, England was on the roads to
cultivate its form of religion. The impact of Reformation can be summed
up in the words of Boris Ford: “The impact of Reformation was
paramount and though there was no complete break with the past, but
the whole balance of political, religious and cultural life was altered and
consequently the balance of art and thought.”

Undoubtedly, Reformation, consequent dissolution of religious houses, abolition of
church rituals, and increasing Protestant voices to reform the existing
form of religion altered the inherited religious framework to a great
extent.

Moreover “the imposing structure of such a cosmos was
demolished and hence, the three tiers of Nature, fixed earlier, were
dislocated and damaged.... Man was deprived of his position of pre-
eminence” by the skeptical theories of Montaigne, Machiavelli, and
Copernicus. According to Montaigne there was no real difference
between man and animals. However, orthodoxy too discoursed on the wretched earthly state of man yet maintained that man, because of his rational capabilities, was superior to animals. Montaigne reversed the natural pattern of the created universe given by Raymond de Sebonde. Similarly, Copernicus reversed the order of creation by placing sun at the centre of the cosmos. His theory was against the Ptolemaic cosmological structure. Machiavelli was no better. Theodore Spencer sums up his views in the following words: “To Machiavelli any concept of universal justice, of the Laws of Nature or of Nations, is quite irrelevant. Instead of thinking of human government as a reflection of the government of God, he suggests, as we have seen, that his prince take on the characteristics of animals….he is morally evil.”

Undoubtedly, the renaissance skeptics questioned the orthodox notions of order, harmony and degree derived from the Middle Ages by Christian: their impact can be summed up in the words of Tillyard. He writes: “Recent research has shown that the educated Elizabethan had plenty of textbooks in the vernacular instructing him in the Copernican astronomy, yet he was loth to upset the old order by applying his knowledge.” Hardin Craig too echoes Tillyard’s words: “He had not yet been demoted from his determinative position in the centre of the universe as the being for whom all things had been made and to whom had been granted the mastery and enjoyment of all things in return for a becoming glorification of an utterly generous Creator.”

In a way, the study of this theological and philosophical background of the Elizabethan age and its application on the major
tragedies of Shakespeare may establish him an orthodox moralist but in
the apt words of a critic: “it is wrong to consider him an orthodox
moralist who passes judgement through his plays. Undoubtedly, he is
very well acquainted will the Christian tradition that influenced his ways
of thinking.... And he makes use of the concepts of repentance,
atonement and grace. But primarily the plays are a product of his own
experience at a creative artist.”

In his tragedies he has perfectly woven, through his characters, all
the prevailing strands of thought e.g. skeptical as well as traditional.
Order of his plays is violated by the perverted wit or will of the
characters, which are followed by social and moral chaos. (If the natural
order is seriously threatened, its consequences will be according to that)
Moreover, irrespective of Shakespeare’s view, the ordinary educated
Elizabethan was bound to interpret his tragedies and the pattern of sin
and redemption in terms of his theological beliefs. The cosmological
structure was definite in its general outline and was known to everyone.
Notes and References:

1. S. L. Bethell, in his article “Diabolic Images in Othello” maintains this view. This article was pub. in Shakespeare Survey, Vol. 5, ed. A. Nicoll, pp.62-63. Accordingly, Bethell interprets the images in terms of good and evil.


9. The source of the most famous quotation from Richard Hooker’s Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity is an article written by Lee W. Gibbs which published in The Sixteenth Century Journal, vol.21, No.1, (Spring 1990), p.76

12. Ibid.
18. E.M.W. Tillyard in *The Elizabethan World Picture* quotes this passage from Romei’s *Courtier’s Academy* on page 85.
23. Ibid.
25. E.M.W. Tillyard in *The Elizabethan World Picture* quotes this passage from Raymond de Sabunde’s *Natural Theology* on p32.
27. Iffat Ara, *op. cit.* p.11.
29. E.M.W. Tillyard *op. cit.* pp. 16-17.
30. Hardin Craig *op.cit.* p.8
31. Iffat Ara, *op. cit.* p.1
(B) A brief survey of the study of major tragedies with a bearing on the present subject
Critical interest in the ‘ideas’ or in the ‘intellectual assumptions’, in Shakespeare’s plays is not a new phenomenon. This interest in the ideas and underlying patterns can be summed up in the words of D.J. Gordon: “Attempts to state these ideas, to relate them to current doctrine and more ambitiously to recreate the intellectual background of Shakespeare and his age multiply and increase.”¹ As far as twentieth century is concerned, three dominant critical approaches to Shakespeare’s plays can be identified. The first dominant critical approach to his plays is through the presentation of the plays on the stage. It is well known that the plays were written to perform on the stage, to be witnessed by the theatergoers and not to be read and studied. According to this critical approach a Shakespearean play is constituted by lived experience in terms of characters than any kind of philosophizing about life. According to this approach this livingness of the action rather than speculation over the behaviour and motivations of characters is brought out in the theatre.

Next, there is mythical approach, to his plays, in terms of the recurrent types of human existence like sense of sin, betrayal, sharing of love and disappointment.

Then, there is the existential approach in terms of the absurdity and meaninglessness of human existence or life. The tragedies are approached in terms of the human conditions characterized by dread, anguish, boredom and absurdity. This approach identifies the rootlessness and meaninglessness of life. There is the idea of nothingness and transcendence.
Shakespeare’s plays, especially the tragedies – *Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* – have been extensively studied over the years and variously interpreted. As far as the proposed topic is concerned, there are ‘agnostic’, ‘christian’ as well as ‘existential’ studies. Critical opinion, as it is, appears to be divided on the nature of the tragic universe as well as on human condition. ‘Agnostic’ and ‘Christian’ studies are concerned with the larger metaphysical issues within a framework which places man at the centre of the cosmos depicted in the play whereas ‘existential’ studies deny any such framework. Existential studies do not find any relationship between man and the universe in which he is to operate.

Nevertheless, ‘christian’ critics like Parker, Siegel, Ribner, identify a submerged but positive pattern of Christian meaning. These critics base their study on the Elizabethan notion of cosmic order. This Christian approach can be summed up in the words of R.H. West: “Far from admitting that he gives nothingness as what is within and beyond man’s life, some Christianity centered critics find that Shakespeare gives the beatific vision and heaven, purgatory and hell. He has Christ figures, Christian lessons and exempla, “segments” of Christian story and numerous Biblical allusions and analogues consistently used to display a special Christian “dimensions.”

As far as this proposed topic is concerned, only a few critics elaborate the pattern as well as mode of redemption; though many of them conclude in favour of redemption or damnation. The main emphasis is on the violation of order, consequent chaos and restoration.
of order. If there is anything disputable: it is the nature of the tragic universe or the human condition.

M.D.H. Parker is one of those few critics who have discoursed on redemption but he too is sometimes vague and sometimes elaborate. He is vague on the issue of redemption in Hamlet. Though he calls him ‘the minister of heaven’; he does not elaborate the pattern and mode of redemption. On the other hand he is much more explicit on this issue in Othello. He elaborately charts the course of his corruption and revelation. He writes abut Othello; “audience knows that in^ his renunciation of evil... Othello has merited salvation.”3 If Othello’s redemption lies in his renunciation of evil: Lear’s redemption, according to Parker, lies in “redemption from error, a redemption from the pride of the eyes and the intellect, the delusion of sense and will to the knowledge that substance is shadow, and shadow substance.”4 Macbeth according to Parker is a full-length study of damnation. He writes: “Macbeth falling less conventionally than Faustus, is more surely damned, so that after this speech not Christ himself dues ex machina, could pluck from destruction the spirit immolated by the will.”5

Paul N. Siegel is much more explicit on the pattern of redemption in major tragedies, though he seldom discourses upon the modes. He considers Hamlet’s death a necessary sacrifice, which alone can purge Denmark of its ‘rottenness’. He considers him a ‘saved soul’. According to Siegel, “… with his nobility shining unobscured by the black clouds of misanthropy and with his soul saved.”6
Contrary to Parker, Siegel calls Othello a drama of 'passion and damnation'. It's an outright rejection of any possibility of redemption or salvation. According to Siegel, "In committing self-murder at the conclusion he is continuing to follow Judas' example. His behaviour in his last moments, therefore would have confirmed Elizabethans in the impression that his soul is lost." Siegel echoes what Granville-Barker has professed much earlier. According to G. Barker: "Shakespeare paints us a merciless picture of the awakened, the broken Othello; of the frenetically repentant creature of Emilia's scornful.

Nay; lay thee down and roar...

Of the man with all strength for evil or for good gone out of him, remorse mere mockery as he looks upon the dead Desdemona; of an Othello crying:

Whip me, ye devils,
sheer horror this; the howling of the damned."

Siegel is much more explicit on the pattern as well as mode of redemption in King Lear. He assumes Cordelia's sacrifice analogues to Christ's atonement for human sins. He writes: "There is, then, hinted to the poetic imagination a miracle greater than all the other miracles in the drama... This miracle is the redemption of Lear for heaven, redemption analogous to the redemption of mankind."

As far as Macbeth is concerned, Siegel maintains Parker's view. Macbeth is a damned figure and his fall, according to Siegel, shows "the latent possibilities for evil in the murky depths of human nature."
Most apt of all the ‘Christian’ critics is Irving Ribner. No other critic has elaborately discoursed upon the pattern as well as mode of redemption as Ribner. Ribner, like Siegel, considers Hamlet’s death a necessary sacrifice and his redemption lies in his knowledge of evil “like all men he must die, but Hamlet’s death, like that of Romeo, is also his victory, for through his encounter with evil he has learned the nature of evil and the means of opposing it. With this knowledge he is ready for salvation.”

Ribner, like Parker and unlike Siegel, seeks redemption in Othello. According to him, Othello is not a study of passion and damnation rather of a deception. He seeks his salvation through Desdemona’s Christ like sacrifice. According to Ribner, Othello’s redemption lies in his renunciation of evil, in his ‘penance and expiation’.

According to Ribner, “Othello dies accepting damnation as his just desert, Shakespeare by his careful delineation of Desdemona as a symbol of mercy has prepared the audience for the salvation of Othello in spite of all.” Ribner affirms the possibility of salvation to Lear and Gloucester. He seeks their ‘regeneration from evil’.

Siegel out rightly denies redemption to Macbeth. He writes: “there can be little doubt of the final damnation of ‘this dead butcher and his fiend like queen’, but the audience comes to feel that Macbeth is destroyed by counter forces which he himself through his very dedication to evil, sets in motion.”
If for Swinburne, the emphasis in *King Lear* is on nihilism: Knight assumes *King Lear* "a purgatorial text wherein takes place the expiation of sins, in order to enable a purification through adversity in which those who suffer, awaking finally to a new consciousness of love, manage to find themselves more truly and in so doing, recognize the God's mysterious beneficience." According to critics like Dowden, Spencer and Sewell *King Lear* is a non-Christian play: whereas critics like Danby, Heilman and Wilson Knight assert the positive role of divine justice.

Implicit in this brief survey of the study of tragedies is that critics are either in favour of or against redemption. Christian critics like Parker, Siegel and Ribner are one about Hamlet's through and through redemptive nature. Critics consider him a saved soul and his death a necessary sacrifice that alone can purge Denmark. Critics like Granville Barker and Siegel deny redemption to Othello whereas critics like Parker and Ribner seek his redemption in the renunciation of evil. A few 'christian' critics consider his suicide as an act of 'pride and despair'. On the one hand, they argue for his saved soul and on the other hand, they consider him a damned figure. Redemption is denied to Macbeth unanimously. All critics interpret his courage in terms of animal passions instead of reason.

This proposed study maintains that redemption lies in the renunciation of evil and this man can do either through God's grace or by learning his true self, though man can also be saved from the power of evil through someone's Christ - like atonement. Hence, the task is to
trace that state where the four protagonists – Hamlet, Othello, Lear and Macbeth – renounce evil and save themselves from the power of evil through any of the mentioned modes.
Notes & References:


4. Ibid. p. 143.

5. Ibid. p. 172.


7. Ibid. p. 131.


10. Ibid. p. 142.


12. Ibid. p. 113.

13. Ibid. p. 155.