CHAPTER - TWO

SHAKESPEARE'S AGE
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The Elizabethan in Shakespeare represents England at the turn of the 16th Century. Its thought was influenced by the pagan Humanist Scheme of values. Elizabethan ethos was equally influenced by the Medieval Christian Humanism. Christian theology and classical learning moulded the Renaissance mind. It is a dramatic assertion of the dignity of man. Pitted between two contrary influences - Pagan and Christian Humanism - Shakespeare dramatizes the mind trapped into indecision.

The Elizabethan mind has absorbed stoicism of Seneca, Scepticism of Montaigne and Cynicism of Machiavelli. Shakespeare reflects the influence of Seneca in his delineation of stoic fatalism as also in his sympathetic delineation of suicide.

The concept of World Order provided a cosmic setting for human life. Man as a crown of creation had touched the Elizabethan imagination. This concept of World order was a simplified version of Medieval Christianity - God, Angel, Man, Beast; Elizabethan individualism was conditioned by the philosophy of social order. In Shakespearean Tragedy, the natural is good, the unnatural evil. In his comedies, he presents social order and in his Tragedies he presents metaphysical order. His characterization results from Renaissance interest in the individual but he places his characters in Christian Social order.
Christian thought in Elizabethan Age was not exclusively Medieval. The impact of the Renaissance has brought to the surface ideas belonging to early Christianity. Shakespeare and Elizabethan artists interpreted the new Renaissance values. He represents the turning point of history from medieval to modern. Shakespeare represents man in both the natural order of the pagan and the Christian order of Grace. Most of his characters faced death as the pagan heroes did rather than with the Christian Certitude of Heavenly Rewards in afterlife. In the Renaissance Age honour was the true measure of values. Fidelity beyond death was an approved concept in the Renaissance. Fame after death was man's immortality.

In the Middle Ages, thought was death-obsessed; in the Renaissance Age, thought was time-obsessed. For two centuries, England along with Northern Europe was primarily concerned with death. In Elizabethan England, the Shadow of death fell everywhere, for it was an unsettled Age-an Age of adventure and violence. The Renaissance approaches tended to be Christian and Pagan Humanist. There was a basic contradiction in the Age regarding Pagan and Christian attitudes to death. This accounts for the apparent inconsistencies in Shakespeare's plays. His Pagan Characters reflect humanist metaphysics of death, which theologians in their enthusiasm interpret as Christian metaphysics. Suicide and Revenge are the touchstones to assess the writer's attitude towards Christian theology.

The beginnings of the Elizabethan Theatre were in the medieval Morality plays and Mystery plays in which 'Death' hovers over the thematic centre. The
Cycle of passion Plays on Christ and Crucifixion had suffering and salvation at the centre. Death on battlefield or by the Sword was a popular draw in Elizabethan plays The Last Plays of Shakespeare reiterate a Christian attitude to personal revenge. The Sterner World of the Tragedies reflects quick sensitivity to affront. He has dramatized the subtle derangement of his central characters as they brood over death or work under the pressure of great passion or family restrictions. He views these predicaments through the eyes of the sufferers under the stress of irresistible passion.
Shakespeare was an integral part of his epoch. The lifetime of Shakespeare 1564-1616 coincided with the full flowering of the Renaissance in England. There were some facets to the English Renaissance that made it different from the Italian Renaissance of the preceding century. One such facet developed from the English Protestant theology derived from Jean Calvin of Geneva which inspired unshakable conviction in God's will. The other facet was English Patriotism of the post-Armada years. By 1588 England had emerged from the Armada year as the Supreme power in Europe. It had successfully resisted the mightiest Spanish Empire and awoke to a consciousness of its greatness. The glory was settled upon, the Queen who was hymned in Spenser's *Faire Queen* as Gloriana.

The Renaissance Englishman discovered their land and its past and with it the desire to preserve its records. The Age witnessed the individualism of the Renaissance as also the moral rigour of Protestantism and the selfless patriotism. On the one hand, there was extreme altruism and on the other extreme egoism. Essex observes that

"martyrs die for religion, heathens for glory, some for love of their country, others for"
affection to one special person, have encoun-
tered death without fear and suffered it without 
shew of alteration. For the virtues which are 
proper unto it are liberality or magnificence 
and fortitude or magnanimity."

This is illustrated by the magnificence of Cleopatra's 
death and the magnanimity of Othello's death. These are 
classical, not Christian values.

English seamen explored the world. English 
merchants penetrated distant lands, English colonists landed on the shores of the New World. In international politics, England became the spearhead of an anti-Spanish, anti-
Catholic alliance. It defeated the mighty Spanish Armada and survived years of war against the greatest power in Europe. Little England emerged as mighty maritime Nation, a nation of such stuff as legends and myths are made of. Such was England's Golden Age in Shakespeare's time. All this made an indelible impression on the popular imagination.

The Age of Elizabeth like the Age of Pericles is one 
of the rare ages in history in which is registered a higher 
quality of life. In that Golden Age arts flourished and an incomparable literature was created. The Age of Pericles and the Age of Elizabeth remain the golden ages of tragic drama. The hero is glorified in death in the Greek and
Elizabethan tragedy, but not out of a mood of pessimism. Both the Ages were periods of victories in war. The Greeks at Marathon and the English against the Spanish Armada were nations on the heights. The dramatist Aeschylus of Greece and the poet-soldier Philip Sidney in England were proud of their role on deadly battlefields.

The World in which Shakespeare lived was tense and troubled, owing to Sectarian and political vicissitudes. Spanish involvement in conspiracies against Elizabeth linked the national crisis with international conflicts. The defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 saved England but by no means ended the war. The War at sea dragged on. Thus Shakespeare came to London about the time of the Armada and spent his sensitive years in an England strained by a protracted War. War with Spain set a premium on martial virtues. The plays of Shakespeare, particularly the History Plays are an exalted and exultant expression of resurgent nationalism.

Shakespeare's History Plays are an evidence of the upsurge in nationalism. The patriotism of the Age was inductive of social cohesion. It was a corrective of self-centred individualism associated with the Renaissance concept of freedom. It shines through the following speeches of
Duke of Gaunt in "King Richard II" and of Bastard in King John.

"This royal throne of Kings, this scepter'd isle,  
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,  
This other Eden, demi-Paradise."

(II, i, 40-42)

"This England never did, nor never shall,  
Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror."

(V, vii, 112-113)

The Church at Stratford opposite Shakespeare's new place had a carved emblem of the Dance of Death. It was a miniature symbol of Elizabethan vision of life. The individualism of the Renaissance was expressed in dangerous living. The explorations at sea had opened out an adventurous career never far away from death. These seamen "faced death in many forms—death by disease, death by drowning, death from Spanish pikes and guns, death by starvation and cold on uninhabited coasts, death in the Spanish prisons."²

The continuing war against Spain, the Sectarian suspicion between Protestants and Catholics and the political uncertainty regarding succession to the throne of England were a
constant threat to peace in Elizabethan England. Essex was the hero of the shorefight at Cadiz. Victory at Cadiz heightened the popularity of Essex among the younger members of the court. But he was impetuously involved in a desperate plot against Elizabeth. Essex and his companions including Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton launched an abortive coup against the Queen. The scheme failed and in 1601, young, erstwhile favourite of the Queen, Essex was publicly beheaded. The beheadings of Elizabeth's cousin Queen Mary of Scots, as also of the Earl of Essex are a reminder of the political tragedy. The death of Essex and the imprisonment of the Earl of Southampton seem to have triggered Shakespeare's tragic mood.

The splendour of Elizabethan life barely concealed the lurking terror of the imperial age. Shakespeare's literary contemporaries died young. Marlowe was murdered in a drunken scuffle, Greene died in misery. Violence was in the air - cruelty inflicted by nature, by wind, water and rocks, as also cruelty inflicted by man on man - were like a refrain of Elizabethan Age. A characteristic instance of the violence of the Age was man slaughter by Ben Jonson who was branded with a T as punishment.

Infant mortality was unusually high, so also was
the mortality rate of the young on the battlefield. As in Macbeth's Scotland, widows were numerous. It was in such an England that Shakespeare dramatized the processes of generation and of death and showed them to be holy. Consciousness of death is the mother of morality in the plays of Shakespeare.

Bubonic Plague was a continuing threat in the Age. London was seldom free from the clutches of Plague. So severe was the threat of plague that the theatres were closed and even the courts were suspended to counter the spread of infection in July 1593. Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonais* and *Rape of Lucrece* resulted from the closure of the theatres as a safeguard against infections. Brother John in *Romeo and Juliet* is a reminder of this grim agent of death.

The moral thought of the Age was influenced by the Pagan humanist scheme of values. Christian theology and classical learning moulded the Elizabethan mind. Poised between two contrary influences - Pagan and Christian humanism - Shakespeare dramatizes the mind trapped into indecision. But he is closer to Pagan than to Christian humanism in presentation of a crucial ethical problem. The Shakespearean hero frequently echoes the moral philosophy of the Renaissance humanists who taught men to bear socially all injuries and remain invincible against the crosses and
thwarts of fortune. The Christian instinctively turns to
the solace and security provided by his trust in beneficent
and omniscient God. The impact of the Renaissance had
brought to the surface ideas belonging to early Christianity.
Such ideas had resemblance with humanist thought. Thus
Shakespeare presented the universal in seemingly christian
set-up.

The Elizabethans knew the classics as they knew
Christian theology. Without humanism, there could have been
no Elizabethan literature; without Erasmus, there would
have been no Shakespeare. The philosophic writings of
the Age give evidence that its value system was derived
from the writings of the ancients like Aristotle and Cicero.
Sir Thomas Elyot speaks for the humanist attitude of the
Renaissance derived from Aristotle and Cicero:

"All way dethe is to be preferred before
servitude." 3

In Shakespeare's tragedies, death is preferred to capti-
vity, as we find in Antony and Brutus.

The Elizabethan Age was poised between a preceding
and a succeeding period of virulent Protestantism. In this
context, a distinct secularism characterised the literature
of the Age. The Renaissance humanism projected the dignity of human life as against the medieval asceticism which had developed a misanthropic outlook. The typical Renaissance man is an amalgam of Christian and Pagan humanism.

Both the Age and Shakespeare absorbed in some measure stoicism of Seneca, scepticism of Montaigne as also the cynicism of Machiavelli. Seneca is a stoic philosopher, for whom the two contracts - the primary contract with God, which is natural law and the secondary contract with society which is moral law, are identical. Shakespeare reflects the influence of Seneca in his delineation of stoic fatalism as also in his sympathetic delineation of suicide. It laid great stress on the virtue of patience. Brutus' reception of the news of Portia's death is a reflection of the stoic philosophy. He informs Messala that his former meditations on the inevitability of her death allow him to bear the news with philosophic patience. As is pointed out by Alfred Harbage:

"Emphasis upon virtue, public and private, upon endurance and upon reason as controller of the passions had so long been a feature of Christian thinking."

Seneca's Roman awareness of man's predicament in the face of cosmic and political terror voiced the apprehensions of
16th century Europe in an era of church and state despotism. The terror of falling from a high place into an abyss seems a recurrent nightmare of the Elizabethan mind. The decade of the 1590s when Julius Caesar was written, marks the rise of Neo-Stoicism in England. Janet Spens in her Shakespeare and Tradition states

"The Senecan Superman is solitary, self-sustained, incapable of appreciating others, a unit in an alien universe, to Shakespeare, greatness and egotism never go together and his heroes 'live along' every thread of human connection." 5

The Catholic sympathy of Shakespeare is not denied even to the murdering Macbeth or 'honest Iago' and crooked Richard III. In this sense only the Machiavellian influence is recognizable in Shakespeare.

In Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca, T.S. Eliot states

"In a period like the Elizabethan Age, the Senecan attitude of Pride, the Montaigne attitude of scepticism and the Machiavelli attitude of cynicism arrived at a kind of fusion in the Elizabethan individualism." 6

Shakespeare seems to waver between Senecan stoicism and the
nihilism of Montaigne. To the Elizabethans, Machiavelli was a synonym for the diabolic. Shakespearean heroes embody the combined influence of Seneca, Montaigne and Machiavelli. Of these influences, the Senecan is largely assimilated, Montaigne's is the most topical and Machiavelli's is the least direct. Curtis Watson has remarked:

"For Eliot, the only choice for the men of the Renaissance was between Christian values and the very inferior values of Seneca which easily led to no values at all." 7

But this does not mean that the Englishmen of Renaissance believed in nothing. The moral values of Shakespeare's Age were eclectic and derivative; hence the charge of confusion.

T.S. Eliot points out:

"When an Elizabethan hero or villain dies, he usually dies in the odour of Seneca." 8

He further adds:

"If you compare the deaths of several of Shakespeare's heroes — notably Othello, Coriolanus, Antony, with the deaths of heroes of dramatists such as Marston and Chapman, consciously under Senecan influence, you will find a strong similarity except only that Shakespeare does it both more poetically and more life like." 9
He also clarifies that it would be more correct to say that

"Shakespeare is merely illustrating human nature, not Seneca".\(^{10}\)

It is thus clear that the ambivalent values of that period deny the possibility of a systematic philosophy of life emerging from the creative writing of the poets and dramatists of the period. Shakespeare accepted and assimilated various trends of the Age and in that sense became the representative of a turning point in history.

The knowledge of Elizabethan social order is necessary for realizing the full dramatic value of Shakespeare's plays. In the Renaissance as in the Middle Ages analogy was an approved method of communicating Truth. The Renaissance mind saw three kinds of Order - order within the Universe, order within the political commonwealth, order within the human system. In *Troilus and Cressida* Shakespeare has offered memorable exposition of the Elizabethan concepts of social degree and universal order.

"Degree being vizarded,
The unwort hie st shows as fairly in the mask.
The heavens themselves, the planets, and
this centre,
Observe degree, priority and place,
Insisture, course, proportion, season, form,
Office, and custom, in all line of order:
And therefore is the glorious planet sol
In noble eminence enthron'd and spher'd
Amidst the other."

(I, iii, 83-91)

Universal order was a core concept with the Elizabethans. The cosmic setting of human life was a central awareness of the Age. The Elizabethans accepted the idea of man's hazardous state between Heaven and Hell.

"The idea of Man summing up the universe in himself had a strong hold on the imagination of the Elizabethans."

"What a piece of work is 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! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?"

(II, ii, 323-328)

"Theodore Spencer in Shakespeare and the Nature of Man and EMW Tillyard in The Elizabethan World Picture offer a picture of the world as Shakespeare and his contemporaries saw it. Under God, all is arranged in a majestic hierarchy: angels, men, animals, plants and minerals and within each category are minor..."
hierarchies - the King in the category of men corresponding to God."\textsuperscript{12}

To usurp forcibly a higher position is to upset the nature, the Divine Order, as is shown by Shakespeare in Macbeth's violation of order by murdering Duncan.

E.M.W. Tillyard states the Elizabethan World Order:

"The order which prevails in the Heavens is duplicated on earth; the King corresponding to the Sun; then that disorder in the Heavens breeds disorder, both in the physical sublunary organization and in the commonwealth of men."\textsuperscript{13}

He further adds:

"The Elizabethan conception of world order was in its outlines medieval, although it had discarded much medieval detail. The universe was a unity in which everything had its place and it was the perfect work of God."\textsuperscript{14}

The Elizabethan concept of world order is perfectly reflected by Shakespeare in Ulysses' speech in \textit{Troilus and Cressida} where he calls degree "the ladder to all high designs" (I, iii, 102). The degree speech of Ulysses is the key of Elizabethan cosmology:

"The Heavens themselves, the planets and this centre
Observe degree, priority, and place."

(I, iii, 85-86)
The criticism that the Elizabethan Age was a period of anarchy, is ill-founded. The social philosophy of the Age was a compromise between the Renaissance ethical concept of individualism and the Elizabethan insistence on social integrity. As is pointed out by Curtis Watson:

"Elizabethan individualism ... was an integral part of a social philosophy which emphasized the importance and value of the individual but never at the cost of society as a whole."  

This is borne out by the fact that Shakespearean villains symbolize extreme individualism leading to social disruption. Yet it is worth noting that Shakespearean Tragedy does not end in chaos. Its finale is in re-establishing social order. Even the dying Hamlet gives his dying voice to Fortinbras.

The Age had its anarchic elements but in Shakespearean Tragedy these disruptive elements were viewed as evil - Claudius, Iago and Goneril are instances. Shakespearean Tragedy closes not only with the downfall of the hero but also with the overthrow of the forces of evil. As we near the end of the play death takes toll of the good and the evil alike but an ordered society survives. In A.C. Bradley’s words:
"Evil exhibits itself everywhere as something negative, barren, weakening, destructive, a principle of death. It isolates, disunites and tends to annihilate not only its opposite but itself." 16

Bradley's theoretical exposition of the concept of order has gained the support of a historical basis in the writings of E.M.W. Tillyard and Theodore Spencer.

Shakespeare shared the view that

"if disorder were produced on one plane of reality, a corresponding disorder might appear on another. Thus an act producing disorder on one plane might in the last resort entail a disintegration of the entire universe." 17

This doctrine finds frequent corroboration in the plays of Shakespeare. The storm in the mind of Lear has a corresponding storm in the universe.

According to the concept of Order, order is natural, disorder is unnatural. According to Shakespeare, whatever is natural is good, whatever is unnatural is evil. Macbeth does not succeed, nor Edmund, nor Iago. In his plays, Shakespeare creates Order. In the Comedies, this order is social, in the tragedies, it is metaphysical.
Shakespeare accepts only two forces: nature and man - the latter being the highest and the most complex manifestation of the former.

"The intimate tie between human destiny and the significance of the universal order is central to Shakespeare's thought as to Medieval Christianity. It is also the core of tragedy." 18

The basic tenet of Shakespeare's world view is that all life depends on the observance of the natural order that makes for health and peace. A diseased situation creates further areas of disease, as in Hamlet until finally matters come to a conflict which claim the life of a new generation - a generation uneasily aware that it is called on by history to suffer for the sins of its fathers. The madness of Prince Hamlet and of Ophelia and the Royal Banquet of Macbeth interrupted by Banquo's ghost are illustrations of that discord.

The social upheaval following a great protagonist's death is truly cataclysmic. Thus after Julius Caesar is killed there is civic confusion in Rome. In the atmosphere of instability, alarm and terror spread like wild fire among the Romans. Troilus apprehends similar fear about the effect of Hector's death on Troy.
The allusions to natural disorders accompanying the deaths of great Princes are of a varied nature. On the eve of Caesar's murder, it rains blood and wild beasts roam in the streets and the graves open to release their tenants. On the night of Duncan's murder, there are tremors of the earth and the Sun is masked on the following day. Gloucester in the Act I of King Lear refers to the late eclipses of the Sun and Moon which portend disorder and confusion. Horatio in the Act I of Hamlet compares the disturbances of Heaven and Earth to those which were reported on the eve of Caesar's death. In all the cases the omens indicate impending disasters and national confusion. The death of Shakespeare's great king, whether it is the death of King Hamlet or Duncan is considered catastrophic. In Hamlet even the Heavens seem to be disturbed by the event. In Macbeth the main emphasis lies on the upsetting of nature. It implies that the upsetting of the normal hierarchy in human world is being accompanied by a similar upsetting of the natural hierarchy in the animal world. The unnatural death of a King, whether it be that of King Hamlet or Duncan has dramatic and philosophic implications. It has a terrifying impact because it is the triumph of the disruptive forces; momentarily evil appears victorious in usurping the ruler's position and overthrowing the social order, but at the end order and stability are restored.
The Elizabethan Age recognized the integrity of the natural man within the natural order. The finest example of this kind of integrity is to be found in Brutus of Julius Caesar. He reaches the high water mark of ethical behaviour.

Theological influences were active in Shakespeare's time and Elizabethan culture. As Paul Kristeller reminds us that

"Christianity is not only medieval but also ancient and modern and thus it was possible for Christian thought during the Renaissance to cease being medieval in many respects and yet to remain Christian."\(^{19}\)

Religious ideas thus operated upon 16th century minds.

"In the Christian understanding sin is ..... a universal element of human experience where saving grace is not, and the theological analysis of sin, guilt and misery would have seemed to Elizabethans to have a relevance to all human situations."\(^{20}\)

The Elizabethan authors present their characters in terms of sin and atonement.

Bishop Latimer speaking on God - ordained Death in his sermon preached before King Edward VI has urged that
"God hath not manifested to us the time because he would have us at all times ready." 21

Similar thought is expressed by Hamlet: "Readiness is all." (V, ii, 237).

Early humanists such as Colet, More and Erasmus were heretical. Hooker was a believer in the fall of man and in salvation by Grace alone. The Book of Homilies provided instruction in Christian faith. The theologians of Shakespeare's time were convinced that the universe is ruled by an inscrutable God.

The only alternatives to the Christian view of life recognized in the Renaissance, were the Epicurean and the Stoic. The Stoic, however, was held in higher respect.

The Elizabethan Tragedy frequently echoes the view that the Gods, if any, are indifferent to the fate of individuals. The very remoteness of Gods creates a suspicion of malice in their dealings with men. This is well expressed by Gloucester in King Lear:

"As flies to wanton boys are we to the Gods
They kill us for their sport."

(IV, i, 36-37)

Shakespeare and his contemporaries however display
lack of religious sentiment. There is an absence of religious inspiration in their works. The plays of Shakespeare were written at a time when Western Europe had ceased to be deeply influenced by the Catholic Church or even the Christian faith. This accounts for the absence of Saints and Angels in the list of the dramatis personae of the plays of Shakespeare. In fact Medieval religious drama has yielded place to secular interest in man. The Medieval image of Fate was a Goddess with a wheel, balanced on a rotating ball. It seems that Shakespeare considered such an image of bad luck to be a crude symbol. He therefore makes mocking allusions to blind fortune at her wheel in his Comedies. Shakespeare, along with Cervantes and Michael Angelo is a representative of the process of revaluation of contemporary concepts regarding religion.

To Shakespeare, Sin brings its own punishment to the conscience of the Sinner. God's way with the Sinner is through the uneasy conscience. This lesson is brought home to the troubled heart of Macbeth.

"Concerned as he was with the universally human, Shakespeare found considerable dramatic relevance in the Christian treatment of sin. .... The theology of sin appears to have been quite serviceable to Shakespeare,
whereas the theology of Grace was less so.\textsuperscript{22}

Atonement for sin is an important concept in Christian theology. It is a faint echo in the works of Shakespeare. For instance, an appeal to the atonement comes in Isabella's plea to Angelo to show mercy to her brother, as also Portia's famous plea for mercy. What is totally missing from the Shakespearean plays is the ardent Christian yearning for union with God. The great Sacrifice of Christ for the human race finds scant reference in Shakespeare. "Absent thee from felicity a while" (V, ii, 361) may seem to refer to Heavenly bliss, but there is no detailed doctrinal affirmation here or elsewhere of the supreme importance of immortal bliss.

"In Shakespeare, allusion is frequently made to man's eternal soul but there is no real suggestion that the after life will afford permanence to man's values and that man can thereby find compensation for his insecurity while here on earth."\textsuperscript{23}

Macbeth speaks of selling his eternal jewel to the common enemy of man, but he is hardly troubled about hell. He is more concerned about the illusion and reality of life, as the art of drama is a constant interplay of appearance and reality.
Most of the comments on death made by the characters in Shakespeare's plays are not exclusively Christian. They might as well have come from Greeks or Romans as from Christians. This is not to say that the comments are un-Christian. In fact Christianity has a long history and there are many points in early Christianity which make sense in any civilization. It is such universal wisdom which is retained in Shakespeare's comments on death.

For the Elizabethans, sin originates in passion, which is the result of perverted will. Shakespeare's Hamlet pays a warm tribute to Horatio because he is not 'passion's slave'. The four major tragedies of Shakespeare dramatize the tragic conflict between passion and reason. Swept by passion, the Shakespearean wrong-doers, by their initial deed, put into action a process of disruption which ends with their annihilation. Such initial act was a characteristic wrong choice rather than a Christian Sin.

The sacredness of the bonds which hold human beings together is the very centre of all Shakespeare's Tragedies. For the Renaissance audience no vice was worse than that of ingratitude — particularly from one's own child. The violence of Lear's curses is justified because of the ingratitude of his wicked daughters.
"Ingratitude, thou marble - hearted fiend
More hideous, when thou show'st thee in a child,
Than the sea-monster."

(I, iv, 281-283)

Shakespeare puts in the mouth of Albany a prophetic condemnation of man's ingratitude and cruelty. As Albany says:

"It will come
Humanity must perforce prey on itself
Like monsters of the deep."

King Lear (IV, ii, 48-50)

Disloyalty to one's family was viewed by the Elizabethans as the most abhorrent crime. The sharp edge that cuts Lear and Hamlet to the quick is the betrayal of Regan, Goneril and Gertrude.

"To discover evil and falseness in one so dearly loved, so completely trusted, at first brings incredulity, then a moral revulsion which cannot be purged by an outpouring of hatred and the impulse for revenge since one's own blood is tainted by it and the revulsion includes oneself."

Hamlet feels unclean at his mother's guilt, Othello feels unclean at the reported infidelity of Desdemona and Lear
feels insufferable pain at the impiety of his daughters. Hamlet's melancholy, Othello's imbalance and Lear's madness are occasioned by evil which involves them through those they love. Melancholy, imbalance and madness are all alike hostages to death. Betrayed in love, they turn to deep hatred of mankind. The following utterance of Othello shows how painful disillusionment in love can be:

"Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell throne
Yield up O love thy crown and hearted throne
To tyrannous hate."

Othello (III, iii, 448)

In consequence the betrayed lover reacts strongly against the whole human race.

While condemning murder, Renaissance England made an exception of the killing of an adulteress. The leniency in this case was justified on the ground that infidelity of the wife was an injury to the honour and reputation of the husband. The Age was hypersensitive to honour. Sympathy was extended to Othello and his feelings were understood when he uttered:

"O perjured woman! thou dost stone my heart
And make'st me call what I intend to do
A murder; which I thought a sacrifice."

Othello (V, ii, 63–65)
The code of honour was the core of Renaissance ethos. The two summits of honour were individual achievement and social obligation. Hamlet is obliged to set right what was rotten in Denmark Othello makes a dignified claim: "I have done the state some service." (V, ii, 338). Renaissance Pagan humanism subscribed to the dignity of man. The glory of man according to Petrarch deserved earthly rewards during his earthly existence. The value of a life was measurable in terms of honour. It was therefore the duty of every man to win the esteem of fellowmen. The two key ideas of Renaissance humanist philosophy are: (1) The virtuous individual must seek public praise. (2) Reputation while alive and fame after death give permanence to the merits of the virtuous. Pagan humanism realized in posthumous fame a kind of immortality. Christianity searched for another kind of immortality of the invincible soul. Renaissance humanism derived the concept of honour from the Pagan classics. In the conflict of life, honourable death was preferred to dishonourable surrender. No man had the right to bring dishonour upon his nation for prolonging his life a little while longer by surrendering to the enemy. Othello's farewell to arms and Cassio's agony at the loss of his reputation are authentic exposition of the importance of honour and the fear of dishonour which
motivated the Renaissance mind. Only the villain Iago scoffs at the word 'honour'. The world judges a man by his reputation, God by his conscience. The history of the Age abounds in multitude of incidents of men who, like Cawdor of Macbeth died bravely, even after a life of crimes.

The Elizabethans believed that great attachments should last beyond death. The attachment to the great is so strong that the followers wish to follow their lord/lady in death as the maid-servants do after Cleopatra or Emilia after Desdemona and Kent after Lear. Love was sustained beyond death in the form of grief of the survivors and honourable burial for the dead. The grief of the bereaved sons, Hamlet and Laertes is intensified when they find that others have not shared their sorrow. Indifference to the dead lacerates their wound.

The idea of oblivion after death - death without appropriate burial, was terrifying to the Elizabethan mind; since that might deprive him of the posthumous remembrance. Shakespeare refers to the image of blind oblivion which he associates with the ideas of time and death.

There are allusions to forgetfulness; evil is punished by being swallowed up in oblivion just as virtue is rewarded by posthumous reputation. The Elizabethan son felt that if he inherited his father's honourable name, he
could perpetrate his father's honourable name. The strength of this filial bond is emphasized in *Hamlet* and more so in *King Lear*.

Gods are essential to the Greek conception of tragedy but they are not really essential to Senecan tragedy. The Elizabethans had little place for the Gods either, which they regarded as personifications of natural forces. Social and political situations have a much more important place in Elizabethan than in Greek Tragedy. Elizabethan tragedy not only had no Gods but was also a secular form avoiding the explicit use of Christian conception of deity.

On no theological issue was there such universal agreement in the Elizabethan Age, as we find in the case of suicide. Suicide is a heroic gesture against a life not worth living. To noble minds, death is preferable to dishonourable life. The Catholics have always regarded it as a damning sin. As Protestant theology excluded the idea of purgatory, the only result of suicide was hell. The Protestants thus had a stern attitude towards suicide. "Suicide was regarded as a far worse sin than murder." It lowered man below the brutish level. It was an act of cowardice. Sometimes, as is the case with Othello or Enobarbus, suicide appears to be appropriate retribution.
for a guilty conscience and a sinful act. Hell was the inevitable end for wilfully committed suicide. The theology of the Age stretched no point in favour of lovers who committed suicide. These theologians deserve the rejoinder which Laertes gave to the 'Churly' priest. The Renaissance attitude toward suicide is a revealing one especially the divergence between the Christian and classical ethics. Montaigne suggests that there is more courage in enduring adversity than in escaping it. Montaigne's objection to suicide is on the ground of patriotism, as our life belongs to our country, but Pagan humanism made an exception in suicides involving honour.

"Montaigne's account of the story of Seneca's death is noteworthy as an indication of the willingness of Renaissance moralists to view suicide as an honourable act, incidentally reminding us of the deaths of Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra." 26

The taking of one's own life, which was condemned by theology, was however approved by Renaissance Pagan philosophy and became for Shakespeare and his audience, the sign of magnanimity and magnificence of soul.

Mortality was a primary obsession in the Middle Ages. The Renaissance was primarily concerned with the
concept of time. The Elizabethans were conscious both of mortality and of time.

"The manner of one's death and the moment of it were ultimate concerns to the Elizabethans." 27

The thoughts, reflections and meditations on death by most of the Shakespearean heroes suggest the familiar teachings derived from the Middle Ages. Hardman in his book 'What About Shakespeare' quoted from Professor Spencer's exhaustive treatise Death and Elizabethan Tragedy.

"A Dance of Death decorated Shakespeare's Parish Church at Stratford-on-Avon. Part of the teaching, Shakespeare .... imbibed from the Middle Ages was the doctrine peculiar to Christianity, that Death was a punishment for man's sin, a notion entirely unknown to the Pagan world of Greece and Rome." 23

Shakespeare does not seem to believe in the theological doctrine 'The Wages of Sin is death'. Shakespearean humanism asserts in interpreting his heroes as more sinned against than sinning. The death of Hamlet or of Desdemona is more sacrificial than punitive. He looks askance at a formula that would bracket all mortals as sinners.
Closely associated with the thought of death was the phenomenon of Ghosts. Credence was given to this phenomenon in Pagan humanism and in Medieval Christianity. As in other important concepts, so about ghosts and spirits, the Elizabethans had the advantage of both the streams. Shakespeare, for instance, derives the maximum dramatic effect by retaining the contradictions in the Pagan Medieval and Elizabethan views on ghosts. The famous ghost of King Hamlet is a Catholic ghost as also a Protestant Evil spirit. It is at the same time a psychological ghost acceptable to reason. The Catholic view was that ghosts were souls returned from purgatory. To Protestants, not believing in purgatory, a ghost was mostly a devil. Elizabethans believed that under the earth was a habitat of devils.

Dover Wilson offers a following lucid explanation of the three schools of belief in ghosts:

"There were three Schools of Thoughts in the XVIth and XVIIth centuries on the question of ghosts. Before the Reformation, the belief in their existence which was of course much older than Christianity, had offered little intellectual difficulty to the ordinary man since the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory afforded a complete explanation of it in theological terms."
Most Catholics of Shakespeare's day believed that ghosts might be spirits of the departed, allowed to return from purgatory for some special purpose.  

The majority of the Protestants accepted the reality of apparitions without question. .... They received support from scripture.

The ghosts were supposed to be devils who assumed the Form of departed friends or relatives in order to work bodily or spiritual harm upon those to whom they appeared.

The third view was that apparitions are either the illusion of melancholic minds or flat knavery on the part of some rogue.

So it was, on the one hand, a branch of philosophy and on the other a familiar element of tragic drama. It was considered safe only for scholars to speak with ghosts because the scholars were equipped with a Latin formula for exorcising evil spirits. This point is well made in the first scene of Hamlet where the guards implore Horatio "Thou art a scholar; speak to it, Horatio" (I, i, 42).
The great majority of the people of the Elizabethan Age believed in witchcraft and ghosts; and Shakespeare's plays are full of references to these superstitions.

In the 14th and 15th centuries, stories of ghosts, witches and spirits found universal credence in all nations of North Europe. Such stories became part of the Elizabethan inheritance. The romanticism of Elizabethan literature gains immensely through the supernatural stories of the world of ghosts.

The plays of Shakespeare embody an inconsistency of the Elizabethan mind, when delineating the theme of revenge. Christianity taught men to leave vengeance in the hands of Divinity. It was not for man to take revenge. The Lord had said 'Vengeance is mine'. But the Renaissance concept of honour subscribed to personal revenge as unavoidable. The characters of Shakespeare's Pre-Christian plays reflect the Pagan attitude which found revenge to be compatible with honour. The theologians however make futile attempts to read Christian dogma in plays like King Lear.

The fundamental ideas held by Shakespeare were in common with the thinkers and writers of his generation. In his notions on matters in Heaven and on Earth, Shakespeare shared the knowledge and the ignorance of his
generation. The Elizabethan climate of thought and opinion went in the making of Shakespeare's plays, but the maker was still Shakespeare.

It is a common feature of the Elizabethan tragedy that revenge is often presented as a duty, even as the call of conscience. The Tudor Age provided a fertile field for The Tragedy of Revenge. The political conflict between Protestant England and Catholic Spain led to the invasion and the defeat of the Spanish Armada. The Catholic Queen Mary of Scots was beheaded under the order of Queen Elizabeth I. The influence of Machiavelli was not strong on Elizabethan literature but it certainly affected Elizabethan power politics. Revenge was not merely tolerated but was expected in politics of the day. It was therefore not an accident that The Spanish Tragedy set a popular trend in Elizabethan theatre. The attitude of the preachers and the moralists of the Age is in curious contrast with political practice and popular drama. As is pointed out by Helen Gardner: "They thought murder unethical and private revenge sinful." But in his "Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy" F.T. Bowers stresses

"the native tradition which laid a heavy obligation on a son to avenge the death of a murdered father."
Laertes wishes to perform this sacred duty when he receives the news of his father's murder. He admits that there is Christian taboo against revenge but defies it. "Conscience and Grace to the profoundest pit! I dare damnation." (IV, v, 131-132).

There are divergent views toward private revenge. At times the stoics shared the Christian view of revenge. To Alcibiades' demand for revenge, a Senator recommended the Christian reply: "To revenge is no valour but to bear." Timon of Athens (III, v, 40). Prospero in 'The Tempest' gives expression to the same thought: "The rarer action is in virtue than in vengeance." The Tempest (V, i, 25) Another instance is provided by Duchess of Gloucester in Richard II. She requests Old Gaunt to avenge the death of her husband. He refuses because of the Christian interdiction against revenge.

"God's is the quarrel; for God's substitute,
His deputy anointed in his sight,
Hath caus'd his death; the which if wrongfully,
Let Heaven revenge, for I may never lift
An angry man against his minister."

Richard II (I, ii, 37-41)

In matter of revenge, the tragedies adopt a sterner attitude. The Renaissance characters are
hypersensitive to affronts. This assertive attitude was not confined to the Renaissance. It was derived from Aristotle. The classics did not disparage indignation or anger or the desire for revenge.

The law of the land certainly condemned Private revenge, but both in France and England law made an exception where revenge for the death of one's father was concerned.

The Elizabethan audience enthused over scenes of violent death. Patriotism and popular demand approved death on the battlefield. A majority of Shakespearean heroes, particularly in his Histories and Tragedies seek honourable death on the battlefield. It is a dazzling sight which meets the eye in the person of the Roman Brutus or the English. Harry Hotspur who finds: "it were an easy leap to pluck bright honour from the pale-fac'd \( \text{Henry IV} \) (I, iii, 201-202). Richard III, Brutus, Cassius and Macbeth die on the battlefield. Brutus, Cassius and Antony do not die fighting, but commit suicide after defeat.

Ambition met with approval in the Elizabethan Age. Attainment of honour was highly esteemed and mutual emulation to secure greater honour was the desire of the
nobility of that Age. Ambition, through lawful means was admired but the Age was critical and wary of ambition, achieved through illegitimate means. The man who reached the goal of ambition and seized its fruit by craft or by force was viewed with horror. Macbeth and Edmund are the warnings to crafty ambition. Crafty ambition causes Edmund to disown father and brother and to join Goneril and Regan in their attempt to persecute their royal father. Similarly Macbeth taking the nearest way of evil to seize the crown stands self-condemned. Illicit ambition induces Claudius to poison his own brother treacherously and then to marry his widow. Such ambition is the driving force behind Shakespeare's most Machiavellian villain King Richard III.

The theme of murder was viewed in two different ways; from the viewpoint of the man murdered as also from that of the murderer. The Elizabethans considered murder an unpardonable atrocity. From the viewpoint of the man murdered it suddenly puts an end to the inward flux of life, the energy, the passion, the dreams of the poor victim. It is a total deprivation at one stroke. He is in panic, the fear of instant death. If anything, the strain on the murderer is even greater. Macbeth takes the way of suicide when he takes the life of Duncan. The conflict
within the murderer creates a hell within his heart. His mind seethes with strange passion, ambition, revenge, fear of consequence. The chaos and confusion in his heart are a kind of inferno for the murderer.

Shakespeare, the dramatist was great because he worked through the traditions of his Age. The Elizabethan theatre had a two-fold history of development. On one hand it worked in the tradition of the people. It was a popular theatre which had to entertain the audience. At the same time it came in the trail of the church Drama of the Middle Ages which was deeply involved in the serious aspects of existence. The Miracles, Mysteries and Moralities of the Middle Ages had acquainted the common audience with the basic concerns of philosophy and theology. It was therefore within the reach of a Marlowe or a Shakespeare to raise their audiences to the highest level of human achievement.

Mystery cycles trace the history of the world from the Creation to the Last Judgment - even the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. The narrative of Christ's Ministry and death was the supreme narrative. It was the prototype of all suffering and all tragic action. Shakespeare made use of mystery play forms in a number of plays.

Shakespeare's dramatic art is rooted in the needs
and the opportunities of the Elizabethan theatre. In the words of C.J. Sisson:

"His drama was rooted in his own Age and in the condition of his art in the stage and its habits, in the audience and its tastes, as well as in the drama of earlier generations of England." 35

The Elizabethan theatre had absorbed the conventions of the elaborate production of the Miracle Plays as also of the folk plays in many forms. By the XVI century the purely domestic groups of actors in the retire of houses of nobility were replaced by travelling groups of actors patronized by noble masters. The patronage of an Essex was sufficient reason for the dramatist to be involved in the tragic fall of Essex.

The Elizabethan theatre was a modified version of the temporary stage erected in an innyard or in a hall of a lord or of university for private performance. In 1576, the first permanent theatre was constructed and owned by an actor. By that time the actors found a ready market for their plays in London. It was an actor dominated drama which Shakespeare developed into poetic drama. Shakespeare had varied audiences - such as the Queen and her courtiers, the University students and the groundings, and Shakespeare had
to cater to the needs and tastes of all before whom
the plays had to be performed. The effect of Shakes­
peare's plays is noted by Webster that

"Shakespeare's plays are by no means
wanting that which is the only grace
and setting out of a tragedy, a full
and understanding Auditory." \(^36\)

Shakespeare found fit listeners among all classes
of London citizens. What was considered their fault
became a merit in Shakespeare's art. His audience had
an uncritical catholicity of taste. Shakespeare gained
by playing upto their catholicity. His audience saved
his drama from over-education and artificiality and that
preserved its strength and universality.

In this common audience, Shakespeare found men
of his own make. He reconciled them and the Princely
elite in one delight. Shakespeare's great tragedies
cohere with the Elizabethan medium Shakespeare was at
home in the medium and developed it to its perfection.

The Elizabethan stage was a cipher unaided by
painted scenes. It was just a barren platform.
Shakespeare exploited to the fullest the freedom from
place and time offered by such bare open stage. He
filled it up with costumes and poetry. The moonlit
Belmont exudes the magic of love and is in contrast with the starlit darkness of the ghost scene in Hamlet. Shakespeare has mastery in conveying change of place through the mind and mood of the characters. The Cipher stage has freed his plays from the crippling reality of time and place. Vague space and illusory time had their advantages. They helped speed through sustained excitement. Dramatic Time is at his command. The tragedy in Othello would have been unthinkable in terms of real time. There is no time for Desdemona to commit adultery. Shakespeare's dramatic time moves hastily towards tragic doom. In Hamlet on the other hand, time moves slowly and has the effect of delay.

The greatest challenge to Shakespeare's genius was the fact that his had to be successfully performed in broad daylight in the theatre open to the sky. His great discovery is that physical action is the least effective on the stage. Killing or kissing is over in a minute. The why and the wherefore of action count. What has to be expressed is the thought or the feeling behind the action. He solves the problem of creating an illusion in broad daylight. The illusion in his plays is lodged in the actor which grips the audience. The stage was surrounded by the audience. The actor in its midst was one with his audience.
the most wonderful means of revealing the spiritual agony within the character. He makes it a direct means of self revelation. He vivifies and dramatizes soliloquy without sacrificing the character. It suits best the introspective characters. In his final plays, he uses it as a conscious artifice.

On the actor-dominated stage, Shakespeare's first success was in realized characters. But with Brutus, his character is revealed. In Hamlet the whole play aims at revealing the Prince. That was the acme of the actor dominated theatre. Not merely thought or feeling but even movement across the stage is made expressive of character and theme. In the major tragedies, action has emotional significance.

Verse is his medium and he paints in words the beauty of the imagined scene. The convention of storm is perfected in King Lear where it is identified with the inward drama. Storm and madness enhance the effect. Thus on a stage described as trestle and boards and through actors fond of heroic rhetoric, Shakespeare developed drama to reveal man's innermost self and to make us aware of the mystery of the world around the tragic hero. He did this through dramatic speech and action. The speech admits us
to a non-material world of emotion and ideas. Even physical action is an indication of the inner truth. It is a world in which the heroes grow to colossal dimensions.

A brief consideration of the tragedies by Webster is relevant in this context. Webster is one of the Last Heirs of English Renaissance. In two of his masterpieces *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil* the revengeful brothers carry their villainy to the extreme verge of depravity. His plays are replete with tragic gloom. Webster dramatizes revenge in its ugliest form. He accumulates horror on horror's head. He builds up an atmosphere of decay. In his plays physical violence contributes to dramatic atmosphere. Crimes are darker and suffering more terrible in these Revenge Plays. Violence reaches poetic level in Webster. The Duchess lives among horrors. Webster manipulates with dexterity a sequence of horrors. Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi* has a beast like instinct for blood which leads to the killing of the children of the Duchess. The tragedy reaches its end with the death of the persecuted Duchess. What follows is a superfluity of horrors.

Webster's plays compel us to stare into the devouring darkness of the grave. These plays were built on
ancient ruins. They display the cult of individuality of
the Renaissance — also its despair and its courage in
despair. Webster's tragic muse is an infidel at heart.
It reveals the glory of man in his doomed defiance of
Destiny. He has little faith, save in the courage of
despair. His hope is only in the rest of death. In
his tragic vision, love brings only unhappiness. The
life of man is splendid but it is shattered. Webster has
put to doubt everything but death.

Webster has not the many—splendoured tragic
vision of Shakespeare. His gaze is narrow, but intense.
His tragic sense is of the impotency of human magnifi-
cence. His driving force is passion. Man, for Webster,
is the tennis ball of the stars.

Shakespeare's great achievement in the major plays
is in visualizing the ebbing of life within his characters.
The deaths of Macbeths while they still live, have been their
essential tragedy. Lady Macbeth's ruthless spirit is
brought to nullity. The sleep walking dramatizes her spiri-
tual death. Body's death is nothing. Macbeth's helpless
indifference is her true death. She is dead and he can
feel nothing. That is his death. Macbeth's living spirit
shrivels to a cipher in his sinister world. In contrast,
the introspective Hamlet reveals spiritual life as Cleopatra
creates vibrant life around her.

To conclude with the words of H.G. Barker on the plays of Shakespeare

"Only in the theatre and only in such a theatre as this for which he wrote, will they be fully alive." 37

The Renaissance was a joyous blaze of creativity. The tragic shadows of its literature are the more sinister and more dark because of life brilliance. Death is the sharper as it arises from the lust for life.
## Chapter II

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