ASPIRATION FOR WORLDLY KNOWLEDGE AND MAGIC POWER

DOCTOR FAUSTUS

*Doctor Faustus* is based on the German story of Doctor Faustus or Faust, who was believed to have sold himself to the Devil. His history, with many marvelous additions, appeared at Frankfort in 1587, in a small volume, generally known as the Faustbush. Its English translation, *The Historie of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus* appeared in 1587 or 1588. ¹ Though the real Faustus was active in early sixteenth century, the German account of his life, *Historia von Doctor John Faustus*, also known as ‘the Spies Faustbush’, upon which the English version of P.F. Gent was based, did not appear till 1587. This Historia Faustus was born around 1480 perhaps in a village.
near Wurttemberg or Heidelberg in southern Germany and died in
the late 1530s at Staufen in Baden. ²

It was translated into English in 1592. Its Lutheran bias, and
specifically anti-Catholic point of view shows up in Marlowe’s
play, most obviously in the scenes at the papal court. ³

It was probably first performed in 1594, a time of
tremendous change in Europe. The Medieval times were over and
the Renaissance was beginning, however, influences of both times
can be found in the play.

This play is transitional play where beliefs from both time
intermingle, sometimes with disastrous results. The Renaissance is
specifically applied to the widespread culture revival, the new wave
gradually spreading over Western Europe and England in the
following two centuries. The revival of learning, new geographical
discoveries and more significantly the rebellion against the
medieval pattern of living and thinking dominated by religious
dogmas and Christian theology were the main sources of
stimulation. Another great contributory factor for the growth of this movement was the revival of interest in the classical antiquity or the Greco-Roman culture.

The main ingredients of this new spirit were individualism and worldliness; and these two traits found manifestation in many forms such as its great yearning for knowledge and learning without fetters, its love of beauty and hankering after sensual pleasure of life, its brave spirit of adventure and its sky-high ambition and supreme lust of power and pelf in this world. Then the epoch making work, *The Prince* by Machiavelli, the famous social and political writer of Italy, profoundly influenced the spirit of the Renaissance. It was Machiavelli's forceful writings that encouraged the men of that age to disregard all ethical and conventional moral principles to achieve the end by any means, fair or foul. In fact Christopher Marlowe himself was the product of the Renaissance. He was saturated with the spirit of the Renaissance with its great yearning for limitless knowledge, with its hankering after sensual pleasures of life, with its intemperate ambition and supreme lust for power and pelf and finally with its spirit of revolt against the
medieval pattern of living, its orthodox religion and conventional morality and ethical principles.

Doctor Faustus seems to be the veritable incarnation of the genius and spirit of the Renaissance, as his character reveals a great yearning for limitless knowledge, power and pelf, a craving for sensual pleasures of life, a defying spirit of atheism or asceticism and also a spirit of revolt against conventional religious doctrines, and Christian theology.

One of the most significant characteristics of the Renaissance was individualism that led to the spirit of revolt to free the human mind from the shackles and dogmas of the Church and feudalism. And Marlowe's Doctor Faustus with all his erudition and scholarship, with his abnormal pride and presumption discusses in his very first monologue, in the first scene, the merit and demerits of all the important branches of study and has the great audacity to take his own decision, right or wrong, and to declare without the least hesitation.
And then, Doctor Faustus as the true embodiment of Renaissance spirit starts dreaming of gaining super-human powers and of performing miraculous deeds with the help of spirits raised by him:

*I'll have them read me strange philosophy,*

*And tell the secrets of all foreign kings;*

*……………………………………………………………………*

*I’ll levy soldiers with the coin they bring,*

*And chase the prince of Parma from our land,*

*And reign sole king of all the provinces.*

All these proud assertions clearly reveal Faustus's Renaissance spirit of adventure and supreme craze for knowledge and power without any limit. And finally as a true follower of Machiavelli, we find Faustus discarding God and defying all religious and moral principles, when he sells his soul to the Devil to master all knowledge and to gain super-human powers.

The characterization of the man of the Renaissance is particularly pertinent to our understanding of Faustus’ trying out of
different ‘vocations’. As well as to his use of magic as a means of self – aggrandizement and hob-nabbing with the ruling powers, the human activities of Renaissance periods are desire to be everywhere, desire for fame, for pleasure and opulence, which are all interpreted as signs of potential divinity.

Marlowe’s Faustus is drawn on by his powers and sense of human potentialities, which critics have so often associated with the Renaissance mood of aspiration. For Faustus’ speech, ‘How am I gluttoned with conceit of this’, Marlowe could have picked up a hint from Mephistophilis’ speech in The Damnable life, Chapter 18, on the wonders to be revealed by devils.  

So this is the main idea of Doctor Faustus, the passionate ambition of the English bourgeoisie of Marlow’s epoch. Faustus is endowed with the Renaissance ‘will’ or ambition peculiar to the sixteenth century England. Marlowe was the ideologist of the anarchistically revolutionary English merchant bourgeoisie of the end of the sixteenth century. As a true humanist, he depicted the ardent moral striving of this epoch in Doctor Faustus.
To the man of the Renaissance, knowledge and power were inseparable, Doctor Faustus is such a superman; he sells his soul to the devil in exchange for moral happiness, knowledge and power. But he desires this power in order to render his country impregnable, to surround it with an iron wall, to create an unconquerable army, to establish universities etc. The high ambition of the Renaissance bourgeoisies to conquer distant lands is also reflected in Faustus's word about his future programme. For instance:

*By him I'll be great emp’ror of the world,*

*And make a bridge through the moving air*

*To pass the Ocean with a band of men;*

*I’ll join the hills that bind the Afric shore*

*And make that [country] continent to Spain,*

*And both contributory to my crown,*

*The Emperor shall not live but by my leave,*

*Nor any potentate of Germany.*

**Theme:** The theme of this play of misdirected desire is sustained all through Faustus’s opening soliloquy. His ambition to
become a great physician is directed only by the craving for present wealth and posthumous fame:

*Be a physition Faustus, heape vp golde,*

*And be eternizde for some wondrous cure.*

But neither wealth nor fame can satisfy an aspiration which transcends mortal limits. Like Tamburlaine, Faustus desires a godlike power over life and death:

*Yet art thou still but Faustus, and a man*

*Wouldst thou make man to live eternally?*

*Or being dead, raise them to life again?*

*Then this profession were to be esteemed.*

*Doctor Faustus* is Marlowe's greatest and most personnel tragedy in the sense that it treats a great psychological theme and also that it offers the reader and the audience a great moral lesson. But what is this great psychological theme? It is the theme of the
great struggle of a human soul that has the noblest ambition of acquiring unlimited knowledge; but as knowledge is power and that power is a positive evil if knowledge is abused or misused. So, Doctor Faustus who pursues false knowledge i.e. necromancy in bad manner, is given the severest penalty in the form of mental disquietness and unrest through and till the end of his life. This is the greatest lesson of human wishes and on the wages of sin. Marlowe abuses knowledge and hence, the power of God who delights not in more material prosperity or physical strength or brute supremacy or in sensuous indulgences to which Doctor Faustus surrenders himself completely and to which, therefore, is bitterly reacted in the form of moral degradation, spiritual lapses and incapacity for repentance or contrition or prayer to God.

*Doctor Faustus* is also an embodiment of the epoch. His mind and soul is afire with an inordinate desire for attaining supreme power through knowledge by any means, fair or foul. With the revival of learning, people began to believe that knowledge enabled man to become all powerful. So Faustus even after getting his degree of Doctorate and studying all the important branches of
learning like Philosophy, Physics, Law and Divinity realizes that he is 'still but Faustus and a man'. All are inadequate and none of these subjects can help him to become as powerful 'on earth, as Jove in the Sky'. Faustus's dream is to gain super-human power so that:

\[
\text{All things that move between the quiet poles,}
\]

\[
\text{Shall be at my command: emperors and kings,}
\]

\[
\text{Are obey'd in their sev'ral provinces,}
\]

\[
\text{Nor can they raise the wind, or rend the clouds,}
\]

\[
\text{But his dominion that exceeds in this,}
\]

\[
\text{Stretched as far as doth the mind of man.}
\]

This inordinate desire to attain super-human power is absolutely in keeping with the adventurous spirit of the age of Renaissance. And to attain this Faustus makes the supreme but tragic decision of his life. But immediately after this, Faustus feels the prick of conscience as he is going to do something against the will of God. But the Evil Angel or the over-riding desire carries the day, as Faustus dreams of becoming powerful. *Doctor Faustus* is a
skeptical play not in advocacy but in depiction: not in proposing an attitude of detachment but in portraying passionate attachment and the attendant, enormously sympathetic self-destruction it can bring on. But the sands of time were running out. Ultimately the final hour approached when Faustus was to surrender his soul to the Devil. The fervent appeal of his scholar friends at the last moment to 'look up to Heaven' was of no avail. He realized that 'Faustus's offence can never be pardoned'. Finally, he was left pitifully alone in his room to face his inevitable doom and damnation. Horror of the impending doom made him tragic and his terror-struck soul fervently wished that movement of time might stop or the final hour might be lengthened so that he could have a last chance to repent and pray for God's mercy. But nothing is of any avail. The Devils appear and carry away the soul of Faustus for eternal damnation. And thus:

_Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight,

And burned is Apollo's laurel-bough,

That sometime grew in this learned man._
The theme of *Faustus*, in this way, is the pursuit of knowledge to infinity and its constant hazards and pangs. The play is a parable of a man who becomes the master of the secret of nature but loses mastery over himself. It is a parable of mankind down the ages which can still go over the precipice if it does not redeem its humanist virtue. It was a warning not only to the Elizabethans who were wild with the dreams of knowledge, riches, powers and adventures but a warning to future generations, to us as well. History is a testimony to the fact that Marlowe’s apprehensions were not unfounded. Though it is about the Elizabethan quest for knowledge and adventure and human glory, it also led to imperialism and exploitation.

**Technique:** According to some critics, his plays lack in quality even in the portrayal of his leading characters. As for me, whatever may be the drawbacks pointed out by critics and scholars, there cannot be any denying of the fact that Marlowe’s plays achieved grand success. So, before mentioning how Marlowe tackled his dramatic technique, it is worth quoting a very relevant remark of one of the most eminent critics, Prof. Boas: “Marlowe is
no mere transferor to the stage of historical scenes. Even in *Tamburlaine* he passes from unifying episodes to treating episodes unified into a keen study of characters; in *Edward II*, by rousing interest promptly, by re-massing his materials so as to maintain interest, by creating and developing sub-plot and by motivation of character he reveals himself a genuine technician, i.e., he wrote vividly aware of the stage on which plays would be given and of its audience. Consequently, he allowed himself methods and effects for which we may not care, but which nevertheless proved him a good technician in his own time. More than that seeking to shape his material for the stage and for that audience he passed beyond mere dramatic persuasion of the honour and discovered for himself many of the principles of technique which held permanently for good drama at any rate and in any tongue.”

Now, the great merits of his technique that made his play so popular and fascinating for the people of his age are the following. The first great thing is that Marlowe infused new life and vigour into the character of his mighty heroes. He provided heroic subjects and thereby the subject matter of his plays was elevated to a higher
level; and this mighty subject matter appealed to the imagination of Elizabethan audiences. And such glorious out-bursts of Marlowe’s dramatic and poetical genius pulsating with passion and emotions must have kept the audience of that great age spell-bound.

The insatiable spirit of adventure, the master passions of love and hate, ideals of beauty, the greatness and littleness of human life etc. were Marlowe’s subjects/techniques. Faustus’ final soliloquy has great dramatic technique. The scene is in two parts: the opening part in prose, perhaps one of the best examples of tragic prose in Elizabethan drama, and the concluding part in verse; and the subtle sense of poetry and drama in both. The juxtaposition of prose and poetry are interesting, because there is a close relationship between the two. In passion and movement the prose hardly differs from the verse:

*Ah. My God, I would weep! But the devil draws in my tears,

Gush forth

Blood, instead of tears! Yea, life and soul! O, he stays my tongue!*
I would lift up my hands; but see, they hold them, they hold them!

………………………………………………………………………………

The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike,

The devil will come, and Faustus must be damn’d.

O, I’ll leap up to my God-who pulls me down?....

Earth, gape! O, no, it will not harbour me!.....

O, strikes, it strikes! Now, body, turn to air, ........

Ugly hell, gape not! Come not, Lucifer!

I’ll turn books! – Ah, Mephistophilis! 10

But perhaps the best example of the succession and inter-penetration of characteristic Faustian attitude may be found in the soliloquy that begins Act II:

No. Faustus, must thou needs be damned,

And canst thou not be saved.

What boot it then to think of God or heaven?
Away with such vain fancies and despair!

Despair in God and trust in Beelzebub

Now go not backward. No, Faustus, be resolute.

Why waverest thou O, something soundeth in mine ears:

“Abjure this magic, turn to God again!”

Ay, and Faustus will turn to God again.

To God? He loves thee not.

The God thou servest in thine own appetite,

Wherein is fixed the love of Beelzebub.

To him I’ll build an altar and achurch,

And offer lukewarm blood of new-born babes. 11

The first six and a half lines of this speech employ the rhetorical technique of second-person self-address – a technique upon which Marlowe frequently relies in the play, particularly in those speeches where heavy emphasis is placed upon Faustus’s inner turmoil. In fact, whatever may be the defects of Doctor Faustus, Marlowe has succeeded in making its technique and its
language sublime at certain moments. Equally important is the poetic conception of the Christian myth which makes it possible for both poetry and religion to be integrated into a dramatic experience.

Marlowe’s poetic and dramatic work bears the stamp of vitalizing energy as well as pictorial and emotional quality, both of which can be found in all his plays. In Doctor Faustus we find brilliant examples of the pictorial as well as of the dramatic quality.

**Aspiration:** All the plays of Christopher Marlowe, without any exception are nothing but embodiments of the aspirations of the Renaissance spirit which found its expression in the spirit of adventures, in the hankering for knowledge and learning, in the passion or just for power, wealth and fame and also an unusual craving for bodily enjoyments. All these aspirations of the Renaissance spirit cast to the four winds all restrictions, all conventions, all formalities and dogmas of religion and morality which need to be worshipped or blindly followed during the Middle-Ages.
It is part of Marlowe's art to have presented character of Faustus differently from the Faustus of the old legend. The old legend, as found in the German Faustus-bush, was a commonplace tale of magic in which Faustus was depicted merely as an example of weakness, as a cunning sorcerer who met a richly deserved end. Marlowe, then, is torn between traditional Christian and Renaissance humanist evaluations of the aspiration to worldly knowledge.

Faustus is more at home in the limitless power of worldly knowledge and his decision to tackle it is the more interesting for the fact that he has also apparently grasped the possible validity of the soaring humanist aspiration. Here I quote Wilbur Sanders:

*Learned Faustus.............*

*Did mount him up to scale Olympus’ top,*

*Where, sitting in a Chariot burning bright*

*Drawn by the strength of yoked dragons’ necks,*

*He views the clouds, the planets and the stars,*

*The tropic, zones, and quarters of the sky,*

*From the bright circle of the horned moon*
Even to the height of premium mobile;
And whirling round with this circumference
Within the concave compass of the pole,
From east to west his dragon swiftly glide
And in eight days did bring him home again.  

Doctor Faustus attained so much of knowledge that he becomes unduly ambitious – he wanted to know all the mysteries of universe and conquer all the forces of Nature by means of necromancy. If so, he will become as powerful as a god who can make everything in the universe.

In Act III, Scene I, Faustus then rides some chariot to fly through space in order to make a survey of the heavenly bodies and come to know something about the construction of the universe. Then he goes around the world, and while visiting Italy he enjoys some mischievous tricks at the expense of the Pope and the Cardinals of Rome and also at the expense of some poor creatures. All these excursions and adventures practically make up his short career of twenty four years; Faustus was granted twenty four years of sensual life i.e., like given to all sorts of sensual pleasure e.g.,
eating, drinking, enjoying women, gambling, earning pelf, power; fame and all other pleasures which came through the five senses and at the end of his world tour, he returns home and awaits his doom i.e. his death and the damnation of his soul in hell for ever. In the meanwhile, some Old Man and also the Good Angel and Evil repeatedly appear before him in order to temp him to save his soul by either degrading his soul further or by urging him to repent and pray to God.

_Doctor Faustus_ is a dramatic embodiment of one or two of such aspirations such as, particularly the aspiration of attaining unlimited knowledge and power. With the Revival of Learning, people began to believe that knowledge is power, and that is why, we find that Doctor Faustus, not being satisfied with scholastic studies, craves for necromancy which, during the Middle Ages used to be considered as the key to all the secrets of the elements forces and mastery over them. Faustus is so crazy for power and knowledge that without realizing the dangers or evils of necromancy he signs a contact with the Devil for granting him twenty four years of perfect freedom and privilege to use his knowledge for any purpose and in any manner that he likes. But
then, the Renaissance people did not know in the fits of enthusiasm of aspiration that just as knowledge is power when it is properly used, it is the source of destruction and ruin when it is abused as it proves to be destruction to Doctor Faustus when he abuses the power of knowledge not merely for making construction of the universe but also for making practical mischiefs, for deriding and ridiculing religion and theology and also indulging in vulgar enjoyments.

Of course, Marlowe wishes this power of human knowledge also to make his country impregnable to any foreign invasion to surround his native land with an iron wall, to create an unconquerable army and also to establish universities for the further advance of human knowledge. In this connection Doctor Faustus says to himself as to how he will use the power of his knowledge acquired through his study of the science or art of magic. Faustus is now dreaming of what he is going to do after becoming the master of the universe. The following verses exemplify this fact:

*But his domain that exceeds in this*
Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man.

A sound magician is a mighty god: 

It means to proclaim that all these dreams are dreams of the Renaissance people who actually dream and also achieve to a great extent some of their dreams particularly the dream of discovering new lands and colonizing them and ultimately exploiting all the resources of those lands and their people.

The idea that after death there is any kind of pain or sorrow or damnation is absolutely nonsensical because there is no consciousness of pleasure or pain, no memory of any past life on earth, no question of suffering from any kind of physical or mental torture. So far as the soul is concerned, Faustus seems to believe that it causes to exit as soon as the body dies or perishes or is discomposed. That is very true. People’s belief in immortality or transmigration of the human soul is pure nonsense.

Doctor Faustus embodies the ambitions of the sixteenth century people of England as generated by the Renaissance
movement. It also embodies religious and moral attitude of the people of the same century. Marlowe presents in this play the most awful doctrine of Medieval Christianity, namely that any person dabbling in forbidden knowledge like the knowledge of necromancy must be penalized in long run with damnation in hell.

The chorus in the play throws hints with regard to this, by pointing out or suggesting that the wise person should be:

\[
\text{Only to wonder at unlawful things,}
\]

\[
\text{Whose deepness doth entice such forward wits}
\]

\[
\text{To practise more than heavenly power permits.}^{14}
\]

And because Faustus does not listen to that warning but babbles in that unlawful knowledge, he pays the severest penalty by yielding up for ever his soul to the Devil. The play further reflects the Medieval conception of heaven and hell, that heaven and hell lie somewhat on the opposite poles, that hell is place of darkness, torture, filth and obnoxious things that the sinful creatures always go to hell while the virtuous souls go to heaven. But Mephistophilis
explains the location and nature of hell and says to Faustus that hell means both mental and physical torture that whoever happens to be deprived of the blessing of God is in hell. Here, the words of Mephistophilis to Faustus may be quoted:

Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it.

Think'st thou that I, who saw the face of God

And tasted the eternal joys of heaven,

Am not tormented with ten thousand hells

In being deprived of everlasting bliss? \(^{15}\)

Thus, heaven and hell and the acquisition of unlimited knowledge form the main idea of the aspiration of the play. His aspiration is so strong that he did not surrender to God. It means to say that even if his soul is lost to the Devil or damned for ever in hell, he should not regret at all considering particularly how much of pleasure and power the art of magic has given him. For example, when the spirit of Helen appears in the form of flesh and blood before him again Doctor Faustus addresses:
Here will I dwell, for Heaven be in these lips,
And all is dross that is not Helena.
I will be Paris, and for love of thee,
Instead of Troy shall Wittenberg be sack’d;
And I will combat with weak Menelaus,
And wear thy colors on my plumed crest;
Yea, I will wound Achilles in the heel,
And then return to Helen for a kiss.  

Thus, he will become the sole owner of Helen’s body and soul as long as he is allowed to live on earth and after his death if his soul did damned eternally in hell he will not mind in the least. One the one hand, The Old Man calls Faustus, miserable creature because he instead of listening to the Old Man’s advice surrendered himself completely to his body’s desire again, for the enjoyment of the beautiful body of Helen. He was quite indifferent to the forgiveness of God for his/the sins. It shows the utmost character of aspiration of Faustus.

In Act V, Scene III, when just, the clock strikes eleven Doctor Faustus becomes aware that he has to live on earth for one
hour more after which his soul will be snatched away by the devils to hell. At the moment Doctor Faustus is afraid of the perpetual damnation in hell. Last of all, Faustus is now perfectly aware that his career of twenty four years of sensual enjoyment is now nearing its end when his soul will be snatched away by the Devil for eternal tortures in hell according to the terms of the contract which he has already signed. Faustus feds remorse and says:

Stand still, you over-moving spheres of Heaven,
That time may cease, and midnight never come!
Fear Nature’s eye, rise, rise again, and make
Perpetual day; or let this hour be but
A year, a month, a week, a natural day,
That Faustus may repent and save his soul! 17

To conclude, Faustus's summoning of Mephistophilis, his signing of the contract, his vision of Helen, and his death and damnation finally are the outstanding scenes of the play, in which "the medley of desire and fear, the poignancy of regret, the ecstasy and the terror are depicted with sureness and strength which give them a place among the greatest emotional situations in Elizabethan
tragedy”. Faustus's final monologue is unsurpassed in English drama, in the expression of sheer agony and horror. As he cries with lamentation:

\[
O \text{ I'll leap up to my God, who pulls me down,}
\]

\[
\text{See, see, where Christ's blood steams in the firmament,}
\]

\[
\text{One drop would save my soul, half a drop, ah, my Christ}^{18}
\]

The tragic emotions of pity and fear at the plight of such a great man tug at our heart. The tragedy achieves its climactic cathartic effect in Faustus's last shriek, "Mephistophilis”. Dr. Faustus is a tragedy of an aspiring intellect which seeks to pierce through to the centre of all knowledge. Such ambition is doomed to failure because of its very nature, for man is a limited being. The courage of the challenge, however, is awesome. Excessive curiosity or thirst for knowledge is harmful as it leads man to adopt wrong methods to satisfy it. Marlowe’s tragedy thus offers a skeptical commentary on the human propensity for the static, the human preference for being over becoming. Faustus wants to perform
miracles, to do the wondrous, to transcend human frailty, fallibility, uncertainty; he wants to “gain a deity”. 19

In the forthcoming chapter, craving for wealth of *The Jew of Malta* will be discussed.
Reference


9. Ibid., p. 188.


15. Ibid., p. 46.

16. Ibid., p. 61.

17. Ibid., p. 62.
