



UN-ARISTOTELIAN APPROACHES TO SHAKESPEARIAN TEXTS

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Abstract : The desire to break away from the aegis of Aristotelian authority had been an intention in literary criticism even before Nietzsche appeared with his book, The Birth of Tragedy in which at loggerheads with the therapeutic effect of the response to tragedy in ‘Catharsis’ (Aristotle, 20), he conceives of its vitalising power born of its Dionysian origins. The ecstatic reality which Nietzsche calls “Dionysian urge” (Nietzsche, xx) has its origin in the profound layers of human psyche.



Keywords: Un-Aristotelian, Monosemantic, Epic Theatre, Dionysian, Apollonian, Polyphony.

Introduction : In the proposed research paper, I hope to bring out the specific characteristics of possibilities of a response in the making of Shakespearean texts – as these texts are available to the spectator/reader for understanding and elucidation. Shakespeare’s tryst with the dramatic forms seems to subject the genre to stretch itself to include newer possibilities in expression and practice. His contributions in creating such powerful and vital dramas as one comes across his Tragedies, Tragicomedies, Histories demand a more comprehensive body of aesthetic and critical principles to be put to practice than were hitherto available.

The rigour of unity and simplification of experience and language in a monosemantic preoccupation as per the Aristotelian ideal, proves to be too much of strain even for a dramatist like Brecht, who appears to carry defiance of the Aristotelian precepts towards the creation of a trend of drama for his ideal of ‘Epic Theatre’. Reacting sharply against the illusionist theatre of the ‘naturalists’ as perfected by Stanislavsky, Brecht developed his ‘Epic Theatre’ which is basically non-illusory where there is not a mirror reflection of reality but a re-presentation, a critical reproduction of reality. In fact, Brecht wanted to create a new realism which would be, at once, objective and socially relevant. In this theatre audience were made to think and activated to participate, not emotionally but intellectually in the complex re-presentation on the stage. We come across the same un-Aristotelian stance in Piscator who favoured to make stage as a platform for public discussion and social and political issues. Piscator writes:

It is not his (man’s) relationship to himself, nor his relationship to God, but his relationship to society which is central..... It is no longer the private, personal fate of the individual but the times and the fate of the masses that are the heroic factors in the new drama. (Piscator, 187)

Thus, these modern playwrights sought to re-present realism where actors try to set up a direct rapport with audience by being natural. But then, in these plays actors used to remain detached from the roles they played. Pirandello came out with a new technique showing actors ‘standing outside their characters”. (Pirandello, 232)

Pirandello departs from the Aristotelian preoccupation with unities and purity of genre and shows his perception of opposites in his concepts of tragicomedy and Meta-theatre. In fact, Pirandello expresses a deep understanding of the unresolved conflict between essential ‘Self’ of man and his assumed ‘Selves’ in social life. This representation of subtle nexus between illusion and reality makes his play open-ended.

If we approach a Shakespearean text in the light of Pirandello’s aesthetic of Reality-illusion nexus we find that Shakespeare shows his deep understanding of Life and Art, Being and Becoming dialectics. It is the re-presentation of contraries that constitute the basic leitmotif of a Shakespearean play. “In the contraries lies the progression” writes Blake and this unresolved, never-ending clash of the temporal and the timeless which constitutes the essence of Shakespearean texts. In As You Like It Shakespeare shows his profound awareness of the fleeting nature of human life when he says:

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players
.....
Last scene of all,



That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion;
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. (II, VII)

Shakespeare goes on to show that man's self-ignorance and his growing recourse to different masks/illusions subjects him to unresolved crisis. He observes the real state of Lear in the following words:

'Tis the infirmity of his age; yet he hath ever but
Slenderly known himself. (I, I)

Goffman aptly writes, "If society is to function as a society, each one of us has parts to play, roles to perform, masks to put on. That daily drama we call real life. But if this awareness of real life is transferred to the theatre, then the individual who plays the part of an actor, the task he performs is a performance and the sense that matters are what they appear to be is a theatrical illusion....

(Goffman, x)

Actually, Pirandello is well-aware of the complex personality of an individual whose 'Self' is large and contains many 'Selves' within. As a result, an actor on the stage embodies the different 'Selves' of the audience in the theatre and thus the gap between actor and audience is thinned out. So, the audience themselves make an active participants in a representation of life on the stage. In 'The-Play within-the-Play' in Hamlet the protagonist tells his friend:

Give him needful note,
For I mine eye will rivet to his face,
And after we will both our judgements join
In censure of his seeming. (III, II)

Such a watchful wonder at the re-production of the complex self gives us an insight into the making a Shakespearean text. Pirandello once wrote:

"There is someone who is living my life, and I now
nothing about him". (Pirandello, 234)

The modern playwrights in their search for objectivity and detachment emphasize an un-Aristotelian stance where the 'mimetic' impulse of dramatics seems to give way to a new realism re-presenting reality as it really is. Shakespeare followed it in his plays in letter and spirit. In the play-within-the play episode of Hamlet he writes:

Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion
be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word to
the action, with this special observance, that you
o'erstep not the modesty of nature..... (III, II)

Since the Aristotelian theory in its perception of unities refers to the monosemantic simplification and regulation of experience and language in the various constituents of drama as they constitute it, the Aristotelian ideal seems to have influenced the making of plot and characterization in a different genre such as novel as well. And it is here that one finds Bakhtin, the Russian scholar and critic, discovering how Dostoevsky's novels draw upon a 'polyphony' of voices as against the monosemantic character of an ideal plot conceived in terms of protsstructuralist beliefs deriving from Aristotle. In fact, Bakhtin was critical of the monologic novels of Leo Tolstoy wherein authoritative voice of the author subordinates the voices of all other characters to monosemantic discourse. He appreciated the novels of Dostovesky in which the characters are liberated to speak "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices." (Bakhtin, 263) The plurality and ambivalence of voices is what marks the plays of Shakespeare complex and a patient reading his text may show polyphonic significations.

Shakespeare's plays are 'constructs' and therefore an open-ended discourse. The death of author leads to an unfinished and unfinalisable reading wherein references and allusions suggest the plurality of meaning. It seems that in the comedies like, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *The First Part of King Henry the Fourth*, *The Second Part of King Henry the Fourth*, *Measure for Measure* Shakespeare's profound perception of contraries of life in terms of the monological life-pattern of the high society is set against the multiple voices of the common men. Shakespeare makes diachronic use of language in representing variety, freedom and joy of the low people. And Shakespeare's consummate fusion of different kinds of experience (e.g. a profession, a social class, mass) suggest multi-voiced discourse. In fact, Shakespeare



depicts heterogeneous and fluid life of the low people as opposed to the homogeneous and fixed life of the high people. Shakespearean text embody a complex blend of the high and low and as such seem to be dialogic and open-ended defying the so-called Aristotelian preoccupation with resolution and finality. Bakhtin rightly says, “Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is still open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future.” (Bakhtin, 265)

Keats said that Shakespeare, of all great poets, possessed the “Negative capability” which enabled him to create an Iago or an Imogen, dark villainy or pure innocence with equal perfection. Shakespeare could easily enter and merge into the personality of Lear in his madness or the clown in his fun-fury. One cannot but feel measured intensity of the grief of a King/a father maddened by the ingratitude of his daughters whom he had already given his all. Shakespeare’s wonderful imagination enables him to enter into the broken psyche of Lear in the storm scene and we have such a touching reaction:

Blow winds and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!
 You cataracts and hurricanes, spout
 Till you have drenched out steeples, drowned the cocks!
 You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
 Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
 Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
 Strike flat the thick rotundity o’ the world,
 Crack nature’s moulds, all germens spill at once
 That make ingrateful man. (III, II)

But then. Shakespeare with equal perfection informs the counterblast of fool in the play who laughs at the King’s evocation of the world of nature. Fool wisely says:

O, nuncle, court holy-water in a dry house is better
 than this rain-water out o’ door. Good nuncle, in, and
 ask thy daughters blessing. Here’s a night pities
 neither wisemen nor fools. (III, II)

Hence, Shakespeare’s comprehension of endless variety of life lends his plays variety and universal appeal.

As in other plays, so in King Lear Shakespeare’s multi-voiced discourse constitutes the leitmotif. It is here that we come across Shakespeare’s justification of the actions, the roles of Goneril and Regan in the given dramatic context which derives largely from the social milieu to which Shakespeare belonged. In the fairy tale King Lear (which was Shakespeare’s source) Lear and Cordelia may live afresh in the end thereby deserving the favourable appreciation of Nahum Tate and Dr. Johnson. But then, Shakespeare was not there to repeat the factual history of Lear. He sought to improve upon the received from with his sharp awareness of the contemporary society.

This accounts for Shakespeare’s introduction of harsh political realities into the dramatic texture of the play. The Elizabethan Age had already ushered in a strong political commitment which can be shown in the bold decision of the Queen who preferred the throne to the execution of her cousin Mary. The same political motives seems to dominate the mindset of Goneril and Regan who do not hesitate to violate their filial obligations to realize their political power.

Hence, those critics who seek to read merely quasi religious meaning of reconciliation in the end of the play deliberately deny the powerful feminist elements of Goneril and Regan marked by tremendous energy and passion for independence, power and sexuality. Hence, the genius of Shakespeare lies in blending complexly the domestic as well as political aspects of life. The same political motif seems to dominate Lady Macbeth’s instigation of her husband to murder even the virtuous king Duncan to become the king.

Of course, the Aristotelian theory has grown out of his perception of the texts of the Greek drama before him – the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles etc. His ‘Poetics’ and ‘Rhetoric’ serve as milestones in literary criticism acting as a guide and model to much European drama ever since their appearance. But other forces arising from the matrix and milieu of European drama of different ages and nationalities sometimes in ignorance or evasion of the classical ideals, sometimes in defiance of such norm or model have also led to variation and change upon its original form in a genre as it came from the Greeks. The Christian



preoccupation of Medieval English ‘Miracles’ or ‘Moralities’ or the vital humanistic exuberance of Elizabethan-Jacobean drama cannot be fully accounted for in terms of a simple response to the neo-classical ideals and theories of drama deriving from Aristotle. This regeneration of faith in the glory and essence of man is wonderfully captured by Shakespeare in the following words:

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)

Marlowe describes with equal felicity the heightened awareness or beauty which becomes a soul saturated with the profundity and rhythm of the Renaissance:

What is beauty, saith my sufferings, then?
If all the pens that poets ever held
Had fed the feelings of their masters’ thoughts,
And every sweetness that inspired their heats,
Their minds, and muses on admired themes:
If all the heavenly quintessence they still
From their immortal flowers of poesy,
Wherein, as in a mirror, we perceive
The highest reaches of a human wit;
If these had made one poem’s period,
And all combined in beauty’s worthiness,
Yet should their hover in their restless heads
One thought, one grace, one wonder, at the least,
Which into words no virtue can digest. (II, I)

Hence, the Aristotelian preoccupation with imitation and reality is subverted by the modern dramatists. Aristotle stresses only one impulse, the ‘mimetic’ impulse. He deplorably shows least awareness of other impulses – the fantastic, the visionary which goes beyond reality itself. What is called dramatic illusion issues from the dramatist’s feel of the fantasy impulse in characters in the given context. Drama being a high literature does emerge as something more than a mere record of life, it turns out a recreation, a reproduction. “All writing, all composition,” states Robert Scholes, “is construction”. There is no mimesis, only poesis. No recording. Only constructing.” (Scholes, 5) True, Shakespeare’s dramas are beautiful blend of the real and the unreal which lends them unique depth and dimension. We come across an intriguing clash of reality and unreality wherein the temporal and the spatial give way to visionary and mysterious layers of life. Shakespeare aptly says towards the end of *The Tempest*:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp’d towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep. (IV, I)

Norman N. Holland’s observation, “Literature is a dream dreamed for us” (Holland, 194) suggests the wonderful power of imagination which transforms the immediate, the visible into something eternally suggestive. Shakespeare expresses superb sense of the fusion of the abstract and the concrete, the fantastic and the real due to the “esemplastic power” of the poet in the following lines:

..... as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing.
A local habitation and a name. (Coleridge, 25)



Shakespearean texts proving to be a consummation of the vitality of the experience of a new age in expression in drama needs its own interpretation and analysis, a truth so well gauged by Pope when he said, “To judge Shakespeare by Aristotle’s rules is like trying a man by the laws of one country, who acted under those of another.” It will not be wide of the mark if we say that Aristotle himself would have formulated different critical theories, were he but acquainted with the romantic dramas of the Elizabethan Age which were marked by unique spirit of freedom, adventure and individuality. Marlowe expresses it so beautifully in the end of his famous tragedy *Edward the Second*:

Farewell, Fair Queen, weep not for Mortimer,
That Scorns the world, and as a traveller goes
to discover countries yet unknown. (V, VI)

Shakespeare was equally well aware of the upsurge of the growing advancement towards freedom and individuality which a soul essentially deserves. Through Prospero Shakespeare manifests the natural birthright of every creature who tells Ariel:

Thou shalt be as free
As mountain winds. (IV, I)

A reader of Postcolonial literature does notice herein the end of imperialism/authority giving birth to a new world of autonomy, independence and endless possibilities of the mass to the detriment of class. Thus, Shakespearean texts appear to be Postmodern in deconstruction of power relations and subversion of authority.

Hence, it is but desirable that Shakespearean texts should be approached along an-Aristotelian lines so as to bring out what is of vital significance in them as in these texts, art seems to measure up to the variety of life itself. A use of critical ideas and practices as available in European literature (i.e. Dialogic Imagination, Structuralism/ Poststructuralism, Deconstruction etc.) to explain these other aspects of European drama along an-Aristotelian lines hence constitute to be part of the subject matter upon which one may draw in responding to Shakespearean texts.

To sum up, different un-Aristotelian approaches have been applied to explore a variety I Shakespearean texts as constructs which lead Dramatic Criticism into new areas. This is also in consonance with the evolution of genre later in playwrights such as Brecht and Pirandello. Judged in the canons of above principles, Shakespearean texts may be adequately understood in their anonymous, dynamic, open-ended and indeterminate forms of expression.

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