

## **CHAPTER 5**

## **CONCLUSION**

Annamma George. “Literary Subversion : A Study of Modern Adaptations of Shakespeare’s Tragedies by Edward Bond, Charles Marowitz and Tom Stoppard” Thesis. Research centre, St. Thomas College, Thrissur, University of Calicut, 2012.

## Chapter V

### Conclusion

*Human and critical history have proved right the Jonsonian eulogizing of Shakespeare as being 'not of an age but for all time' in a very perverse sense indeed. In concrete historical terms Shakespeare can never be 'our contemporary' except by the strategy of appropriation, yet the protean values which subsequent generations of critics have discovered in the texts themselves can be demonstrated to be in large part of the projections of their own externally applied values.*

(Drakakis 25)

Michael Scott echoes much the same when he says that “good plays, like those of Shakespeare, are timeless in their appropriateness and universality” (120).

There is no doubt that Shakespeare is universally admired, perhaps, even revered but there are strong differences of opinion. Charles Marowitz analyses this in a lecture delivered by him entitled ‘How to Rape Shakespeare’. He claims that there are the Conservatives who want to “preserve his integrity”, the Moderates, who are prepared to accept “a shift in emphasis” and The Radicals who eagerly welcome “new innovations – the startling reinterpretations which enable Shakespeare’s work to deliver new sensations”. But there is an even more extreme sect who believe that “there are no limits to

the transformations that can be made to the canon. Restructuring, juxtaposing, interlarding, collating one work with another”and so on (164).

Each of these sects finds in Shakespeare sufficient justification for their own stand. Just as we quote the Bible to prove our point, the Shakespearean Scripture “can be quoted to prove whatever propositions are advocated at any given time”(164). The fact remains that “the thirty-seven plays remain the living source of all these passionate divisions” (164). It is as if “Shakespeare was the author of a kind of Universal Constitution” which, “for the last four centuries, everyone has been noisily interpreting according to their own lights” (164). Marowitz goes a step further when he says:

For many of them, Shakespeare confirms their most deeply held world-view. They believe the Christian Universe was memorialized in his work and, from his sentiments, they find it easy to justify their bourgeois smugness, their conventionality and traditional morality. For them, one sometimes feels as if Shakespeare wrote only so that his aphorisms could be inscribed on their calendars. (165)

Marowitz sums up by saying that “for all these people, Shakespeare is, as he is for me, a living presence and a constant stimulus” (165).

John Russell Taylor in his book on the new dramatists of the sixties and seventies writes that “Again and again, these dramatists are attracted to such subjects such as child murder, sex murder, rape, homosexuality, transvestism,

religious mania, power mania, sadism, masochism”(206). This is the kind of impression that many people have of contemporary drama. They believe that the dominant characteristic of the drama of our times is its obsession with the seamier side of life.

Gareth Lloyd Evans makes a study of this in his book *The Language of Modern Drama*. The general permissiveness of present-day life which involves a decay of religious faith and observance, a disregard for discipline, a dismissal of authority and a great loosening of personal and general moral standards are considered by him to be some of the reasons. The drama of today is supposed to reflect all this and defined as a drama of despair by David Mercer and reported by Russell Taylor:

[Humanity] has been in the wrong bloody boat ever since Plato...  
it's too late to roll back the whole history of western civilization,  
to get back to sources and start again. (50)

It is true, however, that there is an inescapable joylessness in contemporary drama. Comedy seems to have lost its bright eyes and become black in look and gloomy in temper. Farce, too, has apparently lost its simplicity and become ominous. A good deal of contemporary drama might be described as being puritanical.

Strangely enough, comedy seems to have become meaningful in the life of modern man. It has attained a wide significance and encompasses the spirit of a new generation. The disillusioning atmosphere of today makes tragedy an

impossibility. W.D Howarth describes this new trend towards comedy as a new comic response, essentially different from the past. J.L. Styan defines the dark comedy as a kind of “drama which impels the spectator forward by stimulus to the mind and heart, then distracts him, muddles him so that time and again, he must review his own activity in watching the play (262).

Though comedy may not seem to sit well with tragedy, Shakespeare alone was able to introduce the one into the other and was master of both. He acknowledges, by this technique that “ the true action of drama is not just the presentation of events on the stage, but it is the creation, in our minds, of the links between one character and another, between one speech and another and between one scene and another. The image of the play is built up in the imagination of the spectator.

By the eighteenth century, Shakespeare had been established undisputably as a classic. We still believe, for more reasons than one, that he will last forever. At the moment, hardly anyone can speak of master playwrights other than Brecht and Ionesco. But the drama has been continually engaged in discovering new authors who have soon been dismissed. Modern writers are like mushrooms which shoot up overnight and disappear altogether. Shakespeare alone has proved his durability and stood the test of time. The contemporaneity of his plays and the universality of his characters cannot be questioned. He is for all seasons and for all times.

The record of durable dramatists inevitably shows that one element in their permanence is a very particular quality in their language - an unchanging quality. The prism of language remains the same, throughout the dramatists' career. At different times, this is seen from different angles, so that different colours emerge. The depths of penetrations of light increase as the dramatist becomes more skilful at discovering new dimensions and in relating his vision to the prism. This is essentially true of the great dramatists, notably Shakespeare. We are struck with awe at the wide range of his plays and uniqueness of his style. What each modern writer characterized in his own way - Shakespeare was all that and more. A wit, a parodist, a punster, a writer of both tragedy and comedy – he was all these rolled into one. Shakespeare's unique imaginative opulence, his always successful use of puns, his inventiveness in imagery, his awareness of the needs of the actors in communicating the language, the ease with which he combined verse and prose, point to the difference in quality and direction of vision, experience and expertise between him and the modern playwrights. Centuries ago *King Lear* concentrated on the lonely, the irrational and absurd, but it made its vision meaningful through the use of words. Today, words are regarded as fundamentally useless, the logical procedure being to do without them altogether, thus taking us back to the period when the silent film seemed to some the supreme art form. This, in effect, is a return to the really basic elements of drama and is characterized by the Theatre of the Absurd.

Shakespeare's style possessed force and vigour because it was the organic outgrowth of a particular form of speech. The strength resulting from that fact gave to his dialogue an energy which could make it appeal even in periods when familiar prose had materially altered. The modern dramatists, however, who sought to imitate him gained no such power and consequently their lines were bound to fall flat on the stage. We know to a remarkable degree what Othello, Iago, Macbeth, even Hamlet, do or do not know about themselves and their actions. We know this because they are articulate enough to tell us - and to tell themselves. Bond's, Stoppard's or for that matter any modern writer's vernacular is not the language for all periods, it is only for one place, one time. Most writers have moved from the speech of man in society to that of man within himself.

The writings of Shakespeare occupy a position of great importance and if he is the most quoted of writers it is because he has seen, experienced and portrayed life in its entirety. There is no aspect of life and no aspect of man that his dramatic genius has not captured for posterity. His themes range from the sublime to the ridiculous and if you touch life, you will invariably be writing on some aspect already dealt with by Shakespeare. His contemporaneity is discernible in many significant aspects as well. He is our contemporary not only his dramatization of still relevant aspects of human existence but also as regards technical devices.

Shakespeare co-relates high comedy and low comedy since he wrote for a mixed audience. His comedies are a blend of many dramatic forms and

devices. If drama is to be true to the diversity of people's lives, it must show, or at least suggest something of the world in which they live. Shakespeare never loses sight of the natural world, in fact, he "holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life" according to Dr Johnson in his Preface to Shakespeare (qtd. in Harrison 18). His characters are the genuine progeny of common humanity such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find. His persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated, and the whole system of life is continued in motion" (18). A character in other writers is "too often an individual" but in Shakespeare "it is commonly a species" (19). It is no wonder, therefore, that Shakespeare's supremacy has remained unchallenged these four hundred years and more.

Academic suspicion has been levelled against dramatists who have made new plays from old: Bond, Stoppard, Marowitz, Wesker and others. Alan Sinfield in *Royal Shakespeare* challenges the political conventionality of such productions and states that recreations of Shakespeare can only be partially successful. According to him

It is the cultural and therefore political authority of Shakespeare which must be challenged and especially the assumption that because human nature is always the same the plays can be presented as direct sources of wisdom. One way of doing this is to take aspects of the play and reconstitute them explicitly so that they become other values. Brecht in *Coriolanus*. Edward Bond in



*Lear* (1971), Arnold Wesker in *The Merchant* (1976), Tom Stoppard in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966) and Charles Marowitz in a series of adaptations have appropriated aspects of the plays for a different politics...Even here, it is possible that the new play will still, by its self-conscious irreverence, point back towards Shakespeare as the profound and inclusive originator in whose margins we can doodle only parasitic follies. (qtd. in Scott 121-2)

Alan Sinfield treats Shakespeare as a historical phenomenon and the attempt is to historicise him within his own time and culture. Elizabethan drama is comprehensible for the modern audience simply because it retains a contemporary value. "Shakespeare's plays have always been translated for the age that has produced and received them" (Scott 123).

Drama is not static nor is it written primarily for the study. Its nature changes constantly even as it did in Shakespeare's day. It is important to realize that Shakespeare is seen simultaneously within the context of his own time and that of the society producing or reading him. A good deal of the critical problem lies within the timelessness or not of Shakespeare's plays. Scott quotes the words of John Barton, a director at Stratford, about Shakespeare's contemporaneity:

Shakespeare is timeless in the sense that he anatomises and understands what is in men and women in any age, and what he is

to say is always true and real. It is this element that is truly contemporary and which the wise actor or director will try to bring out. (qtd in Scott 125)

However, it is wrong to imagine that all Shakespeare's plays can be relevant and meaningful to a contemporary audience all the time. Though Shakespeare's humanism dominates, and though his plays will always be accessible, our moral sense and our sense of humanist values changes from age to age and from generation to generation. Thus, it is, that a neglected area of the Shakespearean canon suddenly becomes sharply relevant. In Michael D.Bristol's words, "Every staging of a Shakespeare play results from a dialogue between the historical moment of its creation and the contemporaneity of the mise-en-scene" (13). Mikhail Bakhtin's focus is on the more dynamic and eventful long term existence of individual artistic works. He asserts:

It seems paradoxical that...great works continue to live in the distant future. In the process of their posthumous life they are enriched with new meanings, new significance: it is as though these works outgrow what they were in the epoch of their creation. (4)

Bakhtin argues that Shakespeare's works are not confined to articulating the concerns and interests of a narrowly bound historical period. They have the power to originate new meanings in successive ages. It is surprising to note how certain works exist in ages far removed from the time of their creation. Thus, the works

outgrow the meanings and intentions for which they may have been meant and achieve new significance during a continued afterlife. Bakhtin says:

Neither Shakespeare himself nor his contemporaries knew the great Shakespeare that we know today....The treasures of meaning invested by Shakespeare in his works arose and accumulated over centuries and even millennia—they were lurking within language, and not just literary language, but also in those strata of the popular language, which prior to Shakespeare, had not penetrated into literature....Shakespeare, like every artist, constructed his works not out of dead elements, not out of bricks, but out of forms already heavy with meanings. (4)

In conversation with Marowitz, Jan Kott once said, “we need to rape classics without respect but with love and passion” (Marowitz, *Roar* 14). He clarifies the point by adding that “we have to force the classical texts to give us new answers. But to obtain new answers, we have to bombard them with new questions”(14). Kurosawa’s *Ran* is a classic example of the distancing of Shakespeare’s play by radically altering its setting. The Japanese director’s treatment of *King Lear* is, at once, a reinterpretation of Shakespeare’s play and, at the same time, a bold diversion into a completely new work of art. But the greatest and most impressive and illuminating vision of Macbeth is Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood*. “Kurosawa’s greatness” in Jan Kott’s words, “lies in his capacity to reveal a historical similarity and variance: to find a Shakespearean sense of doom in the other, remote, and apparently alien historical place. This

is also true of Kozintzev's *King Lear* which is supposed to be one of the greatest Shakespearean adaptations of all time. Kott adds:

In Shakespeare's dramas, the other place - the other 'historicity' outside Elizabethan England - gives, at the same time, the plays' other universality. And what is more, the place often supplies their other contemporary meanings. (qtd in Marowitz, *Recycling* 6)

The mid twentieth century saw a rise in the number of reworkings of Shakespeare beyond Europe and North America in what was fast becoming the post-colonial world. A few versions of his plays were adapted to local circumstances and traditions. Other appropriations were those in which Shakespearean material was given a post-colonial and anti-colonial turn. Some of them are Msomi's *Umabathu* (a Zulu transposition of *Macbeth*), Murray Carlin's *Not now, Sweet Desdemona* (an adaptation of *Othello*) and Aime Cesaire's *Une Tempete* (an adaptation of *The Tempest*)

It is through the imaginative metamorphosis of a classic that its eternal truths shine through. As one generation replaces another, as new ideas compel us to examine the authenticity or permanence of the old ones, artists are forced to validate what they find in the old works. This attestation is what decides the nature of the new work and it almost always fortifies the integrity of the original.

Coleridge believed that Shakespeare was of no age nor "of any religion, or party or profession. The body and substance of his works came out of the

unfathomable depths of his oceanic mind” (Coleridge 122). It is interesting to note that Shakespeare communicated with his audience by adapting Boccaccio, Marlowe, Holinshed, Kyd, Seneca, Terence etc because his audience “received the theatre at a different frequency”(Marowitz, Recycling 58). The two determining contemporary facts are speed and change. The rhythm of the twenty first century has to be discovered and reflected in Shakespeare’s plays. Marowitz firmly believes that ‘the only way that Shakespeare can speak to us is through the voices of twentieth century actors and directors’ who are messengers of Shakespeare’s thought. Hence, every age reinvents Shakespeare and takes liberties with him to match the contemporary sensibility.

All through these years, our understanding of Shakespeare has grown from text to subtext to ur-text. It has now reached the stage of pretext where the original texts are being used as examples for new texts. Time and time again Shakespeare has been renewed, rekindled and rejuvenated by writers and directors with a view to contemporizing him. Marowitz claims that “what we most want from Shakespeare today is not the routine repetition of his words and imagery but the Shakespearean Experience.” (Marowitz 31) Ironically that can happen only from dissolving the works into a new compound. Harold Bloom in *The Western Canon* claims:

The Shakespearean exuberance or gusto is part of what breaks through linguistic and cultural barriers. You cannot confine Shakespeare to the English Renaissance any more than you can keep Falstaff within the limits of the Henry IV plays, or the

Prince of Denmark within the action of his drama. Shakespeare is to the world's literature what Hamlet is to the imaginary domain of literary character: a spirit that permeates everywhere, that cannot be confined. (52)

Thus, Shakespeare divested of his historical particularity becomes “an ‘Everyman’ whose important episodes in that life’s journey were not his experience as self but his experiences as Man. As a result the Bard becomes a ‘Culture Hero’” (Drakakis 3). His influence has been felt all through the years. It began during his own life time and spread through different cultures and continues to this day. John Gross in his essay on ‘Shakespeare’s Influence’ avers that “his plays have a mythic quality – and myths, more than any other form of fiction, lend themselves to borrowing and adaptation” (633). “What has actually happened in the case of Shakespeare is that his high repute for wisdom has triggered a myth making process ....” (Harbage104). Charles Marowitz is actually searching for just these mythic qualities when he attempts to translate this myth to the modern audience by the use of his chosen syntax. The myths embedded in Shakespeare’s works are innumerable “but the greatest myth of all is that we cannot transcend him” (Marowitz, Recycling 31).