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SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY (BA Part 1 Eng Hons)

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By the time Shakespeare appeared on the literary horizon he experienced two major upheavals in society .A new movement called renaissance had engulfed the entire Europe within its ambit .Originating from Italy in 14th century renaissance made its presence felt in England in the latter half of the 16th century during the reign period of Queen Elizabeth via France. The renaissance enhanced human potentiality and ensured the triumph of man. Various inventions and discoveries made in widely different sectors made man almost invincible and he was treated as the incarnation of God on earth. He no longer remained subservient to the wishes of fate, chance or destiny a concept which emerged at the centre stage in the preceding Middle Ages or dark ages which was marked by superstitions, dogmas and taboos .Man on the other hand became the maker of his own destiny. Miranda, the heroine of Shakespeare' last play The Tempest expresses solidarity with the changes brought out in society by renaissance calling it the brave new world. A cursory glance over the major characters in the dramas of Shakespeare makes it amply clear that they have displayed extra ordinary qualities of head and heart using their enriched mental faculty. The tragedy caused to them is out of the weaknesses latent in their own personality. They

are themselves responsible for their downfall. In this way Shakespearean tragedy is entirely different great tragedians like Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschelus .Oedipus, the hero of Sophocles' drama Oedipus Terence falls victim to the conspiracy hatched by fate .He is no longer responsible for the tragedy caused to him .He is made prey to the circumstances which rule the roost forcing him to dance on their own tune. Thus the tragedy of the heroes of classical drama is caused by fate and chance whereas that of Shakespearean heroes is caused by the lacunae latent n their own personality. Tragedy of Macbeth is the outcome of his over ambition whereas that of King Lear is caused by indecision. Othello on the other hand is made victim to suspicion and jealousy .Macbeth was aware of the fact that so long as King Duncan enjoyed at the helm of affair he could not be elevated to the position of the king of Denmark .Besides this he will be succeeded by his sons to the throne Thus he conspired with his wife Lady Macbeth to eliminate Duncan to usurp the throne. The over ambition of Macbeth finally led him to his grave King Lear made a wrong decision of dividing his kingdom between his two daughter depriving the youngest one Cordilia of her due share .This wrongful decision forced him to take recourse to in the dessert and finally collapses under adverse circumstances.

When Shakespeare made his debut as a dramatist two parallel trends of drama were rampant in society .On the one hand there were dramatists expressing solidarity with classical drama and modelled their drama on the pattern of the rules and regulations supplied by Aristotle. They practised the principles of three unities .Besides this they treated a dramatic composition either a tragedy or a comedy. Tragic elements seldom got intermingled within the frame work of a comedy a drama should be out – and – out a comedy or a tragedy. Aristotle had defined tragedy –

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“An imitation of an action which is serious, complete and of certain magnitude in language enhanced by distinct and varying beauties acted not narrated, by means of pity and terror effectuating its purgation of these emotions.” (Poetics)

Aristotle insisted that while watching the tragedy the spectator undergoes the experiences of pity and terror which helps purgate his emotions and elevates him to the high pedestal. The experiences of pity and terror can be had only in tragedy .That is why Aristotle had treated tragedy superior to comedy.

Besides classical drama a parallel form of drama called romantic drama emerged at the forefront showing stern opposition with the rules and regulations practised by the practitioners of romantic drama. They were fed up with excessive rules and regulations required for a dramatic composition and were looking for an alternative mode of drama where there was plenty of opportunity for amusement to the spectators. Classical rules and regulations too were forced to the background. Comic elements were intermingled within the framework of the tragedy actions were permitted on the stage which was strictly prohibited in the classical drama. Incidents of several years taking place at several places were incorporated within the framework of a drama. Shakespeare expressed his earnest desire in favour of popular drama or romantic drama keeping in mind the demand of the people and the stage was set for the romantic drama to set its feet in England.

Shakespeare made several innovations in the structural and thematic pattern of drama. Blank verse which was earlier practised by Marlowe was brought to the high watermark and was accepted as a popular mode of composition of drama by his successors .Blessed by the changes introduced by renaissance he made significant changes

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in the art of characterization creating immortal characters thus giving new twist and turn to drama particularly tragedy which he composed during the matured phase of his career.