

Jacobean Drama (BA Part1 Eng Hons 2019-22)

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Jacobean drama presents the deglamourized vision of renaissance in the first half of the 17th century. It is marked by the reign period of James I who was the successor of Queen Elizabeth to the throne of England. In Greek James is called Jacob from which the term Jacobean drama has been derived. The English society witnessed vital changes on socio-economic, political and religious front in the aftermath of the death of Queen Elizabeth. Peace and tranquillity in society was badly disturbed. Human relationships were receded to the lowest ebb. Nobody was thinking in terms of norms and principles. Reign of terror and anarchy loomed large which crippled the economy severely causing irreparable damage to the state exchequer.

On the political horizon the situation further worsened following the differences emerged in the relationship between the king and the parliament. Queen Elizabeth succeeded in winning the confidence of parliament using her talent and insight which his successor lacked. It led to the rift between the two power centres. James I had firm faith in the concept of divine rights of kingship and considered himself the chief arbiter of justice with nobody showing dissent with his jurisdiction. He was even not ready to make any compromise with the parliament on this issue. The relationship between the two forces receded to the lowest ebb. They locked horns which other affected the welfare program and created panic in society. The king's growing apathy and negligence to the interest of the masses enhanced their

apprehension that the welfare of the people did not enjoy top priority in his agenda.

The country also witness infighting among various religious sects. James first was an ardent admirer of Roman Catholicism. People showing strong affinity with catholic religion were elevated to the higher position in the royal hierarchy sending a wrong message among those having faith in religious sects other than Catholicism. Charges of step motherly treatment were labelled against the Monarch by the Protestants, the Anglicans and the Calvins. Catholicism emerged as the state religion and the interest of other religious sects was severely damaged forcing them to fight with one another to ensure their supremacy.

In this way a grim picture of society was painted during the Jacobean period. The policies of James first divided the society into several independent pockets who quarrelled with one another eroding the warmth and vitality of society. People no longer craved for moral values. Money reigned supreme. People were ready to make compromise in order to achieve their objective human relationships were brought to the dock. Under the background of this socio-political milieu the citadel of Jacobean drama was erected.

Ben Jonson, John Webster, Philip Messenger, Thomas Middleton, John Fletcher, John Marston, John Ford, Thomas Heywood have contributed significantly for the enrichment of Jacobean drama.

In the Jacobean period there was steep decline in drama .The playwrights attempted to fulfil the desire of the audience but failed miserably since they lacked organic unity which a supreme art must possess .After Shakespeare there was no other dramatist who could fill his space which marked the decline of drama. Their Plot construction shows a complete want of coherence. There are effective

episodes but structural harmony or organization is badly wanting in their drama. Except for Ben Jonson's *Alchemist* and *Volpone* and Webster's *The White Devil* not a single drama achieved the height of that of Shakespeare. The Shakespearean balance between romance and realism was poorly replaced by narrow social activities or by romantic excesses. The Puritan opposition to the drama is also responsible for the decline of Jacobean drama. They regarded drama as the devil's work which must be avoided.

Ben Jonson was the most prominent figure of English drama after Shakespeare. Unlike Shakespeare he took keen interest in classical form of dramas. He was a great scholar traces of which can be noticed in his dramas. The basic difference between Jonson and Shakespeare was that while the former wrote drama to display his scholarship the later used it as a medium to amuse people. Jonson has given a photographic presentation of Jacobean society satirizing their craving or lust for power forcing norms and values to the background. People's growing desire for material advancement has been successfully cultivated in his dramas *The Alchemist* and *Volpone* or *Fox*. He was also the exponent of comedy of humors of which he was the single practitioner. Webster was the other significant dramatist who contributed significantly to the repertory of Jacobean drama. His drama *The White Devil* is the fine example of the deterioration or moral bankruptcy set in Jacobean society. Besides them Beaumont and Fletcher too have enriched Jacobean drama making significant contributions.