

The Alchemist as a Satire

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The Alchemist reflects the deglamourized vision of renaissance which characterized the Jacobean society. The Jacobean society was marked by avarice, greed and deception. Moral values were receded to the lowest ebb. The rift between the monarchy and the parliament had eroded the warmth and vitality of society which crippled the economy severely. Panic gripped the society. People resorted to immoral ways to deceive others to make money. The glamour of Elizabethan period was replaced by the reign of terror, anarchy and chaos. Human relationships ran into rough weather. In another leading Jacobean dramatist Webster's drama The White Devil, The King sprinkles poison on his portrait to eliminate the queen who kisses his portrait before retiring to bed to win the love of Vitoria.

In the alchemist, Johnson satirises the follies, vanities and vices of mankind. People of all social classes are subject to Johnson's Satirical wit. He mocks human weakness and gullibility with the characters like Subtle, Doll Common and Face conspiring together to dupe people by spreading a rumour among the masses of turning baser metals into gold using the ancient technology of alchemy taking advantage of people's desire to become millionaire overnight. They procure huge amount of money by falsely pretending themselves to be alchemists. The city of London is the target of Johnson's Satire which he proclaims in the prologue of the drama "Our scene is London, 'cause we would make known/ No country's mirth is better than our own/ No clime breeds better matter for your whore..."

The Alchemist is tightly structured, based around a simple dramatic concept. All the characters in the play project a different kind of

image. Johnson has satirises man's insatiable lust for riches through his successive dramas. In Bartholomew Fair Johnson embroils the visitors to the fair in its myriad temptations, exposing the materialistic impulses beneath the apparent godliness of Jacobean puritans. His other drama Volpone dramatises the corrupting nature of greed in an exuberant satire set in contemporary Venice.

Ben Jonson has neatly constructed the plot of the drama The Alchemist and is appeared to have overpowered other dramatists, even Shakespeare in structural organisation and elevated classical drama to a new height. The basic difference between Shakespeare and Jonson is that while the former wrote drama to amuse people, the later took drama as a platform to display his scholarship.

Jonson mocks many social classes of 17th century London such as the Puritans whose greed of money is even more excessive. Ann Barton in her book Ben Jonson, Dramatist has presented the real picture of society when saying, "people of all classes and temperaments make their way to Subtle's consulting rooms because they think that somehow he can make their lives better, because they have become dissatisfied with what they are. She further added that contrary to Shakespearean characters, those of Jonson " yearn to be changed" since they "are not content with the paltry dimensions of their habitual lives and selves. They are totally led by their own desire which is portrayed by Jonson as ugly material desire and greed for money and gold that not only guides them towards Subtle but also creates Subtle. According to Lacan we want to be objects of the other's desire and our identities are shaped by the others desire just as the Alchemist's identity is created out of the other character's desires. As long as there are dupes like Dapper, Mammon, Druggier with their illusory hunger of turning baser metals into gold individuals like Subtle are created. Even their nomenclature is highly suggestive which speaks in volume of their mood and temperament.