

## **B. A. English (Honours) Part-II**

### **Paper-III**

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### **Shakespearean Tragedy: A Brief Introduction**

When it comes to evaluate the concept of Shakespearean tragedy it is very usual that his four recognized greatest tragedies—*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*—come to our mind and the whole concept revolves mostly around these tragedies. Shakespearean tragedy is ‘essentially a tale of suffering, calamity, conducting the death’ of a hero. Whereas Aristotle regards plot as the soul of tragedy, Shakespeare bestows the same regard to the character, that is character is destiny. It may be one of the reasons that his tragedies are also called ‘tragedies of character’.

A. C. Bradley says that Shakespearean tragedy is pre-eminently the story of persons of ‘high degree’, for example, Hamlet is the prince of Denmark, Lear is King of Britain, Macbeth and Othello are distinguished soldiers. These exalted personages suffer greatly and their suffering and calamity is exceptional. The hero in Shakespearean tragedy is a common human being with many noble qualities but one overwhelming weakness that is called ‘tragic flaw’ or in Aristotelian words ‘*hamartia*’ which leads him to doom; for example, ‘vaulting ambition’ in Macbeth, indecisiveness in Hamlet, flattery in King Lear, and suspicion and jealousy in Othello. It is in this sense that ‘character is destiny’ is true dictum for Shakespearean tragedy.

Most Shakespearean tragedies depart from Aristotle’s paradigm by introducing humorous characters, incidents, or scenes called ‘comic relief’, which were in various ways and degrees

made relevant to the tragic plot. Whereas classical dramatists thought it to be an offence against dramatic art to combine serious and comic elements in a single play, Shakespeare does not subscribe to this concept and he frequently introduces comic episodes and jests in most of his famous tragedies with a view to giving a true picture of life which is seldom all serious or all gay at a time. As for Shakespeare anything that yielded a true picture of human life is legitimate. Moreover, this comic relief is also meant to intensify the tragic ambiance of the play.

Shakespeare in his tragedies, occasionally and for reasons, represents abnormal conditions of mind as insanity, hallucination, somnambulism etc. But these conditions are never introduced as the origin of the deeds of any dramatic movement. For example, the sleep-walking scene of Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* has hardly any influence on the events that follow it. The role of supernatural elements like ghosts or witches is very crucial in Shakespearean tragedies as they contribute to the action and are often indispensable part of it. For example, the witches in *Macbeth* and the ghost in *Hamlet* have an objective existence as they promote the inherent tragic flaw of the hero, which becomes the cause of his ultimate suffering. Thus Shakespearean tragedy is a probing of some basic human psychology and in this process a lot of people get killed which is called 'tragic waste'. There is no 'poetic justice' with this bunch of people but with the hero it is beautifully done.

#### **Sources:-**

*Macbeth* edited by W. Turner

A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*

B. Prasad's *A Background to the Study of English Literature*