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HAMLET, STYLISTIC ANALYSIS AND TEACHING

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I

Before we proceed to consider drama and stylistics, we must take into account what kind of drama we are talking about. Stylistics tries to analyze drama first as a verbal art with reference to the effect it produces or is supposed to produce. It is not merely a linguistic classification of items found in verbal composition. Second it also analyzes the performance aspects of it – especially its non-verbal semiotic aspects. The performance could be a single event or a mental image created by similar occurrences or a concept of potentiality of a script with regard to its staging. These three are quite distinct and we are bringing them under a single umbrella for convenience for the time-being.

If one is analyzing drama where the spectators/ readers are native speakers of the language used in the play, the effect is of a kind and the analysis would also be of a kind. In such a situation the cultural signs, the verbal connotations used in a drama have a better matching with those known to the spectators or readers. The stylistic analysis of a Marathi drama for spectators in Pune, or that of a Kannada drama for spectators in Bangalore is of different kind than that of a Sanskrit drama for any spectators now in the world, or a Persian drama for Aligarh spectators. The stylistic analysis of an English drama for Indian spectators or readers, irrespective of the fluency the Indians may have in English, and especially in the academic field where it becomes a subject of study for the Indian students, has to be different from both these kinds.

We should also notice the important aspects of the Indian context for English drama. There are now Indian writers of English plays that are presented before the Indian audience. This development is admirable though it is restricted to a very limited number of people. The English drama produced and performed by the American or British companies for Indian audience is also a rarity. And in such performances no changes and attempts are made either in the script or in the performance for the sake of

the audience. The main influence of the English drama of the American or British dramatists is restricted to the Indian academic circles.

The British when they ruled India, introduced a new system of education with new intentions. Our acquaintance with English literature was mainly through this educational system. Shakespeare for example was a favourite author in this system. The state did not change much after independence. In modern times most people debunk it as hangover of colonialism. In the 1960s teaching of English language rather than English literature became the main concern in language education. The issue of priority caused a rift between teachers of language and teachers of literature. The fact that the two focus on two different but related functions was perhaps forgotten. The emphasis on contemporary English led to the emphasis on contemporary literature as well. The purpose was to expose the students to modern usage. It is noteworthy that before 1960's Shakespeare was introduced to undergraduates; after 1960's his plays became only a part of syllabus of English literature as a special subject and in some universities even that place was denied to him. In the first part of the twentieth century one can find many translations of Shakespeare's plays in major Indian languages though in the second half of the century, teaching of English literature itself acquired diminishing utility. When we consider drama and stylistics with reference to Shakespeare—especially his Hamlet – we must take into account this state of affairs of teaching English literature.

II

Stylistics considers a literary work as a verbal unit complete in itself. Structural linguists consider language as a system; structural approach considers a work of art as a system in itself. The basic principles of language analysis are considered to be good for literary analysis as well. A literary work is a system of signs the only difference between language and literature is that literary signs have a wider and unusual signification. In Sklovsky's words a work of art could be analyzed in terms of the artistic devices it uses. The narration of facts ('Fabula') does not make literature. How this fibula is manipulated is important. This manipulation creates 'suzhet'. Poeticity resides in this suzhet', in the presentation.

Roman Jakobson argues that the dominance of the poetic function over other functions such as referential function, conative function etc. creates poeticity or literariness. And the poetic function is created when the focus is on the message rather than the speaker, listener or the world outside. In Jakobson one finds a synthesis of Russian formalism and Saussurean structuralism. Jakobson's view that poeticity is created when the principle of equivalence is projected from the axis of association onto the axis of combination explains the basic nature of 'what makes something poetic'.

The Prague school emphasized the notion of deautomatization in considering literature. The process of deautomatization is achieved by deviation from the norm as a device. The discussion of deviation in the Prague school linguistics reminds one who is familiar with the ancient Indian Poetics, of Kuntaka's notion of 'Vakrokti'. 'Deviation creates markedness' is an important concept in Prague school linguistics.

In discourse analysis linguists discuss the strategies that speakers adopt for successful communication or for discontinuation of a discourse or for withdrawing oneself from the discourse. Play dialogue resembles natural conversation and the method of discourse analysis could be used to reveal its nature, its role in the dramatic presentation.

For Peirce, language is a system of legisigns. In considering literature – especially drama – his classification of signs in relation to these objects seems to be useful. An iconic sign resembles its object. An indexical sign is related to its object through dynamic action. A symbol is related to its object through a rule, a law.

For Roland Barthes language is a first order signifying system. It is denotative. Literature is a second order signifying system. It is connotative. Gerard Genette introduces some useful concepts in analyzing narration in literature. He makes a distinction between the chronological order of events and the narrative order of events. With regard to duration he makes a distinction between the time taken by the actual event and the time taken for the narrating the event. With regard to frequency there is a difference between the number of times an event happens in the world – real or created by the text – and the number of times it is actually narrated or reported. For Genette, the narrator may not be the author : but the narrator is always present. Finally he talks about focalization – the perspective one finds in a narrative.

These are some of the useful concepts from structuralism, post structuralism and semiotics that we would use in considering drama – the script and the performance.

III

The structure of the plot has certain characteristics. First, it has a lot of action. Hamlet, the Ghost Horatio move on one plane. Claudius, Polonius, Gertrude, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern move on a second plane. Polonius, Laertes, Ophelia form the third plane. And on the external but covering plane there are the King of Norway, Fortinbras, the King of England, and the King of Poland. The players on these planes are linked through common individuals. For example the outer plane is connected to the three inner planes through Claudius and Hamlet. The ghost Horatio, Hamlet hold the underlying truth of a treacherous murder. This plane and the plane of Claudius's royal activities are linked through Hamlet. Again, the plane of Polonius and his family is linked to Claudius's plane through Hamlet. These four

planes have independent action with different motivations but they are interconnected through Hamlet. The character of Hamlet becomes the central point at which the activities of the four planes meet.

As T.S. Eliot argues, making Hamlet a play of one central character is misleading. Coleridge and Goethe made that mistake. Coleridge sees in Hamlet a Coleridge. Eliot thanks God that Walter Pater did not write Hamlet. Influenced by this "reading one's own dream into a character" style of analysis in the 18th and 19th century modern critics such as Bradley, Granville Baker, and Dower Wilson also gave importance to the explanation of Hamlet's character rather than to the play as a work of art. Samuel Johnson seems to be taking this view when he says that Shakespeare has no heroes; his scenes are occupied only by men who act and speak. What matters is the action, the event, not the characters isolated from the scene.

Goethe liked Hamlet and he liked Kalidas's 'Shakuntalam' too. The two plays are quite different in structure. In Shakuntalam, there is hardly any action; it is full of description. Hamlet on the other hand has a lot of action. There are parallel actions on four distinct planes influencing each other simply because they occur in the same environment and because they have some common participants.

Fortinbras initially wants to take revenge on his father's death; he was killed by Hamlet's father. Fortinbras intends to attack Denmark. But Claudius buys peace with his Uncle- the King of Norway. Fortinbras is sent to conquer some territory from Poland. He succeeds in defeating Poland and is backed by England. Fortinbras's initial purpose is set aside but he succeeds in whatever actions he is forced to take.

Hamlet had come to Denmark as his father dies suddenly. He is shocked to see his mother hastily marrying Claudius. The Ghost tells him about the murder. Hamlet wants to take revenge. He is furious with Claudius and is depressed by Gertrude's haste. He pretends madness to ascertain the truth of his father's murder though that pretence does not really lead him anywhere except the deaths of Ophelia, Polonius and his classmates. He kills Claudius without an well-planned action – the deaths of Claudius, Laertes, Gertrude and Hamlet himself are accidental. Hamlet's failure in taking revenge ultimately leads to his own death though he kills Claudius ultimately in a hasty action. This series of acts stand in contrast to the series of acts committed by Fortinbras. Fortinbras's actions are well-directed though his original motive is lost. Hamlet's actions are directionless though his original motive is fulfilled. Fortinbras lives and Hamlet dies.

Claudius has succeeded in eliminating his brother. In marrying his wife, in becoming the king. His only left out work is to make Hamlet reconciled to the new situation. He uses Gertrude and Ophelia and to some

extent Hamlet's classmates to persuade Hamlet to accept him as king and father. He uses Polonius and then Laertes to remove Hamlet from his path in case Hamlet is not persuaded. His actions lead him to failure on both the fronts and he falls a prey to his own trap. The contrast in Claudius's acts and Hamlet's acts is different in degree than the contrast in Hamlet's acts and the acts of Fortinbras's.

The difference lies in the emotions they produce. The events in Hamlet happen – they appear to be natural, true to life. But they are not 'deigned' by the dramatist. They are so unplanned that even the deaths in Hamlet appear to be casual. But Hamlet is a work of art because Shakespeare makes these events poetic. He makes Hamlet's death more poetical and more lifelike. Hamlet's 'self-dramatization' – a device that Shakespeare uses in all his plays – becomes effective because the drama as a whole creates an illusion of a view of life. The emotions that are produced in scenes such as the closet scene or the grave-digger's scene are so intense that they gain the quality of thought. There is 'thought' in literature only in the form of emotional equivalence. To say that Shakespeare uses Hamlet to express stoics or to express his philosophy is to forget the work of art that he created.

IV

Repetition and parallelism are devices that Shakespeare uses frequently in Hamlet. We will examine only a sample – the soliloquy in Act I scene ii, Act III, scene I, Act III scene iv, Act V scene I and scene ii – for the sake of convenience. The soliloquy in Act I scene ii constantly harps on the haste in Gertrude's marriage to Claudius:

But two months dead : nay, not so much, not two

And yet within a month,

Let me not think on't : Frailty thy name is woman!

A little month;.....

Within a month,

Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears

Had left the flushing in her galled eyes

She married. O! most wicked speed.....

This repetition underlines the cause of Hamlet's agony and creates curiosity in the mind of the spectator.

In Act III scene I, the same device is used in Hamlet's speech to Ophelia and it shows Hamlet's disbelief in love, in a woman's chastity. It also serves the purpose of driving Ophelia to a dejected mood:

Get thee to a nunnery; why wouldst thou

Be a breeder of sinners?.....

We are arrant knaves, all; believe

None of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery...

Get thee to a

Nunnery, go; farewell. Or if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool; for wise men know well enough what a monstrous you make them. To a nunnery, go; and quickly too. Farewell.

Go to, I'll no more on't; it hath made me mad. I say, we will have no more marriages; those that are married already, all but one shall live; the rest shall keep as they are. To a nunnery go.

In Act III scene iv the effect of Hamlet's criticism of the Queen is shown by the same device:

O Hamlet! Speak no more,

.....

O! Speak to me no more,

These words like daggers enter in mine ears;

No more, sweet Hamlet!

No more!

In Act V scene i the repetition is in the form of an object on the stage – the skulls the grave-diggers dig up. The entire humour that points out the futility of human endeavor, of human pride, comes out through this repetition. In the last scene there is repetition of the act of death --- the death of the queen, that of the king, that of Laertes and finally the death of Hamlet. This gives the play the structure of a melodrama.

Parallelism is a device in which two items are juxtaposed so that their similarity or dissimilarity becomes marked. In the closet scene (Act III scene iv) we have a good example of it at the verbal level:

Queen : Hamlet; thou hast thy father much offended

Hamlet: Mother, you have my father much offended

Queen : Come, come you answer with an idle tongue

Hamlet: Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue

.....

Queen : O! what a rash bloody deed is this!

(= king Polonius)

Hamlet : A bloody deed! Almost as bad, good mother,

As kill a king and marry with his brother

.....

Hamlet : Leave wringing of your hands : peace! Sit you down.

And let me wring your heart....

.....

Queen : What have I done.....

Hamlet : Such an act

That blurs the grave and blush of modesty,

.....

O! such a deed

As from the body of contraction plucks -----

The very soul.....

.....

Hamlet : Look here, upon this picture, and on this

.....

This was your husband : look you now, what follows

Here is your husband; like a mildew'd ear

.....

this parallelism with one exception, juxtaposes contrasting elements. Parallelism is the result of what Jakobson calls the projection of the principle of equivalence onto the axis of combination as the parallel expressions make a sequence. But Shakespeare has other ways of this projection too:

Hamlet : What devil wasn't

That thus hath cozen'd you at hoodman-blind?

Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,

Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all,

Or but a sickly part of one true sense

Could not so mope

the arrangement of scenes also there is parallelism. Dr. Johnson points out that Shakespeare unites the power of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one character but in one composition. Almost all his

plays are divided between serious and ludicrous character. He produces seriousness and sorrow, and sometimes levity and laughter. Though this parallelism of contrasting feelings was against the prescribed norms in the Greek tradition of drama, Shakespeare violated them and the result is presentation of opposite feelings side by side. In the grave-digger's scene (Act V scene i) the theme is death and the treatment is light and humorous. In the scene that follows (Act V scene ii) the theme is the final act – that of fulfilling the desire to take revenge. And in this, three characters are involved. Laertes wants to take revenge of his father's death. The king is revengeful because Hamlet is the obstacle in his otherwise smooth life. Hamlet still wants to take revenge but the duel is not planned by him, nor is he aware of the situation. The duel is apparently planned as a recognized way of establishing one's honour. The external show therefore has a sportive spirit but the treatment develops in a serious manner; it leads to four deaths. There may not be any design in this, consciously executed; but the dramatist's inclination towards mixing of opposite feelings could be the underlying motive of the composition.

It is difficult to discuss Shakespeare's stylistic deviations in language as we do not have any norms of Elizabethan English. His plot structure, his handling of time, action and place in his plays have been criticized by critics who consider Aristotle's poetics as norm. But Shakespearean drama itself became a norm in later literary compositions.

A drama is basically a performing act. The performance is not music or singing as in the epic poetry or ballads which contain narration at the verbal level. The drama presents events in which the verbal component is one of the natural components. Normally a good drama, therefore has a minimum of narration. Shakespeare keeps the narration the minimum level. In the eighteen scenes in the five acts of Hamlet there are only nine instances of narration. In the first Act there is a short report of Fortinbras's attacking Denmark and of Claudius's peace-initiative. In the second act Ophelia's narration of Hamlet's distracted mood and the news that the king of Norway restrained Fortinbras, take a very short space as compared to that given to Hamlet's interactions with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In the third act that contains four scenes there is a short confession by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that they failed to find the cause of Hamlet's 'crafty madness'. In the fourth Act the Queen tells the king how Polonius was killed – an event which is already enacted on the stage in the previous act. In addition there is Hamlet's narration of his ship being attacked by pirates and the Queen's report on Ophelia's death. The event of Ophelia's death in her depressed mood does not need presentation as in Act IV scene v. Shakespeare presents Ophelia in a depressed state. In the final act that is full of events, there is only one small narration by Hamlet on how he got rid of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In fact a major part of these narrations has a reference to political activities that occur far away from Denmark and that are not of prime importance for the structure of the plot. In spite of the fact that critics have concentrated on the character of Hamlet and especially his soliloquies that are abundant, the play remains a play full of action.

V

The drama as a whole is an iconic sign. What it presents is something that has happened or is assumed to have happened. The actors in their costumes resemble the roles; they resemble the individuals in the real world or the created world. The audience conceptually participate in witnessing the actions on the stage but they normally keep themselves aloof as they know that the presentation is iconic. In medieval times people used to beat the actor who played Judas : in India actors who play Rama or Krishna or actresses who play Sita or Lakshmi are respected, even worshipped outside. This is the result of mistaking the icon for its object. A good drama always tries to blur the distinction between drama as an iconic sign and its object. It must be noted that for Peirce, an iconic sign resembles its objects or the quality or character that resembles belongs to the sign – it may not belong to the object. This second qualification is important for drama. The drama as a whole may have impact that differs from person to person. And the script could be presented differently by different directors. One has to remember, for example the Hamlet presented by British directors. The Russian presentation of Hamlet that can be seen in a movie is significantly different from the normal British presentation of Hamlet. What critics call, 'the plurality of meaning' in this respect is the resemblance of the icon (here the drama) and its object(here the conceived world) depending on the quality of the sign rather than that of the object. The object in this case is not something that is already given; but something which is conceptually created.

In the absence of a given performance I would not be possible for us to analyze the semiotic system used in it but with the help of the script we can broadly see the semiotic process underlying the sequence of scenes.

In the first act the appearance of the ghost is a symbol as the relation between the sign and its object – the dead man's spirit - is conventional. The ghost's narration of the murder is an iconic sign. Hamlet's decision to feign madness and his bearing as a mad person is an indexical sign. It indicates one thing to Polonius, another to Claudius and yet another to the audience.

In the second act Hamlet's appearance to and behaviour with Polonius is an iconic sign as it indicates mental imbalance caused by love. In the third act, Hamlet's interaction with Ophelia is an indexical sign. It does not indicate to Claudius a simple dejection caused by love, but he doubts whether it is madness at all. He suspects something deep. The dumb-show, a play within the play, is an iconic sign as it resembles the murder of the king. The scene in which Claudius prays is an indexical sign indicating the object to Hamlet in one way and to Claudius himself and the audience in another way. The re-appearance of the ghost in the closet scene is not a symbol; it is an indexical sign as it points at restraint. The closet scene is also indexical as it shows the Queen's non-connivance in the gruesome murder.

In Act four the appearance of Fortinbras and his army marching towards Poland is an indexical sign that has patriotism, quick decision-making and action as the object. The sign is related through its dynamic action to the object. In the grave-digger's scene in the final act, the indexical signs – skulls, graves – and its object – death, futility of life – exist now as well as in the past. The four deaths on stage in the final act are also indexical signs with presuppositions and information about 'death' as an object.

What does this indicate? The scenes are more indexical. The performers are iconic. And if we analyze a particular performance, we may find that the costumes, the sets (though they could be indexical as well), and the movement of the actors could be symbolic. The light-effects could be indexical and the soundtrack could be iconic. Drama would be the best object for Peircean semiotic analysis. The links among the different signs at different levels – script, acting, sound etc. – would reveal the artistic pattern underlying a drama.

VI

Let us now consider this analysis in relation to the teaching of English in India.

We have already noticed that English for a majority of Indian students, is a foreign language. Their competence in English also is limited. In such a situation the analysis of the verbal component of drama has a particular role. One cannot expect the students to make the analysis. But one could do it in such a way that their interest in the language and drama is encouraged. The artistic devices that we discussed and the devices such as foregrounding, contrast, metaphor, rhetorical dialogue and conversational dialogue, could be brought to the notice of the students or one can ask the students to search for them. The effect of these devices could be discussed with students' active participation; it need not be imposed on them. Different responses from the students would be revealing for the teacher. Unless the response is based on the lack of linguistic comprehension, they are to be appreciated. For arriving at a particular characteristic of the play, the use of inductive method in the classroom teaching is more beneficial than that of the deductive method.

In semiotic analysis, identifying the sign is an important process. We have discussed scenes as signs. But there are other elements in a drama that also function as signs. Apart from the actual performance which is full of visual and aural signs, there are different types of signs even in the verbal component of a drama. Some of the laws underlying a symbol or some of the objects underlying the icons and indexicals are culture-bound. That is they are closely associated with the background knowledge of a culture. The significance of 'Go to a nunnery', for example, has a cultural background. The object includes the concept of purity, renunciation and control over passion. Such signs are not likely to be understood by Indian students on their own unless they are well exposed to Christianity. In such cases the teacher's role is important. The teacher can lead them to that knowledge through comparison with Indian culture or

through parallels from literature which the students are acquainted with. Just as in teaching of language, grammar is the guiding principle for the teacher to select and arrange the linguistic items to be presented in the class, knowledge of the different stylistic approaches and devices are to be at the back when the teacher is presenting a drama.

Cultural differences are bound to occur while teaching of English literature in the Indian context. But they need not be condemned as obstacles. There are two goals : one, to make the students see the other culture in a proper perspective and two : without obliterating his/her cultural background, to allow him/her to respond on his/her own to a different cultural product – that is, drama.

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