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Relevance of Shakespeare in the 21st Century

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Abstract : Ben Jonson was correct when he said 'he (Shakespeare) was not of an age, but for all time. Nature herself was proud of his design.' Shakespeare's enduring popularity for several reasons like illumination of the human experience in simple yet profoundly eloquent verse; great stories transcending time and culture; unequal character and their various interpretations; literally coined phrases like 'to be or not to be' is a testimony to his relevance in the 21st Century. Apart from this he has made contributions not only to the English language but the way in which people think and behave. In his works Shakespeare constantly generalizes, constantly moves from particulars to the general. Thus the particular story of a play becomes a part of the general story of mankind and his men and women a part of the panorama of humanity which continues 'unbroken from generation to generation.' He deals with powerful elemental passions, with joys and sorrows common to all humanity, so that each one of us shares vicariously in the fate of his characters. As human nature, in its essentials, is the same in all ages and times, his works have relevance even today. His plays continue to be studied, performed and reinterpreted in diverse cultural and political context throughout the world even in the 21st Century not because Shakespeare is famous but because his characters feel very vivid and alive to viewers. While they may be kings, queens and princes, they struggle with the same issue that many playgoers do, and characterizations on the stage which people can associate with.

Relevance of Shakespeare in the 21st Century

Paying the tribute to William Shakespeare Carlyle said, "Shakespeare was the grandest thing we have yet done... Indian empire will go, at any rate, someday, but this Shakespeare does not go, he lasts for ever with us." ¹ Shakespeare's relevancy in the 21st century can be realized by paying attention to his great stories which transcend time and culture. The stories in his plays are classics in English literature for their evocative language and dramatic structure. Studying and appreciating the stories of his plays the students develop a certain mental discipline in analyzing the language. They talk about the abstract theme of universal cultural value.

The American author Marchette Chute in the introduction of her book *Stories from Shakespeare* write: "William Shakespeare was the most remarkable storyteller that the world has ever known. Homer told of adventure and men at war, Sophocles and Tolstoy told of tragedies and of people in trouble. Terence and Mark Twain told comic stories, Dickens told melodramatic ones, Plutarch told histories and Hans Christian Anderson told fairy tales. But Shakespeare told every kind of story—comedy, tragedy history, melodrama, adventure, love stories and fairy tales—and each of them so well that they have become immortal. In all the worlds of story telling his is the greatest name." It is the first enduring appeal and relevancy of Shakespeare's plays and poems that have kept generation after generation visiting his hometown as a pilgrimage to a literary shrine. The seemingly inexhaustible capacity of his plays to give, in all historical periods, delight, consolation and insight into so many human dealings, has ensured that the name of Stratford remains synonymous with Shakespeare. Shakespeare is not a person but continent rich

with wondrous landscape unfolding scenes and situations vast in their range, 1200 characters of different shades and hues, glorious and ludicrous, usual and visuals. Sri Aurobindo pays his unique tribute when from a certain point of view, he brackets him with Valmiki, Vyasa and

Homer and calls him elsewhere 'a seer of life'. He says further that Shakespeare's way indeed is not so much the poet himself thinking about life, as life thinking itself out in him through many mouths in many moods and moments...'²

In the 21st century Shakespeare concept with the man almost forgotten amidst the terminology that surrounds the criticism, tourism, adaptation and utilization of his plays. The representation of Shakespeare in new media form is now a well established trend providing alternative strands, identities and location of Shakespeare and the growth is as widespread and fast as technology, performance, social networking and cinema will allow. The quality of Shakespeare source material, his handling of the different texture and dimensions of the verse and meter and the work still communicate across the centuries and across the culture. As new way of representation are developed, new material does not need to always welcome but likewise excellent composition and invention take place around the framework that Shakespeare offers.

The second reason for the relevance of Shakespeare in 21st century is illumination of the human experience. His insight in human nature and sensitive imagination ranging over all time and place are more transcendental than any other versatile poet. He has an incredible unmatched prospect on human psychology with abstract theme that exhibit the harsh truth of the beautifully twisted universe rounded with such characters. We may call *Othello* a drama of deception or self deception; *Macbeth*, a drama of ambition; *King Lear*, a drama of social pride and *Antony and Cleopatra*, a drama of unlawful love. This abstract notion of human life is given a tangible and concrete shape. The genius of Shakespeare is so variegated versatile and relevant that any one theory becomes limited in unfolding its meaning. Packed with layers and layers of meaning, capturing all nuances of human psychology, repertoire of plethora of emotions, the plays of Shakespeare defy anyone interpretation as inadequate.

The fair and equitable representation of women in Shakespeare's comedy has relevance in twenty first century. Though the feminist critics of Shakespeare have unnecessarily and unjustifiably divided themselves into two ideological groups – one emphasizing that he had an obsession with male themes and male characters while the other highlighting in his plays the portrayal of emancipated female characters are just as much strong, forceful, outspoken and modern as his male characters, sometimes submitting to male dominance but other times outwitting men. Shakespeare evinces an insight not only in the women of seventeenth century England and Europe but in the timeless and universal women.

Shakespeare is most definitely relevant today for he has introduced thousands of words and phrases to English language, along with new concepts and grammatical structures. While Shakespeare's language sometimes seems antiquated to modern eyes it was quite daring and forward thinking for the time, and Shakespeare literally coined words to describe previously

unimaginable situation and events, thereby enriching the English language immensely. The 'gems of practical wisdom and philosophical truth such as 'All is well that ends well', 'To be or not to be. That is question' (*Hamlet*) 'All the world's a stage/ men and women are merely players' (*As you Like it*), 'Cowards die many times before their death' (*Julius Caesar*), 'Life is a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing' (*Macbeth*), 'More sinned than sinning' (*The Merchant of Venice*) are as relevant today as they were penned. Shakespeare's relevance lies not only for countless passages of poetic beauty – passages which generation after generation have love but also for moral truth and practical guidance in day to day affairs of life. His exploration of poetic form and grammar also expanded the scope of English laying the ground work for other authors who worked after him. Shakespeare's works also transcends traditional boundaries. His tragedies, for examples, include a great deal of comic relief in a marked departure from the traditional presentation of tragedies. Likewise his comedies have included deeply tragic and very human moment while the mixture genre is widely acceptable and sometimes even expected today.

Shakespeare's plays are of paramount relevance in the 21st century on account of his art of characterization. Shakespeare's characters are as varied as life itself. In sheer prodigality of output Shakespeare is unrivalled in literature. From the king to the clown, from the lunatic and the demi-devil to the saint and seer, from the lover to the misanthrope, all are revealed with the hand of a master. He is entirely objective and impartial and paints the good and the evil, the wicked and the viruluous with same loving care. His characters are drawn from different walks of life; belong to both the sexes and to all age groups. They are veritable living men and women. They have nothing ungenue about them; they are not designed from any work of art; they are not designed even from nature; they are nature itself. Shakespeare knew that in life Good and Evil do not exist in watertight compartments, but invariably mingle together in human nature. That is why he has no unredeemed villains and no monsters. Iago, the worst of them, goes motive haunting and recognises good in others, and even the savage Caliban gets a redeeming touch of humanity. His characters, whether good or bad, whether moving among the realities of history or in a world of romance, of his own creation, have an unflinching universality which always keeps them within the orbit of our sympathy. Shylock for example comes to life in his hands, acquires a depth and significance wholly incongruous in the story which Shakespeare accepted. He no longer remains the monster needed by

the medieval story but becomes a pathetic towering personality which reduces Antonio and Bassanio to pale shadow and Portia seems to be little better than a clever trickster.

Shakespeare's objectivity and impartiality in his characterization seems to be relevant for the literary person of the 21st century. Shakespeare's objective and impartial approach shows that

the dramatist obliterates his personality so entirely and keeps himself so much in the background that everything, every word, every action appears to come not from him, but from his creations. Every word is suited to the character, and character to the word. Romeo's expression of passion just before he swallows the poison, the jealousy of Othello, the love of Ferdinand and Miranda etc. are all entirely in character. This perfect adjustment results from the poet's mastery over the inmost springs and principles of human action. The subtle souled psychologist that he was, he had a quick and sure insight into the internal workings of human mind. He could enter inside a character and portray him from within his consciousness. Shakespeare portrays Edmund, Edgar, Iago and Desdemona with the same even handedness. It is as if he under a solemn oath to report the truth, the whole truth, and not nothing but the truth.

Thus 'Shakespeare has come down to us, as an English man of letters, he has been separated from his fellows, and recognized for what he is: Perhaps the greatest poet of all times, one who has said it better; whose works are the study and admiration of divines and philosophers, of soldiers and statesmen, so that his continued vogue upon the stage, is the smallest part of his immortality; who has touched many spirits finely to fine issues, and has been for delight and understanding of wisdom and consolation.'³ Even today people actually enjoy seeing Shakespeare's plays in their original state with the period costume and scenery. As the entertainment in the extraordinary language, bold and memorable characters unforgettable image are the requirement of the people living in 21st century also Shakespeare's plays are relevant and may be even more relevant than they ever were.

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