

## **Jagannath Chakravorty : A Shakespearean Critic**

### ***The Idea of Revenge in Shakespeare***

(Calcutta : Jadavpur University), 1969 pp. xvi + 303.

### ***King Lear : Shakespeare's Existentialist Hero***

(The Shakespeare Society of Eastern India), 1990. pp. vi + 124.

Among the Indian scholars of Shakespeare, Prof. Jagannath Chakravorty has a distinctive place of his own. With rare perceptiveness and profound scholarship, he has written two original studies of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. The first book which formed his doctoral dissertation, sets out to study the theme or idea of revenge in the plays of Shakespeare with special reference to *Hamlet*. The study purports to show that Shakespeare's attitude to 'revenge' is unconventional and through an analysis of different kinds of Shakespearean plays, Chakravorty establishes that Shakespeare suggests an alternative to the traditional concept of blood-revenge which is consistent with his new 'ethical mode' influenced by the Christian disapproval of private revenge. In fact, Shakespeare's progress in his dramatic career is marked by a transformation of the crude motif of revenge into profoundly ethical and humane theme of forgiveness that finds its culminating expression in *The Tempest*. In the opening chapter of his book, Chakravorty discusses *Gorboduc* and *The Spanish Tragedy* in order to draw a contrast between Shakespeare and his predecessors in their ideas of revenge. In these pre-Shakespearean plays, 'revenge' invariably means merciless massacre and 'justice' is sheer savagery. Shakespeare's references to Kydian revenge carry always a note of disapproval. Not that there is no 'blood and thunder' in the drama of Shakespeare, but he has consistently imparted to his protagonists an 'ethical character' that distinguishes them from these earlier stage heroes. In a masterly analysis of *Titus Andronicus* in the second chapter of the book, Chakravorty develops a balanced judgement against majority critical opinion and shows how in the character of Titus the conflicting demands of 'honour', 'justice' and 'revenge' bring to birth a new type of revenger in the Elizabethan stage for the first time.

The third, fourth and fifth chapters of the book provide a competent study of Shakespeare's history plays in order to show how the dramatist handles the revenge motif with an eye on the personality and psychology of the character and highlights that revenge can be absorbed in a nobler attitude to life. Chapters 6-13 devoted exclusively to *Hamlet* form the centre-piece of the book. *Hamlet*, aptly described by Eliot as the Mona Lisa of literature, bristles with a number of problems for its interpreter of which the most interesting is the question of

delay or inaction on the part of Hamlet to carry out the Ghost's desire for revenge. Chakravorty's analysis of the play focuses on the character of Hamlet who is distinguished from others in Elsinore by his strenuous idealism and therefore, favours a superior kind of revenge — moral revenge — instead of the simple blood revenge enjoined upon him by the Ghost and thereby to act as a regenerator of the time that is "out of joint". His purpose is not to kill the king but to catch his conscience and Hamlet is able to accomplish this moral revenge on the king in the play-within-the-play scene. Encouraged by this initial success in his plan of alternative revenge, Hamlet proceeds to repeat the process on the Queen in the closet scene. The apparently superfluous stuff of the Pyrrhus Rehearsal is firmly linked to these later scenes in so far as the Pyrrhus episode highlights the rehearsal of moral revenge in Hamlet's mind. It is in this context, Chakravorty provides a very perceptive interpretation of the 'to be, not to be' soliloquy as underlining Hamlet's moral triumph, his self-discovery. Hamlet's refusal to accept the bloody directive of the Ghost uncritically means that the question of delay is irrelevant to the action of the play. However, his aversion to crude physical revenge could not be sustained in the murky world of Elsinore and he has to surrender to the baser ethic at last. That is Hamlet's tragedy.

Chapter 14 of the book explores the idea of revenge developed in the study of *Hamlet* in the other tragedies and shows that Shakespeare has infused an element of dilemma into the ordinary revenge motif in these tragedies in order to deepen their tragic effect. The last chapter considers the comedies and the final plays together and demonstrates the rejection of the punitive idea of revenge in favour of the principle of forgiveness — "pardon's the word to all". The novelty of Chakravorty's central argument and the close studies of several plays of Shakespeare, particularly of *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet*, will remain valuable for a long time to come.

*Hamlet* and *King Lear* together, observes Chakravorty, constitute Shakespeare's *Being and Nothingness*. The author had this insight when he was engaged interpreting the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy in the light of Sartre's concept of freedom the embryo of the second book where Chakravorty makes a detailed study of the underlayer of 'Existentialist' meaning that he discovers in *King Lear*. According to Sartre, man is free because he is a conscious being; but man lives most of the time in Bad Faith being unconscious of his essential freedom. Whereas man with his consciousness or freedom is a 'being-itself', he lives like an absolutely determined thing acting as a 'being-in-itself', playing a fixed role all along. When the urge for freedom becomes dominant, man chooses to cast off his mechanical role-playing and enters into freedom again. But this state is not

for-itself and in-itself. Freedom and Bad Faith. *King Lear* dramatizes this Existentialist rift which takes the form of a struggle between *King* and *Lear*, between the habitual role of the king played by Lear and his repudiation of this role in an urge for freedom. The crux of the play is abdication or renunciation which is Lear's darker purpose stated in the opening scene. The division of the Kingdom and the sufferings that follow are the consequences of Lear's choice of freedom, his self-discovery. The prompting of Bad Faith from time to time leads Lear to recant and re-assume his royal power already renounced by him. This makes the Lear-universe open-ended and all Christian or redemptive interpretations of the play do not fit the scheme of things in *King Lear*. The entire play issues out of Lear's 'choice' : he is the decisive figure of his universe.

Chakravorty divides his book into eight chapters, the first introducing the context of the novel interpretation of the play and the last making a brief conclusion. In between, the author grapples with the major points of the play: the division of kingdom and the love-test; the storm; Cordelia and the Fool; Nakedness and reason in madness. The opening scene announcing Lear's 'darker purpose' of renouncing power while the king in him is still relishing exercise of power introduces us to the peculiar absurdity of the human condition. The love-test turns into a tussle of will power between Lear and Cordelia, between Lear's 'thou shalt' and Cordelia's 'I will not', in other words, between the Bad Faith of Lear and Cordelia's existentialist freedom. The storm in *king Lear* is at bottom the storm in Lear himself designed to generate his freedom. That is why. Lear's comforter, the Fool cannot understand Lear and his action and interprets them as madness. But Lear's rushing out into the storm is a celebration of his freedom, and hence the gusto despite the agony.

*King Lear* is a play which dramatizes the Sartrean Nothingness with man and the process of discovering this to work out his freedom. Cordelia is the agent of the consciousness of 'Nothingness' for Lear : through her defiance and 'choice' of freedom, Cordelia works as Lear's mirror : opposite. The fool, on the other hand, represents the Bad Faith that still lingers in Lear and tempts him to revoke his free decision to abdicate and renounce royal power. Edgar-Tom is not a mimicry of the misery of Lear as supposed by the critics of the play, he embodies the vision of Lear's bare, unadorned self shorn of all regalia and enjoying its freedom. Lear's madness is a comprehensive metaphor as freedom is uncaused and so cannot be understood by reference to-rationality. Nor is Lear's freedom religious or political : it is essentially subjective and mysterious and is synonymous with Being. It calls upon man for taking himself the mystery of things and remain as ever 'condemned' to be free.

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Chakravorty's thesis, so deftly worked out in the book, is a bold and original one challenging, as it does, almost all established critical opinions regarding the play. Chakravorty has the sensitivity and perception of a poet as well as the erudition of a scholar; their happy union in this study of *King Lear* makes the book an outstanding and significant contribution to Shakespearean scholarship all over the world.

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