

“Critique on *Shakespearean Tragedy* by A.C Bradley”

❖ Introduction:-

The topic ‘Shakespearean Tragedy’ is the most significant and discussed during 19th and 20th century especially in the field of literary criticism. The reason was one the most significant and influential works on criticism on Shakespeare’s tragedies by one the most popular Shakespearean critic A.C. Bradley, whose work produced in 1904, containing his minute observation and thorough study.

❖ Critique on the essay:-

Bradley’s work can be seen in the context of the 19th century’s interest in characterization but it has cast its shadow over 20th century approaches to the genera. So through Bradley’s analysis we can understand Shakespeare more clearly because he studied him through various perspectives. Bradley in his introduction put stress on the right way to read Shakespeare. In the words of Bradley

“Our understanding and enjoyment of these works as dramas is as if an actor studying the parts, coupled with a process of comparison and analysis”

So according to Bradley the right way to read Shakespeare is ‘process of comparison and analysis so for this purpose he identifies ‘Shakespearean Tragedy’ as represented by Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth.

After observing these four tragedies Bradley argues that

“Tragic story concern primarily with one person, a tale of suffering and calamity conducting to death, unexpected and contrasted with previous happiness or glory.”

So here he points out that tragedy primarily concern with tragic hero and because of his deeds or actions and it’s a story which leads him to his on fall as well as it affects the welfare of the whole nation or empire. Further he says that tragedy wouldn’t come in simple

manner but it proceed mainly from the actions and those are actions of the hero. He rightly points out that Shakespeare's main interest might be

"Action issuing from character or in Character issuing from action"

So there are both the possibilities applicable in Shakespearean tragedies like in Othello Iago's actions leads Othello to his character and in King Lear King's nature or to say behavior of his character leads to the action. Same as in Hamlet situations and incidents create his character whereas in Macbeth Lady Macbeth or Macbeth's over ambitious nature leads him to further action.

With this stress on character and action Bradley also mentioned other tragic agents that is 'Fate' for Bradley it is

" a mythological expression for the whole system or order, of which the individual character form an inconsiderable and feeble part; which seem to determine, far more than they, their native dispositions and their circumstances, and, through these, their action"

But here he argues that in tragedy we feel emotions like repulsion, pity, wonder, fear, horror etc. but we don't judge them so his tragedies are dealing with what is good and evil but not with justice and merit and he adds that

'Tragedy would not be tragedy if it were not a painful mystery'

So good tragedy should have mystery which gives pain so one can feel such emotions.

Then Bradley opposed Greek philosopher Hegel who stated that

"the conflict between and within characters as a rule the hero though he pursues his fated way is, at least at some point in the action and sometimes at many torn by an inward struggle"

But Bradley argued and said that character are made of the stuff which we find within ourselves but intensely to leads the story they share those inner conflicts with others so he says

" We observe one sidedness, a predisposition in some particular direction; a total incapacity in certain circumstances, of resisting the force which draws in this direction, a fatal tendency to identify the whole being with one interest, object, passion or habit of mind"

So he wants to say that above is a fundamental tragic trait of Shakespearean hero or protagonist so his interest, passion or particular habit of mind is their tragic flaw which is key feature for his tragedies and they are:

- (1) **Hamlet:** brooding on one subject
- (2) **Othello:** jealousy
- (3) **King Lear:** predominant self will
- (4) **Macbeth:** over ambition

➤ **Hamlet:-**

Bradley in his essay mentioned one folly of Shakespeare in his play Hamlet he says

"The mysteriousness of life is one thing, the psychological unintelligibility of a dramatic character is quite another"

So his point is we feel strange that in Hamlet strength and weakness mingled in one soul and this soul doomed to such misery and apparent failure. For Bradley Hamlet is

'a state of profound melancholy'

and reason is his mother's nature and behavior which poisoned his mind and because of that his tendency towards women is generalized so he can never see Ophelia in the same light again. Here Bradley identifies 'the feeling of a supreme power of destiny.'

➤ **Othello:-**

Now Bradley turns to Othello and for him it is

'the most painfully exciting and the most terrible of Shakespeare's tragedies.'

though it is not highly as the other tragedies and less symbolic but the emotional pull is strong. The suffering of Desdemona is the most nearly intolerable thing that Shakespeare offers us. Her suffering is like

'The most loving of dumb creatures tortured without cause by the being he adores.'

Bradley correctly ranks Iago on the top of Shakespeare's evil characters because the greatest intensity and subtlety of imagination have gone into his making.

In terms of psychological complexity, Bradley suggests he is equaled only by Hamlet but goes on to argue that the tragedy of Othello is in a sense his tragedy too. It doesn't show us a violent man, like 'Richard III' who spends his life in murder, but a thoroughly bad, cold man, who is at least tempted to let loose the forces within him, and is at once destroyed.

➤ **King Lear:-**

Turning to King Lear Bradley echoes Lamb:

"The play as a whole is imperfectly dramatic, and there is something in its very essence which is at war with the senses, and demands a purely imaginative realization"

So this play is overpowered to the purely tragic emotions and physical horror works as stimulus to pity which appalled essence of the tragedy to excite.

Bradley correctly compare Shakespeare with Greek philosopher Empedocles who believed that all matter is composed of particles of fire, water, air and earth, where as Shakespeare regards Love and Hate as the two ultimate forces of the universe for this play.

Now Bradley argues over the last words by Lear on the body of Cordelia represent an agony; not of pain but of ecstasy and 'unbearable joy' or belief that she is still alive this is reasons that play has some optimism.

➤ **Macbeth:-**

For Macbeth he writes

"Shakespeare no longer restricts the action to purely human agencies"

So in this play many actions takes place and further he compares Lady Macbeth with Iago and mentioned about the tone of the play which shows dark and bloody environment in words of Bradley

"It is as if the poet saw the whole story through an ensanguined mist, and as if it, stained the very blackness of the night"

Of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, Bradley writes that 'there is *egoisme a deux*' Means they have no separate ambitions and they remain tragic till end, even grand. In the short notes on 'Shakespearean Tragedy' Bradley addresses number of specific quotations like Did Lady Macbeth really faint? then about Duration of the action in Macbeth, Macbeth's age and so on and with his arguments he tries to define answers.

❖ **Conclusion:-**

Thus through his minute observation and thorough study on Shakespearean tragedies Bradley brought variety of dimensions in the way of reading Shakespeare in 19th century which affects the later time periods and he also justified himself by putting concrete arguments. In the conclusion I would like to quote two scholars' opinion on Bradley's work.

In the words of Terence Hawkes,

"Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* is one the most influential texts of our country...which remains a key and vastly formative work"

Gary Taylor observes that,

"In Bradley's hands, Shakespearian criticism become a philosophical novel"

- Jay Ranpura