

4. Re-reading the Renaissance

Postcolonial Shakespeare

Traditional literary history treats Shakespeare as the best thing that happened to the English language, English culture and the literature of the entire world. From the 1980s, there has been an opposition to this reading of Shakespeare's greatness. Critics adopting many different theoretical and ideological positions have found problems with Shakespeare's characters, plots and politics. Contemporary critical readings prefer a highly political reading of Shakespeare's literary texts, paying attention to various ideological biases and political issues in his work. This includes the (1) colonial, (2) patriarchal, (3) racial, (4) heterosexist and (5) bourgeois themes embodied in the plays.

The Renaissance presented itself in certain ways – humanist, rational-scientific, universal, liberal – by masking very serious oppressive structures. Homosexuals, women, other races, the working classes, and vagrants and the homeless were exploited, controlled and often became victims of social power structures. Social structures, claiming to be universal and humanitarian, served the interests of the ruling classes. Dissent was put down in the name of social harmony and order. England began to fashion itself as a country favouring justice, fair play and equality by comparing itself with other races (which were being discovered through the voyages). In fact, England's image of itself was constructed precisely through this racial 'other', the theoretical opposite of what England was. Terms like 'fair' became associated with the colour of the skin when Europe met the dark-skinned races (as shown by Kim Hall in *Things of Darkness*, 1995. Also, see Richmond Barbour's *Before Orientalism*, 2003).

The upper classes imposed their coat of arms on the land through maps and local histories that erased the working classes from the

landscape. While homosexuality, transvestitism and alternate sexualities were common within Renaissance and Shakespearean England, they were not talked about and were often the subject of strong condemnation from the law and the church. 'Masculinity' and 'femininity' were constructed as concepts during this period. That is, concepts and norms of what masculinity/femininity meant, how men and women were supposed to behave and the relations between them, were framed during this period.

Postcolonial theory seeks to re-read English literary texts in the context of European colonialism of Asian and African nations. Colonialism was a feature of the period between 1600 and the mid-20th century. It meant that white men and women governed the lives – social, economic, political and, often, cultural – of Asian and African populations. It was a white versus black situation, where one side (the white) had power over the other (the black).

Colonialism, in addition to being a military and political condition, was also a very powerful cultural event in the history of Africa, Asia and South America. Through literature, the arts, media and education, colonial rulers often presented certain images of the Asians – as poor, helpless, traitorous, primitive, feminine and such. All such images were used to justify white colonial rule as a saviour of the Asian race. Thus cultural forms such as museums and literary texts popularized specific ideas and images of the two races. Culture becomes a site of politics and power-play. Postcolonial readings of literary texts show how race and power are disguised in the texts' themes. They seek to expose the political, racial, masculinist (patriarchal) politics that are encoded into literary themes.

In the case of Shakespeare in particular, there has been considerable postcolonial interest. Since Shakespeare remains the most popular (canonical) literary figure in the world, it is natural that he and his works must be seen less as individual than as institutions. How does Shakespeare come to occupy such a high position? What are the politics that make Shakespeare a popular staged, studied, researched and critiqued text? These are some of the questions that postcolonial studies ask.

Postcolonial readings of Shakespeare address the following themes and issues in his works:

- Shakespeare's work often gives a fictional account of actual political conditions of slavery, colonial conquest and native suffering. A play like *The Tempest*, with its pair of Prospero and Caliban, is actually about the colonial rule of the white man over a native inhabitant.
- It looks at how English language itself expands its vocabulary in the new context of colonialism. Encountering new races and cultures, English required a new vocabulary to describe what the Englishmen and women saw. Thus, the term 'fair' began to describe not only a sense of justice, but also a complexion. 'Black' becomes associated with evil and, by extension, the 'black race' itself becomes the symbol for evil (Kim Hall, 1995).
- It explores how race and gender are crucial elements of the Shakespearean context. As noted above, *The Tempest* is about racial conquest. *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* also look at the power relations between white and non-white races. These plays are about the 'differences' between races and cultures. They deal with the cultural encounter of races (African or Jewish versus English or European) and cultures (native or non-white versus English or European).
- It looks at how Shakespeare's plays comment on (or quietly erase) the English politics of acquisition and colonization. For instance, Terence Hawkes has argued that *Henry IV* is about the English attempts to bring Wales under English power. *King Lear* is also about land ownership.
- Ania Loomba, Michael Neill and others are interested in unravelling the politics of Shakespeare's *global* popularity. They note that he is extremely popular even in the non-English speaking world. In a way, there are 'Shakespeares' appropriated by writers and performers worldwide. Reviews of Shakespeare's performances, film adaptation, translation, curriculum and such efforts radically appropriate his work for all people. David

Johnson, for instance, looks at how education policy-makers in colonial Africa sought to spread the study of Shakespeare there.

- Such readings argue that while Shakespeare may have been using European history as his immediate source, the themes often involve a history of other nations. That is, the history of Europe in Shakespeare's period 'cannot' be separated from its political context of colonial travel, colonial power and racial politics.

Further Reading

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