

EVOLUTION OF MIXED GENRES IN JACOBAN DRAMA



S K Mishra

Associate Professor , Satyawati College, University of Delhi, Delhi.



ABSTRACT

The Jacobean age witnessed a profound change in the spirit of English life and, this change was reflected in the English drama. The beginning of the new century saw the fading of earlier optimism and creation of an atmosphere of uncertainty and defeat. This atmosphere was significantly critical and pessimistic. It saw the coming together of tragedy and satire. The changed spirit of life had destroyed the magic circle surrounding the genres of comedy and tragedy. There were many reasons for the evolution of mixed and confused genres— comedy became bitter and tragedy was blended with a grim humour.

KEYWORDS : *Genre, comedy, Tragedy, Dark Comedy, Jacobean, Revenge Tradition.*

INTRODUCTION :

The Jacobean age witnessed a profound change in the spirit of English life and, this change was reflected in the English drama. The beginning of the new century saw the fading of earlier optimism and creation of an atmosphere of uncertainty and defeat. This atmosphere was significantly critical and pessimistic. It saw the coming together of tragedy and satire. The changed spirit of life had destroyed the magic circle surrounding the genres of comedy and tragedy. There were many reasons for the evolution of mixed and confused genres— comedy became bitter and tragedy was blended with a grim humour. The idea of the hierarchical ordering of everything in the cosmos was the cornerstone of Elizabethan optimism, but the new philosophy of Machiavelli and Montaigne, called everything in doubt. Both men, though in different ways signaled the arrival of a new spirit somewhat skeptical, analytical, interested more in man as he is than in what he ought to be. The political uncertainty surrounding the succession in the last years of Elizabeth I's reign led to instability and disillusionment in the first years of the reign of King James. Abroad, the indomitable Irish rebels, aided and abetted by England's great enemy, Spain, were seemingly unbeatable. On the economic side enclosing of farmlands and granting of monopolies to favourites were proving to be intolerable burden on the common people. The uncertainty in socio-economic life was seen in the increasing number of religious dissidents, and the gunpowder plot resulted in a fear and distrust which

precipitated even stricter suppression of religious non-conformity.

The atmosphere of uncertainty resulted in the evolution of evolved a genre in which we see the renaissance emphasis on the richness of sensual experience colliding with the Machiavellian cynicism regarding all human experience, and the revival of a medieval notion that the world was running down and civilization was on the brink of dissolution. The Jacobean drama is the result of this new critical spirit in which the richness of human capacity and the poverty of human achievement are juxtaposed together and this drama, as Patrick Cruttwell shows in his book *The Shakespearean Moment*, leads to a strange mixture of satire and tragedy due to which the impulses of compassionate understanding and savage mockery are found together.

In our study of *The Malcontent*, *The Revengers Tragedy*, *The Changeling* and *The White Devil*, we see an evolution of a new kind of genre which reflects the bloody relationship of the tragic and comic scenes or what J.L. Styan calls the interbreeding of tears and laughter. All the four plays have typical Jacobean background where we see tragi-comedy or comic tragedy of life being enacted. Alvin Kernan, in his book *The Cankered Muse*, sees this Jacobean background to be satiric. He points out that the dramatic personages are grotesque caricatures, distorted by the imperfections which they embody, and there is obsessive concentration on the purely animal aspects of human existence, eating, drinking, defecation and copulation. There is no development in the plot and the satiric hero moves along with his two selves, a public one-blunt and truthful and the darker private self-proud and egoistic.

In *The Malcontent* we see the grim comedy of life being enacted. The hero acts the drama of his thwarted existence between the two poles of his personality. In public, Malevole is a satirist or grim humorist but in private, he is a vengeful Machiavellian figure. Malevole tells Pietro that Mendoza is making him a cuckold. Malevole's idea is not that of blood revenge. He feels:

The heart's disquiet is revenge most deeps;
He that gets blood, the life of flesh but spills;
But he that breaks heart's peace, the dear soul
Kills. (I.3.187-90)

But, at the same time, Malevole acts as a satirist or grim humorist in the play. He tells Pietro that he finds "common actions, flattery and cozenage; common things, women and cuckolds" (I.2.) The mind of Malevole is occupied with treachery, revenge, adultery and incest. He goes on to tell Pietro how adultery is often the mother of incest. The corruption in court life is exposed when Bilioso offers Malevole to take his dinner with his "young wife". Malevole remarks to Celso:

How servile is the rugged'st courtier's face:
What profit, nay, what nature would keep down,
Are heav'd to them are minions to a crown. (I.4.80.84)

The play dramatizes these satiric comments as a grim comedy of the bankruptcy of values in life. Maquerette, a professional whore, commands the world of courtly ladies. She brings a lover, Ferneze, for Aurelia, while Bianca wants her husband's transfer to some other country so that she can call her lovers to her house. The play's atmosphere is embittered by bloody intrigues which are no different from the amorous intrigues going on in the play. Mendoza hurts Ferneze and then wins Aurelia's heart by showing sympathy to him while he plans to kill the Duke, as he has been adopted by him. Mendoza hires Melvole to kill the Duke. Melvole exposes Mendoza in the eyes of Duke. They both come back to

the palace with the Duke disguised as a hermit. There is a dark atmosphere of treachery, violence and adultery. Here Aurelia and the Captain turn out to be faint positive in a drama leading to the final catastrophe. But in *The Malcontent*, the masque, in the end, is given a comic twist when the old Duke is recognized and in the atmosphere of joy and reunion, the villain is merely kicked out. However, the background of *The Malcontent* captures the spirit of the age, which is reflected in the confused quality of the genre of this play.

In spite of the comic ending the threat of potential violence and a horror of intrigues remains the central experience of *The Malcontent*. Gamini Salgado, in his introduction to *Three Jacobean Tragedies*, points out *The Malcontent* (1607), is a play which set the pattern for later revenge tragedy." he goes on to suggest that in the Jacobean revenge tragedy, it is the darker, private persona of the satirist hero, which is mainly emphasized, "in the bitter railing of a Vindice or Flamineo." These plays are not merely revenge tragedies. In them we see corruption in society, and with it exploration of moral and emotional chaos where the lusts and appetites drive a man to destruction and self annihilation. Victims are not distinguishable from each other. They both face the death with a typical Jacobean courage and visionlessness.

These plays reflect the moral and emotional anarchy through the chaotic design in both theme and structure, where comedy results from the grimness of life and bankruptcy of values. In the *Revenger's Tragedy*, we see Tourneur's endless delight in the spectacle of bitter comedy. We are to see a grim comedy arising out of what Horatio would call "purposes mistook, fall'n on the inventors' heads." Almost everyone is involved in a conspiracy and they are all deceived. A comedy of lust and murder and power goes on. The Duke conspires to thwart Ambitioso and Supervacuo and to gratify his lust but it leads him to his death at the hands of Vindice and Hippolito. Lussurioso wants to deflower Castiza and destroy Spurio, this leads him very near to the gallows as he invades his father's chamber in search of Spurio. He literally plays into the hands of Vindice for his lust for Castiza. The two princes want to destroy Lussurioso and rescue their youngest brother, ironically the death warrant which they bring for Lussurioso is construed by the officers to be for their own real brother and we see a comedy of "purposes mistook / fall'n on the inventors' heads" when Ambitioso and Supervacuo are greeted by Lussurioso. As if this is not enough in the race for power, the two brothers conspire against each other just after they have planned that Spurio, who has shamed them by committing adultery with their mother, "Will not live" (V.1). The plan of Spurio's murder arouses the idea of Dukedom in the minds of both of them and they set out against each other. In the final mask, we see a blood bath. Lussurioso is killed by Vindice, Supervacuo, who claims himself the Duke, is killed by his brother Ambitioso while Spurio slays Ambitioso and is killed by a Lord.

In this grim comedy, there is one character, who is not deceived by anybody because his intrigue is not motivated by lust, power or money, and this is Vindice himself. He wants to avenge his wife, who has been a victim of Duke's lust. He comes from the country to the court. He learns the game of intrigues so well that there is no difference between the player and the victims. When Vindice, having "sworn allegianc" to Lussurioso, exclaims, "No let me burst, I've eaten noble poison". He speaks truer than he knows, the poison works within him, goading him to more and more elaborate refinements of evil. Vindice leads the Duke to his death by making him kiss his wife's poisoned skull, disguised as a lady, as if this is not enough, Vindice delights in tormenting the Duke by telling him "thy bastard, thy bastard rides a hunting in thy brow" (III.5). Vindice adds to the humor of the play by making a fool of Lussurioso, by getting himself appointed "to kill myself" (IV.2). Vindice also delights in testing the purity of his sister and mother. The purity of Castiza is the saving point in the play who manages to save her mother. In the final mask, Vindice revenges himself upon Lussurioso by killing him and survives to enjoy the scene:

No power is angry when the lustful die;
When thunder claps, heaven likes the tragedy. (I.3)

The artist of the scene, Vindice, is there to enjoy the comedy when Ambitioso, Supervacuo and Spurio are killed. Hippolito seizes the Fourth Lord, who killed Spurio, while Vindice exclaims, "Alas, the Duke is murdered!" (V.3). Here we see Vindice, who saw corruption in society and court, delights in his art of revenge. He feels delighted at the sight of the bleeding Duke 'Tis state in music for duke to bleed", he is not sorry for sending an innocent Noble to the gallows and the sight of the blood bath is a pleasure to him. He is a person who, in the process of revenge and in observing the grim comedy of life, has lost his attachment with the world in which he took a plunge and is unable to see the value of human life. He has become tragically comic like other characters where the sole purpose of their existence is revenge. Vindice tells his brother:

Thou hast no conscience – are we not revenged?
Is there one enemy left alive amongst those?
'Tis time to die when we are ourselves our foes.
When murder's shut deeds close, this curse does seal "em". (V.3)

The final experience of the play is not one of tragic awareness and elevation of the hero's mental stature rather it is that of death is, taken. as a comic fact, unable to take out the hero from his subjective world and although Antonio restores order, the grim comedy of moral and social chaos and the valuelessness of human life does not free us from its impact. The play remains a typically Jacobean in the confused quality of its genre.

In Webster's *The White Devil* we find a drama of high passions and the comic grimness arising out of the general corruption in the world. Gamini Salgado finds Webster's drama to be a drama of the moment. He feels Webster's characters and plot are governed by his attitude to the world – "an attitude compounded of mocking content, a sense of the corruption of power and stoic endurance". When we enter into the world of white devil, we find it to be a world of grotesque reality where Lodovico talks about murders committed by him as "fleabittings" (I.1). In Act I sc. 2, we see a grim comedy where a brother is acting as a pimp for his sister. Flamineo not only manages to lock Camillo in his chamber but he also arranges Vittoria's meeting with Brachiano. It is this background of values against which the drama in *The White Devil* takes place. We see that there are no heroes and villains. Webster's characters are complex, passionate, self-aware and intensely alive in a world where the guilty and the innocent suffer or prosper indiscriminately. The sense of the world as a "deep pit of darkness" is forcefully conveyed by the macabre humour, the rough diction, the overtones of insanity and the imagery of disease that pervade the play. Flamineo is intensely aware of the pulse of the society, he knows the relation between corruption and advancement. He tells his mother:

...And shall I,
Having a path so open and so free
To my preferment, still retain your milk
In my pale forehead? (I.2)

He knows that to succeed he must arm and fortify himself against shame and blushing. He asks

his mother a question which is unanswerable in terms of the world presented by the play:
Pray, what means have you
To keep me from the galleys, or the gallows? (I.2)

Flamineo knows that his advancement lies in Brachiano's relation with Vittoria and in the house of convertites he acts to make peace between them. Flamineo's complexity lies in the fact that he is intensely self-aware of his grotesquely comic situation:

[Aside] It may appear to some ridiculous
Thus to talk knave and madman, and sometimes
Come in with a dried sentence, stuffed with sage:
But this allows my varying of shapes;
Knives do grow great by being great men's apes. (IV.2)

Marcello, who resists Flamineo's code of success and advancement, is killed by him. This leads to Cornelia's madness and we see the reality of Flamineo "And sometimes when my face was full of smiles, / Have felt the maze of conscience in my breast" (V.4). Flamineo faces Brachiano's ghost which throws earth upon him and shows him the skull. Flamineo realizes his fate which is the inevitable result of his doings but he goes on with his material obsession to acquire Vittoria's "bounty." He knows there is no choice for him "I do dare my fate/ To do its worst" (V.4). At the same time no tragic awareness about his relation with the objective world dawns on him. He dies without faith in anybody with his own pride as he tells Lodovico "I will carry mine own commendations" to heaven.

The materialistic environment of the play celebrates the code of success in life as Francisco tells Lodovico that their success in revenge will "justify their actions" ... for the fame/ Shall crown the enterprise, and quite the shame" (V.3). This environment of moral and social anarchy leads human beings to adopt a defiant stance even when they have no moral and spiritual grounds. We know that the court is corrupt and the trial is an eye-wash. Francisco and Monticelso have already decided the judgements. In the face of this corruption, Vittoria shines out as a person who is fighting against "a rape" of the justice. Her strength comes out in the trial scene when the odds are against her. She refuses to weep and tells Monticelso that she will turn the house of convertites "into a place "honester" than the "Pope's palace." Vittoria shines through her passion, and not through her moral righteousness.

The material atmosphere has caused moral and social anarchy to such an extent that individuals work for their advancement, display their personal passions and defiance, and while dying, with all their self-awareness, drift towards a visionless annihilation. Their tragic awareness is merely a disillusionment resulting from the frustration of their material expectations. Vittoria realises this much only, that her greatest 'sin lay" in her blood and now her blood "pays" for it. She feels herself to be a product of her circumstances and mere wishes.

O happy they that never saw the court,
Nor ever knew great men but by report. (V.6)
Flamineo's awareness is also the same kind of disillusionment with life:
This busy trade of life appears most vain, since rest breeds rest, where all seek pain by pain. (V.6).

The collapse of their subjective world does not expand their consciousness, and without any vision as a product of a materialistic society suffering from moral and social chaos, these characters

merely drift towards death in a dark confusion. Their stoic stance is not enough, the lack of human faith and moral courage makes them see their death as a journey into some dark reality. Vittoria feels, while dying, "My soul like to a ship in a black storm, / Is driven, I know not wither." While Flamineo, in keeping with his character is alone and confused while dying:

....I do not look
Who went before, nor who shall follow me;
No, at myself I will begin and end.
While we look up to heaven, we confound
Knowledge with knowledge: Oh, I am in a mist: (V.6)

This is a world where tragedy is diluted into pathos resulting from the frustration of individual passions and expectation and satire sublimates itself into a grim comedy, resulting from the quality of life itself. This is a world where romantic expectations have no place as the revenger, Francisco tells Zanche, who is trying to woo him, "You're passionately met in this sad world." This is what J.L. Stayan would call "the dark comedy." This new confused genre is a reflection of the spirit of Jacobean age itself where the contradictions of life became sharper and anemias of moral and social values became acute. Ronald Peacock, in his book *The Poet in The Theatre*, does not find tragedy and comedy to be incompatible. He feels that both 'spring from the tension between our imperfect life and our ideal aspirations. They exist together in their dependence on the contradictions of life. They are parallel expressions, in different keys, of our idea of what is good."

The Changeling is a powerful example of the new confused genre of Jacobean times. If we find high passions, money, power and lust providing the grim comic or satiric background for the other plays than in *The Changeling* we see lust in action in a limited, domestic and personal landscape. Here the tragedy arises out of moral madness or knavery. The farcical sub-plot of the mad house scenes makes the main action of the play more tragic.

The keeper of the mad house, Alibius, is keeping fools and madmen in his academy and he wants to protect his wife from them. The theme of seduction is being enacted in the mad house where his own assistant Lollio tries to seduce his wife, and Antonio comes there like an idiot while Francisco is living there like a lunatic. In the main plot also a grimly comic situation takes place. Beatrice reduces herself to the position of a morally mad person. In her desire for Alsemero, she wants to clear Alonzo out of her way through De Flores. In her moral myopia, she ignores the implications of her conspiracy with De Flores. She thinks "Gold tastes like angels' food" and it can buy De Flores. De Flores is a moral knave. In his desire for Beatrice, he can do anything. His existence is at the level of senses only:

Hunger and pleasure -- they'll commend sometimes
Slovenly dishes, and feed heartily on'em,
Nay, which is stranger, refuse daintier for 'em. (II.2)

Beatrice's collaboration with De Flores costs her, her innocence. She has taken human slaughter too casually and now she is, as De Flores tells her the deed's creature". He points out to the "whoredom in thy heart" (III.4) while his own life he rates "at nothing." Now Beatrice realizes "Vengeance begins; / Murder I see is followed by more sins." In herself imposed madness Beatrice goes on to deceive Alsemero by arranging virgin Diaphanta for his bed while De Flores in his knavery goes on to burn Diaphanta to save Beatrice's honour". Beatrice realize "Tis time to die when "Tis a shame to live" while

De Flores triumphs over others by killing Beatrice and, what he thinks, saving her honour. He thanks life" for nothing/ But that pleasure," and he stabs himself as he "would not go to leave thee far behind" (V.3).

These deaths also, we see, involve a mad kind of stoic instance or shame, they do not lift the protagonists from their subjective world and they die as madly or foolishly as they have lived. The tragic pathos of the play is blended with experiences which verge on satire or can be called grimly comic.

This new genre, we see, evolves against a new background of moral and social bankruptcy with new characters who are motivated by lust, money and power--- the dominating force of a materialistic culture. Their passions at a broader or domestic levels provide a scope for the grim comedy of life which is at once tragic as there is a natural contradiction between the desires and outcome. In this new genre, we see, madness of various kind and in different degrees as a widespread phenomenon. In King Lear madness creates an apocalyptic vision of the disordering of all nature and out of this disorder arises the triumphant human spirit of "unaccommodated man" which achieves a dignity and awareness that neither the malevolence of fortune, the wantonness of the gods, nor the presence of evil in human nature itself can erase. But in this new genre of Jacobean age it seems madness has been assimilated by the corrupt society and it has become the motivating part of human nature which makes it difficult to distinguish between the hero and the villain, and the end these plays are also a product of this madness where we see the human spirit is drifting towards a darkness and in this drift it makes a sadly comic gesture of stoicism to preserve its dignity in the face of self caused degradation.

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