**Unit-V**

**6. Shakespeare as a Sonneteer and a Narrative Poet**

**i. As a Sonneteer**

*What is sonnet?*

Sonnet is derived from an Italian word “Sonneto” which means a little sound. Sonnet can be defined as:

***“A short poem expressing one main idea or emotion consisting of fourteen decasyllabic lines”***

*Emergence of sonnet:*

As far as sonnet is concerned, sonnet was emerged in late 13th century by the famous poets Petrarch and Dante. The sonnet is classified into two forms;

1. Italian or Petrarch
2. English or Shakespearean

*English sonnet:*

The Italian poet Petrarch divided it into two parts. The first part of eight lines is called ‘Octave’ and the second part of six lines is called ‘Sestet’. He used the iambic Pentameter and the rhyme scheme *abba, abba, cde, cde*. He wrote on the subject of love. The thought or emotion was stated in the octave and then further developed after a pause called ‘Cesura’ in the sestet. As far as English sonnet is concerned, it was brought into England by Sir Thomas Wyatt and perfected by Earl of Surrey in the 16th century. This sonnet was consisted of three quatrains (of four lines) followed by rhyming couplet “Heroic Couplet”.

*Sonnet and Shakespeare:*

Shakespeare’s sonnets have been for long looked upon as the secret key to the poet’s loves,

*“with this same key*

*Shakespeare unlocked his heart”,* writes Wordsworth.

Shakespeare was a poet before he became a dramatist. His earlier known creations are ‘The Rape of Lucreece’ and ‘Venus and Adonis’. In all his life about 154 sonnets flowed from his pen on love and friendship. Shakespeare followed this scheme and he handled it with such mastery that today English sonnet is known as “Shakespearean Sonnet.” Its rhyming scheme is “*abab, cdcd,efef, gg*.” Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets out of which 126 are devoted to a young man and the remaining 28 are addressed to a black lady.

*Analysis of Sonnets:*

The sonnets tell us the story of Shakespeare’s love affair. The story is that Shakespeare had a rich, young and a noble friend to whom he devoted 126 sonnets. Shakespeare loved a woman to whom he addressed 28 sonnets.

*Summary of sonnets:*

The thing is that Shakespeare sent his rich, noble and young friend to his beloved with love messages. Unfortunately, the lady fell in love with the rich, young and noble friend of Shakespeare. She wooed and won him and left Shakespeare to mourn the loss of both his friend and his beloved.

Shakespeare describes his failure in love in these sonnets but one remarkable feature in his sonnets is that there is not any single or slight or a word of blame, contempt or complaint. The whole atmosphere is that of supreme affection. As he starts his sonnets by saying:

*“From fairest creatures we desire increase,  
That thereby beauty’s rose might never die.”*

In sonnets firstly, he tries to convince his handsome and young friend to get married with the lady to preserve his beauty for future generation by passing it in to a child. Later, Shakespeare feels exhausted and dejected as he feels himself isolated. He is missing his friend. He apologizes in later sonnets, his friend for his own treatment. Now, he addresses “Dark Lady”, as he calls her on seeing her with another man. He, in sonnet 131 says:   
*“In nothing art thou black save in thy deeds."*

*Themes and characteristics:*

Shakespeare uses a lot of themes in his sonnets such as marriage, friendship, lust and rivalry. Hence, his main focus in on his devotion to his friend and his hopeless passion for his mistress. He mourns on loss of both his friendship by his friend and failure of love by his mistress respectively. The theme of the sonnets is eternal. They tell us of the triumph of time over human ambitions, desires, loves and friendships. Old Time is a tyrant. It destroys everything. Rich monuments of stone, the page on which the poet writes, human civilizations and works of art are all subjects to the ravages of Time. All things decay. True love is eternal and it alone escapes Time’s scythe. This is the only comfort for the poet. On this note of consolation, the first series of sonnets ends. The second series is shorter and coarse. Shakespeare speaks of his mind with frankness. That is almost brutal. Its theme is the short-lived delight of lust, its violence, its treachery and the torments are its reward.

*The Auto-Biographical Nature:*

Some doubt the sincerity of the emotions expressed in the sonnets. They say that they are entirely conventional. Shakespeare wrote them because it was the fashion of the day to write them and not because he really experienced the emotions expressed in them. But general opinion is that they were private documents meant for some particular individuals. There is overwhelming evidence in favor of their being auto-biographical. They are passionate records of the poet’s own feelings. It is not by the artistic merit but by the intensity of their passion that these sonnets rank with the greatest poetry of the world. They tell a story of passionate friendship, of broken faith, of love that does not alter when it finds an alteration, of lust hat is short madness and turns to bitterness and remorse. In the sonnets the voice of the poet is heard in many tones, now pleading with his friend, now railing against the woman that has ensnared him.

*The Artistic Excellence of Sonnets:*

The sonnets contain some of the finest lyrical poetry for all times. Poetry is not biography. To the modern reader their value lies in their poetic excellence. All true poetry is a record of the overflow of powerful emotions. The passionate intensity of Shakespeare’s sonnets has not failed to move even the oldest hearts. The splendor and grandeur of their style, their music, and their sensuous phraseology, have received recognition from all critics of Shakespeare.

Studying the sonnets as a whole we find that the texture of the poems is showing a slowly increasing complexity as the sequence proceeds. They are getting more introspective. The interest is often far more on the state of the mind than the object of his lover or even the love itself. Shakespeare writes in the sixty-sixth sonnets “tired with all these, for restful death I cry”. Self disgust and self reproach are the usual tones of his introspection. The poet is bitter at the thought of age. He feels even more deeply the conviction of failure as a poet.

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**ii. As a Narrative Poet**

Shakespearean literature has provided a rich variety of narrative and lyrical poems, sonnets and plays of all genres. His poetry is a superb means of dramatic expression even as he was writing plays he found occasions for composing poems, mostly narrative. Following the outbreak of plague during 1592 and 1593, plays were suspended. Shakespeare sought the patronage of noble men. So he published, **‘Venus and Adonis’** in 1593 which was dedicated to the young Lord Henry Wriothesley. It was followed by ‘**The Rape of Lucreece’**. It was also dedicated to the same patron. **‘A Lover’s Complaint’** has a narrative style. Shakespeare’s last poem was **‘The Phoenix and** **the Turtle’**. Besides the sonnets the nondramatic poems still remain the greatest.

**'Venus and Adonis'** was the first literary feature of Shakespeare’s narrative poem to have the poet grip on the complexity of human life and on the study of evil which can frustrate nature and man. Tarquin’s ravishing steps are associated with flashing images of vultures, hawks and wolves. His crime is presented as a devastating challenge to the order of Nature.

**‘The Phoenix and the Turtle’** is said to be an outstanding metaphysical poem. It was included in a collection of poems, Chester’s **‘Love’s Martyr’**. This poem celebrates mystic love-union beyond sex. The supremacy and sublimity of love transcend nature and reason. Purity of diction and lyrical form distinguish this poem from the narrative poetry of Shakespeare. Love is very intimately associated with chastity. Much of the substance recalls the sonnets. The Turtle-Dove in the poem represents the female-element while the Phoenix, the male element. There are varied interpretations about the sexes of these two birds. The poem lends itself, to several meanings of symbolic significance and topical and personal interests tend to baffle the reader. Yet the main myth about Phoenix forms the basis of all shades of meanings. The baffling debates about the sexes of the birds become irrelevant when the distinctions between lovers are annihilated.

In the final analysis with Wilson Knight, “The Mutual Flame in consuming the grossness of love attains a spiritual, consummation dreamt of by Dante in his ‘Divine Comedy’. Such a sacred flame undoubtedly is burning, behind the sonnets of Shakespeare”.

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