

The Rise of Working Class in Shakespeare

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ABSTRACT : *As all the keen lover of English history know that at the dawn of the renaissance, the old feudal order has been weakened following the Baron's war. A new political elite was beginning to emerge. This elite was near allied to the merchant class. As Marx has observed, the new aristocracy considered the power of money as the most important factor. This aristocracy was not interested in agricultural work rather they developed the trade of sheep rearing and wool trade, this action somewhat changed the countryside scenario of Middle English society. The new aristocracy became the natural ally of bankers and big merchants. They had come up through what the Americans call wheeling dealing. They flaunted their money power, and used it ruthlessly to secure their position in society. The new aristocracy well knew that its interests were all the way linked with the interests of those who were engaged in trade, banking and manufacturing. To quote Trevelyan in this regard; \" the accumulated wealth of the feudal classes and their call for new luxuries caused the rise of the English towns, and the new middle class engaged in manufacture, trade and overseas commerce.\" The middle classes grew from strength to strength and began to extend their dominance all around. The main thrust of the middle classes was towards consolidating their economic power against the decadent feudal order in their own interests, and in order to take social leadership, they initiated and encouraged certain progressive movements such as Reformation and Humanism. The movement of Renaissance Humanism particularly owed a great deal to the middle classes. My submission is that Shakespeare's plays; quite a few of them at least may well be viewed as the clear painting of this rising middle class, whether it is Merchant of Venice or The Tempest and so on.*

I. INTRODUCTION :

My submission has mainly to do with the emergence of the bourgeoisie to position of dominance in the 16th century English society, before the rise of the bourgeoisie, the structure of English society was feudal and agrarian. The exploitation of the serfs by their feudal lords was the order of the day. The concept of wage labour had not yet come; the serfs provided labour almost free of cost. The serf or the villain had no personal freedom. In the above situation things began to change towards the end of the medieval age. A new aristocracy sided with the merchants and traders who were coming into wealth and prominence. Overseas exploits of England of 16th century created a strong base for rising of working class, which began to engage in the work of trade of wool, sheep rearing and business entrepreneurship. Seafaring turned out to be central to the bourgeois prosperity. Shakespeare being the leading dramatist of the age pointed out many references of the positive as well as negative aspects of this new transformation through his dramas.

II. DISCUSSION :

Before the rise of the bourgeoisie, the structure of society was basically feudal. The social historians point to the various kinds of exploitation perpetuated by the feudal lords. Trevelyan gives a fairly long account of the pattern of life which obtained in feudal England:

The serf or villain was by birth and inheritance bound to the soil; he and his family were sold with an estate when it changed hands. He could not marry his daughter save with the lord's consent and the payment of a heavy fine. When he died, his best beast, sometimes his only cow was seized as 'heriot' by the lord of the manor. He could not migrate or withdraw his services at will. He could not strike. He must work on his lord's domain so many days in the year without pay, bringing his own team or half team of oxen for the plough. It was by these services of the villain and not by hired labour that the lord's home farm was worked. The bailiff had to keep his eye on the unwilling workmen lest they should sit down for half-an hour at a time at the end of the every furrow.

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But the villein, half slave as he was in those respects, held lands of his own which he tilled on those days of the year when his lord had no claim upon him or his oxen. And he had his share in the use and profit of the village meadows, the village pasture and the village woodland and the waste, where the swine and geese were turned loose.

The things began to change when those engaged in trade and manufacture before the big merchants took control of things. Earlier small homogeneous groups or guilds had conducted manufacture and trade. Their business had been conducted largely within the community or in the nearby marts and fairs. The guildsmen had participated in the larger community life (when English drama began to move out of church precincts, it was taken over by these guildsmen. They got together to present the cycle plays and the interludes). Later some of these guildsmen would rise to become middling or even big merchants, while the less fortunate among them would sink to the level of wage labour.

The factional fights among the Barons and their attendant lords, the long drawn war with France, frequent visitations of pestilence and famine, all created a situation of anarchy and distress. They created the circumstances for rapid change in the social order. Thus, Ramsay Muir observes:

In brief the mediaeval social system was breaking up, and was being replaced by something like the modern system which we know. The essence of change was that men's rights and duties, and their place in society, were ceasing to be governed by the status into which they were born, and were gradually coming to be governed by free contract between individuals.

A new power elite was emerging; it was beginning to take control of the administration and the economic structure. The Tudors would accelerate this process of change. We have these observations of L.G.Salinger, made in his essay "The Social Setting", included in *The Age of Shakespeare* :

The new monarchy needed a new kind of aristocracy. The material was there, partly in older families partly in new men like Elizabeth's leading minister, William Cecil (Lord Burleigh)- men who had begun as merchants or lawyers or even yeomen, had acquired estates under the Tudors, and were wedded to their interests by the spoils of the monasteries (Emphasis added).

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The transformation had begun much earlier, though. To quote Trevelyan:

Under the first Tudor the chief Privy councillors were middle class clergy of the civil servant type, such as Morton and Fox, or lawyers like Empson and Dudley... After the reformation the lawyer element remained, but the clergy became less prominent in the council and civil service. There arose a new type of Privy councillor men like Cecils, Walsinghams and Bacons, aspiring to be numbered among the courtly gentleman, but connected with the trading community.....(Emphasis added).

This is the example of rising of middle class into prominence. The English merchants rising into a new aristocracy. The list of sixteen regents named in Henry VII's will to govern on his son's behalf; contain not a single peer of twelve years standing. Let us consider the lineage of some of the leading figures of Renaissance England. There was Thomas Cromwell. His father had been a trader in wine; perhaps he had owned a small carpenter's shop. Thomas studied law at the university, and then went on to join the company of Merchant Adventurers as a functionary. The same Thomas appears as Earl of Essex in 1540. The Cecils had been small landholders of Hertfordshire, gone into ship rearing, rising to become one of the wealthiest families of England. William Cecil would become Lord Burghley.

In 1561, the queen appointed him to the position of Master of the court of wards. Sir Francis Walsingham came of a middle class family of London. Trade helped him to become a leading member of the new aristocracy. Varney had been a merchant but rose to be the Mayor of London in 1465. Doubtless they were all endowed with great strength of character; most of them had benefited from the university education. But they were men exceptionally good at profit making exercises, be these bribery, selling offices or trade. The new ruling class closely allied to the trading community, had arrived. It is generally assumed, and in some ways rightly so, that the emergence of the bourgeoisie marked a definite progress in the history of man. Apart from the fact that they had freely indulged in exploitation of their serfs. The feudal are generally believed to have had closed old view. Education had missed them. They had not opened out to new concerns and pursuits; then had not travelled. I have no quarrel with this widely accepted view of the feudal. Doubtless the bourgeoisie were far more reformative and innovative in their functioning. The contribution of men like Cecil and Bacon to the

advancement of learning cannot be gainsaid. Many of the leading merchants sent their sons to the universities. The university training made access to the court and to the professions easy. Salinger notes:”but scholasticism had been crumbling since the 15th century, if not earlier, and new tendencies broke the unity of its abstract reasoning. The new conditions favoured a pragmatic outlook and the ideal of self development through action.” To this “Pragmatic outlook” we owe not a few enlightened measures. Bacon looked well ahead of his time.

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He had an inquisitive mind he also showed a scientific temper. But in his thinking Bacon was closely allied to the emergent bourgeoisie. Again, we get this description of William Cecil in Muir’s History of England : “He was a man of immense industry, an economist as well as a statesman, and he had a genius for detail. He was the Principal author of the Elizabethan social code: and it was his assiduous work which made it successful”.....

The point is that the new ruling class effected changes which would prove detrimental to the old ways of life. The ‘Pragmatic outlook’ of the new power elite hastened the collapse of the traditional personalised relationships among the agents of production. Thus, considerable progress notwithstanding this class was responsible for bringing about a culture of ruthless competition. This resulted in certain not very wholesome values being fostered. As already mentioned, profit making became a major consideration. The ideal of self advancement at all cost had the effect of distraughting a number of traditional relationships. When Shakespeare’s Iago repeatedly asks Roderigo to put money in his purse, he is in fact giving voice to one of the major aspects of the new culture. Iago is the new economic man of Renaissance; he measures everything—chastity, virtue, honour, truthfulness and loyalty— by its exchange value in terms of money. Let us think, by way of contrast, of Chaucer’s very perfect knight who lives by the five ideals of courtesy, truthfulness, valour, honour and chivalry. It was just the opposite picture of Shakespeare’s character of 16th century. The new aristocracy well knew that its interest was all the way linked with the interests of those engaged in trade, banking and manufacture. To quote Travelyan in this regard: “ the accumulated wealth of the feudal classes and their call for new luxuries caused the rise of the English towns, and the new middle classes engaged in manufacture, trade and overseas commerce.” However, once the process had started, there was no holding back. The middle classes grew from strength to strength and began to extend their dominance all around. At the same time, the old feudal order, which had initially caused them to come into being, was gradually losing its position of eminence. As we have noted, a new aristocracy was coming into being. It combined some of the older feudal habits (love of ostentatious living) with the shrewd manipulating nature and rationalism of the merchant and professional classes.

The main thrust of the middle classes was towards consolidating their economic power against the decadent feudal order in their own interests, and in order to take social leadership, they initiated and encouraged certain progressive movements such as Reformation and Humanism. The movement of Renaissance Humanism particularly owed a great deal to the middle classes. The middle classes, the bourgeoisie, were helped no end by the “organic intellectuals”, intellectuals, that is, drawn mainly from their own classes, and

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committed to the new social order. To be precise, such men as Luther and Bacon contributed not a little towards consolidation of the bourgeois power. Even the older church affiliations underwent change. We are aware of the rise of the Puritanism in the 17th century England. The point is that the rise of Puritanism and Calvinism coincided with the rise of capitalism. Lea in his Voices in the Wilderness notes : Puritanism, exalting the communion between man and his Maker at the expense of that between man and man, was fundamentally individualistic. It is a fact of history that the middle classes had succeeded in passing through their own people into the British Parliament as also the ideal parliament of 1295 enterprising merchants and members of the landed gentry the burgesses, began to find place in the court. The new rulers recruited their officials from among them. One of the features of this period was a rapid increase in the manufacture of English cloth from English wool, not only for the domestic market but also for export. Earlier the bulk of the English wool had been exported to the Flemish towns. The whole process of dyeing had been done there. The English did not have the necessary know-how or the means for the dyeing job; they could at best produce only coarse woollen cloth. But then Edward-III took measures to get Flemish weavers to come and settle in England. The king, by statute, put restrictions on the import of foreign woollen clothes, and the export of raw wool. Ramsay Muir observes: “It was in the reign of Edward-III that the development of national trade became a principal object of national policy, both in the eyes of the king’s government and in the eyes of parliament, which was very active in petitioning for trade laws, and welcomed the French war largely because of its anticipated effects on trade”. Muir further observes:

The industrial system of the middle ages was also rapidly breaking down. The rigid rules of the 'misteries' were being found obstructive. Capitalist employers (especially in the cloth trade), refusing to be hampered by these restrictions, were tending to transfer their activities from the old towns where the 'misteries' ruled, into villages and the open country; and the new industries which were springing up were taking the same course.....Escaping from the 'misteries', the employers were left free from all regulations and control, and they often treated their work people with great unfairness.(Emphasis added).

Thus by the time we come to the Tudor period, a wholly new economic power structure had come into being. William Cecil, later Lord Burghley, Elizabeth's minister, was unvaried in his endeavours for the improvement of British industry, shipping and trade. Under his guidance

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merchant activities began to pick up. German miners were brought in to find ways and means for exploiting the mineral resources of England. Patents were granted to a whole range of new economic activities, such as the manufacture of glass, cutlery and paper. Doubtless all this contributed immensely to national prosperity. Doubtless all this created the right circumstances for new ideas to be bred and developed. But it also needs to be recognised that all this led to the emergence of the new middle class whose chief concern and motivation is economic affairs, cynical, self centered, and exploitative. The culture of profit and loss had come. A new philosophy of utility was beginning to threaten the old value structure. Commerce became the main motivating factor for all expansionist enterprises. What needs to be examined is where Shakespeare stands in respect of this social transformation. The question which arise that whether he align himself with the rising bourgeoisie? Or does he indict the new culture brought about by the new middle class majority of whom were merchants and traders. Does he affirm such values as belonged to the previous age, or does he affirm the values fostered by the newly arrived middle classes? It is undoubtedly that renaissance was an exceedingly "aureate" age is recognised by all students of the subject. No wonder the plays of the period are rich with details of gold and gems. When Marlowe's Faustus speaks of ransacking the ocean for the orient pearl, he is voicing not an individual's dream but the collective dream of a nation riding the waves in pursuit of trade and commerce and colonies. We must not forget that the sea hawks pirating for gold enjoyed the status of national heroes in the England of Elizabeth-I. L.C.Knights has piled up a whole lot of evidence to underline the acquisitive character of the age. It would be unwise to think that Shakespeare remained blind to the ugly spots which marked the culture of his time. In play after play he draws attention to the 'naughty times', the 'times out of joint'. It would seem that 'Be Rich' was the mantra of those naughty days. It is educative, in this context, to quote the following lines from Shakespeare's Cymbeline :

*'Tis gold,
which buys admittance; off it doth yea and makes
Diana's rangers false themselves, yield up
Their deer to th' stand o'th' stealer; and 'tis gold;
which makes the true man kill'd and saves the thief;
Nay, sometimes hangs both thief and true man. What
Can it not do and undo?*

For gold a person could easily betray his trusted integrity. Gold could save a thief's life, while jeopardising the life of an honest man. Gold could buy admittance to the court, do and

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undo things. Cloten is voicing the philosophy of the bourgeoisie. It is not love that makes Cloten, but the prospect of striking it rich; *"If I could get this foolish woman Imogen/ I should have gold enough"*. The same greed motivates Portia's suitors in **The Merchant of Venice**.

Shakespeare's portrayal of Iago in Othello is important in the above context. Much has been said about Iago's motiveless malignancy. He is cynical and self seeking. He uses every opportunity that comes his way to his advantage he is totally amoral. He is nonetheless a man of intelligence. His kind of intelligence is incapable of doing good; it is diabolic in its functioning. 'Virtue' to him is but a 'fig'. He cannot imagine that there could be a lasting love or lasting relationship, it may be noted that Shakespeare punctuates Iago's speech with as many as ten references to money. It is difficult to ignore their weight. Iago is Shakespeare's image of the new economic man of Renaissance who has walked through the streets of 16th century England. To him everything is a commodity, so be bought and sold at a price.

Desdemona's chastity is something which Roderigo can buy for a price. Iago's "Put money in thy purse", Cloten's "Tis gold which buy the admittance", Mamon's "Be Rich", Bosola's I will thrive some way, all, to my mind, constitute a pattern. Money is the god they worship.

I am driving at the point that what is Shakespeare's stand on the whole issue. The examples mentioned above shown the areas of disapproval, he disapproves some of the features of the culture brought about by the bourgeoisie. The rise of the bourgeoisie was a historical fact. The rise of the bourgeoisie signalled the collapse of the values, the structures of feeling, which had come into being in the earlier social formations. The culture which the merchant adventurers, and the new aristocracy, and the organic intellectuals allied to them spawned would develop its own value system, its own structures of feeling. Doubtless, this new culture accounted for a number of progressive movements and moments of history. Reformation and humanism were two such movements. Doubtless, the earlier social order, the feudal order, had shown a number of dark spots. I am not disputing these facts of history, all that I have been trying to labour is that Shakespeare, the practising dramatist, the poet of the masses, the great representative of the common mind took every opportunity to show up the ugly face of the new culture. And for his positive referent he opted for some of the structures of feeling which one associates with the earlier social formations. In quite a few of his plays some of the characters show undisguised leanings towards the Christian ideals of charity and piety. Quite a few of his plays throw us back to the values enshrined in the Bible. Some of Shakespeare's characters speak of the general good of the community. The social vision that they espouse has points of contact with the Biblical paradigm of socialism. And then there is the city forest divide that we find in As You Like It. The bourgeoisie, the social historians tell us generally converged on the city and

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larger towns, and the court. Thus when we find Orlando and Rosalind and the Duke Senior fleeing the city, and seeking refuge in the Forest of Arden, we have no difficulty in grasping the direction in which Shakespeare's mind worked. In the forest of Arden or in the magical woods of A Midsummer Night's Dream, rich or poor, high bred or low bred, cultured or boorish, they all live together, under sun or rain. That is Shakespeare's advocacy towards an ideal life for bourgeois society.

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