



The Glimpses of India in Shakespeare's Plays

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Shakespeare's greatness and pre-eminence as a dramatist are universally recognized. But wherein does this pre-eminence lie? There is, indeed, hardly any glory of Shakespeare's drama which might not be matched by some other play of the period. Because of his much experience of life and drama both, he depicted the real idealism of coincidence. Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpracticed by the rest of the world; but the peculiarities of studies or professions, which can operate but upon small numbers; or by the accidents of transient fashion or temporary opinions; they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply and observation will always find. In reading Shakespeare the most powerful impression is of the extraordinary range of his knowledge imagination and literary power.

He was one of the most versatile men of his age. It is universally accepted that Shakespeare is not of an age but of all ages, not of one country but of all countries since they were composed by the world's immortal poet. Though they were written more than four hundred years ago and reflect the tastes, customs and transitions of Shakespeare's own age, they are as popular to-day as before. They have been translated into almost all the important languages of the world and most of them have been filmed. Shakespeare was not a traveler. He spent his life at Stratford and in London. There is no evidence to show that he ever left England to visit any foreign country: yet the range of the world to which he refers in his works is amazing; the countries and the people of Europe, Africa, Asia and America are frequently described in his plays. Of course, Shakespeare views them through the magic casement of imagination. The references to the topics relating to Asia and Africa in particular have not the degree of realism necessary to influence the theme and actions of a play. Yet they were enough to create an indefinable yearning for far-off and little-known lands in

the minds of the Elizabethan audience. The interest of the common people, however, was mainly limited to the accounts of the voyages. They eagerly listened to the tales of the sailors; read the travel accounts with the same avidity as for romantic novels; and this was the principal topic of conversation in the taverns and other meeting places. This was the demand of the Elizabethan audience as well. No contemporary playwright could afford to ignore the mood of the people.

The spirit of the age was introduced in the dramas by referring to the voyages and to the new discoveries. Even the scenes of some of the dramas by Marlowe, Greene, Massinger and Beaumont and Fletcher were laid in Asia and Africa. The events of Shakespeare's "The Tempest" take in the enchanted desert island which does not belong either to Asia or Africa. In "Antony and Cleopatra", Shakespeare takes his audience to an Africa so thoroughly Romanized that one can hardly feel effect of the change of milieu. The scenes of his other plays do not cross the geographical limit of Europe. Yet references to countries and places outside that limit are frequent. The sources of information about the places mentioned by Shakespeare were written accounts and verbal narratives of sailors and travelers. Though he deftly refers to some of the characteristics of these places there is no proof regarding his special knowledge about them. Shakespeare did not use any of these places outside Europe as a background of his plays. He was not therefore required to have specialized knowledge necessary for introducing local color. Shakespeare used 'India' as a synonym for gold, wealth and sunshine. To him India was more an abstract idea than a country peopled by men and women having distinctive features. In the age of William Shakespeare "India" is the centre for agricultural trading like as – grains, Spice, making of hand made Indian clothes, Jewelry, gold, medicinal plants, black magic of Bengal and foundation of beautiful buildings & sculpture etc. These specific quality gives a lot of fame at world level to India as a prosperous & wealthy country. This is the impact of India in Shakespeare's mind

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so further he develops his personal ideology for India context by his own wit & intellect in his plays. India is mentioned by name in various forms, Viz. Ind, Inde, India Indies (East) and Indian. His references to Asia and the East also largely meant India. Shakespeare used 'India' 'elusively for a country fabulously rich'. Shakespeare's earliest reference to India is probably in King Henry VI (III. I). King Henry values the feelings of the heart more than the crown on his head, even if that crown be decorated with precious **Indian stones**: -My crown in my heart, not on my head, Not deck'd with diamonds, and Indian stones, Nor to be seen. There are four references to India in "A Midsummer Night's Dream". In no other play is India mentioned so many times. India, land of gold and sunshine, has been appropriately introduced at intervals to suit the fairy- world theme of the play. In the Elizabethan age, trade with a rich country like India was profitable. In "The Merchant of Venice", Bassanio makes a reference to his friend Antonio's trade India-What, not one hit? From Tripolis, from Mexico, and England, From Lisbon, Barbary, and India? ¹But it is an anacronism to refer to Antonio's sea trade with India.

According to scholars, the date of the action of the play was before Vasco de Gama's discovery, when traders used overland routes to India. In explaining to Portia. That appearances are deceptive, Bassanio says that Indian woman use attractively decorated cloth to cover their dark faces- Thus ornament is but the gulled shore To a most dangerous sea; the beauteous scarf Veiling an Indian beauty; ²There are a few instances where Shakespeare compares the good qualities of his characters with the wealth of India. Again in Twelfth Night Sir Toby, describes Olivia's gentlewoman Maria as 'metal of India,' ³Or, as good as Indian gold. The heroine of "Troilus and Cressida" is compared with a precious and beautiful Indian pearl - "Herbed is India; there she lies, a pearl." Troilus is lost in love for Cressida. Pandarus is anxious to bring Troilus back to himself. To achieve this he even prepared to go barefoot to India - "Condition, I had gone barefoot to India." Helena of "All's well that Ends well" is deeply in love with Bertram whose high social status is beyond her reach. She mourns that her lot is like the sun-worshippers of India.- Thus Indian-like,

Religious in mine error, I adore The sun that looks upon his worshipper But knows him no more. Othello regrets before his death that he has killed Desdemona without realizing her virtues. She was like a precious pearl and he, like an ignorant Indian, has thrown her away:- Of one whose hand, Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away, Richer than all his tribe. Indians mentioned in "The Tempest" and in "Henry VIII" the tempest refer to Red Indians who were Frequently brought to England in captivity and displayed for money. 'Ind' and 'Indies' often refer to India, The incomparableness of Rosalind in "As you like it" is emphasized like this - From the east to western Ind, No jewel is like Rosalind ⁴In "The Merry wives of Windsor", Falstaff compares Mistress page and Mistress Ford with the East and west Indies respectively for their wealth - They shall be my East and Indies. Speaking of Antonio's pecuniary resources Shylock comments in "The Merchant of Venice": Yet his means are in supposition: he hath an argosy bound to Tripoli's, another to the Indies. Here Indies refers to the East India was prominent in contemporary international trade. In "Twelfth Night" Maria describes Malvolio's smile follows. He does smile his face into more lines than is in the New map with augmentation of the Indies. ⁵

The Indies, like India, Stand for fabulous wealth. In "Henry VIII", Shakespeare compares the queen with the riches of the Indies- Our king has all the Indies in his arms, And more, and richer, when he strains that lady.; In the plays of Shakespeare we find pure mirth, bright and tender fancy, airy satire, ardent passion, questionings into the deep and terrible mysteries of life. In almost every play we have the most, diverse elements, the high and the low, the great and the little, the noble and the base, the sad and the merry, brought under the dominance of one dramatic purpose. In Johnson's words, Shakespeare "was not of an age, but of all time". So astonishingly widespread is his glory, that it might also be said that "he was not of a land, but of all lands". Free of every theory, accepting all of life, rejecting nothing, uniting the real and the poetic, appealing to the most various men, to a rude workman as to a wit, so we can say Shakespeare's contribution to drama and literature is a great river of life and beauty.

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Note:-Certain ideas are directly borrowed from the article "India in Shakespeare" by C.R. Banerji - The Indian Journal of English studies Vol. V No.1 Orient Longmans New Delhi. 1. Shakespeare William, The merchant of Venice, Atlantic publishers and distributors, B-2, Vishal Enclave, Opp. Rajouri garden, New Delhi. 2001, page No. - 53 2. Ibid, page no. -48 3. Lothian J.M. and Craik T.W. Twelfth Night, first published in 1975 by Methuen & Co. Ltd., Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., Nelson House Mayfield road Walton-on-Thames Surrey KT125PL UK. - 2000, Page No.-63 4. Shakespeare William, As You Like It, Atlantic publishers and distributors, B-2, Vishal Enclave, Opp. Rajouri garden, New Delhi. 2001, page No. - 43 5. Lothian J.M. and Craik T.W. , Twelfth Night, first published in 1975 by Methuen & Co. Ltd., Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., Nelson House Mayfield road Walton-on-Thames Surrey KT125PL UK. - 2000, Page No.-88