

Alchemist - As a Comedy of Humours. (13)

'The Alchemist' is the most popular of Ben Jonson's Comedies of Humours. Ben Jonson is a dramatist of a classical bent. He writes dramas in full conformity to the dramatic rules expounded by the great classicists. He has freed drama from the Romantic entanglements and has brought it closer to the realities of life. Now, it is no more a mere source of thoughtless laughter but a powerful weapon to correct the follies by magnifying and exaggerating them. In fact, Ben Jonson has blended Comedy with Satire. His plays present lively pictures of his contemporary society with all its minutiae. Let us see the play in a brief.

M.A. HAQUE

Ben Jonson's plays are described as the Comedies of Humours. A Comedy of Humours exposes some particular traits of an individual or a group or a society in a satirical vein. Ben Jonson himself defines 'Humour' in his 'Every Man out of his Humour' -

"When some one peculiar quality
Doth so possess a man that it doth draw
All his affects, his spirits and powers
In their all to run one way

This may be truly said to be a humour."

This concept of 'Humour' can clearly be understood with reference to the medieval view about the four constituents of the Universe - Earth, Water, Air and Fire. These elements produce Melancholy, Phlegm, Blood and Cholera which determine human nature and distinct temperaments of individuals. In Ben Jonson's plays 'Humour' is a particular trait, habit or mood demonstrated by the characters. His characters are recognised by their specific 'Humours' such as greed, jealousy, love for fashion etc. In his

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Volpone, Ben Jonson exposes the 'passion of greed' that has infected the whole society. Similarly, in the 'Alchemist' 'human gullibility' gets main focus of attention.

Thus, the 'Comedy of Humours' is realistic and satirical by nature itself. The 'Alchemist', in the true spirit of the 'Comedy of Humours' is a satire on the 'Alchemy' and Puritanism, the two breeding grounds for other evils in the contemporary society. Ben Jonson clearly states in the 'Prologue' to the Play:-

M.A. HAQUE

'No country, mine is better than our own
No clime breeds better matter for you whose
Band, squire, impostor, many persons more
whose manners, now call'd 'humours', feed the stage
And which have still been subject to the rage
Or spleen of Comic writers'

The follies and the vices of the contemporary life are exposed and satirised in the category of 'Humour'. The lust for gold is the general human weakness. The Elizabethan society, in the midst of prosperity, develops lust for luxuries and desire for more wealth. Hence, people believe in 'Alchemy' and 'Astrology' and are in search of the philosopher's stone that can change base metals into precious gold. Alchemy is believed to be the best method of securing limitless wealth. Naturally, swindlers and fool the innocent people. This social evil and other allied vices of the Elizabethan age are already realistically presented in the 'Alchemist'.

Dr. Subtle, the alchemist, circulates report that through Face, his agent, that he is on way to discover the philosopher's stone. They cheat

their clients through clever tricks. Mammon's humour is a greed for money. He represents those Elizabethans and Jacobean who run after luxury and are ultimately duped by the Alchemist like Dr. Subtle. Mammon reflects on his getting the philosopher's stone.

"I will have all my beds blown up, not stuff
Down is too hard, and then, mine oval room
Fill'd with such pictures as Tiberius took
From Elephantis, and dull Arctino
But coldly imitated"

No doubt, there ~~was~~ ^{are} persons like Surly who warn the multitude against the unnatural greed when Mammon is trapped in the snare of Alchemy. Surly intimates him —

"... I'll believe **M.A. HAQUE**

That Alchemy is a pretty kind of game
Somewhat like tricks of the cards, to cheat a man
With charming"

Dr. Subtle does also cheat people as an astrologer. He reads the fortune lines of Dame Pliant and deceives Dapper by a promise to show him Fairy Queen. Druggier, who is to open a shop, is advised by the fortune teller:—

"And, on your stall, a puppet, with a vice
And a court-focus to call city dames.
You shall deal much with minerals."

The religious zeal of the Puritans is also exposed. Ananias and Tribulation are the typical Puritans of the period. They, in spite of their profession of righteousness, are attracted by the glamour of gold. However, they need money to establish their supremacy in England by hiring troops or bribing magistrates.

when Dr. Subtle reckones the nefarious means adopted by them, Tribulation acknowledges.

M.A. HAQUE

"True Sir they are ways that the godly brethren have invented for propagation of the glorious cause as very notable means, and whereby also themselves grow soon, and profitably, famous?"

Thus, we see that 'The Alchemist' is not a romantic comedy with thoughtless laughter but a comedy of 'Humours' rooted in the contemporary society. But, Ben Jonson's realism is not psychological. He concentrates on the external traits which are reflected not only in the 'Humours' of his characters but also in their conversation which are full of local slangs and colloquialism.

In a nutshell, the guiding 'Humour' in the characters is the greed of the contemporary society. The 'Humours' of ambition and lust for power also get sufficient exposition. Mr. Scurvy is Ben Jonson himself who understands the tricks of Dr. Subtle, the Alchemist. In spite of timely warnings, men like Mummie are easily duped. In fact, Ben Jonson leaves out incorrigible 'Humour' and exposes those which are the products of time and social situation. The Really, 'The Alchemist' is a satire on the 'Humours' of the Elizabethan age.