

71. Alchemist: realistic depiction of the age - ^{Themes} (17)
The Alchemist is his most popular of Ben Jonson's Comedies

of Humour. Ben Jonson is a dramatist of a classical bent of mind. He writes drama in full conformity to the dramatic rules expounded and practiced by the great classicists. He has freed drama from the romantic entanglements and brought it closer to the bare realities of life. In fact, he blends Comedy with Satire. Now, it is no more a mere source of thoughtless laughter but a powerful weapon to correct the follies by magnifying and exaggerating them. Jonson's plays represent lively pictures of his contemporary society with all its minutiae. The Alchemist, quite true to his artistic instinct, paints the life style of his age in a satirical vein. Let us see the play in a brief.

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All great writers are the product of their age in which they are born and intellectually fed. Likewise, Ben Jonson is also a genius of the Elizabethan and Jacobean age that refined and moulded his rational outlook. He has been well acquainted with both the virtues and vices of the period. He minutely observes the life style of the contemporary society. As he is a realist, he pinpoints the absurdities of characters and incongruities of manners. He vehemently exposes these abnormalities with satirical touches, for he wants them to correct. In fact, the present play gives a satirical exposition to the hollowness of Alchemy and Puritanism, the two dominant forces active in the English society. It paints a real picture of the London of Ben Jonson's times. He clearly states in the Prologue to the Play:-

"Our scene is London, 'cause we would make known,
No Country's mirth is better ^{than our own} matter for you whose
No clime breeds better matter for you whose
Bawd, Squire, impostor, many persons more
whose manners, now call'd humour, feed the stage"

The follies and vices of the age mainly form the Themes of this Play which are satirised in the category of Humours. That is each character is recognised by a particular trait or humour that guides his or her course of actions. Actually, the Elizabethan Society has made a considerable progress in Commerce, art and Culture. This national prosperity caused drastic changes in social habits, tastes and bred a strong lust for wealth and luxuries. Naturally, people developed faith in Alchemy, Astrology and other superstition that might enable them more wealth with less efforts. It is in such a social environment that swindlers like Dr. Subtle and Face dupe greedy people like Mammon or Dapper. Dr. Subtle poses to be Alchemist and circulates he is to discover the philosopher's stone that can turn base metals into gold. People from all sections of society are allured and cheated. Mammon stands for those who run after more and more luxuries. He imagines of his luxurious life when he will get the philosopher's stone.

"I will have all my beds blown up, not stufed down is too hard and then, more oval room full'd with such pictures as Tiberius took from Elephantis, and dull Aretine. But coldly imitated..."

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Puritanism is also exposed with all its nefarious scruples. The Puritans, here represented by Ananias and Tabulation, are also magnetised by the glammers of gold. They want to establish their supremacy in England. So, they need the philosopher's stone, for they have to hire soldiers and bribe the magistrates. They calculate to become both spiritual and temporal lords by enriching themselves. Tribulation nods in the affirmative and says:—

" Truly, Sir, they are (19)
ways that the godly brethren have invented,
For propagation of the glorious cause
the very notable means, and whereby also
Themselves grow soon, and profitably, famous."

Dr. Subtle also plays the role of an astrologer and almanac maker. He reads the fortune lines of Dame Pliant and cheats Dapper by a promise to show him Fairy Queen. He dodges Druggier, a beginner in the tobacco business, and advises him -

" And, on your stall, a puppet, with a Vice
And a Court-scurr, to call city dames:
You shall deal much with minerals."

Gamblings were also common in the contemporary society. Ben Jonson calls them the sons of Swords and Hazard. This social evil is also referred, when Face says, pointing to Dapper: -

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" He will win you,
By irresistible luck, within this fortnight,
Enough to buy a barony."

There ^{are} also references to the Plague that has recently visited the Country. Even duelling, much sought profession of the gentry, is mentioned when Dr. Subtle assures Kartil to make him a great dueller -

" Come Sir I'll have you to my chamber of demonstration
where I will show you both the grammar, and logic
And rhetoric of quarrelling."

Smoking is also a social habit. So, there is elaborate arrangement at a tobacco shop -

" He had his maple block, his silver tongs
Wincher's pipes and fire of Juniper."

Thus, we see that 'The Alchemist' depicts Ben Jonson's age with all its peculiarities. The attitudes and

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aspirations of the people are analysed and dissected in a satirical vein. No doubt, human greed, gullibility and superstitious belief are universal phenomena. But, as the Elizabethans and the Jacobean have dangerously been occupied with them, Ben Jonson exposes them with all his sincerity. Really, this play strengthens Ben Jonson's claim for an elevated place among English dramatists, realists and satirists:-