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B.A Part- II (English Hons.)

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Q. 3. Describe and Bring out the significance of the Supernatural elements in Macbeth ?

Ans : Shakespeare has made frequent and free use of the supernatural powers in his dramas. The importance of supernatural agencies in the Shakespearean drama can hardly be exaggerated. Commenting upon the significance of the supernatural elements in the Shakespearean plays , Prof. A. Nicoll remarks –

“By this means, an otherwise sordid story of murder and revenge has been carried to higher level and assumes at once a peculiar significance of its own.”

The supernatural elements play a very vital role in heightening the effect and in universalizing the appeal of Shakespearean play. The witches, ghosts, apparitions, hallucinations and malignant fate render the Shakespearean tragedy tremendous and awe-inspiring. These devices do not appeal to us in the modern age of science when all forms of superstitions are gradually passing away. But Shakespeare is not to blame on this account because he wrote for audience which fully believed in the reality and existence of invisible supernatural beings operating upon the thoughts and actions of human beings. Shakespeare employs the supernatural in his tragedies with high artistic purposes – for creating an atmosphere of mystery, awe and horror and for heightening the intensity of tragic effect. If we throw a glimpse on the play ‘Macbeth’, we find that supernatural elements like witches, ghosts and hallucinations play an important role in creating a tragic atmosphere.

The various supernatural elements employed by Shakespeare in Macbeth are as follows :

The Witches : The first and foremost dreadful form of supernatural power in ‘Macbeth’ is represented by the three witches. Shakespeare has introduced these witches in the very beginning of the play. He writes about their physical appearance , *“Old-women, lame, blear-eyed, pale, hideous, wrinkled, lean and reformed. They generally had beards. They were melancholy looking and horrid.”* Their physical appearances are such a dreadful that anyone can be horrified. On first seeing them on the deserted heath, Banquo exclaimed –

*“What are these ?
So withered and wild in their attire,
That look not like the inhabitants o’ the earth
And yet are on it”*

These three witches not only influence and control the character and actions of Macbeth, but also govern the plot of the tragedy. It is these three witches who had made a way of tragedy by changing a kind, noble, patriotic, brave general Macbeth into a cruel and unkind killer. It is these supernatural forces who had touched the softest place of Macbeth by forecasting his future that he will be “ ‘Thane of Cawdor’ , ‘Thane of Glamis’ , and later on ‘King of Scotland’ . The life of Macbeth, a noble general, changes after this incidence. He kills his king Duncan to be the king of Scotland. Later he kills Banquo and many others only to save his kingship. Thus we can say that witches have one of the most significant places in ‘Macbeth’ . It is these forces which change the plot and present a tragic environment.

Ghosts : It is the second most dreadful supernatural agency used by Shakespeare in ‘Macbeth’ . It serves the same dramatic purpose as is done by the witches. In Macbeth, it is the subjective ghost that appears. It is the ghost of Banquo, visible only to Macbeth because it is he who killed him brutally only to save his kingship. The ghost of Banquo appears in the banquet scene. When Macbeth, after entertaining all the three murderers of Banquo, returns in the banquet, he finds the ghost of Banquo occupying his place at his chair. Here the atmosphere of the play becomes impenetrably mysterious and awful. Macbeth begins to shiver with fear. His fear can be seen in these lines :

*“I have the courage to meet all the perils that may beset a man. You may approach here
like fierce Russian bear, the horned rhinoceros, or the tiger infesting the south-western
district of the Caspian.”*

Thus the ghost of Banquo creates a tragic environment. Banquo’s ghost is often interpreted by critics as the creation of the heated imagination and horror-stricken spirit of Macbeth. Lady Macbeth says : “O proper stuff ! This is the very painting of your fear.” The second ghost , which some critics call that of Banquo, but some call it of Duncan, further intensifies the tragic tone of the drama.

Hallucination and Apparitions : Apparitions and hallucinations also appear in Macbeth. They are no less mysterious and awe-inspiring than the ghosts. The ‘air drawn’ dagger seen by Macbeth before the murder of Duncan is an example of apparition. The dagger seen by Macbeth is a subjective creation – the dagger pointing to the bed chamber of the old king.

“Is this a dagger which I see heat oppressed brain ?”

When Macbeth again meets the witches, they present before his sight a series of apparitions, all hideous and frightening. One is “an armed head, another is ‘bloody child’, yet another is ‘a child with a tree in his hand’.” Thus, we can say that Shakespeare uses the Supernatural with a definite dramatic purpose. By creating an atmosphere of mystery, awe and terror, he heightens the intensity of his tragic tales. Without the intervention of the supernatural, his tragedies would not be what actually they are.

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