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The Role of Woman in Selected Renaissance Revenge Tragedies

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CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

1. The Renaissance

The term “Renaissance” means a revival of classical learning and reawaking of man to the beauty of the world after the long domination of the Middle Ages¹. In other words, it alludes to the liberation of mind from the chains of the Middle Ages. In the Renaissance period, man created a new idea about himself as a “glorious creature, capable of infinite individual development in the direction of perfection”² to whom everything was possible.

The Renaissance started in Italy in the latter half of the fourteenth century with Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), the Italian poet, Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374), another great Italian poet and humanist, and others, and continued throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It reached England at the end of the fifteenth century. It was a great shift in its concept of man and society , since it made a great balanced development of mind and body .

The Renaissance witnessed a series of social, religious, and intellectual changes which “rippled into areas of science, literature, and philosophy”³.

On the social level, it was the effect of the hundred years’ war with France (1338-1453) which awakened the national consciousness in England; the Black Death, which was “the result of uncleanness and the absence of an effective central authority”,⁴ that smote England in 1348 and led to the death of a third of its population; and

the wars of the Roses (1455-1485) which caused the decline of the Feudal system. The results of those wars were a shortage of labour (and that led to poverty), and the fact that a lot of English barons were killed in battles⁵.

The new discoveries, new geographical expeditions, and the discovery of America encouraged trade, colonization and investment abroad.. The most striking result of these discoveries was inflation, and man had to fight to face the tide of high prices⁶.

On the religious level, it was the effect of the Reformation, “the great religious upheaval”⁷ led by the German Reformation leader Martin Luther (1483-1546) and the Swiss reformation leader Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531), which broke out in Germany and spread away all over Europe. That revolution was against the corruption of the Church of Rome, i.e. the Catholic Church and led to the establishment of Protestant Church. The leaders of the Reformation sought to restore Christianity to its early purity as a simple religion; therefore, they believed in religious liberty⁸. People had to be free to worship according to their conscience. The reformers wanted to make people honest and to make them free. Therefore, they tried to free people from the teachings of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church taught people that the present life was only a preparation for the life to come, and that men had not to try to know too much about it or even enjoy themselves.⁹ And that the priests only could understand and interpret the Scripture. The reformers threw off those restrictions and maintained that man was

capable of understanding the scriptures for himself by using a translated Bible.¹⁰ The Reformation, through its insistence on people's freedom, allowed people to think of revenge as a part of their right.

On the intellectual level, Renaissance intellectual life was expressed through Humanism as a new era. That philosophy emphasized the importance of dignity, the personal worth of the individual, his perfection, and the central importance of human values as opposed to religious beliefs. It considered this life a worthy thing of interest; therefore, it promoted secular values, put reason above revelation and magic, and saw man as a master of his own destiny¹¹. To the humanists, man was the centre of the universe. Humanism viewed man as limitless as if there were no bounds to human greatness. It even adopted classical culture as a source of understanding man and his needs¹².

According to that philosophy, man could seek revenge because it regarded man as the crown of creation. As a result man saw that he had the right to have revenge against the person who had injured him without respect for law or religion. Humanism focuses on the potential powers and gifts of man made him think that he was the master of the world to whom everything was possible including vengeance. That philosophy made man believe that he was chosen by God to establish justice on earth by taking law into his own hand, and thus his act of revenge would be a service to god and not an usurpation of God's role.

2- The Character of Woman during the Renaissance Period

The Renaissance period did not bring marked changes in the status of women and certainly did not emancipate them despite the religious, social, and intellectual changes which influenced man's new way of life¹³. Women were socially looked down and viewed to be weak creatures whose mental abilities had no chance of development. Therefore, they were almost good for nothing.

The idea that "Eve was conceived from the rib of Adam and was therefore inferior to him"¹⁴ was dominant in the Renaissance and led to the subjection of women. It was that subjection, which obliged woman to be rebellious and disobedient to her father, mother, brother, or husband. She was also obliged to do what she desired to prove to herself that she was, at least, a human being just like man and had the right to enjoy the same rights and privileges that man enjoyed. In this respect, the Renaissance woman tried her best to reconstruct a world in which she could enjoy a larger range of freedom and respect. She began to highlight and shape a new picture of a more dignified woman. Luckily enough, she was morally fortified and assisted by the image of the Queen Elizabeth whose presence on the English throne gave her the right to demand some more dignity. Otherwise, she would be crushed by a merciless materialism¹⁵. The matter which encouraged women in this respect was the doctrine of "chaste marriage"¹⁶ which was taken from Martin Luther. Although this doctrine, which also represented the Puritan attitudes toward women,

was a kind of spiritual freedom for women because it attacked some customs such as force marriage, marriage for money, and marriages between very old men and very young women, the Puritans' emphasis on chastity and virginity represented another restraint upon the emancipation of women in the seventeenth century, i.e. in the Jacobean period. When a Jacobean gentleman wanted to marry a woman, he assumed that one of the things he was buying was her virginity.¹⁷ Thus, having been afraid of losing chastity on the part of women, the society deprived them of their rights. That provoked woman to seek revenge against the society which wronged her. That picture of a revengeful woman is reflected in several of the plays of this period since she was no longer the silent and obedient woman. In other words, the representations of women in the Renaissance drama reflect the nature and the characters of women in the real life. Since in real life, women tried to get independence and break the chains of subjection, women characters in drama speak of their restrictions that men and society imposed on their lives. They had less control over their material lives than men; therefore, their positions were subordinated by the community response which suggested that women had no right to express themselves or to give opinions and they had to be submissive and obedient. In spite of that this period witnessed disobedience and revolt on the part of individual women which can be considered as a challenge to Patriarchal tradition.¹⁸

The literary significance of women characters makes them no less important than men in such tragedies as Thomas Kyd (1558-

1594), *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587); William Shakespeare (1564-1616), *Hamlet* (1600-1601); John Webster (1580-1630), *The White Devil* (1612) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (1623); and Thomas Middleton (1580-1627), *Women, Beware Women*(1621) and *The Changeling* (1622).

Renaissance dramatists' treatment of women has always attracted attention. Their attitudes toward women were part of "a common stock"¹⁹ to be found in the plays of almost all Renaissance dramatists- in Thomas Kyd, William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, John Marston, Thomas Middleton, Thomas Dekker, John Webster, Thomas Heywood, Philip Messinger, and even Cyril Tourneur, Francis Beaumont, and John Fletcher. Those dramatists asked the same questions about women and their nature, about men's attitudes to them, and society views about their treatment. In their plays, the dramatists tried to give answers to these questions.

3. Renaissance Revenge Tragedy

Revenge tragedy is one of the most important types of drama in England in the Renaissance period. It is a kind of tragedy, as its name implies, in which the leading catalyst is revenge and the progress of the action depends on that motive²⁰, i.e. the tragedy is brought about by the pursuit and accomplishment of revenge.

In this kind of tragedy, there is "a desire to retaliate for an injury"²¹. This means that an injured or a victimized person feels grudges against his injurer and cannot feel relief until his wish of

revenge comes true. It is sometimes considered as an honourable action to restore honour to one's self or family, i.e. in many plays, we find that it is the duty of the injured to defend himself and his family by restoring honour. In this case, it is not an undesirable motive. It is even called "wild justice"²² because a person does the action of revenge by himself by following brutal ways with no consideration to the sad results of this action, which is similar to animals' action, just to prove that he has the ability to obtain justice by himself without the help of law.

Whether revenge is an honourable action or "wild justice", it is forbidden by law and religion. For if everyone avenges himself or others by himself without consideration to, or respect for law and religion, there will be chaos. Even if a man is injured, there is law which should avenge him. If the law cannot say its word to bring about justice and vengeance, God can do so: "vengeance is mine, and I will reward"²³. So, it is not man's responsibility or duty to avenge and he must leave it to God. However, "despite the biblical injunction to leave revenge to God, there had been a long tradition of private revenge in England"²⁴.

At first revenge appeared among primitive people and it was up to the injured person alone to return the injury if he could. Thus, revenge was a matter of strength and not right or duty. Then it took the form of obligation, i.e. it is the duty of the relatives to return any transgression and injustice done to any member of the family because "[w]ho offends a single member of the family now offends

all”²⁵. Later on private revenge was developed to include anyone of the causer’s relatives that can satisfy the injured’s family.

At the time of the Anglo-Saxons, revenge took the form of ransom. This means, it is the responsibility of the victim’s family only to return the feud and not anyone else. Then when William the conqueror invaded Britain in 1066 and became the ruler, he established a new kind of revenge called “the appeal”²⁶ which was done by a judicial combat. The appeal was settled in a manner similar to the private revenge.

In Tudor times, the violence, which had been the duty of the whole family, became confined to the individual and private revenge increased especially among the aristocratic people although there were laws preventing it. The laws were not effective to put an end to it and the idea of “redress by private active was still very much alive”²⁷.

In the Elizabethan Age, the law had the power to control everything including revenge. People respected the law because if they did not follow it, they would be punished and put in prison²⁸.

When James 1 ascended the throne in 1603, quarrels and disputes increased because James 1 took sides with Scotts against the English. He neglected the English rights. This matter made the English very angry and wanted to have revenge upon the Scotts when the former failed to achieve revenge by law or legal means. Thus, at James 1’s reign the country was unsettled and bloodshed increased.²⁹

Revenge can be said to be a universal human impulse, which knows no time boundaries. Thus, there are causes or motives which provoke people to seek revenge. They are: love, marriage of inconvenience, malice, anger, hatred, jealousy, pride, and ambition.

Love is a main motive of revenge and murder. Love finds its fullest expression in vengeance. That is to say, vengeance is an assertion that the loved one is not forgotten. It drives a person to have revenge upon even his relatives because he believes that it is his duty to have revenge for his beloved just to prove to the latter that he is loyal to his memory.

Marriage of inconvenience is another prime motive of revolt and revenge. It implies that the pressures, which society puts on man through forcing him to marry against his will, lead to seek revenge on the part of the victim who sees that it is part of his freedom to marry according to his will³⁰. So, marriage against his will forces the person to have revenge upon the person he is going to marry to remove this obstacle from his way and to be able to marry whoever he wants and not what the society, representing by the family, wants.

Malice is “the crux in determining murder, and is implied in the manner of the deed”³¹. It makes man kill another without provocation. A malicious man is heartless. He kills others without even feeling pity or sympathy.

Anger “comes from personal wrongs”³². It is short lived, as it reaches its peak only for specific moments after which it subsides. But through these moments, man can take his revenge, i.e. man,

through these moments, loses his temper, and behaves like a mad person. So, whatever he performs is out of his control. Later on, when he feels quiet, he is full of pain and feels sorry for what he has committed³³.

Hatred can be defined as a natural anger which will be turned to unnatural malice after a period of time³⁴. It is everlasting, i.e. man's hatred remains for a long period and never rests or is relieved unless he achieves his aim, which is the destruction of the victim and, of course, by means of revenge. After his revenge, he never feels sorry or sympathy toward his victim. He is as cold as ice as if he had a stony heart.

Jealousy is another prime motive of revenge and murder. It is boundless in revenge, since it fills a man's eye with hatred and malice. It makes him lose his balance³⁵.

Pride is considered "the forerunner of revenge and death"³⁶. It controls humane passions or sentiments in man and makes him another one. He becomes unnatural and behaves strangely under the spell of pride to the extent that it pushes him to revenge to satisfy his instincts.

Ambition and revenge are close to each other, i.e. they are combined to make one filled with "revengeful ambition"³⁷. This "revengeful ambition" makes man active, earnest, and full of alacrity. The ambition of man will not stop whatever happens unless he takes his revenge even if he knows that he will gain nothing out of his revengeful acts.

Envy is “the greatest Elizabethan vice”³⁸ because an envious man is greedy and merciless, and all he wants is to achieve his goals. Therefore, the revengeful schemes of such a person are continuous and destructive. The revenger can satisfy his revenge by different ways. For instance: direct assault, poisoning, cunning, arousing suspicion or disputes, or even by plotting against the victim or against the country³⁹.

Revenge tragedy has its origin in the plays of the Roman dramatist Lucius Annaeus Seneca. He is considered the father of revenge tragedy and many English Renaissance dramatists considered him their model, especially the Elizabethan dramatists who “took almost every dramatic element that was to be found in Seneca”⁴⁰.

Seneca establishes new ways of presenting themes in his plays, such as the theme of revenge and violence. His contribution to drama is also illustrated through the division of the play into five acts. As in ancient Greek tragedy, Seneca uses the chorus as a commentator on certain events in order to show the significance of their respective scenes. He also uses supernatural characters, such as fairies and ghosts, to evoke the motive of revenge in the protagonist⁴¹. He indulges the protagonist in long soliloquies, speeches, and stichomythia to reveal his inner thoughts and passions and to make the audience feel either sympathy or hatred toward his character. In Seneca’s tragedies, there are messengers who narrate the offstage actions, especially those unfit to be enacted on stage. Besides that, all

his tragedies carry moral lessons and all the descriptions of violent actions are to awaken the spectators. Thus, it is not surprising that Seneca is considered the leader of revenge tragedy, since most of the characteristics of his tragedies are the general characteristics of revenge tragedy in Renaissance England.

Other characteristics of revenge tragedy include that the prominent role is assigned to a Machiavellian villain, and that the plot “revolves around the murder by a person in power of a near relative, wife or husband of the central character, who is then forced with the problem of how, or sometimes whether to carry out revenge, against a murderer who, because of his social impatience, is out of reach of ordinary justice”⁴². The atmosphere is one of terror and gloom. The terror is produced by the piling up of crime, which is often monstrous.

With the coming of Jacobean revenge tragedy, certain characteristics are omitted and replaced by other characteristics by the dramatists of this period. The characters of fairies and ghosts are replaced by characters that are more realistic than those in the Elizabethan revenge tragedies. Moreover characters are depicted with more psychological depth. What is called “the Machiavellian schemer”⁴³ becomes more prominent. In short, Jacobean revenge tragedy is characterized by being “critical, somber, disillusioned, in style it is more conscious of social abuses and rivalries”⁴⁴ than Elizabethan revenge tragedy.

The faith in life, the vitality and the elation of mind that characterized the Elizabethan age were fading out in the Jacobean age⁴⁵. In the Jacobean age, however, the centre seems to have moved from certainty to skepticism. Immediately after James I's succession, there was a feeling of disenchantment due to his personal unpopularity because he stood with the Scots against the English. This produces dissatisfaction and a feeling of restlessness⁴⁶. So, the Jacobean skeptical thinking was reflected in drama. During this age, the drama "revealed a decided preference for action over talk; high adventure, crime, passion, and tales of success and failure"⁴⁷. The tales of success and failure were interpretations of contemporary life and that is why "there was a widespread growth of realism in art and cynicism in thought"⁴⁸. As a result, the Jacobean dramatists exhibited in their plays grotesque qualities such as violent death, suicide, murder, bloodshed, and cunning.

Whereas the Elizabethan dramatists were concerned with clarity and exhilaration with love, even the material chosen was romance or myth which shows that they reflected the desires of their audience rather than their normal lives and depicted a soft life⁴⁹, the Jacobean dramatists were concerned with death and unusual, they developed "a transition from wonder and discovery to assessment and criticism"⁵⁰. That is why their drama is characterized by gloomy mood and macabre atmosphere.

Besides that, incest, insanity, adultery, rape, murder, infanticide, suicide, poisoning, treachery, charnel houses and arson

are also major characteristics of Jacobean revenge tragedy⁵¹. In the end, there are a number of deaths and the stage is left filled with dead bodies in revenge tragedies.

CONCLUSION

In the Renaissance period, great social, religious, and intellectual changes took place. Those changes, though they did not bring marked improvements in the status of women or emancipate them, influenced women in that they tried their best to rebuild a world in which they would enjoy a larger range of freedom and respect. Since women were still given no right to lead an independent life, that provoked them to seek revenge for themselves, since it was the only way in which women could preserve their personal integrity.

That picture of a Renaissance woman is reflected in several of the plays of that period, in which Renaissance dramatists focus on the portrayal of women according to received ideas about women's behaviour and personality, and their plays provide voices in which women speak of their struggle over marriage, sexual relations, and restrictions which society imposed on their lives.

Through this thesis, we conclude that women characters in the Renaissance period play conspicuous and remarkable roles in revenge tragedies, though they are looked down upon and deprived of human rights, when they dare defy social norms, which ignore them, in order to assert their individuality. Thus, their behaviour is due either to a personal feeling of injustice or as a part of common social practice in which women lead for revenge. For instance, Bel-imperia's revenge is

caused by a personal feeling of injustice, whereas Beatrice-Joanna's revenge is against society. So, women cannot be blamed entirely, because it is society that forces them to follow wrong decisions or illegal ways in order to be what they want to be and not what society demands. That obliges them to commit transgression, and their transgression is a challenge to the persistent conception of the authority of man upon woman. This transgression also leads to their destruction and downfall.

Though women's roles-in the selected revenge tragedies of the present thesis-remain subordinate to those of men, they range, in particular, between revengers, as in Bel-imperia in *The Spanish Tragedy* and Beatrice-Joanna in *The Changeling*, and provokers or tragic catalysts for revenge, as in the case of Isabella in *The Spanish Tragedy*, Ophelia and Gertrude in *Hamlet*, Gratiana, Glorianna, and Castiza in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, and Diaphanta in *The Changeling*.

In general, these women can be seen as a means of providing pathos, suspense, and surprise. They embody a whole range of fantasies concerning marriage, sexuality, seduction, cruelty, compassion, and grace.

The roles of these women, in these revenge tragedies, are crucial to each plot in a very powerful way. Without them, there would have been no revenge tragedies because the reason behind the tragedy in each of the selected revenge tragedies here is a woman. Although each

of these women does little in comparison to what the society of man would allow, they assert themselves as catalysts within the plays, and within the genre(i.e. revenge tragedy) itself. Women in the Renaissance period had little control over their fates. Although women in the selected revenge tragedies here are reflections of Renaissance women in real life, because they are examples of men's ideas about women, they demonstrate the crucial and necessary presence of women and their consequential influence upon life and society in any time and any period.