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RENAISSANCE: ELIZABETHAN LITERATURE

Explained by Dr. Vipul V. Kapoor, Associate Professor

“If I could create an ideal world, it would be an England with the fire of the Elizabethans, the correct taste of the Georgians, and the refinement and pure ideals of the Victorians.”

H. P. Lovecraft

INTRODUCTION:

Renaissance or the Elizabethan age is hailed as the fast breathing and the most flowering period in the history of English literature. Almost all forms of literature rose to its ultimate height of success during this golden period of English literature. William Shakespeare, the father of English tragedy and romantic comedy became the dazzling star in the galaxy of Elizabethan literature. Edmund Spenser took English poetry to a new height of romanticism and lyricism. Ben Jonson experimented with the form of comedy and produced a new type of comedy



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– Comedy of Humor. In the field of essay writing, Francis Bacon's name has become immortal as he published the essays full of wisdom of practical life. Sir Philip Sidney inaugurated a new era of criticism by writing 'An Apology of Poetry', the first English defense of poetry.

MEANING OF RENAISSANCE:

The term “**RENAISSANCE**” comes from French language, which means “**rebirth**” or “**revival**”. The period from 1500 to 1650 / 1558 to 1625 is generally considered as the broad period of Renaissance in England. Renaissance in England means the gradual revival of human mind after the darkness of Middle ages.

The movement of Renaissance actually began in Italy during the 14th century. It travelled in the whole Europe and entered into England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. The magic of this movement brought drastic changes in the social, economic, religious and literary life of the people.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUD:

When we examine the history of England in particular and Europe in general, we come across three major events



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which brought this “**revival**” or “**rebirth**”.

1. Invention of Typewriter: During the period of Renaissance, the type writing machine was invented for the first time. Before this invention, the authors used to write the copies for the readers. The type writing machine proved to be a blessing to England. Social, religious and literary writings were now printed in mass. Books were easily available to the readers. Hence, there was an increase in the authors as well as the readers. Reading became a habit of the people and this rubbed off the ignorance and orthodoxy from the English mind.

2. Defeat of Spanish Armada: The spirit of nationalism and patriotism was found as England defeated the Spanish Armada. The people of England were now infused with patriotism. Unity and self-confidence was found and this brought about the development of England. People welcomed each and every change or invention with great courage and patriotism.

3. Overseas Exploration: Columbus, Vasco de Gama and others went to different corners of the world (India, America, Caribbean Islands, Africa) and



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returned with their ships loaded with shining silk, spices, diamonds and other expensive materials. This made Europe richer and materialism entered in the life of the people.

LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ELIZABETHAN AGE:

1. **INTEREST IN GREEK LITERATURE:** The invention of movable type-writer during Renaissance gave birth to interest in the study of Greek literature and philosophy. The great poets and philosophers like Homer, Virgil, Plato, Aristotle and others were studied largely. As a result, there was a deep impact of Greek literature on English literature. English authors polished the Greek style of writing and produced the literature which was shining like a glass due to removal of loopholes in Greek literature.
2. **ABUNDANCE OF OUTPUT:** The period of Renaissance was very rich in literary productions of all kinds, literature was given a great boost up by

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Queen Elizabeth. There was abundance of pamphlets and treatises. The output of literature was very wide. Infinite poetry was written and drama, both tragedy and comedy, became the passion of the people.

3. MATERIALISM & INDIVIDUALISM: There were great changes and improvements taking place in material surroundings in England. The great English explorers went to West Indies, Africa and India. They returned to England with their ships loaded with fragrant spices, “to eat, drink and be merry” was the philosophy accepted by the English people. There was a great effect of this materialism on English literature of the time. Marlowe beautifully expressed this craze for materialism found among the English people, in ‘Doctor Faustus’.

“O, what a world of profit and delight,
Of power and omnipotence
Is promised to a studious artisan,
All things that move between the quiet poles



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Shall be at my command.”

Thus, literature of this time mainly expressed the materialism of the people.

4. **SPIRIT OF INDEPENDENCE:** Because of the individualism, people of England became extravagant to a large extent. God, heaven, death all these became the fairy tales told by an idiot. This spirit of independence finds a fine expression in the plays of Marlowe. In his ‘Tamburlaine, the Great’, Mortimer rightly declares:

“A god is not so glorious as a king,
I think, the pleasure they enjoy in heaven
Cannot compare with kingly joys of the earth.”

Not only this, the spirit of independence was found among the authors too. No doubt, they borrowed largely from the ancient Greek literature, but they molded it with their imagination so as to make the



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dross into gold. Spenser introduced the Spenserian stanza which achieved great popularity during the time.

5. **DEVELOPMENT OF DRAMA:** During Renaissance developed into its maturity. If Shakespeare was the master of tragedy, Ben Jonson was equally a great master of comedy. Shakespeare's four immortal tragedies – 'Hamlet', 'Macbeth', 'King Lear' and 'Othello' became the jewels of English drama. Comedies, tragedies, romances, historical plays, tragi-comedies – all reached their ultimate height of development.

"Considering the wealth of poetic drama that has come down to us from the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, it is surprising that so little of any value has been added since."

James Fenton

6. **POPULARITY OF POETRY:** English poetry became so much popular that it came to be known as "the nest of singing birds". There were a number of poets



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writing melodious, romantic and picturesque poetry. Spense was the real master of poetry who wrote unweathering poetry like 'Fairie Queene', 'Shepherd's Calender' etc. Apart from Spenser, there was Sidney, Thomas Wyatt and many more who popularized lyrics in English.

7. RISE OF PROSE LITERATURE: Before Renaissance, English prose was living under a great stress and impact of Latin. But during the 16th century, it came out in its real color. English prose acquired the importance of its own. There were many prose writers like Thomas Elyot, George Cavendish, Thomas Wilson, Francis Bacon and others who became the fountain-heads of prose literature.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, the beginning of Renaissance during the 16th century was indeed a heavenly blessing to English literature. Poetry, drama, prose – all rose to a delirious height. If one wants to read the greatest tragedies, comedies or the most melodious poetry, he/she has no other option but to open the golden pages of English



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**literature when Shakespeare, Marlowe, Ben Jonson,
Spenser and Sidney lived.**

