Twelfth Night: Excellences And Defects Of Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was an English author and playwright who was generally considered to be the greatest writer in English and the best dramatist in the world. His works recognised worldwide, capture the spectrum of human passions and struggles. People are still enjoying his work all over the world. when it comes to writing plays, he can be called a legend. He is the epitome of English literature. But as a human being, he cannot escape making mistakes. He is very famous for his comedies like he was born to write comedy but his tragedies are not as good as his comedies according to some critics. Samuel Johnson, English leading literary leader of the mid and late 18th centuries, in his “preface to Shakespeare” outlines his editorial principles and offers an appreciative evaluation of the “excellences” and “defects” of Shakespeare’s plays. This essay is regarded as a seminal source of English literary criticism.

The critical analysis of the “Twelfth Night” by William Shakespeare is described in the light of “preface to Shakespeare”-

Twelfth night is a comedy play where Shakespeare examines the lives, misunderstandings and relationships of Illyrian nobles. There is a girl named Viola who disguises herself as a young man Cesario and joins Duke Orsino’s service. Cesario becomes Orsino's s favourite so he asks cesario to get him to court countess Olivia, but instead, Olivia falls for cesario. Here the triangle of love is complete and all are unhappy. There are many humorous scenes like comic wordplay and the joke played on pretentious malvolio etc. Sir Toby, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Maria, Feste and Malvolio etc these are the characters who created most of the comic scenes throughout the play.Then in Illyria arrives viola’s twin brother Sebastian, who she thought had died in the shipwreck. Olivia mistakes and marries Sebastian for cesario. This marriage makes Orsino angry as he thinks cesario betrays him. But when the play comes to an end viola exposes real identity and dispelling doubts.viola and Sebastian are reunited. Orsino is asking viola to marry him and she agrees.This play provides a happy ending where the lovers meet each other and enjoy wedded bliss.

Excellences of Shakespeare:

1-Shakespeare is a poet of human nature. By his characters, he tried to offer a faithful representation of reality. In this play the characters have different passions and principles which represent human nature.

2- The plays of Shakespeare are full of “practical axioms and domestic experiences”.In the Twelfth Night, through the character of viola we can learn a lot for example how she handles the situation after the horrible shipwreck and disguises herself as a boy for her survival.Even the play’s title has great significance.

3-His characters are relatable to real life people unlike other plays. Even the fiction looks real.Readers often find simple dialogues and realistic incidents. In twelfth night, through the normal conversation he shows the misunderstandings and pains for which the main characters suffer. Throughout the play, he portrays the foolishness of human nature and also other

features like madness, disguise, desire and pain etc.He uses the theme of deception which is considered viola’s fault because she deceits people around her and complicates the plots.We can easily relate it to our life because it can happen to us at any time.

4-According to Samuel Johnson, most plays overemphasized the subject of love but it is quite opposite in Shakespeare’s works. In Twelfth Night, he does not emphasis the theme of love rather he focuses on other passions and emotions.

5-It is easy to differentiate each characters in his plays. In this play, every character is different and unique. Orsino, Olivia, viola and Sebastian are the main characters who have different personalities, then feste and Maria seem wise and witty again sir Toby,sir Andrew Aguecheek and Malvolio are the comic figures in this play.

Defects of Shakespeare:

1- Shakespeare focuses on pleasing rather than teaching. His purpose was not to instruct but to please. Though the play twelfth night offers a happy ending the readers do not find any moral purpose. Even the character of Malvolio gets no poetic justice in this play.

2-Shakespeare has little concern for time and place. Three unities were never maintained in his plays except for action. In this play, he also violates the chronology.

3-The plots of Shakespeare’s plays are often loosely constructed and created carelessly. In the first part of this play, he writes very well but when the end comes the readers find the plot very confusing though lovers meet each other their love was not that real except viola’s love for Orsino. Here, Orsino's love compares to opal ,a gem which changes its shades due to the condition of the sun.so the ending seems like Shakespeare does not put much effort.

4-The scenes are gross and licentious in his comedies. Even the gentleman and the ladies are not gentle and elegant enough. In the Twelfth Night Duke Orsino and lady Olivia do not behave like royal people. Orsino is not brave enough to express his own feelings so he sends his messengers again and again. whereas Maria and feste seem more intelligent and witty. Again the servant malvio try to act serious than sir Toby and sir Andrew Aguecheek who is member of a royal family. Here we find misrepresentation of the image of a certain class and culture.

5-His play narrative shows undue pomp of diction. His works seem to be wordy, prolix and verbose. We find difficult words, repetition, and the use of puns and quibbles in his plays. In the Twelfth night, Feste and Olivia use a lot of difficult words and puns to express their thoughts.

In “Twelfth night “ we find both “excellences” and “defects” in the light of “preface to Shakespeare”. Samuel Johnson’s essay shows that his criticisms are influenced by his sense of reality and remain one of the historical and important interests.