

In this chapter we will learn:

- Meaning of term 'Renaissance' and its definitions by critics.
- Historical background, features and impact of Renaissance on English Literature

(A) THE RENAISSANCE

The Renaissance is a French word which means re-birth, revival or re-awakening. The Renaissance was both a revival of ancient classical mythology, literature and culture as well as a re-awakening of the human mind, after the long sleep of the dark Middle Ages, to the wonder, the glory and the beauty of the human body and the world of nature. It was as if mankind were awakened from a long sleep and looked at the glory of nature with astonishment. "It was a re-discovery by mankind of himself and of the world." It was a period of great illumination in the life of humanity. It was a revival of the cult of Beauty, "the beauty of woman, the beauty of nature, and the beauty of art and literature." It began in Italy as early as the 14th century with the works of Petrarch and others and was greatly stimulated by the fall of Constantinople in 1453, by the invention of printing in Germany about this very time, and the great discoveries of scientists and navigators which followed. Its influence reached England as late as the last years of the 15th century and the opening years of the 16th.

As Compton-Rickett puts it, "*while Italy was afire with the new sunrise, it was still for England merely a streak of light upon the horizon.*"

The Medieval world was curiously limited and narrow. It was limited spiriually, intellectually and physically. Geographically, its boundaries were narrow; to the North it was bound by frozen seas, to the West by the Atlantic, and to the South and the East by the Mediterranean. Astronomically, its boundaries were fixed by the closed system of Ptolemy, with the earth at its centre, and with the heavenly bodies revolving in a fixed circle. Intellectually, it was limited by the fact that all books were written by hand and so literary culture was confined to a few. Spiritually it was confined within the bounds of Catholic Orthodoxy, which nobody could question, and by scholastic philosophy.

However, even as early as the 14th century, this limited, narrow world had begun to decay. It was specially so in Italy where the study of Greek literature had been revived and keen interest was

being taken in the humanistic culture of ancient Greece and Rome. There was an attempt to rebuild medieval culture according to the ancient Greco-Roman pattern of life. The study of humanity or humanism (*The study of ancient Greek and Roman literature and thought is called "humanity" because of its emphasis on things human and secular as opposed to the divine studies of medieval scholars*) received a great stimulus from the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453. While ancient literature had been practically lost to the Western world, it still flourished in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire with its capital at Constantinople. At the fall of this city, countless Greek scholars poured into Italy, and sought its shelter. They brought with them the precious manuscripts of the ancient writers. The classical masterpieces fired the imagination of the Italian scholars and it was felt that the ancient Greco-Roman culture was more modern than their own and that their own culture should be reconstructed according to this ideal. The invention of the printing press multiplied books and carried the fruits of classical renaissance to the people at large, in the various countries of Europe.

In Italy the Renaissance was not merely a literary revival, it was also a scientific and artistic revival. It not only produced splendid poetry but also splendid painting and sculpture. It gave man a new idea of life and morals as is exemplified in *The Prince* of Machiavelli and *the Courtier* of Castiglione. Both the books advocated a vigorous life of action and worldly success, even by the use of questionable means. The geographical and astronomical methods of the ancients were also revived and in this way there was a break-down of the closed universe of the Middle Ages, Astronomers—*Copernicus* and *Galileo*—rediscovered the spherical shape of the earth and that it moved round the sun, and further that it was not the centre of the universe. The warped and narrow medieval cosmology suffered a blow that in shaking it shook also religious faith. Man was spiritually liberated and free-thinking was stimulated.

The discoveries of astronomy suggested to explorers and merchants the possibility of reaching the fabulous wealth of East by sailing into the unknown West. It was in the last decade of the 15th century (1492) that Columbus reached America and Vasco De Gama reached India by sailing round the Cape of Good Hope. These epoch-making discoveries were the result not so much of intellectual curiosity as of the lust for the fabulous wealth of the East. The imagination of Europe was fired by the accounts of travellers, of the sights and scenes they had seen, and of the wealth that could be had in the East. The romance and mystery of the untried seas could not but have a profound influence on the thought and literature of the period.

Thus the immense widening of man's intellectual, spiritual and physical horizons, which we term as the Renaissance, was the result of two impulses: (1) the inspiration derived from the re-birth of classical learning, and (2) the stirring of men's imagination by the

great voyages of discovery. These twin threads run through all Renaissance literature.

A number of works of the great writers of ancient Greece and Rome were soon translated into English. In the Elizabethan age, there was a spurt of translations. As Legouis put it, "The rich soil was fertilised by a deep layer of translations". The printing press swiftly placed these rich spoils within the easy reach of the common man. These translations opened for the English people, "a window on the enchanted world of classical antiquity, which appeared with all the freshness of a new discovery, the world of the gods and goddesses of Greece, and great soldiers and statesmen of the Roman Empire." The great works of dramatists like Marlowe and Shakespeare, and of poets like Spenser were inspired by the Renaissance spirit.

It this way was prepared the audience which could understand and appreciate the allusions and references to ancient literature and mythology with which Renaissance drama is heavily over-loaded. It was the classical drama which gave to English drama its divisions into scenes and Acts, and unities of time, place and action, its rules of artistic composition. These translations and borrowings provided the dramatists with an endless variety of themes. The Elizabethan dramatist does not invent his own plot, for there is no need for him to do so. Plagiarism was the order of the day because the temptation was too great. It is the Renaissance impulse which accounts for the Roman or Mediterranean setting of Elizabethan drama, and for the extensive use of blank verse. Plutarch's *Lives* translated by Thomas North, Montaigne's *Essays* translated by Florio, and Chapman's Homer, became the everyday reading of many and had considerable influence on Elizabethan literature. The language was enriched with new words and the translators learned the art of using words with power and dignity. *English style and prosody were formed by these countless translations.* They provided the English writers with the necessary discipline and training.

To study the classics, English scholars had to go to Italy and this contact with Italy, for a second time, inspired English writers. Close on the heels of the men of learning went the men of fashion. The classical learning and art of Italy, its rich sensuousness, and its splendour, dazzled their eyes and corrupted their morals. The young gallants imported not only the books of light reading of Italy—its novelle or short story, often licentious or sensational, which had such profound influence on English drama and novel—but also its morals, and its ways of living and dressing. This wholesale assimilation of Italian manners and vices was deplored by such sober scholars and educationists as Roger Ascham, Sir John Checke and Thomas Wilson. These Italianate gentlemen became the chief part of the stock-in-trade of the satirists and moralists of the day. Satirical references to the fashion, and extravagance of these youngmen are frequent in the plays of Shakespeare. The licentiousness of Italy is reflected in such poems as Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* and Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. However,

the censure of the scholars and the reformists held the evil in check and as Mairs puts it, "*Italian vice stopped short of real life; poisoning and hired ruffianism flourished only on the stage.*" The literature of England was enriched by an immense looting of Italian treasures, but the faults of Italy could not infect English life to any great extent.

The revival of ancient Greco-Roman culture had a profound impact on the ideals of life. The ascetic ideal of the Middle Ages was replaced by the new ideal of the enjoyment of life. Man had again grown conscious of the glory and wonder of the Creation and the beauty of human life and human body. This new ideal found reflection everywhere in Renaissance literature. *The zest for life instinctively and naturally found its expression in song.* England was transformed into a veritable nest of singing birds. Every one sang, down from the flowery courtier to the man in the street. *Men craved for entertainment and in response to this demand, there came the drama and the novelle*—stories of love, bloodshed and violence, often licentious. Consequently, the lyric, the drama and the short story are the characteristic modes of expression in the Elizabethan era.

Not enjoyment alone but also action was the new ideal. Energetic men of action were admired and not the ascetic or the poet leading retired, secluded life. A perfect gentleman was a man of all accomplishment. To fashion such a gentleman is the aim of Spenser's *Fairy Queen*. Hence the close connection between life and letters that we find running through all Elizabethan literature. The noted Elizabethan writers are also energetic men of action. They are not only well-versed in the classics but are also accomplished courtiers, soldiers and statesmen. Sir Philip Sydney is the best representative of the Renaissance ideal of a perfect gentleman. Literature is either an expression of their life and activity or the necessary escape from life: this latter fact accounts for the popularity of the pastoral romance and poetry—the *Arcadias* of Sir Philip Sydney and others.
