

A Study of Moliere's *The Miser* within the Apparatus of Northrop

Frye's Theory of Modes

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The prolific playwrights whose names are associated with comedy are Aristophanes, Johnson, Menander, Moliere etc. These are the men of innovative ideas who contributed a lot in the treasure of English literature. Comedy actually flourished at Athens by Aristophanes who is also considered as the 'Father' of comedy. His comedies are known to the world as the Old Comedy. After its declination when the social order moved towards a new phase, the New Comedy came into existence. The name associated with the New Comedy was Menander. In the comedies of Menander, the element of fantastic lyric was vanished and extravagant characters like the birds, the frogs which were popular at the time of Aristophanes were abandoned and also imaginary characters were lost its importance. Instead of this the use of realistic plots came into existence. "Menander's play- world points forward towards more than one kind of later comic endeavour; it may be associated with the comedy of social manners which flourished in the seventeenth century, and it may also be seen to have connexions with the Elizabethan comedy of romance." (1668: 16)

The seventeenth century can be regarded as the significant time period in the history of literature. In this period itself the France started rising in terms of power and wealth under the leadership of King Louis XIII. Moliere, a man hand full of talent was born on 15th January 1662. His parents were engaged in the business of *tapissier* which in present times known as interior decoration. They named him as Jean Baptiste Poquelin. A student of civil law at the University of Orleans went against the wishes of his parents and joined theatre. Earlier times, since 4th century the actors were not given respectable position in the Roman Catholic Church. They were excommunicated. They cannot be buried, married or given any other sacrament of the church unless they repented before the church. Following the

common practice of French actors of changing names he named himself as Moliere which in future became very popular in the realm of French playwrights.

Adopting the profession of dramatist in those days was not everybody's cup of tea. Many obstacles ceased Moliere's way but confronting all the problems like the sun shines after every stormy night he became a successful famous playwright of his time and left his stamp in the form of great comic plays. Devoted towards comedy and finding his true love in comedy he began writing full-length play. His first comedy was *Affected Young Ladies* (1659). Some of his penned works are: *The School for Wives* (1663), *The Misanthrope* (1666), *Tartuffe* (1649), *Don Juan* (1665), *The Bourgeois Gentleman* (1670), *The Imaginary Invalid* (1673) etc. Moliere theatre was the theatre of artificiality. He made frequent use of masks in his comedy which has dual purpose. First is to divulges about the character and secondly the masks which people wear to hide their true selves. His umpteen plays earned him the reputation of greatest comedian of his heyday.

Since centuries the word comedy has been a debatable term. It is not necessary that comedy always brings humor and laughter to the audience. The term also refers to the plays or narrative which ends with a positive resolution. It is quite certain that the comic situations which bring humor among audience centuries ago are different from that of present century in terms of the clothes, the frequent use of masks etc. but surprisingly the foundation is same. Story of the Lovers who confront problems in their wedding due to an old person who came in their way with his old fashioned and outdated ideas became popular among audience and hence brings humor in them. It was actually popular in the theatre of ancient Rome. Moliere in writing his comedy was deeply influenced by Italian *commedia dell'arte* troupes touring Europe.

Summary of the play

Moliere's play *The Miser* was written in 1668. It was his twenty second play out of thirty. He got the inspiration of writing this play partly from classical author Plautus's play called *Auluria* which had been translated into French at that time and partly from a real life officer Tardieu. Money matters a lot in the play. The rich widower of the sixties named Harpagon is so obsessed with greed that he keeps all his gold buried in the ground and all his cash in lock and key hidden from his children. Due to his suspicious and possessive nature he keeps on patrolling the ground.

“Har. (*aside, looking towards the garden*). Ah! I fancy I hear a dog barking. Is anyone after my money. (*To Valère*) Stop here, I'll come back directly.” (2013:17).

He starved his household and never gives liberty to his children in terms of money. Even for the marriage of his children he doesn't want to spend money and to get out of this situation he found a widow for his son and a rich man of fifties who is ready to marry Elise without dowry. As he talks to himself:

“Har. (*thinking himself alone.*) Meanwhile, I hardly know whether I did right to bury in my garden the ten thousand crowns which were paid to me yesterday. Ten thousand crowns in gold is a sum sufficiently ... (*Aside, on perceiving Élise and Cléante whispering together*) Good heavens! I have betrayed myself; my warmth has carried me away. I believe I spoke aloud while reasoning with myself. (*To Cléante and Élise*) What do you want?

Cle. Nothing, father.” (2013: 10)

The play has become more interesting when Cleante and Elise planned to get marry secretly. Elise and Valere are in love and in order to stay nearer to Elise, Valere has become headbutler of Harpagon. The miser also has desires for a girl called Mariane, but unfortunately his own son is in love with the same girl and two are planning to elope but Cleante needed money as his father destitute him. For this he took loan on a very high rate of interest but all his schemes and plans goes in vain when he discovered that the moneylender was his father only. The truth which made him almost insane is the theft of his gold box which was buried in the garden. Jacques, the cook and the coach man of Harpagon accused Valere behind the theft not for his money but for his daughter. Valere confesses his crime and also accepts his love for Elise. He also reveals his true identity. Anselme who had changed his name and left Naples for France discovered that both Valere and Maraine were his lost children. Cleante became ready to give that cash box but on the bet that Harpagon will permit his and Maraine marriage. First he denied but when Anselme became ready to bear all the expenses for both the marriages then Harpagon gave his permission for marriage. And the play ends happily with the smiles on all the faces. Moliere's plays are generally humorous but with a hidden serious motive. He through his comedies satirized the follies and faults of the people which he had seen in the people of France in his heyday.

Northrop Frye, the renowned critic of twentieth century can be called as an innovator of the terms, as he has used his own terminology in his works mainly in *Anatomy of Criticism*. The literal motive of the first essay *Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes* is to change the age old conception of people on Historical Criticism and also to reveal universal

modes on which the literature of the world depends. Hazard Adams calls Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* as a systematiser for its deeper critical insights.

In the beginning of *theory of modes* Frye has given the reference of Aristotle's *Poetics* in which he reveals the elevation in the status of characters in fictional works. Frye's systematic arrangement of modes is based on Aristotle's three aspects of poetry *mythos* (plot), *ethos* (characterization) and *dianoia* (theme). It, therefore, becomes his inspiration of writing his *theory of modes*. The various modes discussed by Frye in his theory of modes are (i) mythic (ii) romantic (iii) high mimetic (iv) low mimetic (v) ironic.

Frye has divided literature into fictional and thematic and then project the above revealed five modes in the light of fictional and thematic literature. Frye's *theory of modes* can be called as a staircase. In this staircase the mythic mode holds the first position where the heroes are gods; then comes the romantic mode where the hero is an extraordinary person and above from both the ordinary persons and the nature. The next is the high mimetic mode where the hero is the leader but bounded by the natural and social laws; in the low mimetic mode the hero is like a normal and ordinary human being, and at last comes the ironic mode where the hero in some way or the other inferior to the other human beings.

Application of Frye's *theory of modes* on Moliere's *The Miser*

The paper examines Moliere's *The Miser* within the frame work of Northrop Frye's *theory of modes*. The play comes under the category of Frye's Menandic low mimetic comic mode. The low mimetic mode reveals the normal standard and realism of human society and ethos. The writer or the narrator of this mode is like the other men who are much affected by the social, moral and physical factors of the society. This category includes comedies, realistic fiction and literature of social criticism or the nineteenth century fiction.

The low mimetic comedy is also called New Comedy or the Menandic comedy. Menander in fact was influenced by French playwright Moliere in writing his comedies. This comedy does not need high poetic endowment, imaginativeness and political discernment like the high mimetic mode. It on the other hand provides the use of simple and common language of everyday life and people. The New Comedy unlike the Old Comedy is dominated by realism. As Frye says:

New comedy normally presents an erotic intrigue between a young man and a young woman which is blocked by some kind of opposition, usually parental, and resolved by a twist in the plot which is the comic

form of Aristotle's 'discovery', and is more manipulated than its tragic counterpart.(1957: 44)

The comic plot basically commenced with the love of the hero which is opposed by the family. After a strong opposition the love becomes successful and at the end the heroine becomes respectable in the society due to which the other minor characters attracted towards the society and at last joined the new society. The last scene reveals the integration of the society which according to Frye is both "a kind of moral norm" and "the pattern of a free society." The characters who stood there in opposition are the people who are miser and hypocrite. They are bound to behave in such a manner as they are mentally bounded and helplessly driven by a social pattern. The hero of such type of comedy is free from such bondages and tried to bring a new society which is freed from slavery.

The reformed new society by the hero is actually a new real world which is free from the narrowness of the society. It basically projects the struggle between a normal and abnormal society in which the normal wins. It also reveals the action which could be very nearer to the tragedy but by a sudden new turn it transforms into comedy. Along with the major stereotyped characters like boastful soldier, irritated father, indulgent mother, a young lover, the New comedy also give a brief description of minor characters as well, for instance a cook or a parasite, senex etc.

The above revealed features of Frye's low mimetic comic mode can be easily traced in Moliere's *The Miser*. It depicts the real picture of the earlier French society. Moliere makes use of everyday life, speech and pictures in the play. Along with the revelation of major characters, the play also depicts the role of minor character like La Flenche, Jacques, Mr.Simon etc. Harpagon the old and the hypocrite character of the play became barrier in the marriage of both Cleante and Elise which is also one of the most important features of Frye's theory of low mimetic comic mode. Another important feature revealed by Frye can be seen in the last part of the play where a twist came when Ansleme discovered about his lost children and suddenly the situation transforms into comedy which brings smile on everybody's face. The play ends on a happy note of integration. Moliere comedies were the commentaries which targeted the hypocrites of the time.

Therefore, after a deep study of Moliere's *The Miser* under Northrop Frye's Theory of modes it became crystal clear that the play, *The Miser* bears all the relevant features of Northrop Frye's theory of Menandic comic mode in terms of plot, characters, language and setting.

Works cited

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