The term Renaissance

Renaissance (French ‘rebirth’, from Italian rinascenza, rinascimento) is the name applied to the period of European history following the Middle Ages. It is commonly said to have begun in Italy in the late 14th century and to have continued in Western Europe through the 15th and 16th centuries. The original meaning of the Italian rinascimento for those who actually took part in it was the ‘rebirth’ of Classical Greek and Latin literature. In this period the arts of painting, sculpture, architecture, and literature reached an eminence not exceeded by any civilization in any age. The development came late to England in the 16th century, and did not have its flowering until the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods; sometimes, in fact, Milton (1608-1674) is said to be the last great Renaissance poet.

In course of time a variety of misconceptions about the Middle Ages (as opposed to the Renaissance) developed. In the 19th century, for example, there evolved an image of the Middle Ages as being ignorant, narrow, priest-ridden, backward, superstitious, uncultured and inhibited by dogmatic theology. By contrast, the Renaissance was extolled as learned, civilized, broadminded, progressive, enlightened and free-thinking.

The Renaissance was essentially a European movement which had its birth in Italy and from there spread to Germany, France, and England. In England the age of Queen Elizabeth-I is known as the age of “Renaissance”. One significant event, which marked the beginning of ‘the revival of learning’ as coming to Italy about 1450, was the Turkish conquest of Constantinople on May 29, 1453. The result was the diffusion of fugitive scholars, bringing valuable manuscripts with them, and the most obvious heaven was Italy. A revival of classical studies had already begun in Italy and the mixing of the fugitives stimulated and assisted it. Latin writers like Virgil and Ovid were never forgotten, but Catullus and Lucretus were rediscovered. Such writings of the antiquity inspired the imagination of the Italians who gave birth to a new kind of aesthetic culture, much different from the Middle Ages in Europe. The Renaissance marked the beginning of the modern spirit. Broadly speaking, it may be said that between c.1200 and c.1600 man’s opinions about the nature and structure of the universe (and the role of man in it) brought about profound and far-reaching changes. But the gradualness of these changes must be emphasized. The full impact of many of the Renaissance developments did not make itself felt until the later 17th and 18th centuries. But the period undoubtedly indicates the vitality, the audacity, and the restless curiosity of many men of the Renaissance, whether scholars, thinkers, artists, or adventurers.

The new learning:

Renaissance scholars of the classics, called humanists, revived the knowledge of the Greek language, discovered and disseminated a great number of Greek manuscripts, and added considerably to
the number of Roman authors and works which had been known to the Middle Ages. The result was to enlarge immensely the stock of ideas, materials, literary forms, and styles available to the Renaissance writers. In the mid-fifteenth century the invention of printing on paper from movable type made books for the first time cheap and plentiful. Floods of publications, ancient and modern, poured from the presses of Europe to satisfy the demands of the rapidly expanding literate audience.

In England, the many-sided intellectual activities of the Renaissance were fully reflected in the literature of the 16th and 17th centuries. The prose writings of Malory (Morte d' Arthur), Erasmus' Praise of Folly, and Sir Thomas More's Utopia were largely responsible for heralding the dawn of the Renaissance, which attained its maturity in the age of Elizabeth. These prose writers appreciated the Renaissance spirit and denounced vice, ignorance and superstition, the three foes of humanity. More's Utopia was the “true prologue to the Renaissance”. In the 16th century, Bacon, in his Essays, represented the true specimen of the materialistic and Machiavellian facet of the Renaissance. The Essays are the fullest and finest expression of the practical wisdom he had acquired from study, experience and meditation.

The new religion:
The Reformation led by Martin Luther (1483-1546) was a successful heresy which struck at the very basis of the institutionalism of the Roman Catholic Church. This early Protestantism was grounded on the individual’s inner experience of spiritual struggle and salvation. Faith (based on the word of the Bible as interpreted by the individual) was alone thought competent to save the individual. And salvation itself was regarded as a direct transaction with God in the theatre of the individual soul, without the need of intermediation by Church, priest, or sacrament. For this reason Protestantism is sometimes said to have been an extreme manifestation of “Renaissance individualism” in northern Europe.

The new world:
In 1492, Columbus, acting on the persisting belief in the Greek idea that the world is a globe, sailed west to find a new commercial route to the East, and discovered an altogether new continent. The great English explorers went to the West Indies and down to the coast of south America and returned with their ships loaded with bars of silver and gold, heaps of pearls, sapphires, opals and emeralds, shining silk and fragrant spices. The travelers’ tales of the incredible plunder of the New World inspired the imagination of the men of letters. The magic world of Shakespeare’s The Tempest is an example. More important for literature was the fact that economic exploration of the New World put England at the centre of the chief trade routes. This encouraged the development of a vigorous intellectual and artistic life. After the defeat of the Spanish Armada by the English the national spirit in England rose to delirious heights of self-confidence.

The new cosmos:
The cosmos of medieval astronomy and theology was Ptolemic(that is, based on the astronomy of Ptolemy, 2nd c. A.D.) and pictured a stationary earth around which rotated the successive spheres of the moon, the various planets, and the fixed stars. Heaven, or the Empyrean, was thought to be situated above the spheres and Hell to be situated either at the centre of the earth (as in Dante’s Inferno) or below the system of the spheres (as in Milton’s Paradise Lost). In 1543, Copernicus came with his theory in which the centre is not the earth, but the sun, and in which the earth is not stationary, but one of the many planets revolving around the sun. Though this theory was not immediately accepted, it did influence men’s
opinions of the general principles and methods of the new science (of Kepler, Galileo, William Harvey) and helped constitute the climate of 18th century opinion known as the Enlightenment.

The growing interest in the classical learning, the growth of trade and commerce with the far off countries and the rush for gold, a series of extensive voyages and explorations by the Dutch, the Spanish, the French, and the English, the rise of ferocious nationalism and the spirit of individualism and worldliness were the ingredients produced by the new spirit of the Renaissance. The term Renaissance reminds us of great painters like Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael; and writers like Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Machiavelli in Italy, Erasmus in the Netherlands, Montaigne, Rabelais in France, Cervantes in Spain, Sir Thomas More, Sir Thomas Wyatt, Edmund Spenser, Sir Philip Sidney, Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Sir Francis Bacon in England.

The Renaissance heralded the birth of a new age in Europe. It brought an end to the dark middle ages and ushered in a new era of bright hopes and rosy aspirations. As mentioned earlier the Renaissance spirit took some time to reach England. When the new light came, it cleared off the old cobwebs of ignorance and superstition and made the way clear for the new thoughts and ideas to enter in to the minds of the people. The Renaissance men felt the new spirit, and exhibited their newly experienced emotions and feelings in their literary works. The Renaissance inspired the writers of the age to give expression in their drama, poems, essays and letters, to the values which the Renaissance had brought in its wake. Throughout the period of the Renaissance there was a love for life and its manifold beauties. It was the age of adventure and material wealth. Music, dance and mirth played a significant role in the general life of the men and women of this age. With mirth and laughter came a love for luxury and wealth, and the life of the people was spent in luxurious plenty. Puritanism came into disfavour. Deep learning of the classical writers of Rome and Greece began to find favour with the writers of the new age. There was a general love for knowledge and learning among the people of this age and it was considered to be a sin to remain shackled in the chains of ignorance and superstition.

The most important dramatist before Shakespeare among the University Wits was Christopher Marlowe. He is really the greatest figure in pre Shakespearean drama. He has left behind powerful tragedies – Tamburlaine, Doctor Faustus, The Jew of Malta and Edward II. Marlowe, more than Shakespeare, was the representative dramatist of the Renaissance period. In his four plays we have a full-blooded expression of the entire age with all its new aspirations, hopes and dashing adventure. Marlowe is the dramatist of the Renaissance period par excellence and his plays are an epitome of what the Renaissance people felt and lived. Marlowe touches almost all aspects of the Renaissance in his works. Each one of these tragedies reflects the Renaissance spirit and revolves round the central personality who is consumed by lust for power. Marlowe’s tragedies are one man type of tragedy in which the hero dominates over the rest of the characters and drafts them by his towering personality.

Marlowe’s ideal of a man of the Renaissance is pictured by him in the figure of Tamburlaine, the Scythian conqueror. In Marlowe’s vision the man of the Renaissance were expected to be –

Of stature tall, and a sprightly fashioned

His lofty brows in folds.

The pleasure of the earth and material values of life, which the man of the Renaissance held dear are given full scope in Tamburlaine where the dramatist says:
“A god is not so glorious as a King,  
I think the pleasure they enjoy in Heaven  
Cannot compare with kingly joys on earth.”

In his second play Doctor Faustus Marlowe presents a man of learning and a man running mad after the pursuit of worldly power. Doctor Faustus if the master of varied knowledge ranging from philosophy to economics, but he is dissatisfied with all his knowledge and practices necromancy to acquire worldly power. So great is his love for power and pleasure that he sells his soul to the Devil for enjoyment of worldly pelf and power. Doctor Faustus, a German scholar and physician, signed the fateful contract with Mephistopheles, the agent of Devil that he would readily allow his soul to be taken wherever Mephistopheles wanted, if for twenty four years he was at his command and carried out his borders according to his liking. For twenty four years Mephistopheles served Doctor Faustus as faithfully as the magician (Doctor Faustus) wanted him to do, but after the expiry of twenty four years, his soul was forcefully dragged by the devils to hell where it was perpetually consigned without any hope of redemption in the future. The tragedy of Doctor Faustus is extremely pathetic and the cries of agony emerging from the lacerated heart of the Doctor at the last moment of his departure to hell are sufficient to rend even a stony heart to pieces.

In the third tragedy The Jew of Malta we have another expression of the love of wealth and precious stones which fired the imagination and vision of the Renaissance men and women. Barabas, the Jew is a typical Renaissance figure in his love for wealth. He employs all his energy to accumulate “infinite riches in a little room”. His vision of –

Bags of fiery opals, sapphires amethysts,
Jacinths, hard topaz, grass-green emeralds,
Beauteous rubies, sparkling diamonds

is, in fact, the vision of the average wealth fired men of the Renaissance.

Barabas is a terrible old-leader, who in his craze for wealth and his general capacity of temper strongly suggests Shylock in Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice. The Jew had made plans to hold an entire city to ransom, but the evil reconciled upon him and he fell a prey to his sinister machinations. He fell into a boiling cauldron which he had prepared for another, and died blaspheming, his only regret being that he did not commit all the crimes that he had kept stored in his mind. The Jew felt no compunction at the time of his death and was tortured by no qualms of conscience. “Let me be envied, but not pitied” was his dying farewell to the people whom he had sought to ravage.

The love for the world finds a different expression in different form in Edward II. In Marlowe’s last play Edward II the love and lust for the world takes the shape of sensuous pleasures. Gaveston gives expression to this spirit when he says –

I must have wanton poets, pleasant wits,
Musicians that with touching of a string
May draw the pliant king which way I please.
The defined tone of the Renaissance adventurer is heard in the speeches of young Mortimer when he is commuted to the tower.

What Mortimer, can ragged stony walls,
Inmure they virtue that aspires to heaven!
No, Edward, England’s courage, it may not be;
Mortimer’s hope surmounts his fortune far.

The introduction of the character of Lightborn and his pride in his art murdering people is also typically of the Renaissance. He says –

I learned in Naples how to poison flowers.
To strangle with a lawn thrust through the throat.

The contempt for worldly limitations is a typical feature of the Renaissance and Marlowe’s speech, a few minutes before his end, brings out this spirit in the fullest measure. He is not bound by earthly limitations and defiantly challenges base fortune that brings him down.

It is a tragic study of a king’s weakness and misery and brings out the irony of kingship. Edward II is murdered in the castle in cold blood and his tragic end moves us in sympathy for his unhappy lot. The utterances of the king in the prison are tinged with true regret and have potency in them to move us to tears. In point of style and dramatic construction, this play is best of all Marlowe’s attempts in the field of tragedy.

Thus, Marlowe was, in fact, the mouthpiece of the new age of the Renaissance. He was himself a lover of all those values which were held dear by the people of the Renaissance.

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References:

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