

RESEARCH ARTICLE



PERCEPTION OF MORALITY AFFECTED BY THE EVOLVING SOCIAL STRUCTURES IN BEN JONSON'S *VOLPONE*

MUHAMMAD MUSHFIQUR RAHMAN

Lecturer, Department Of English, Noakhali Science and Technology University, Sonapur, Noakhali, Bangladesh



MUHAMMAD MUSHFIQUR RAHMAN

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ABSTRACT

Individuals have their own culture and social structure. They are accustomed to the norms and practices of that social structure. But the advent of new elements brings notable changes in their particular social pattern. These changes have impact on individual's personalities, thinking, and behavior; and the society takes a new look with distinguished characteristics. Ben Jonson, in *Volpone*, presents a group of diverse characters who seemed to be the representatives of the rising period of protocapitalist economic order. These characters are distinguished by what and how fraudulently they speak to others to boost money and wealth. They are in rivalry against each other, and mostly engaged in the acquirement of material goods over good-will and moral obligation. Among others *Volpone* and *Mosca* are the leading representatives who constantly entice the different entrepreneurial potential to avariciously drive for money, and to finally shatter their hopes. The two mastermind plotters creatively shroud their true sort in entwining linguistic artifice merely to trick the wealth-maniac people by making themselves unsuspected and credible. The difference between right and wrong evaporates from society, and the principles and morality have been at stake. Such society depicted in the play gives a new mode of principles, morality, and good conduct. The attitudes to morality have been under consideration in the analysis.

Key Words: Morality; social-structure; deception; individual bankruptcy; moral decadence.

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Ben Jonson's *Volpone* is highly occupied with the evolving city setting during the early seventeenth century in London where international trade, migration and commercial commotion played the imperative role to shape and reshape people's

attitude to life. This evolving urban panorama entices moral decay of individuals and corruption in institutions. Fraudulence, deception, covetousness, greed, and selfishness become the means of individual existence in the exceedingly cutthroat

money-making society. For the Jonson's people in the play, vocal supremacy comprises the way of devising plots for deceiving the wealth-maniac. Language performance by the characters has presented a cohesive and lacy development of Volpone that is full of complicated assortment of conspiracies by the fraudsters (Freitas1). Jonson furnishes the mind of audience with a pastiche of microplots artistically embroidered to intensify and heighten the social atmosphere in the play and to embody the seditions of a morally decaying society as well. Individuals are shaped by the social world. There is a close connection between individuals and social structures: the nature of the individual's relation to the broader social system, the ways in which behavior is influenced by social experiences, the genesis of the individual's social makeup (Turiel 5). Individuals develop conceptual systems for understanding and transforming the social world. Therefore, the role the materialistic world usually plays upon the individuals; the episodes of changing social status among the community; and individuals' attitude to perception of morality are considered to analyze in the write-up.

During the early seventeenth century the social atmosphere of London was shifting into a new status- cultural, commercial, and moral. London faced abrupt cultural transformation, rapid commercial revolution, and disgraceful moral decadence. Some words such as 'deception', 'covetousness', 'selfishness', 'self-entertainment', 'vice', 'pride', 'foibles' and 'frailties' in individuals and institutions were on the go around the urban London society where Jonson was a camera-observer of the time. He was personally experiencing some events out of the ordinary, and inclined to reflect social and cultural upheavals, and moral decay of the afflicted region. Moreover, Jonson reflects his own misfortunes and presents his challenging life in Volpone which gives the audience a pastiche of microplots artistically embroidered to intensify and heighten the social atmosphere in the play, and to embody the seditions of a morally decaying society as well. His attempt is to picture these anxieties and shifting attitude of individuals in his widely read Volpone (Chaplin). London was in a flux with the high rate of immigration and urban expansion due to the global trading venture and

industrialization of the new mode of economy which bestowed a visible and unprecedented boost to commercial departments there. People are forced to shift from their hinterlands to the urbanizing region by changing their primordial profession, and to change their pecuniary status. Accordingly, they adopted multifarious means subversive of moral conduct, principles, ethics and values to bring their vision into reality. Thus, the flood of fortune seekers in the urban area brings new mode of lifestyle 'challenging and rejecting the most fundamental elements of practice' (Barry 81), and sweeps away love, family, morality and goodness causing an avaricious quake in the society.

The people of English countryside were moving towards the urban for fortune. "With some 200,000 inhabitants at the turn of the sixteenth century, London had doubled its population within the next half century". Most of them were the young who hardly knew London that was poorly prepared for the overwhelming immigrants. A good number of young immigrants were "servants apprentices bound to authority by the terms of their employment." Volpone and Mosca in Jonson's play are "masterless men" who have no family ties to an apprentice mentor or authoritative structure. (Stock, Zwierlein 5-6). This portion of people is gearing up the urban population in London, and their prime concern is to expand their fortunes by violating social norms and practices prevalent during and around the Elizabethan period. They were fuelling "street violence and riots, which become more frequent as the population expands" (Stock, Zwierlein 6), and they left a solid social structure in the suburban climate in the hand of civil unrest caused by the young. By discarding their family ties in the countryside they entered the urban atmosphere where no family dynamics existed, and thus morality was laid into a serious question. These people were instigated with criminal minds which resulted in urban riots and postponement of morality out of absence of family structures that highlighted anxieties in the town space (Chaplin).

The repulsive and contemptible knave, Volpone, with his unbounded desire for heap of gold is revealed when he addresses gold as a patriarchal object in the absence of family structures,

O thou son of Sol,
But brighter than thy father, let me kiss,
With adoration....

[(Act I, Scene I) (Jonson 404)]

It seems interesting that Volpone himself does not have family attachment and he addresses a nonliving material, i.e. gold, as his father. Here, the sense separation among the ancestral affinities is illustrated in the play. On the other hand, his affiliation with 'gold' is not only of greed, but also of ravenous self-enhancement. Furthermore, his rampant longing for the acquirement of wealth evidences his singular source of moral satisfaction devoid of ethical characteristics of humankind in general, and his evil intention to play a trick with the money-mongers puts human distinctiveness into a vulnerable state. Volpone shouts,

I glory
More in the cunning purchase of my
wealth, Than in the glad possession....

[(Act I Scene I) (Jonson 405)]

According to Jonson scholar Andrew Hiscock, Volpone's alienation from any "cultural" or "human commitment" proves his animalistic quality. His separation from the family tie is ascertained in his own words,

I have no wife, no parent, child, ally,
To give my substance to....

[(Act I Scene I) (Jonson 406)]

His satisfaction lies in having "parasite" whom he intends to make his heir. He horribly pronounces,

... but whom I make
Must be my heir: and this makes men
observe me:
This draws new clients daily, to my house,
Women and men of every sex and age,
That bring me presents....

[(Act I Scene I) (Jonson 406)]

This vicious inclination to grasp joy is an unfortunate threat to parameter of human life, and thus social conduct receives a shocking hindrance from his

perverse gluttony. His turning away from the normative relationships distorts social values and produces a smoky atmosphere in the society. When such smoke disappears, an urban space with its contesting and avaricious inhabitants appears before the audience, and the audience is introduced to a man morally bankrupt. His "adoration" for "gold" smashes the conventional view of human simplicity and kinship. Ben Jonson's objective is to vividly portray the moral destruction of the time through the elevation of "gold" as the cosmological supreme point around which Volpone and his puppets are greedily whirling by sacrificing behavioral norms. Even Volpone's death is not a natural one; rather it has become a commodity as his suitors expect his immediate demise only to establish their rights of being his heir. But the readers never succeed to identify a single person as his heir because of Volpone's insatiability of confiscating the wealth of others by advertising his dying illness that can be termed as his sickness.

Mosca takes pleasure in the pursuit rather than the possession of their wealth. Mosca's enjoyment of conspiring creation of hypnotizing the money-mongers and bringing forth "forms such as never were in nature" (Sidney, Defense) are simply the practices of illusion of self-love and godlike attitude. He forgets who he is:

I Feare, I shall begin to grow in love
With my deare selfe, and my most
prosp'rous parts,
They do so spring, and burgeon; I can feele
A whimsey in my bloud: (I know not how)
Successe hath made me wanton

[(Act III Scene I) (Jonson 435)]

Mosca, the "parasite" of Volpone, cheats all the beastly people using the pervading social disease, i.e. greed for fortune. He has scandalized the historically significant structures of society through techniques of exaggeration that shatters the durability of moral conscience in individuals (Haynes 9). Mosca himself is of no exception, and he says,

...I have the keys, and am possest.
Since he will needs be dead afore his time,

I'll bury him, or gain by him: I am his heir,
And so will keep me....

[(Act V, Scene III) (Jonson 477)]

He keeps a pseudo- relation with Volpone to betray in the end. However, this pseudo-relation encapsulates one of the characteristics of moral vulnerability seen among the young people devoid of family dynamics and conventional types of human attitude toward the social affinity during the dawn of modernism. This shifting of moral structures constitutes the idea of honest ways of gaining materialistic stuffs in the urban landscape where the suitors of Volpone do nothing but act like the birds of prey thriving for no-hard-work comforts. But their effort to expand the effortless capital reflects Volpone's urban context in which unbridled search for fortune leads citizens to immoral corridor of stockpiling possessions. Consequently, individual integrity, social bondage and ideals fail to survive in the pretending world. And the audience is sadly obliged to observe the play, Volpone, without true lovers, friends, fathers, sons, or husbands. Characters' insatiable pursuit of excessive wealth has damaged social evenness while they are endeavouring to triumph over Volpone's deceptive yearning to have an heir. However, all of them have been deceived and left with naught. In his article, "Jonson's Joyless Economy: Theorizing Motivation and Pleasure in Volpone", based on Tibor Scitovsky's Joyless Economy, Oliver Hennessey asserts that the early modern urban context reveals, "When Volpone is not sick and twisted, his society is."

The anticipation of Corbaccio to be the sole heir of a feigned fox, i.e. Volpone, leads the "crow" to deprive his own son, Bonario. He pretends to be a true sympathizer of Volpone's dying condition as Mosca reports to him, "you can hardly perceive him that he breathes." Although Corbaccio imports crocodile's tears to double his son's fortune in exchange of his assets, his pursuit of fortune is to regain youthfulness; and it appears in his conversation with Mosca, "This makes me young again, a score of years." The undertaking of chief plotters gives him (Corbaccio) a feeling of joy, "ha (having) my youth restored to me." However, his undue ambition has left him with self-destruction,

and the social values spoiled. Here, Mosca's fraudulent attempt to append Volpone's wealth causing Bonario's disinheritance by Corbaccio serves as a weapon of eliminating moral justice from the society that is obsessed with urban commercialism and transitional interferences.

The consumer revolution marked a departure from the traditional mode of decent life that was dominated by frugality and scarcity to one of increasingly mass consumptions in society. The tendency of maximizing their commodity displays the gulls' moral degradation as social beings. Corvino is puzzled with the oral weapon exploited by Mosca. Corvino's contract to prostitute his wife, Celia, in exchange of the rights of being Volpone's heir threatens family ties creating a barefaced community. His intention lies on gearing up his fiscal status in a competitive money-making society, and he is not unwilling even to sever the family bondage. Moreover, his pretention to protect the family honour cannot conceal his venture of word-game played upon Celia who is eventually convinced for an accompaniment with Volpone. Corvino's plea to his wife,

... An old decrepit wretch,
That has no sense, no sinew; takes his meat
With others' fingers; only knows to gape,
When you do scald his gums; a voice; a
shadow;
And, what can this man hurt you?

[(Act III, Scene V) (Jonson 444)]

Corvino forgets what to do for a dying person; even he fails to feel family bondage as well. Mere snatching of money and wealth is whirling around his thought of becoming the superior member in the society. Whereas, Celia being astounded with his husband's hunger for money and sick attitude to her mumbles, "Lord! what spirit/Is this hath enter'd him?" and urges God to reconcile the twisted situation but unfortunately God is replaced with greed, lust, capitalism, deception, and what not. Celia's belief in the Great Creator evaporates, and she questions on the ability of God and saints,

Are heaven and saints then nothing?
 Will they be blind or stupid? ...
 O heaven! canst thou suffer such a change?
[(Act III, Scene V) (Jonson 444)]

The street scene is another instance of dishonesty and moral bankruptcy of the society. Volpone's selling of fake 'tonics' as "Scoto of Mantua" in the street reflects how dishonestly people make money in the actual cityscape of seventeenth century London. Volpone knows well what he is doing. He is well-aware of his deceiving performance but he never regrets for that. He has a strong notion that all of his suitors' desire for wealth without any effort shall ultimately ruin them. He even considers the suitors as fools because they fail to disclose his ill motive in deceiving them, and he thinks foolishness shall never be awarded rather they shall receive punishment, i.e. they have to hand their all property over to him. What a confident trickster he is! He views,

... Poor wretches! I rather pity
 their folly and indiscretion, than
 their loss of time and money; for
 these may be recovered by
 industry: but to be a fool born, is a
[(Act II, Scene I) (Jonson 4426)]

Everyone in the play has the vulgar sense of superiority. Volpone himself feels superior because of his affluence, and ability to dodge others. His possession of several servants- the eunuch, the hermaphrodite, the dwarf, and Mosca, symbolizes his high social status. He cannot own them all rather his money has owned them. Mosca unscrupulously tricks because he can do so. His ingenuity, ready wit to check a situation instantly, inventiveness, having of knack of humouring Volpone, understandability of his master's mind, persuasive tongue, and genius for manipulation make him think superior to all. Corbaccio disinherits Bonario rearing up a dream in mind of chewing Volpone's wealth and being superior to chief tricksters. Corvino demonstrates his ill temperament towards Volpone when the knave and Mosca pretend to be mountebanks in the city street. As both of them croon to Celia, it reveals their lower social status. On the other hand, Corvino

responds with the prospect of fortunes in his mind and a desire to rise higher than those, Volpone and Mosca, he sees as inferior. Corvino's chauvinistic superiority is disclosed when he is in an oral combat with Celia who ultimately surrenders to suicidal commitment. Corvino's words,

Heart of my father!
 Wilt thou persist thus? come, I pray thee,
 come.
 Thou seest 'tis nothing, Celia. By this hand,
 I shall grow violent. Come, do't, I say.
[(Act III, Scene V) (Jonson 445)]

Celia replies,
 Sir, kill me, rather: I will take down poison,
 Eat burning coals, do anything.—
[(Act III, Scene V) (Jonson 445)]

But the kit of money making society, her husband, is not pacified rather his ambition to reach higher ladder is explored in his later dialogue,

Be damn'd!
 Heart, I'll drag thee hence, home, by the hair;
 Cry thee a strumpet through the streets; rip up
 Thy mouth unto thine ears; and slit thy nose,
 Like a raw rotchet!--Do not tempt me; come,
 Yield, I am loth--Death! I will buy some slave
 Whom I will kill, and bind thee to him, alive;
 And at my window hang you forth: devising
 Some monstrous crime, which I, in capital
 letters,
 Will eat into thy flesh with aquafortis,
 And burning corsives, on this stubborn breast.
 Now, by the blood thou hast incensed, I'll do it!
[(Act III, Scene V) (Jonson 445)]

Corvino's ravenous anticipation to be superior in the evolving neighborhood makes him more furious to his once loving wife.

Voltore, the 'vulture,' is an unusual type of immoral suitor of Volpone. His professionalism, practicing law, is lowered when he brings 'plate' as a gift only to establish the rights of heir. On the other hand, Voltore, without showing any honest or emotional inclination for Celia or Bonario, comes forward to protect him whenever Volpone is in danger. More

interestingly, his actual target is not to protect Volpone, his real objective is to ensure the rights of being Volpone's heir. Sense of morality in Voltore is completely absent whereas sense of pride is vigorously present. He addresses the court authorities as "most honoured fathers" and states that Corvino is "the easy husband" whose wife is a "lewd woman."

The tacit assumption is that individuals accommodate to the patterns or elements of the culture or social system, thereby coming to mirror culture in their personalities, thinking, and behavior. The evolving social structure is of no exception. It reveals individuals' unpredictable mind-set, a result of shifting society in which selfish and cynical people are constantly acting to deceive one another. They are on the move every now and then to stitch traps for their rivals in grabbing wealth. Consequently, their behaviour gets new form in the evolutionary social atmosphere or the evolutionary social atmosphere moulds their behavior. It can be seen that each suitor's individual greed is a part of "the practices of an unhappy elite and the untutored desires of those who wish to gain access to that elite" (Hennessey). Each character is unwilling to work for the livelihood but they patch up schemes to deceptively obtain money and wealth even from an apparent dying person whose pretentious motive is left undiscovered by the suitors' voluptuous attitude to the materialistic object. Characters' unwillingness to work and to earn no-effort profit gives insight into Jonson's agony regarding the evolving social tensions. This demoralization of human behavior is perfectly depicted in the play, *Volpone*.

Ben Jonson stands at his height for constructive cleverness, wit and brilliancy of dialogue and the presentation of even minuscule elements of transitional period of early modernism in his satirical play, *Volpone*. The play that bears the testimony of a rigorous struggle of wit applied to chicanery itself is a transition play from the dramatic satires to the purer comedy. Jonson's work seems coarse as well as massively strong, and he is considered the great master in English of satirical comedy of the Elizabethan age (Walker 91-119). Among the

characters in the play from the villainous Volpone himself, his wicked servant Mosca, Voltore the vulture, Corbaccio and Corvino, the big and the little raven, to Sir Politic Would-be, and the rest, there is no virtuous personality. All of them are ferociously engaged in undermining of individual and institution to serve their purpose of being reached the peak of the ladder. Riches and power catapult the fortune seekers into a realm of personal loss and the decline of family dynamics. Volpone's thought of being superior to others in consideration of wealth; of being capable of deceitfully pretending with the suitors, of having a notorious realization of morality that the sluggish fortune seekers shall finally lose and get punished because of their repulsive ambition-for-wealth is full of dejection of ethics, morals, principles, honesty, goodness, and decency humans usually have.

Every character is convicted of blasphemous acts as they self-effacingly worship "gold." Sons and wives are overlooked and their natural relations are almost abandoned for the sake of "gold" which is, throughout the play, considered as an all-can-do object that also makes men and women do all things. Even Mosca, a fly, is extolled by a judge as valiant and noble for his inventiveness and fertility of mind. The judge's negligence in obvious observation of the case and aspiration to marry Mosca off to his daughter exhibit a sophisticated degeneracy. Soul, religion, war, work, and philosophy are treated in a cynical manner. People are poor in terms of having rich souls. What a soul a man has is used as an instrument to undermine him and others, to lodge progressive deterioration of mankind, and to eventually pervert the society.

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