



INDIAN SCHOOL MUSCAT
SENIOR SECTION
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
CLASS XI
TALE OF MELON CITY
VIKRAM SETH

Explanation

The Melon City represents any nation whose policies are based on superstitions, beliefs and age old convictions. The king is said to be a placid (peace loving) one but soon we realize how hollow/ironic that claim is. He wished to establish peace by eliminating anyone who committed a trifle of mistake. Looking at the way he is passing orders to execute innocent people, we can easily get this. Looking at the way how the convicts escape the law, too, we can see how people benefited from the nation's policies.

'The Tale of Melon City' by Vikram Seth is a satire about a king, his ministers and the kingdom. The poem shows the stupidity of the king and his kingdom. The poem, The Tale of Melon City, is a narrative poem about how a melon, following a custom, was chosen to become the king of a state. It narrates in an amusing tone the events leading to such a situation when no other but a melon was coronated as the king.

The poem begins with the description of a just and peace loving king ruling an ancient state. Once the king planned to construct an arch, spanning the main thoroughfare. The purpose of the arch was to improve the onlookers morally and provide aesthetic joy to them. The plan of the king was executed immediately.

One day the king was passing by the side of the thoroughfare. The arch was constructed very low so that the king's crown struck against it and fell off. Immediately the king responded negatively. He felt dishonoured. He decided to hang the chief of builders holding him responsible. Necessary arrangements were made for the hanging.

The chief of builders in his defense shifted the responsibility to the labourers. On hearing so, the king adjourned the proceedings for a moment, and decided to have all the labourers hanged. According to the labourers, it all happened due to faulty size of the bricks. So, the king summoned the masons. They, in their turn, put the blame on the architect. The king decreed to hang the architect. The architect reminded the king that he had made certain amendments to the plans when they were shown for his approval. In a way, the architect indirectly put the blame on the king. The argument of the architect left the king completely confused. Considering the matter to be intricate, the king sought the advice of a wise man. He ordered to bring to him the wisest man in the country.

The king's men could find out the wisest man and, accordingly, he was brought to the court of the King. He was so old that he could neither walk nor see. According to the old man, the real culprit was the arch. It was the arch that hit the crown violently and it fell off. So, the arch was to be hanged. The arch was led to the scaffold. At that time, a counselor said that it would be a very shameful act to hang the arch that hit the king's head.

The crowd was getting restless. In order to appease the mass, the king commented that someone must be hanged as it was the public demand. The noose was set up. It was somewhat high. Each man was measured turn by turn. Interestingly, there was one man who was tall enough to fit in the noose, and it was the King. So, his majesty was hanged.

The ministers heaved a sigh of relief that they were able to find someone, otherwise the crowd might have risen in revolt. Now the issue came up as to who would be the king of the state. The old custom was invoked. They sent out the heralds to proclaim that the next to pass the City Gate would choose the King. An idiot happened to pass the City Gate. The idiot was asked who was to be the king. The idiot uttered Melon. Actually that was his pet answer to all questions since he liked melons. The ministers coronated a melon and placed the melon king reverently at the throne.

All these events took place long long ago. Now when someone asks the people how is it that their King appears to be a melon, they reply that if His majesty takes delight in being a melon that is all right with them. They have no right to say what he should be as long as he leaves them in peace and liberty. It seems that the principles of non-interference are well established in that state.

Answer the following questions in 30-40 words.

1. What were the two qualities of the King? To what extent were they found in him?
2. What mishap happened and why? How did the King react?
3. How did the various persons involved in the arch construction try to exonerate themselves by passing on the blame to the others?
4. The king's sense of justice went to the extent of absurdity. How?
5. What are the principles of 'Laissez- faire'?
6. How did the melon become King?
7. How did the people of the kingdom react to their melon king?

Answer the following questions in 100-120 words:

1. Suggest a few instances in the poem which highlight humour and irony.
2. How according to you, can peace and liberty be maintained in a state?
Peace and liberty can be maintained in a state if the ruler is just, rational and impartial. If the ruler like the king in the poem, is swayed by the opinions of others and has no opinion of his own, there can be nothing but chaos in the state. A ruler has to be firm and his decisions should be governed by reason. He should have the ability to inspire in his people, respect for authority. No doubt, He should not be a dictator. His democracy should ensure respect for law and order, hierarchy and good sense. The policy of non- interference by the ruler in public affairs cannot be allowed to go to the limit of absurdity.