



A PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF MAJOR SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDIES

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare was gifted with remarkable powers of psychological intuition, and one of his greatest achievements was the creation of highly individualized characters who seem to have a life of their own and to invite the same kind of analysis that we give real human beings. Shakespeare delved deep into the human psyche in his tragedies which is as convincing and persuasive today as it was four hundred years ago. He is rightly called the myriad-minded Shakespeare which means many things to many people. As such Shakespeare remains the best loved, most performed, most translated, transformed and experimented upon playwright in India today. The paper is an honest effort to analyse the major tragic heroes of Shakespeare like Hamlet, Iago, Lear and Macbeth and indicate the course of their psychological crisis.

Key Words: *Tragic Flaw, Inner Conflict, Psychological Observation, Psyche.*

INTRODUCTION

On the 400th Death Anniversary of William Shakespeare, the dramatist par excellence till date I wish to pay him a humble tribute in this paper. In fact, Shakespeare has been so incorporated in the fabric of our thought and the texture of our feelings that in our literary world, he constitutes the Trinity with Valmiki and Vyasa as he has become in Germany the third classic after Goethe and Schiller and in America the third 'god of idolatry' after George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. The glory of every empire vanishes, but the glory of Shakespeare's kingdom is perennial; like a Keatsian thing of beauty its loveliness increases, it

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will never pass into nothingness. Works of Shakespeare are like the glow of the moon that illumines dark minds, enlivens dying hearts and rejuvenates withered branches of love; it is the love that moves the stars, flows through human heart and has become a part of the innate joy. Shakespeare, says Ben Jonson, was not of an age but 'for all time', not of England only but of the whole world. Not that we cannot ignore him; but to ignore him is to ignore a significant part of the human heritage of Thought and Culture. Also to ignore him, is to miss our chance to understand the basic impulses and emotive forces of life: Truth, Beauty, Goodness and Love. Writers like Shakespeare are the benefactors of mankind and we can only ignore them at our own peril. In a great work of art it is ourselves that we recognise; Art, or for that matter literature, has no territorial boundaries; men and women the world over find light and delight in the works of this great dramatist.

Shakespeare was gifted with remarkable powers of psychological intuition, and one of his greatest achievements was the creation of highly individualized characters who seem to have a life of their own and to invite the same kind of analysis that we give real human beings. In the past four centuries, these characters received much praise and attention. It is difficult to find mimetic characters in Shakespeare's comedies and romances, but a number of the leading figures in the histories and the tragedies are among the greatest psychological portraits in all of literature. The outcome of the action is predetermined in these plays by their source and genre but Shakespeare's objective is to make the behaviour of his personages flow from their inner motivational systems and to make their fates appear to be inevitable outcome of their characters interacting with circumstances. The kind of arbitrary behaviour, which is perfectly acceptable in the comedies and romances would be very disturbing in the histories and tragedies, where the characters are supposed to feel, think and act in accordance with their natures. In this paper, my attempt is to identify the bargains of Hamlet, Iago, Lear and Macbeth and indicate the course of their psychological crisis. It is possible to treat Othello, Desdemona and Lady Macbeth within the same framework but space does not permit.

Hamlet's crisis is precipitated by the death of his father, the crowning of Claudius and the remarriage of his mother. Hamlet is so profoundly affected by these things because he is a predominantly self-effacing person whose entire strategy for living has been undermined by the fate of his father. Hamlet and his father are similar psychological types because they both strive to be noble, good and loving, and they both expect these qualities to be rewarded. They are conscientious, dutiful, religious men who exalt women, are faithful to their oaths and place a high value upon sexual purity. In his first soliloquy, Hamlet is in despair because he experiences his father's fate as though it were its own. His father was the kind of man that Hamlet has aspired to be, and his memory has been fully dishonoured. What promise does life hold for Hamlet in such a world? Will he, too, be mocked by the objects of his affections, betrayed by the people to whom he has been faithful, abandoned for base creatures by those

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from whom he deserves loyalty and appreciation? Even before he learns of the murder, the fate of his father shows that the world is not a just order, but an unweeded garden in which good people are abused, the vicious triumph, and fair appearances are untrustworthy. It is unbearable to Hamlet that the aggressive Claudius has gained the love, power, and recognition which should be the reward of virtue. This is not a world with which his kind of person can cope or in which he sees much hope of reward as he wants to escape by melting away into nothingness.

His encounter with the ghost intensifies Hamlet's inner conflicts. The wrongs done to his father are greater than Hamlet had imagined, and the ghost's outrage feeds his already seething indignation. Hamlet cannot help feeling ambivalent, however, about being an avenger. It is a matter of love, of loyalty and of manliness for him to carry out the ghost's commission and he swears to do so. But there is both in Christianity and in Hamlet's self-effacing defence system a strong taboo against vindictive behaviour. Actually the ghost himself is not a single-minded revenger. He is protective towards Gertrude and fearful of his son's damnation. After his encounter with the ghost, Hamlet is paralyzed by a cross-fire of conflicts, he hates himself for not being aggressive. He would like to escape his inner conflicts by dying, but suicide is a sin and his disillusionment with Ophelia and the Mousetrap scene releases his anger, and he becomes capable of violence.

In the tragedy *Hamlet* it is noteworthy that Iago and Hamlet are opposite psychological types. Iago is an arrogant-vindictive person who sees the world as a forest in which the strong exploit the weak and in which goodness does not pay. There are two kinds of people in this world - the realists, who exploit others lest they are exploited themselves; and the fools, who trust other people's professions of loyalty and love and are abused as a result. The bargain of the complaint types whom Iago scorns is with the masters. He trusts no one and has no belief in a moral order either in human affairs or in the universe. If he succeeds in this crooked world, he must not be taken in by the traditional code of values which is simply an instrument by which the powerful exploits the powerless. He must never be guilty of loyalty or unselfish behaviour, he must attend constantly to his own interests; and above all, he must always conceal his true purposes and feelings. The promotion of Cassio is for Iago a bitter defeat which threatens his self-esteem, his value system and indeed his whole strategy for dealing with life. He has played the role of faithful servant in order to advance his own interests, and he has had an immense pride in his cleverness and in the success of his duplicity. But his scheming has, in fact, failed. Othello has benefitted from his service but has given the reward which he was expecting to someone else. Iago, the exploiter, has been exploited. Iago experiences this as a profound humiliation which calls into question his cleverness, his manipulative ability and the whole system of rationalizations by which he justifies his code of egoism and deception. The blow to his pride is all the worse because Cassio is precisely the

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kind of person whom Iago scorns. In reality he is very loyal, dutiful and he really loves his master. Iago's reaction to Cassio's success is similar in a way to Hamlet's response to the triumph of Claudius. If those kinds of people succeed, then the world is not what he has thought it to be.

Iago has an innate hatred for Othello for hurting him so badly by promoting Cassio and for the bitter enmity with the Moor who has achieved success through his marriage to Desdemona. Iago suffers from a pervasive envy of everyone who seems to own something which he is lacking, it may be wealth, honour, physical attraction or the love of a devoted woman. The promotion of Cassio has reminded Iago of Othello's power in comparison to his inferior position. Othello's marriage as to his prestige and makes Iago feel his own loveless state more acutely. Iago plots to take revenge because he has some practical objectives such as gaining the lieutenantcy but the primary values of his plot are psychological. Through it he expresses his rage to restore his pride and to lessen his inner torments. He thought that he should be able to turn his humiliation and defeat into triumph by plotting in such a way. According to his vision of life we live in a 'monstrous world' in which 'to be direct and honest is not safe'. He must be a villain in order to avoid feeling like a monster as he envies Cassio's attractiveness to women, Othello's happiness in love and the Moor's confidence. All these things intensify his feelings of inferiority and his sense of emptiness of his own life. All these are reflections of the psyche of Iago as well as other characters.

The psychology of *King Lear*, who is a self loving man has been profoundly affected by the experiences of being a king. He has been made to feel that he is 'everything' and he needs his sense of importance and pride to be constantly nurtured. The function of other characters is to satisfy his desires. Lear even tells Cordelia that it would have been better if she had not been born because she cannot please her father as her other sisters have done which shows that Lear suffers from a psychological problem that is called 'Narcissus Complex' i.e. self-love. The behaviour and response of Cordelia is terribly disappointing because she says precisely what Lear does not want to hear. He wants to be assured that he alone counts and nothing else matters which shows that all the tragedies of Lear imitates from this psychological condition.

A minute psychological observation presents a contrast between the character of Cordelia and her sisters. Cordelia is delineated as a character who is beautiful, kind, devoted as well as reasonable to her father whereas Goneril and Regan are selfish, crooked, liars and manipulators. Lear wants his daughters to tell him who loves him the most in the opening scene of the play as he intends to divide his property among them. Carol Hansen points out a difference between Goneril and Regan in *Women as Individual in English Renaissance Drama* and analyses this scene and comments, "Ragan's speech fulfils the wishes of Lear



better than the speech of Goneril" (Hansen 20). It means that Regan is a greater liar who desires power and position more than Goneril. In the *Introduction of The Tragedies of King Lear*, Jay Halio states:

Cordelia's refusal is thus a refusal to participate not only in a show trial but in the unreasonable behaviour that Lear demands and insists upon. Although his daughter, attached to him by filial devotion, she is no partner to his foolishness here or if she is, she knows it by also being insistent, demanding. Her logic nevertheless is irrefutable (Halio 32).

This refusal proves her independence in her ability to make her own choices, no matter the consequences. It is clear that to be truthful is one of Cordelia's goals in life, or in any case more important to her than property or social status. It could then be that Shakespeare meant to say that no matter what methods are used, achieving goals as a woman is difficult despite their personality and despite the goal.

So far as *Macbeth* is concerned, G. Wilson Knight declares, "Macbeth is the most profound vision of evil, a statement of evil" (Knight 68). Kenneth Muir remarks, "It is the conflict between order and disorder that structures Macbeth" (Muir 36). The case of Macbeth is somewhat different from Lear, Iago and Hamlet. Macbeth is a perfectionistic person who has always abided by the values of his society. His aggressiveness has been expressed like Othello's in the wars that make ambition his virtue. He has searched for glory in honourable ways through loyal service to king and country. As the play opens he is receiving all of the recognition which he can reasonably expect. Macbeth then violates his own virtues by sacrificing the honour and golden opinions in order to satisfy his lust for absolute power. He does this only after much hesitation since he is caught in a cross fire of conflicting ideas. Lady Macbeth understands his psychology perfectly and provokes Macbeth to murder Duncan and move on the path of ambition otherwise it was most unlikely that Macbeth is a predominantly arrogant person become like that without the prodding of his wife. Macbeth knows he cannot kill the king as his own perfectionistic psyche tells him that such a horrid deed is bound to bring retribution, unlike his lady. After he commits the murder, Macbeth's aim is to make his new bargain work despite its impossibilities. This is one reason why he becomes so ruthless and blood thirsty. Having sacrificed his eternal views, he feels that he has nothing more to lose and he is determined to assure himself of the earthly glory for which he has paid such a terrible price. His murderous behaviour is also aimed at giving him a feeling of safety because he lives in constant fear. His torture of the mind is produced by the conscientious side of him which had made him shrink from his bloody thoughts before he killed Duncan and from his horrible deed as soon as the murder was committed. He wishes to make himself a hardened criminal in order to gain some peace of mind and he seems to have



achieved his goal when he fails to react to the cry of women at the death of his wife. The peace which he has achieved is, however, the peace of despair as we observe him still longing for the honour, love, obedience and friendship which he once had but he knows that he can never have them again and in this psychological condition of mind towards the end of the drama, he is ready for death.

Conclusively it can be said that Shakespeare delved deep into the human psyche in his tragedies which is as convincing and persuasive today as it was four hundred years ago. He is rightly called the myriad-minded Shakespeare which means many things to many people. As such Shakespeare remains the best loved, most performed, most translated, transformed and experimented upon playwright in India today. Another great homage to Shakespeare from the Indian shore has been paid by the famous Urdu poet Sir Mohammad Iqbal. In his poem entitled *Shakespeare* written in 1908, Iqbal praises Shakespeare's enlightened genius and states that nature, which is so possessive about her secrets, revealed all the secrets of the human heart to Shakespeare and it is unlikely that nature will ever endow anybody else with so much love and talent to speak of her secrets with such felicity and grace.

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