



TRAITS OF SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare's tragic plays are the beautiful combination of Aristotelian tradition and plays of Seneca. There is a touch of poetic emotions and sublime experiences. In the words of critics, his tragedies are nothing but a tale of sympathy. In his tragedy, the hero suffers a lot. Besides it there are some common features observed almost in all his tragedies. Such as the role of fate, conflict, weakness of the hero, comic relief, supernatural elements, use of irony, poetic justice, Catharsis of emotions, change in character etc. Let us have a glance on them.

Key Words: Status of Hero, Role of Fate, Source of Calamity, Conflict, Suffering, Tragic Flaw, Gripping Catastrophe, Downfall of the Hero, Supernatural Elements, Tragic Waste, Abnormal Condition and Chance of Accident, Use of Irony, Redemption, Poetic Justice.

INTRODUCTION

During the Elizabethan Age, the romantic drama and tragedy reached its climax. William Shakespeare has won an immortal place. His foremost tragedies "Hamlet", "Othello", "King Lear" and "Macbeth" are greatest gifts to humanity. Because of his universal appeal, he is considered as an uncrowned king of English Literature. Shakespeare possessed a creative mind. He is the man of genius. He is the wonder of Elizabethan stage. He is master in showing the struggle between good and evil. In his hand, a story never remains mere a tale of suffering. A. C. Bradley says... "A Shakespearean tragedy is a story of human action producing exceptional calamity in the death of a man in high estate".

Shakespearean tragedy revolves around the tragic life and action of the hero. According to A.C. Bradley, Shakespearean tragedy is divided into three part i.e. exposition, conflict and catastrophe [1]. Though Shakespeare followed Aristotelian tradition, he has his own touch in creating magnificent tragedy. There is a common feature of his tragedies that hero dies with a tragic death. His tragic suffering lies in his emotional and spiritual agony. We observed that

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in the life of hero, death comes to him more as a relief than a punishment. As we come across to Shakespearean literary chronology, he wrote his greatest tragedies during the third period of his literary life. We can consider his first literary period when he contributed twenty-six sonnets and seven plays during 1585 to 1594. There are influences of many writers yet Shakespeare became a successful writer. He has his own techniques. Let us discuss traits of his tragedy.

Status of Hero:

Basically, the Shakespearean tragedy is the story of the hero. It is only in love tragedies, Romeo and Juliet and Antony and Cleopatra, that the heroin is as much the centre of action as the hero. Apart from that, the rest tragedies are the stories of great man. Shakespearean tragic heroes are generally of high estate. Macbeth is the general in the army. Hamlet is the prince of Denmark. Othello is the great warrior of the state. Julius Caesar is the king of his state and King Lear is the aged king of Britain. Thus, we have a list of great emperor, king and commander. A.C. Bradley says... "Shakespearean tragedy always concerned with the person of high degree". The Shakespearean tragedies are perfect with the perfection of tragic heroes. However, the stories of these heroes are full of sorrow and suffering.

Role of Fate:

Shakespearean tragedy is 'pre-eminently the story of one person'. The Shakespearean tragic heroes are all conspicuous person who suffers greatly. Their fate plays a vital role in their lives. "Character is destiny is true of Shakespearean tragedy". Because hero is finally responsible for his suffering and tragic end. Shakespeare believed that man is architect of his own fate. After the murder of King Duncan, Macbeth suffers the tortures of hell. He suffers due to the vaulting ambition. King Lear goes mad and raves. Abnish singh Chauhan said, "because of fate the terrible sufferings of King Lear and the inhuman blinding of old Gloucester sadly take place in King Lear" [2]. He arouses the wrath of destiny due to his love for flattery [3]. Hamlet's soul is torn within. He suffers from 'noble inaction'. While Othello suffers from credulity. Characters are found in trouble due to the fate. For example, Desdemona drops the handkerchief by chance in the garden and by chance it was picked up by Emilia which was further handed to Iago, the villain. Shakespeare's heroes do not themselves bring their tragic death but it is their destiny, which provides the variety of situations to heighten the tragic intensity. Thus, in the words of Bradley... "Shakespearean tragedy is a tale of suffering ending in the death of the tragic hero".

Conflict:



The major action of Shakespearean tragedy always develops through conflict. This conflict may be internal or external. In most of his tragedies, we see the conflict of passions, ideas and principles rather than opposing person. In addition, this conflict leads the heroes to feel or to suffer the agonies of hell. Macbeth has conflict between ambition and loyalty and in portraying that conflict Stoll says... "Shakespeare is partial for theatrical effect" [4]. The conflict between Hamlet and Claudius is delayed by Hamlet but does eventually occur in the last scene. It is called external conflict. Hamlet's most of internal conflict is seen in his soliloquies including the famous... "To be or not to be that is the question". Othello is torn within himself between jealousy and love. After Iago's poison started working on Othello, he is in conflict with himself. He says... "I think my wife be honest, and think she is not, I think that thou art just, and think thou art not". Thus, Shakespeare introduced the conflict as a dramatic art whether it is internal or external.

Tragic Flaw:

The hero of Shakespearean tragedy possesses some flaw or defect. This tragic flaw attains in him a terrible force. A.C. Bradley refers this trait as 'tragic flaw' while Aristotle calls it 'Hamartia'. For example, Hamlet possesses 'noble inaction', Othello is 'credulous', Macbeth is 'ambitious', Brutus possesses too much love for nation, Antony has too much attraction for Cleopatra's beauty, King Lear has 'hasty judgments'. In fact, a Shakespearean tragedy is not just the tragedy of destiny or the tragedy of character but is a mixture of both.

Supernatural Element:

The supernatural in Shakespeare could be subjective, that is visible only to the concerned character or could be objective, which is visible to all. They are not mere illusions of the hero. They are in the close relation to the protagonist. In 'Hamlet', there appears perhaps the most notable of the supernatural forms, the ghost. It is objective. Along with Hamlet, others see it also. In 'Macbeth', not only does a ghost appear but a floating dagger, witches and spirits make appearances. We see that Banquo's ghost is subjective and it is seen by Macbeth only. Thus, ghosts, witches, omens and superstitions play very important role. They push the hero on to the path of evil and bloodshed. This supernatural provokes the hero to take action. These various forms of supernatural help to build up the true atmosphere of darkness, gloom, mystery and fatality (Robert 2007) [5]. The supernatural except comedy hasten the downfall of the hero.

Use of Irony:



Irony creates a dramatic effect in the play. It is a situation in the play in which the author shares the knowledge of which a character is ignorant of. In 'Othello', we see that the audience is aware of Iago's cunning. Hence, when Othello calls him "honest" it appears ironic. When audience face such situations, the words of the character themselves become ironic. In 'Macbeth', earlier Lady Macbeth says... "Go get some water, and wash this filthy witness from your hand. A little water will wash up this deed". However, later in the sleep walking scene she says... "Here's the smell of blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand".

Gripping Catastrophe:

Gripping catastrophe is one the characteristics of Shakespearean tragedy. The Shakespearean tragedy is unique with this feature of gripping catastrophe. In 'Othello', we can see that Othello's despair when he comes to know from Emilia that he has been duped is touching. He appeals to the devils: "Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulphur, and wash me in steep – down gulfs of liquid fire". Even in 'King Lear', we have touching words as spoken by Lear on the death of Cordelia... "Why should a dog, a horse, a cat have life and thou no breath at all? Thou it come no more, Never, never, never, never, never".

Comic Relief:

In tragedy, generally comic relief is out of question. However, to lighten the tragic side of character, the dramatist uses this technique of comic relief. Many critics consider the device of comic relief as an irrelevant part of the tragedy. Nevertheless, Shakespeare uses humorous scenes in his tragedies. In 'Macbeth', we observed the porter scene.

Poetic Justice:

Poetic justice mean good should be rewarded and evil should be punished in proportion to their goodness and badness. Nevertheless, in the Shakespearean tragedy there is a lack of poetic justice as it mirrors the real life. Very often, we find in his tragedies that good and virtuous are crushed because they are merited by their faults. Edward Phillip is agree with these words of Ophelia over the death of Hamlet... "O what a noble mind is here over thrown" [6]. The suffering of King Lear and Cordelia are certainly undeserved. Othello is generous yet he has to suffer. Even though Ophelia and Desdemona too suffer without any fault of their own.

Redemption



Redemption means at the end of the play we find a remarkable change in characters. They gain the original nobility of the heart and head. In 'Hamlet' we find the villainous character like Claudius desire to pray. In 'Macbeth', in the end we find the sanity of words... "Life is nothing but a tale/ told by an idiot, full of sound and fury; signifying nothing". In Lear's character after enough rest, he gets his sanity back[7]. He makes a speech full of sympathy... "I am a very foolish found old man fourscore and upward, not an hour more or less and to deal plainly. I fear I am not in my perfect mind". Thus, the Shakespearean tragedy follows the tradition of Aristotelian Katharsis of emotion [8]. Towards the end of the life, the protagonist makes lament and gain sanity. However, hero dies with tragic and sadder, they are full of wisdom.

Summary:

The Shakespearean tragedy mainly arouse two types of feeling in the audience i.e. pity and fear. Shakespeare has made very effective use of soliloquy in his plays especially in his tragedies. His tragedy is the story of calamity, which leads to the death of a hero of high status. Shakespeare's popularity lies on his characteristics of tragic writing. In the words of Dowden... "Tragedy as conceived by Shakespeare is a subject to struggle of good and evil in the world". We can consider his tragedy as an epitome of great art. We totally agree with Carlyle when he says... "Shakespeare lasts forever with us; we cannot give up our Shakespeare".

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