Shakespeare with his two great tragedies: Macbeth and King Lear

Lochan Aggarwal
UGC NET English (Research Scholar)

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ABSTRACT: The present study is an interpretation of two great tragedies, Macbeth and King Lear, written by William Shakespeare who is considered the greatest writer of tragedies. In this study, an attempt has been made to explore the two most profound tragedies, King Lear and its immediate successor, Macbeth from a different point of view. The study aims to throw some light on different aspects related with these two tragedies such as their sources, language, themes; and in their reference—the writing style of Shakespeare. An attempt is made to bring the light from the incidents happening around at the time these plays were being written; and in this light, how Shakespeare as a person revived his prolific genius and influenced these plays. This study also takes a deep dive in exploring the principal characters of these two plays along with their comparisons, which attributed to them being contemporary, look similar to a great extent. Along with this, the present study also focuses on development of Elizabethan stage and drama under the reign of Queen Elizabeth.

Key Words:

Shakespeare’s plays have always been the center of attraction and read almost continually, in English as well as other languages. His plays can be broadly divided into four time periods. The first period (pre-1954) has its root in Roman, Greek and medieval English drama. It is a period of early experimentation and it is said that his early dramatic work is immature. The second period (1594-1600) shows a clearly maturing speaker. It’s a period of rapid growth. During this period, he wrote some of his great comedies and historical plays. The third period (1600-1608) was the period of great tragedies like King Lear, Hamlet, Macbeth and Othello. The last period is one of the cynical plays followed by plays of deep symbolism. Shakespeare’s great tragedies and the “problem plays” date from 1600 with Hamlet. Other plays are ‘The Marry wives of Windsor’, ‘Troilus and Cressida’, ‘all’s well that end’s well’, ‘measure for measure’, ‘Othello’, ‘King Lear’, ‘Macbeth’, ‘Antony Cleopatra’. Othello, King Lear and Macbeth chiefly concern with the conflict of chaos and order, evil and virtue, hedonism and spirituality.

In order to appreciate Shakespeare’s plays, firstly it’s useful to know something about Elizabethan stage and how it developed. Drama in England began with folk festivals religious ceremony. With time entire plots began to be drawn from the Bible and set in English were firstly performed inside churches. Then came a tradition of plays that were played out in great “cycles” of stories. After these, Morality Plays and Mystery Cycles became more popular. Two important plays Ralph Roister Doister (the first regular comedy in English) and Gorboduc (the first regular tragedy in English) began to have an impact on public theatre which began to develop throughout the reign of Queen Elizabeth and went from a traveling entertainment to something housed in a permanent structure with distinctive stories.

There are some prominent elements of a Shakespearean tragedy like a well-defined tragic hero, some kind of tragic waste, role of fate and character, the supernatural elements, role of chance, no poetic justice, inner and outer conflict and catharsis etc. Shakespearean tragedy is preeminently the story of one person. And this main hero should be a person of high degree, often kings or princes with some tragic flow in their character. In Macbeth, the hero is shown as a brave warrior as well as one of the leaders of Duncan’s army. But his one flaw is that he chooses to walk the bloody path of ambition in order to attain the glory and power. As in King Lear, Lear is shown as the aging king of Britain who decides to split his kingdom among his three daughters: Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia; and his tragic flow is his love for flattery. That’s why only he banishes his daughter Cordelia from his kingdom. As he says to her in Act I Sc I, “nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.” (99) Destiny and character also play a significant role in hero’s life. The supernatural agency also affects hero’s mind subsequently affecting his deeds. In Macbeth, we are introduced to witches in the very beginning of the play in act I sc.1, “When shall we three meet again” (1-2). In most of Shakespearean tragedy, chance or accident exerts an appreciable influence at some point in the action. Conflict, which according to Aristotle, is the soul of tragedy, is also an important element of Shakespearean tragedy. This conflict may be of two kinds: internal and external conflict. External conflict may lie between two persons of which hero is one or it may be between two rival groups in one of which the hero is the
leading figure. Internal conflict lies within the hero himself. As in his great tragedy *King Lear* we see this inner conflict as Lear also says, "Blow winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!" In *Macbeth* Lady Macbeth’s inner conflict can be seen in her madness and hallucinations in Act II Sc.II as she says:

“A little water clears us of this deed.
How easy is it then! Your constancy
Hath left you unattended.” (70-7)

Shakespearean tragedy is considered true to life. In these, we cannot expect a poetic justice. Like in *King Lear*, we can see many good characters dying at the end of the play. One such character is Cordelia who dies at the end of the play. In Act V Sc. III, Lear in his despair curses,

“A plague upon you, murderers, traitors all!
I might have saved her: Now she is gone forever:” (325 -27)

Shakespearean tragedy is also cathartic. It means it has the power of purging us of some of the pain and sufferings which we all feel in our lives.

Many believed that Shakespeare had lost his extra-ordinary genius by the time he was forty; attributing it to a general middle age crisis found very prevalent across human life span. But at age forty-two, it's clear that he makes a come-back and proved all those believers wrong by completing 'King Lear', which he had started sometime earlier and then coming up back to back with two other great tragedies, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Shakespeare's great productivity had now revived. James Shapiro, in his book – "Year of the Lear" – sheds light on these great tragedies by putting them in the context of their times, which also gives an insight into how Shakespeare was personally touched by such events as growing religious divisions and a terrible outbreak of plague. It is interesting to find how the beliefs, fears, and politics of his time are reflected in his plays.

We can deem *King Lear* and its immediate successor, *Macbeth*, as Shakespeare’s most profound tragedies. Both focus on studies of high ambition and self-consuming evil; both bring us to wonder if human disorder is mirrored in the natural world; both deal with the nature of kingship and authority. Both coming out in almost same year1606, post Queen Elizabeth’s death and her successor – King James of Scotland - coming to England, looks like there was a lot happening around that time. To list a few which seem very relevant to this: the proposed union of Scotland and England under King James; the continued attacks on English Catholics; and the aftermath of the infamous Gunpowder Plot that nearly wiped out the Royal Court and Parliament in a single blow. Reflecting on these real incidents, King Lear centres upon the dismemberment of a kingdom and the nature of royal justice; while acted in the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot, Macbeth revolves around the murder of a king, and includes among its cast, the then king James's ancestors.

*King Lear* is one of Shakespeare’s most famous as well as one of his most challenging tragedies. It is written between *Othello* and *Macbeth*. This play has come to us in three very different editions- an early quarto printed in 1608, another quarto printed in 1619, and the Folio version printed in 1623. Today there are various editions of *King Lear*. They vary from each other depending upon which version is used. In this play, suffering is so much great that one finds himself in trouble in finding the words to write about it. *King Lear* is such a play that relentlessly challenges its readers with the intensity, magnitude and sheer duration of pain that the play represents. In Shakespeare's other tragedies almost all the characters are depicted experiencing a measure of joy and love before the onset of their actual misery. But in *King Lear*, it is the death only which seems to provide escape from, "the rack of this tough world."

Shakespeare's style is individual and all his own. He plays with language so often and so variously that books are written on the topic. Especially in *King Lear* his word play is very distinct and interesting. In this play, he makes a distinct use of puns and figurative language as compared to his other plays. He has used puns rarely in this play but when they are used, they carry interesting ambiguities. For example, in the opening lines of the play in Gloucester responds to Kent’s question, "is not this your son, my lord?" with the statement "His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge.” In this sentence Shakespeare plays on two meanings of "Breeding" and two meanings of “at my charge.” Not only are puns used rarely and complexity in *King Lear* but same is the case with the use of figurative language. Use of metaphors is also shifted away from Shakespeare's customary use of metaphors. More often, the metaphors are either displaced or are placed slightly beneath the surface of language. In this play most of the Fool's speeches can be taken as examples of displaced metaphor. In Act 1 scene for Lear's daughter Goneril calls her father as if he were her dependent and threatens him with "censure" and "redresses". In response to this, the Fool replies in Act I Scene IV:

- "The Hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long,
That it's had it had bit off by it young.
So out went the candle, and we were left darkling.” (221-23)
If we go to this comment metaphorically, Lear is a hedge-sparrow and his daughter Goneril is the cuckoo whom sparrow “Lear” has fed. And like the sparrow Lear is now being attacked by his young (Goneril). Not only metaphors, puns are used in this play but personification, a kind of figurative is also used with unusual frequency and power in this play. In personification, natural objects or abstract qualities are given human characteristics. Kent uses personification in Act I Scene I, when he says to Lear:

"Think'st thou that duty shall have dread to speak
When power to flattery bows? To plainness honor's bound
When majesty falls to folly.” (164-6)

Shakespeare’s another great tragedy is Macbeth. Except for ‘Titus Andronicus,’ Macbeth is considered Shakespeare's bloodiest tragedy. Macbeth is often considered as an example of what happens when ambition goes unchecked by moral constraints. This tragedy shows us the disintegration of a very powerful and ambitious man who in his pursuit of more power will stoop to anything, even murder, to get it. Macbeth, the hero of the play, chooses to walk the bloody path of ambition in order to attain the glory and power whichis promised to him by the witches. Macbeth is a brave soldier who is tempted by the witches for attaining more power. And this mad pursuit of Macbeth and his wife, Lady Macbeth propels them into arrogance, madness, and death. Unlike her husband, who is enticed by witches into pursuing his ambition, Lady Macbeth’s lust for power leads her naturally into the nightmare realm of madness.

On the other hand, the play has great power as a work of poetry and imagination. The language is rich in sound and meaning with full of pictures. For example, when Macbeth comes from the murder of Duncan, his hands are covered in the king’s blood.

In Act II Scene II, when he looks at his hands, he feels that all the waters in the ocean cannot wash away the blood, but

“This my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarmadine,
Making the green one red.” (64-6)

The word ‘multitudinous’ gives a sense of vastness, and ‘incarmadine’ is another impressive word; its length and sound give strength to the meaning.

Having studied the two plays with their depth and contrast, now a comparison can be drawn between the core traits of the two principal characters. We find a lot in common with some differences. We find both the characters non-sympathetic because they ruled in an intimidating way along with their own selfish interests. Both look greedy - Macbeth for power and Lear for pride and everyone’s love; selfish and to a good extent, obsessed. None possesses good king qualities. King Lear clearly seem to have huge hunger to be loved by everyone and possess this obsession of knowing what everyone thought about him, even if it was a lie. On the other hand, Macbeth’s main flaw was that he was too power hungry. He was too worried about his throne taken away by someone rather than worrying about the people he was ruling. This made him paranoid as well as a murderer. Though both are themselves the reason for their downfall, there is a difference in how they caused it. King Lear caused it by taking pride in dividing kingdom between his daughters – Goneril and Albany – both evil. Macbeth caused it by being paranoid and by murder. Committing murders and dividing a kingdom are too different things, but led to a similar outcome.

Works Cited