The present paper aims at the study of the supernatural elements used in Shakespeare's Macbeth and Hamlet. Shakespeare is the most representative dramatist of his age. His dramas hold the essence of human thought and emotions that transcends time. His works are of universal appeal and we can relate to the psyche of his characters even today. His tragedies are different from the Greek tragedies. In Greek tragedy the fall of the hero is brought about by a twist of fate. But in Shakespearean tragedy a flaw in the hero's character brings about his ruin and ultimately leads to his death. To develop his tragedy, Shakespeare dwells on such flaws in the character of the hero - credulity in case of Othello, ambition in Macbeth, indecisiveness in Hamlet, vanity in King Lear; to which people can relate even today. This is why his works are so popular and important. They seem to be a case study of human psychology.

Shakespeare's tragedy has some distinctive features. His tragedy is pre-eminently the story of one person, the hero, and only in love tragedies, Romeo and Juliet and Antony and Cleopatra, the heroine is as much the centre of the action as the hero. The hero is always a person of 'high degree'-a king, a prince or a general. They are exceptional beings whose sufferings are also unusual. Desire, passion, or will gains in them a terrible force. The hero is totally incapable of resisting this force. And it takes him towards a fatal end. This, for Shakespeare, is the fundamental tragic trait. According to A.C. Bradley, Shakespeare's hero errs, by action or by omission; and his error, joining with other causes, brings on him ruin. And where the principal characters fail to reach tragic dimensions, it ceases to be a tragedy as in case of the Merchant of Venice, Cymbeline and the Winter's Tale. The story is essentially a tale of suffering and calamity, which is unexpected and contrasted with previous happiness and glory. Such exceptional suffering and calamity is the key of tragic emotions and pity. In Greek tragedy 'Fate' is held responsible for the downfall of man and people were made to feel that man is blind and helpless, just a plaything of inscrutable power i.e., Fortune. But in Shakespearean tragedy the hero falls due to a flaw in his own character. The hero always contributes in some measure to the disaster in which he perishes. The tragic trait brings about a conflict within the hero, represented by the abnormal conditions of mind or insanity like hallucinations. Macbeth saw the dagger when he was about to murder Duncan, it shows the conflict in his mind. Shakespeare also adds supernatural elements into some of his tragedies.

In Hamlet and Macbeth he introduces ghosts and witches who have supernatural knowledge. The supernatural element can't be seen as a mere illusion in the mind of a character. Rather it contributes to the action. It gives a confirmation to the inward movements and conflicts present in the mind of a character - sense of failure in Brutus, memory of guilt in Macbeth and suspicion in Hamlet, exerting influence on his action. In Hamlet the supernatural appears in form of the Ghost. It is the ghost of the late king of Denmark. The Ghost is seen by two guards, Marcellus and Bernardo. Horatio at first dismisses it as a fantasy but when he sees it himself he find it to be true. The appearance of the Ghost creates an atmosphere of tension and fear. The Ghost has appeared in the very armor which the late king wore when he fought against the Norwegian monarch and has the same frown on his face as the late king had when "he smote the sledded Polacks on the ice." The appearance of the Ghost in such a manner made Horatio believe that it is an indication that some evil is brewing in the state of Denmark and that some danger threatens the country. Horatio supports his view with reference to the strange supernatural omens that were witnessed in Rome just before the assassination of Caesar:

In the most high and palmy state of Rome,
A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,
The graves stood tenantless, and the sheeted dead
Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets.

When Hamlet visits the spot at midnight to see the Ghost, he too believes the appearance of the Ghost signifies some evil:

My father's spirit in arms! All is not well;
The Ghost reveals to Hamlet the secret, unknown to anyone so far, that Claudius, now the King of Denmark, had murdered his brother, the reigning monarch, by pouring poison into his ear when he was asleep and gave out that the King had died of snake bite. The Ghost now lays a duty upon Hamlet. Hamlet must avenge his father's murder and must not allow the royal bed of Denmark to be "a couch for luxury and damned incest."

The appearance of the Ghost is vital to the plot of this play. The play is largely concerned with the theme of revenge and the motive of revenge is provided by the Ghost. The Ghost can be regarded as the personification of Hamlet's own suspicion that his father did not die a natural death. The Ghost is not an illusion but an objective reality. It is seen by people other than Hamlet on more than one occasion. They also hear the Ghost utter the word 'swear' when Hamlet asks Horatio and Marcellus to swear that they would keep the incident of appearance of the Ghost a close secret. It surprises Horatio and he says:

*O day and night, but this is wondrous strange.*

Besides Elizabethan audiences did believe in ghosts and that is why, it was not far- fetched device for Shakespeare to introduce a Ghost in this play.

Shakespeare uses the Ghost not only to confirm Hamlet’s own suspicion regarding his father’s death but also to introduce a new element into his thinking to disturb his peace of mind. It now becomes his sacred duty to avenge his father’s death, which he now knows has been deliberately caused by his uncle, and this he finds irksome. And this is the cause of his indecisiveness;

*The time is out of joint; - O cursed spite,*

*That e’er I was born to set it right!*

The Ghost is responsible for another development in the play. To seek confirmation, Hamlet decides 'to put an antic disposition on.' It explains Hamlet's strange behavior and his strange remarks while interacting with people. When Hamlet sees the Ghost while having a talk with his mother in her chamber, she sees nothing. She finds Hamlet having discourse with 'incorporeal air'. This proves that here the Ghost is not an objective reality. Here it represents only Hamlet’s own conscience urging and spurring him to revenge and scolding him for inaction. The Ghost is introduced by Shakespeare in the very first scene to forewarn that unnatural deeds are either to take place or to be disclosed. The Ghost reminds us that even the greatest earthly strength is still subject to the controlling influence of a spiritual power beyond the laws of man.

The supernatural in *Macbeth* consists of the Witches, the Ghost of Banquo, the unnatural portents and the divine powers of the English Kings. The air-drawn dagger is not part of supernatural. It is a projection of Macbeth’s heated mind before murdering Duncan. The Witches introduce an element of mystery and fear into the play. The play opens with a brief meeting of the Witches. Their words - "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" points to the general upheaval of order to which Scotland is led by Macbeth and constitutes the main action of the play. The Witches have been described as 'wither’d' and not dressed like earthly beings, their fingers are choppy and lips skinny. They look like women, yet are bearded. They can vanish into air and can foresee the future. Mischief making is the favorite pastime of the Witches. Shakespeare has endowed their powers with limitations. They may have power over a man's soul but that power is not absolute either. They can at most trouble innocent Banquo’s soul with cursed thoughts and disturbing dreams. It is only when a mortal mind is tainted that they can have an influence over it. They do not instill into Macbeth any evil that was not already in him. The thought of assassinating Duncan occurs to him independently of them, without any hint from them. Their prophecy only gives a definite shape to the dark thoughts that have already been dwelling in Macbeth's mind. For his convenience, Macbeth views the prophecies as a 'supernatural soliciting' to murder and Lady Macbeth looks upon them as 'metaphysical aid.'

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*Keep the word of promise to our ear and break it to our hope.*

The play develops under the evil shadow of the Witches until the shadows are finally lifted in the last scene with Macduff's entry with "the usurper’s cursed head."

The Ghost of Banquo is another supernatural element in *Macbeth*, though some believe it to be just an illusion. Banquo’s Ghost plays an important role in the action of the tragedy. The horror of its sight compels Macbeth to make many a compromising disclosures.

*I am in blood*
Stepp'd in so far, that should I wade no more,  
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.

A number of portents and prodigies occur on the night of Duncan’s murder, adding to the supernatural. We are told how a falcon was killed by ‘mousing owl’ and how Duncan’s horses ‘turned wild in nature’ and ate each other. These portents suggest a topsy-turvy situation in Nature and emphasize the unnatural murder by Macbeth of his king, kinsman and guest-Duncan. Lastly, the good King of England is referred to as one endowed with divine powers. Reference is made to Edward, the Confessor who was thought to be inspired with a gift of divine prophecy and also possessed gift of healing infirmities and some incurable diseases. This reference provides a contrast to the evil supernatural of the witches. Shakespeare has used the supernatural very aptly in his plays. The supernatural is a manifestation of the character’s innermost turmoil. It lays bare the flaw in the hero’s character and helps in its further development. Thus, brings about his downfall.

References