

Shakespeare Views Mind as a Domain of Intense Tragic Sensibility and Potentiality

Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D., D.Litt.
Professor, Head & Chairperson
School of English & Foreign Languages
Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai – 21
schelliah62@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper perfectly projects the dramatic skill of Shakespeare in exploring the intensity of tragedy in sensible and potential ways. In the way there are certain aspects followed by Shakespeare in his tragic plays with such noticeable features as tragic flaw, internal and external conflict, fate, revenge and catharsis. Behind all these features he has something to explore. Bringing home the point, he handled tragedy in a very emotional manner.

Keywords: Shakespeare, mind, tragic potential, sensibility, Catharsis, fidelity, treachery, desperation, Pre-eminent, convulsions, aggrandizement

Shakespeare, the Elizabethan dramatist, is called the “soul of the age! The applause, the delight, the wonder of the stage”. Shakespeare, in the words of Ben Jonson, “was not of an age, but of all ages”. It is true that he has powerfully expressed the spirit of his age. However, he is called the very “epitome of mankind”, for he has dealt with the archetypal emotions, aspirations and truths of human nature transcending the barriers of time and space. The British have left India, but Shakespeare’s empire has been widening with the passage of time. Louis B. Wright observes:

“The field of Shakespeare criticism today is so vast and has such a ramification of specialized topics, from aesthetic appreciation to Freudian analysis, that non-specialised literary scholars, much less other folk, and it is difficult to sort out the significance from the trivial” (1).

Shakespeare was one of the greatest men of genius that have ever been born on this blighted planet of ours. The extent, variety and richness of his plays are quite bewildering as one approaches them. He wrote for the Elizabethan stage and audience: but he is read and enjoyed even today not only by English men but by the English-speaking people all over the world. Even though his works have been translated into all the important languages of the world, his freshness and appeal seem to grow the more he is need. But what is the secret of this universal appeal of Shakespeare? How does

he achieve this universality? Aristotle defined universality as the idealizing power of art, i.e. the capacity to lift the narrow world of the story to a higher, wider and vaster world. Shakespeare has this power, for in his works he is constantly generating, constantly moving the particular to the general. Thus, the particular story of a play becomes a part of the panorama of humanity which continues “unbroken from generation to generation”. Coleridge has called him “the myriad – minded Shakespeare” and yet another critical observation is that Shakespeare represents “the prophetic soul of the wide dreaming of the times to come”. The facts which encompass the entire world become his subject matter and his characters are universal in their application and appeal.

Shakespeare today has crossed the geographical boundaries and national frontiers. He has, no doubt, become a Mona Lisa of literature and his reputation has been soaring internationally. Shakespeare’s Tragedy is a very fascinating and profound subject. Tragedy is older than comedy for comedy deals with the hero’s success and prosperity while tragedy tells a dismal story of courage and inevitable defeat. But in spite of defeat, man vindicates his unconquerable mind. “After comedy and most other literary forms, life goes on; but tragedy stops history. It is a summit or end stage, always concerned with problems of value; it is human life seen in an ultimate prospective”. That is why the tragedies of Aeschylus, *Sophocles and Euripides*, of Marlowe, *Shakespeare and Webster*, of Lope de Vega and Calderon, of Corneille and Racine have stood four-square against the ravages of time. In some of his tragedies, particularly, the earlier ones, Shakespeare was undoubtedly influenced by Seneca, the Mysteries and Moralities of the Middle Ages and Marlowe and Kyd. But while writing his major tragedies, viz., *Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello* and *King Lear*, he appears to have outgrown these influences. The supremacy of Shakespearean tragedy is, no doubt, unchallenged and unchallengeable. Rather undoubtedly, supreme among the British dramatists, Shakespeare is unquestionably one of the greatest of all time.

Shakespeare’s greatness lies in the distinction of his work which continues the zenith of English drama. His apparent ability to dramatize situations, his talent for creating vivid characters his all-embracing philosophy of life in dramatic craftsmanship and poetic genius have all combined to make him the most popular and one of the greatest dramatists of the world. His genius is universal and the unique achievement of his lies in his capacity to amalgamate diverse individual factors and in his talent to surpass all those from whom he borrowed”. He borrowed like a prince and enriched everything he borrowed” (Iyengar, 31). Truly speaking, Shakespeare’s tragedies are realistic and natural to the core. Lear is essentially a good king who believes that the world is full of love and virtue, but he was too late to realize that all of it was a mirage when experiencing the stark realities of life. In *Macbeth*, the author pictures the good and evil as co-existing in the same character. In *Hamlet* which begins with a murder and ends in a massacre, Shakespeare makes deep analysis of human behavior through characters of different mental frames. In *Othello*; fidelity and infidelity, jealousy, treachery all play a convincing reality.

A history of Shakespearean criticism is nothing but “a history of the evolution of human thought with its progress and retrogression.” There is no way of discovering when exactly Shakespeare began writing his plays. Starting about 1590 on his long and enviably successful career

as a professional dramatist, he wrote about 38 plays in all. Thirteen of them are classified as ‘Tragedies’. The remaining plays comprise comedies and Histories. Before he entered his ‘tragic phase’, he had already written his masterpieces of comedies such as *The Midsummer Night’s Dream, The Merchant of Venice, As You Like it*. What factors were responsible for Shakespeare’s departure from the charming and sprightly world of the romantic comedies into the grim and dark world of tragedies and stay there for many years, it is different to say. Even the comedies are not unaware of the tragic elements. The basic situation in *The Merchant of Venice. As You like it* and *Twelfth Night* are all potentially tragic. In them, the dramatist deliberately looks at the respective situations from a point of view other than the tragic. It may be said that in Shakespeare, the comic and the tragic do not exclude each other; they co-exist as in everybody’s life. G.B. Harrison writes:

“Shakespeare was once an actor and a playwright; the notion that he was the supreme genius of the English speaking races did not begin until he had been dead more than a century” (6).

Aristotle’s view of tragedy is expressed in his *Poetics* which had a profound and far-reaching influence on the Elizabethan theory – and practice of tragedy. Along with the Senecan and Medieval concept of tragedy, it went a long way towards moulding Shakespeare’s own view of it. Aristotle defines tragedy as “the imitation of an action, serious, complete and of a certain magnitude in a language beautified in different parts with different kinds of embellishment, through action and not narration, and through scenes of pity and fear bringing about the catharsis of these or such like emotions” (27). The action of the tragedy must be of a certain magnitude i.e. it must be long enough to permit an orderly development of action to a catastrophe. A tragedy is a dramatic composition which represents a sombre or a pathetic character involved in a situation of enormity or desperation of by the force of an unhappy circumstances.

The aim of tragedy is to exert pity and fear. Hence, tragic hero must be represented as to serve this purpose of exciting pity and fear among the spectators. According to Aristotle, the tragic hero should be a good man, passing from happiness to misery or a bad man passing from misery to happiness or an extremely bad man falling from happiness to misery. Thus, an ideal tragic hero is said to be the intermediate kind of person – a man not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon not by vice or depravity but by some error of judgement – Hamartia – a miscalculation. Hamartia is not a moral failing. It is known as ‘tragic flaw’. If the hero is a thoroughly bad man, we never feel pity for him but rather we express that he deserves it. The hero thus is “more sinned against than sinning”. So, a tragic hero should rather be a good and eminent person accepting a bad end.

Shakespeare’s tragic heroes are all conspicuous or remarkable persons who stand in a high degree in society. They are either kings or princess or great military generals who are indispensable for the State. In this respect, Hamlet is a prince, Lear is a king, Macbeth belongs to the royal family

and is a trusted kinsman and General and Othello is a great warrior and brave General and their suffering is contrasted with their previous happiness. So, the tragic hero of Shakespeare is not only a person of high degree, but he also has an exceptional nature. He is built on a grand scale and his tragic heroes are all driven with certain particular interest, object, passion or habit of mind. Owing to the fault or flaw of his character, the tragic hero falls from greatness. He errs and his error, joining with other causes, brings ruin upon him.

Shakespearean Tragedy in the main confirm to the classic definition of Aristotle but it does not strictly follow the Greek philosopher. Maurice Morgann observes:

“Shakespeare’s plays and above all the great tragedies offer an experience that can only be lived into and understood to the best of our individual powers and our understanding changes as we change” (P 228)

The essential structure of Shakespeare’s plays is poetic. Shakespeare’s genius is explicit in creating his characters with a human nature. His heroes are all one with the humanity. He depicts human nature and gives importance to emotions, moral instinct, human weakness etc., In fact, Shakespeare’s characters are all true examples of human nature. The action of a Shakespearean tragedy always develops through conflicts. This conflict is both external and internal. It may be between two persons or group of persons representing opposing interests. Such is called external conflict, internal conflict is found in the mind of the hero between two opposing ideas or attitudes which pull him in different direction so that the hero, torn and divided within himself, suffers the agonies in the mind. Thus, there is conflict in *Macbeth* between ambition and loyalty to the King; *Othello* is torn within himself between jealousy and love; and *Hamlet* hesitates and broods and does nothing. Hamlet’s madness is due to inner conflict. King Lear suffers terribly as a result of the ingratitude and treachery of his daughters. In a word, the theme of a Shakespearean tragedy is the struggle between good and evil resulting in serious convulsions and disturbances, sorrows, sufferings and deaths. In the words of Dowden, “Tragedy as conceived by Shakespeare is concerned with the ruin and restoration of the soul and the life of man. In other words, its struggle is the struggle of good and evil in the world”. For Shakespeare, character is Destiny. “His Tragedies are not mere tragedies of character but tragedies of character and Destiny” (Nicoll, 43). There is a tragic relationship between the hero and his environment. Fate or destiny places him in various circumstances and situation, Fatal forces seem to hover over his head. For example, *Macbeth* is exposed to various temptations, power and glory which he could have resisted; but he does not. He is weak of will, his ambition longs for the crown and desires personal aggrandizement or glory. The situation in *Othello* requires calm and cool thinking but it is just this quality which the hero doesn’t have; in *Hamlet*, swift action would have saved the situation, but the hero is given to brooding thought and noble inaction. In *King Lear*, the circumstances require cool thought, but Lear is rash and hasty, there could be no tragedy at all in their different – circumstances. In other words, the flow in the character

of the hero proves fatal of him only in the peculiar circumstances in which cruel Destiny has placed him.

‘Catharsis’ the great word, signifies cleansing or purifying. It is used by Aristotle in his descriptions of the effect of tragedy – the purgation of emotions. A Shakespearean tragedy is really ‘Kathartic, i.e., It purges the readers of the emotions of self-pity and terror. Shakespeare brings home to us a kind of serenity at the end of his play. Macbeth realizes a new beauty in existence; *Othello* and *King Lear* regain some of their former nobility and dignity just before the end. Antony and Cleopatra, Brutus and Cassius are never so great and heroic as at the moments of their death. Thus, a sort of calm descends on the tragic hero. It is owing to the serenity at the end that the readers are never left crushed or pessimistic. Thus, emotional equilibrium is maintained. Shakespeare has made effective use of soliloquy in his plays especially in his tragedies. He has skillfully used soliloquy mainly 1) to reveal complex character, 2) psychological conflict of the character, and 3) various motives and emotions of a character. “The soliloquy in Shakespeare is an integral part of the action of the play. It reveals character, gives a self-analysis of motives and helps in the development of action. According to A.C. Bradley, “many of the soliloquies of Shakespeare are masterpieces” (P 58).

Hallucination, somnambulism, violent fits of anger or jealousy, imbecility etc., are various types of abnormalities which Shakespeare deals in his plays. Bernard Lott observes:

“Studies of true madness (Lear, Ophelia in Hamlet, feigned madness (Hamlet) or madness included (Malvolio in Twelfth Night) are spread through Shakespeare’s plays. They do not always receive the kind of Compassionate – treatment we would look for today. Lear’s madness doesn’t figure in the sources and was long thought to be a natural product handling the revenge theme in the plot as Shakespeare assembled it for his own purposes” (P XXXIII).

Shakespeare’s tragic art attains a new dimension in the portrayal of his plays. He never rewards the wicked and does not put the virtuous to suffering and death unnecessarily. When Lear driven into the storm by his daughters, he has already lost control over his self-possession. The storm has intensified his imbalance of mind and has made him insane. Shakespeare shows that punishment always follows wrong deeds. The presence and power of the unseen is found in Shakespearean Tragedies. All classes of people shared this belief of the supernatural elements which controlled human nature. A.C. Bradley observes that Shakespeare occasionally and for various reasons represents the abnormal conditions of mind, insanity, somnambulism and hallucinations.

Shakespeare also abundantly depicts witches and ghosts. They all have specific role to play and deeds issuing from these are certainly not what we call deeds in the fullest sense, deeds expressive of character. Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking has no influence whatever on the events that follow it. Macbeth did not murder Duncan because he saw a dagger in the air, he saw the dagger because he was about to murder Duncan. A.C. Bradley observes:

“If Lear were really mad when he divided his Kingdom, if Hamlet were really mad at a time In the story, they would cease to be tragic characters” (P 8).

Shakespeare, with his artistic genius used the supernatural – the unseen forces most sparingly. His supernatural beings remain aloof, and do not mingle freely with human beings. His supernatural is never repetitive; yet their influence is felt throughout the play. In the words of Mary A. Woods, “Supernatural are Messengers from the unseen, Ministers of justice, Avengers of crimes that but for them, might have remained unpunished. They stand for the Nemesis which is a prime factor in all the plays” (P 271).

A Study of Shakespearean Tragedies is a complex one. As Dowden puts it, “Tragedy as conceived by Shakespeare is concerned with the ruin or the restoration of the soul and of the life of art. In other words, its subject is the struggle of good and evil in the world” (P 7). In Shakespeare's tragedies, we have before us a type of the mystery of the whole world. We witness astounding power, intelligence, life and glory, perishing and destroying themselves. It looks as if a fate, a pre-determined design of god that calamities arise as in the case of Greek Tragedies. Yet “in our final analysis, it appears that human action is the central fact of tragedy, and the catastrophe is the return of this action, and in this found justice or that orders of moral necessity” (P 7).

Shakespeare has left behind a good number of tragedies. They are *Titus Andronicus*, *Richard III*, *Richard-II*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Timon of Athens* and *Coriolanus Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. Shakespeare was so masterly a playwright that one can find unfathomable aspects of tragic sensibility in his Great Tragedies.

Shakespeare is at his best in Hamlet. “One of the qualities of Shakespearean tragedy hardest for readers and audiences to accept is the vividness of evil. Shakespeare's villains are among his most compelling characters and the villain is gradually practical, intelligent, resourceful and without illusions” (Charney, 241). Hamlet is a play in which supernaturalism plays a dominant role striking a note of mystery so as to intensify the tragedy and *Othello* is a tragedy of passion *Othello* is a tragedy of intrigue. *Othello*, like *Romeo and Juliet*, is a love story that ends with the death of the lovers. “There is in both plays the same sense of speed in movement, the poignancy in the double tragedy” (Iyengar 494). Along the lines of Aristotle's poetics, Lear is the most fully developed of Shakespeare's tragic protagonists. He moves from tragic blindness and hubris through a suffering and madness in which he experiences tragic recognition. He is extremely different at the end of the

play when he is reconciled with his daughter Cordelia. But he cannot escape his tragic fate, and the innocent Cordelia shares this fate:

“For thee, oppressed king,
I am cost down” (535)

This helps to define the kind of tragedy that powerfully evokes pity and fear, in Aristotle’s terms. There is no justice in the death of Cordelia, yet she is indissolubly linked with Lear. The redemption of Lear, his recovery from madness, his reconciliation with Cordelia takes place gradually and it may be the most tender and moving part in the play. The old king believes that he is a soul in hell, and he needs to be convinced that he is alive and that his daughter Cordelia is speaking to him.

“You do me wrong to take me out O’ th’ grave.
Thou are a soul in bliss; but I am bound
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears,
Do scald like molten lead” (4.7. 45-48).

This scene comes closest in Shakespeare to fulfilling the criteria of Aristotelian tragedy because Lear’s return from madness brings with it an intense recognition of his fallible humanity. His acknowledgement of Cordelia is done with extraordinary simplicity:

“Do not laugh at me
For, as I am a man, I think this lady
To be my child Cordelia” (4.7. 68-70).

Our final image of the king at the end of the play is “cheerless, dark and deadly” (5.3. P.262) in the words of Kent. He enters with the dead Cordelia in his arms and there is a brief and heartbreaking illusion that she may be alive. But Lear at this point is beyond tragedy:

“Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou’ It
Come to more.
Never, never, never, never, never” (308-310).

The ‘never’ is the final voice of tragic doom and sensibility. Here is a tragic sense of parting and otherworldliness. *Macbeth* is full of splendid psychological insights expressed in a dramatic form. In Act-I scene-5, Lady Macbeth is alone on stage reading herself husband’s letter and speaking the first important soliloquy. *Macbeth* has many soliloquies. Macbeth’s unquiet mind is already apparent in this soliloquy before he enters the scene. He is not a natural murderer like Claudius or Iago. Lady Macbeth understands the impediment that the “milk of human Kindness” imposes. Lady Macbeth gives him courage:

“Thou’dst have, great Glamis,
Thus, thou must do, if thou have it” (1.5. 24-25).

Macbeth is unusual in structure because it has a villain – hero – Macbeth. Macbeth is like Iago and it splits the role of protagonist between husband and wife. In terms of dramatic logic, Macbeth is set against Lady Macbeth, and they seem to move in opposite directions. Before the murder, Macbeth is already defending Duncan and accusing himself in a manner that resembles Claudius in the prayer scene of Hamlet. In his lucidity and self – awareness, Macbeth seems to be modeled on Claudius. Macbeth’s only motive for the murder of Duncan is his “vanting ambition”. Aristotle’s criteria of pity and terror is amply fulfilled in *Macbeth*. We sympathize with his loss of everything that is most characteristically human, we feel for his own clear-sighted-recognition of what is happening to him. Macbeth cannot react promptly to his wife’s death, and he remembers nostalgically, the time when his “senses would have cooled to hear a night-shtick” (10-11).

“I have supped full with horrors” (13).

Macbeth’s “tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow”, Speech is a sign of despair because life has become tedious, repetitive and meaningless. He hopes for death. Macbeth is considered the most vehement, most concentrated and perhaps the most tremendous of the four great tragedies of Shakespeare. *Titus Andronicus* is Shakespeare’s first tragedy. This play reminds us how strong, passionate and eloquent the play is and how clearly it prepares way for later tragedies, especially king Lear. “The most intemperate judgement comes from T.S. Eliot who called *Titus Andronicus*” one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written, a play in which it is incredible that Shakespeare had any hand at all a play in which the best passages would be ‘too highly honoured by the signature of Peele” (P 211). Like Lear, Titus is a man, “more sinned against than sinning” (King Lear 3.2. 60). He is overwhelmed and driven mad by an endless torrent of grief that makes us sympathize with his sufferings. As a tragedy, Titus is powerful in performance. *Julius Caesar* is a wonderfully designed political tragedy of Shakespeare.

To conclude, Shakespeare brings serious moral purpose in his tragedies. The wicked is ever punished in Shakespeare as in the Greek tragedies. Shakespeare conceived of tragedy as something that celebrates life. Life in itself is nothing. It is a dream that keeps us fighting, willing and living. The death of the hero must reveal the dignity, nobility and universality of his struggle has been a futile one. In Great tragic, the order is symbolized in fate or the Gods, but in Shakespeare, it is in the laws of nature or in human justice or reason. Shakespeare is said to have explored the mind as a domain of intense tragic potentiality. Pride or vanity of lust is responsible for their tragedy, as they rely too much on their conscious ego, ignoring the tremendous power of the unconscious. Shakespeare lingers at length with tragic sensibility. Yet it doesn’t mean that his vision of life was essentially tragic. Behind the tragic scene, Shakespeare has something to explore. Tragedy is an outcome of a mistake, a moral lapse. Shakespeare sees a flaw, a lapse in moral responsibility at every tragedy or catastrophe.

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