

‘Humanity’s Encounter with the Powers of Darkness’¹: A Study of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* from the Quranic Point of View

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Abstract

The paper studies the encounter between two opposite forces, - humanity, on the one side, and the forces of evil on the other. Many great pieces of literature portray this encounter. Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* is such a play that presents this encounter with remarkable insight. However, the comprehensive picture of this encounter is portrayed in various chapters of the Holy Qur’an. The paper looks at, on the one hand, some such verses of the Holy Qur’an and, on the other, Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, in order to analyze and compare the inherent conflict of human situation between the temptation of human mind and the ethical biddings of human soul. It also verifies the popular perception where *Macbeth* is viewed as representatively human, and his downfall is considered as helpless failure of humanity. After analyzing the nature of some encounter between the forces good and evil, it has been found that *Macbeth* represents only the inherent weakness and vulnerability of mankind against evil; but he does not represent humanity’s spiritual strength. The paper takes the final view that Adam (pbuh) represents humanity; Yusuf (pbuh) represents humanity in their respective encounters with evil.

The battle between humanity and the forces of evil is a perpetual one. The history of this antagonism stretches back to the very moment of the creation of the first human being- Adam (pbuh). From that eventful moment Satan- the avowed enemy of humanity- and his forces are relentlessly trying to entrap human beings. Hence, it has become an everlasting battle between the two. This is a psychological battle and the battlefield is human mind. Whenever a human being is in a psychologically weak moment, taking advantage of it, the forces of evil appear to him in various forms to bring about his total down fall. By presenting different situations repeatedly, the holy Quran, over and over again warns mankind against Satan and all kinds of satanic forces. The Quranic portrayal illustrates the real nature of evil, and exhibits various satanic ways of tempting and deceiving mankind; at the same time provides guidelines for tackling them. On the other hand, this eternal encounter has become one of the most recurrent themes in the world of literature. John Milton’s celebrated epic *Paradise Lost* presents the story of the Fall of Man, the satanic temptation faced by Adam and Eve, and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Christopher Marlowe’s *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* is a play about how a very learned man is deceived by the devils, and consequently is doomed. Again, the study of evil is one of the major themes in many plays of Shakespeare. As Martin Orkin says: “... *Othello* shares with other plays a fascination with evil in its most virulent and universal aspect. These plays study the devastating effects of different forms of evil- ambitious pride, ingratitude, wrath, jealousy, and vengeful hate...” (1150)

In many of his plays, especially in his major tragedies – *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*- Shakespeare presents his perception of evil. Among these plays *Macbeth* is, indeed, the most remarkable one for its focus on evil in the protagonist and on his relationship to the forces tempting him. As Jean E. Howard, in her essay on *Macbeth*, observes: “*Macbeth* is the last of great Shakespearean tragedies that examine the dimensions of spiritual evil... As a culmination of a series of tragedies on evil, the play offers an intensely human study of the psychological effects of evil on a particular man and, to a lesser extent, on his wife.” (1255). She repeatedly mentions *Macbeth* as a representative human character. In her words:

Macbeth is more representatively human ... his awareness and sensitivity to moral issues, together with his conscious choice of evil, produce an unnerving account of human failure.... *Macbeth* is presented to us as typically human, both in his understanding and in his perverse ambition... a perspective on the operation of evil in human affairs. (1257)

Samuel Johnson in his ‘The Preface to Shakespeare’ describes Shakespearean plays as “just representation of general nature” (2394), and the characters of Shakespeare as “the genuine progeny of common humanity” (2394). According to Johnson, they demonstrate “sentiments of real life” (2395) and we can read there “human sentiments in human language” (2396). Again he says, “The reflection that strikes the heart is not that the evils before us are real evils, but that they are evils to which we ourselves may be exposed” (2400). John Dryden in ‘An Essay of Dramatic Poesy’ defines drama as “just and lively image of human nature” (1838), and eulogizes Shakespeare saying “but I love Shakespeare. . . . as he has given us the most correct plays, . . .” (1842).’ A. C. Bradley says, “Darkness, we may even say blackness, broods over this tragedy. It is remarkable that almost

¹ The phrase has been taken from the introductory essay on *Macbeth*, collected in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 5th Edition, Edited by David Bevington. New York: Longman (2003). P. 1255.

all the scenes which at once recur to memory take place either at night or in some dark spot”(292). Wilson Knight, in his essay ‘Macbeth and the Metaphysic of Evil’, comments: “*Macbeth* is Shakespeare’s most profound and mature vision of evil ... the central human theme... one is in touch with absolute evil, which, being absolute, has a satanic beauty, a hideous, serpent-like grace and attraction, drawing, paralyzing” (160). Harold Bloom in his ‘Shakespeare the Invention of the Human’ says:

The universal reaction to *Macbeth* is that we identify with him ... Shakespeare rather dreadfully sees to it that we are *Macbeth*; (517) We are to journey inward to *Macbeth*’s heart of darkness, and there we will find ourselves more truly and more strange ... (518), ... the proleptic element in *Macbeth*’s imagination reaches out to our own apprehensiveness, our universal sense that the dreadful is about to happen, and that we have no choice but to participate in it. (535)

Here, we can see that *Macbeth* is repeatedly viewed by many critics as representative human character. But, if we consider him from the Quranic point of view, does *Macbeth* really represent humanity in his encounter with evil? Here, my endeavor is to examine the extent to which we do ‘identify’ ourselves with *Macbeth*, and to see whether we are really helpless in such encounter with evil, or we have some ‘choice’ to take against it.

Searching for the origin of the encounter between good and evil from the Quranic point of view, we find that the original instance of it is illustrated by the encounter of Adam (pbuh) and Iblis- Satan. Here Adam stands for all mankind. According to the holy Quran, just after creating him, Allah (SWT) taught Adam ‘*the names of all things*’ (2:31), and his status was raised higher for his knowledge. Then, Allah (SWT) asked the angels to prostrate to him, and they immediately did so. But Satan refused to bow down. He arrogantly argued that he cannot bow down to a man who was created from clay, whereas he himself was created from fire. The egotism of Satan put himself above man. But he ignored the fact that Allah (SWT) had not merely made man’s body from clay, but had breathed His Spirit into man. Allah (SWT) says: “*when I have fashioned him [in due proportion] and breathed into him of My Spirit*” (15:29). Explaining this verse, commentator says:

...here the emphasis is on three points: i. the breathing from Allah’s spirit into man i.e. the faculty of God-like knowledge and will, which, if rightly used, would give man superiority over other creatures, ii. The origin of evil is in arrogance and jealousy on the part of Satan, who saw only the lower side of man (his clay) and failed to see the higher side, the faculty brought in from the spirit of Allah, iii. That this evil only touches those who yield to it, and has no power over Allah’s sincere servants, purified by His grace. Adam is not here mentioned by name, but only man. (*The Holy Qur-an...*, 2030)

After this incident Satan was expelled from the Garden for his arrogance, jealousy and rebellion. He immediately prayed to Allah: “*Give me respite till the day they are raised up.*” (7:14). Allah (SWT) accepted his prayer: “*Be thou among those who have respite.*” (7:15) As soon as he was granted the respite, he threw the challenge that he would mislead the children of Adam. He says: “*I will mislead them, and I will create in them false desires; ...*” (4:119). Thus Satan obtained Allah’s permission to tempt man. As Satan is powerless against Allah, he turns therefore against man. But Allah (SWT) threw a counter challenge saying: “*For over My servants no authority shalt thou have, except such as put themselves in the wrong and follow thee*” (15:42). Here, the important point is if a man is really sincere in maintaining his relationship with Allah (SWT), and seeks His grace to protect him, he will definitely obtain purification from all influence of evil. It changes the whole nature of man. After that, evil cannot touch him. But if he puts himself in the way of wrong and deliberately chooses evil, he will deviate from humanity, and will be allied with satanic forces. This is the guided way for man to take. Allah (SWT) says: “*This is, with me, a strait way.*”(15:41). Explaining this verse Muhammad Asad says:

... ‘*this is what I have willed*’ – namely, that Iblis (Satan) should tempt man, but should have no power to seduce those who are truly conscious of God. Thus, the Qur’an makes it clear that despite his ostensible ‘rebellion’ against his Creator; Satan fulfils a definite function in God’s plan: he is the central tempter who enables man to exercise his God-given freedom of choice between good and evil and, thus, to become a being endowed with moral free will. (*The Message of the Qur’an, ...* p 387)

Shakespeare, in his play *Macbeth*, dramatizes such a battle between good and evil that takes place in the mind of *Macbeth*. Here, the profound psychological portrait of the protagonist focuses directly upon what he thinks and feels, why he acts the way he does, and what consequences his own evil brings about upon himself. At the beginning of the play *Macbeth* is a very successful and highly esteemed army general. We learn of his heroic actions in defence of the kingdom. But, at the end of the play *Macbeth* is totally alone. He has lost all his friends, he is universally despised, his wife committed suicide, and all his eager hopes have been shattered. He is a man without a place in the social community. Through this imaginary situation, Shakespeare studies the inevitable encounter between humanity and the forces of darkness, and its ultimate consequences.

At the very outset, when *Macbeth* and Banquo were returning from battlefield, suddenly they encounter three witches who make certain prophecies about their future:

FIRST WITCH: All hail, *Macbeth*! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!

SECOND WITCH: All hail, *Macbeth*! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!

THIRD WITCH: All hail, *Macbeth*, that shalt be King hereafter! (I. iii. 48-50)

Their prophecies strongly influence Macbeth; he is startled and immediately lost in his thought. Banquo observes:

Good Sir, why do you start, and seem to fear
Things that do sound so fair? – I'th' name of truth
Are ye fantastical, ...? (I. iii. 51-3)

On Macbeth's initial reaction to the predictions of the witches A. C. Bradley comments:

But when Macbeth heard them he was not an innocent man. Precisely how far his mind was guilty may be a question; but no innocent man would have started, as he did, with a start of fear at the mere prophecy of a crown, or have conceived thereupon immediately the thought of murder. Either this thought was not new to him, or he had cherished at least some vaguer dishonourable dream, the instantaneous recurrence of which, at the moment of his hearing the prophecy, revealed to him an inward and terrifying guilt. In either case not only was he free to accept or resist the temptation, but the temptation was already within him. (301)

Here Macbeth started experiencing psychological conflict. He himself questions the suitability of the atmosphere of their meeting, but treats the witches' words as 'prophetic' ones. "Why upon this blasted heath you stop our way / With such prophetic greeting?" (I.iii.77-78). As the predictions synchronize with his ambitious thought, he feels that it is 'prophetic greeting', but his moral nature questions the suitability of the circumstances for such 'prophetic greeting'. Just a little later, the two messengers from the King greeted him as the 'Thane of Cawdor' (I. iii. 105), with which the witches greeted him earlier. This greeting creates a terrible battle in his mind between his ambitious self and his moral human impulse – "This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill; cannot be good" (I.iii.131-32). As his ambition is strong, the suggestion 'cannot be ill' comes first to his mind. But in very quick succession his moral human impulse protests that it 'cannot be good' either. His ambitious self argues that "If ill, why hath it given me earnest of success, / Commencing in a truth? / I am thane of Cawdor" (I. iii. 134-35). Again his moral self puts counter arguments "If good why should I yield to that suggestion / Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair," (I.iii.136-37). The thought of murdering Duncan is gradually getting stronger and he has already started feeling the terrible implications of it: "My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical, / Shakes so my single state of man" (I.iii.138-41). W. Knight comments: "This is the moment of birth of evil in Macbeth – he may indeed have had ambitious thought before, may even have intended the murder, but now for the first time he feels its oncoming reality" (174). Here, Macbeth feels that the thought of murder shatters his very existence as a human being. Grierson says "in *my single state of man*, 'single' here means 'indivisible', and the phrase as a whole – *my composite nature – body, spirit, etc. made one by the soul.*" (qtd in Muir, 21)

Now, realizing the terrible consequences, Macbeth leaves the matter to Fate. He decides not to do anything in this regard: 'If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown / me / without my stir' (I. iii. 145). Here, Macbeth's moral self wins, however temporarily, the battle. But, the fulfillment of the second prophecy makes him yearn for the fulfillment of the third one. He keeps thinking about murdering Duncan even though the prospect of committing such a deed 'doth unfix my hair / And make my seated heart knock at my ribs' (I.iii.136-137)

The connotation of the predictions of the witches is much more significant and deeper than their denotation is. To the Elizabethan audience it was needless to explain that only the imminent end or the death of the present king necessitates the nomination of the next king. Moreover, the prediction of the first witch that Macbeth is "Thane of Glamis" comes true only because of the death of Sinel-Macbeth's father (I. iii.71). Similarly, the prediction of the second witch that Macbeth is 'Thane of Cawdor' comes true only by the death of the immediate past thane of Cawdor (I. iii. 110). So, to become true the prediction of the third witch- 'shalt be King hereafter' (I.iii.50)- definitely requires the death of Duncan. W. Knight comments: "...the Weird Sisters foreshadow the death of Duncan" (158).

Again, the natural death of Duncan will not pave the way for Macbeth's becoming the next king. In that case, according to the law of primogeniture, the eldest son of Duncan will be the king. All these things are crystal clear to the powerfully poetic imagination of Macbeth. He knows with total certainty that only by murdering Duncan and occupying the throne he can be the next king. In fact, at this point, his imagination is in the grip of a powerful tension between his desire to see himself as king, and his vivid perception of the immorality of the act, and of the disastrous consequences it will bring. He knows he will have to violate what he believes. Moreover, he is intelligent enough to apprehend the public reaction to the killing of Duncan. But he cannot wave off the desire. It is not that Macbeth is averse to killing. He is famous as a warrior, and the first thing we hear about him is that he killed his enemy ruthlessly- 'unseamed him from the nave to th' chops' (I. ii. 22). His high social status comes from his effectiveness as a bloody warrior. So it is not reluctance to kill that holds him back, rather a clear awareness that in killing Duncan he will be violating every rule that holds his community together. As this awareness is uppermost in his mind, he decides not to carry out the murder but to enjoy his newly won social honours.

The problem is that his imagination just does not let his possibility of becoming king go off easily. Again, as soon as Duncan declares Malcolm as the heir to the Scottish throne, the thought of murdering Duncan comes strongly back to Macbeth's mind. Now, in front of him there are only two alternatives; either he has to give up the idea of becoming king, or he has to murder the King to occupy the throne. Evidently, he cannot give up his hope of becoming king. So he has opted for the second alternative: "The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step / On which I must fall down or else o'erleap, / For in my way it lies" (I. iv. 48-50).

Again, when the King was taking supper in Macbeth's castle, Macbeth suddenly left the room and was pacing up and down in an inner courtyard examining the pros and cons of murdering Duncan. Here he is being terribly tormented by an acute indecision like Hamlet's 'to be or not to be' situation. On the one side, he feels the sooner the murder is done, the better: "If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly" (I. vii. 1-2). On the other hand, he finds many strong points against the murder. He clearly feels that the assassination will not end the matter with the completion of the deed itself. Rather it will catch him up in a net and bring dreadful consequences:

But in these cases
We still have judgment here, that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague th'inventor. (I. vii. 7-10)

Duncan is here Macbeth's guest. The relationship between guest and host is a holy one. As the host he has the compulsion of shielding his guest against the murderer. So in no way he can carry the knife to murder him. Moreover, Kings were believed to be the representatives of God, and regicide was considered similar to cutting one's relationship off with his God.

To his utter dismay, in favor of the murder he finds only one vague point-his vaulting ambition:

I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on th'other (I. vii. 25 - 28)

Jean E. Howard comments:

We are moved, too, by the poetic intensity of Macbeth's moral vision. . . . The horror, indeed, of his crime is that his cultivated self is revolted by what he cannot prevent himself from doing. He understands with a terrible clarity, not only the moral wrong of what he is about to do, but also the inescapably destructive consequences for himself. . . . finally, judgment in 'the life to come' includes the prospect of eternal torment. (1259)

Considering the strong ground against the murder, once again he has decided not to proceed in this matter any more: "We will proceed no further in this business" (I. vii. 32). To this Lady Macbeth reacted sharply. At this point, she strongly whets his impulse for murder by all means at her disposal:

...Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valor
As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that
Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,
And live a coward in thine own esteem,
Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would'
Like the poor cat i'th'adage? (I.vii.37-45)

Thus, Lady Macbeth hits him on the ground of his personal pride. She taunts him to act on his desires. She asks him not to let any communal scruples stand in the way of his achieving a thing which he wants for himself. Interestingly enough, part of her tactics with Macbeth is to urge him to be more of a *man*. She identifies his scruples as something *unmanly*. She sneers at him by comparing him to a cat who wants to eat fish but unwilling to wet her feet. She further stimulates the desire in him:

I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me;
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brain out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this. (I.vii.55-60)

Here Lady Macbeth appears to be more tempting than the witches. W. Knight describes her as "she is not merely a woman of strong will: she is a woman possessed – possessed of evil passion" (168). Her speech is described as "demonic in intensity and passion. It is inhuman –as though the woman were controlled by an evil something which masters her, mind and soul". (168) Being strongly tempted by both inner and outer evil Macbeth finally takes his decision: 'I am settled and bend up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat' (I. vii. 80-81). Finally he murders Duncan.

Macbeth is an imaginary character, but the situation he faces is a very real-life human situation. This is why such a dramatic presentation moves us so profoundly. As Johnson says: "Imitations produce pain or pleasure, not because they are mistaken for realities, but because they bring realities to mind" (2400). We are moved by Macbeth-situation because it brings to our mind "a just picture of a real original" (Johnson 2400). Here, for our better understanding of the nature of this universal good-evil encounter, now we will examine two factual instances from the holy Quran where two holy prophets faced some awkward situations. The purpose of taking the instances from the lives of holy persons like the prophets is to show that even they also encountered evil temptations. Moreover, their lives are role-models for us. By examining their ways of coping with the odd situations they faced, we can draw instructions for us.

We observe the first instance of the battle between good and evil as it is manifested in the case of Adam (pbuh). At first, Adam and Eve were placed in the Garden of comfort and bliss. Allah (SWT) says: "*O Adam! Dwell thou and thy wife in the Garden, and enjoy (its good things) as ye wish: but approach not this tree, or ye run into harm and transgression.*" (2:35) Here Allah has given him a limited faculty of choice. For Adam only forbidden thing was to approach a particular Tree. From that moment Satan started tempting him continuously in various ways, and finally Adam succumbed to Satan's suggestion. Allah says: "*But Satan caused them both to stumble therein, and thus brought about the loss their erstwhile state...*" (2:36)

Our first parents as created by Allah (SWT) were innocent in matters - material as well as spiritual. They knew no evil. But the faculty of choice, which was given to them and which raised them above the angels, also implied that they had the capacity of doing evil. Satan targeted this human capacity of doing evil in Adam, and started to whisper suggestions to him. It is significant to note that Satan found it impossible for him to entrap Adam and his wife remaining in his own identity. So he assumed the role of an adviser to them, and to deceive them he swore by the name of Allah. He said: "*Your Lord only forbade you this tree, lest ye should become angels or such beings as live for ever. And he swore to them both, that he was their sincere adviser*" (7:20-21). It created acute psychological conflict in Adam. He could not think that anyone could give him any bad suggestion swearing by the name of Allah. Again, the forbidden tree is described to him as the 'Tree of Eternity': "... *he (Satan) said, O Adam! Shall I lead thee to the Tree of Eternity and to a kingdom that never decays?*" (20:120), indicating the possibility of attaining eternal life by eating the fruit of that tree. Now the situation was too difficult for Adam to take right decision. Here he faced temptation from within as well as without. On this verse commentator says:

The suggestion of satan is clever, as it always is: it is false, and at the same time plausible. It is false, because (1) that felicity was not temporary, like the life of this world, and (2) they were supreme in the Garden, and a "kingdom such as was dangled before them would only add to their sorrows. It was plausible, because (1) nothing had been said to them about Eternity, as the opposite of Eternity was not yet known, and (2) the sweets of Power arise from the savour of Self, and Self is an alluring (if false) attraction that misleads the Will. (*The Holy Qur'an ...* 909)

This is how Satan deceived Adam and brought about his down fall. The holy Quran says: *So by deceit he brought about their fall: when they tasted of the tree, their shame became manifest to them, and they began to sew together the leaves of the garden over their bodies*" (7:22). Although temporarily Satan was able to misguide Adam, he could not take him totally away from the obedience of his Creator. At this Allah (SWT) asks Adam: "*Did I not forbid you that tree, and tell you that Satan was an avowed enemy unto you?*" (7: 22) He immediately surrendered to Allah, started repenting fervently, and begging His forgiveness: "*Our Lord! We have wronged our own souls: If thou forgive us not and bestow not upon us Thy Mercy, we shall certainly be lost.*" (7: 23). Allah compassionately accepted the repentance of Adam. He was still given the chance to make good and recover the lost status. "*Thereupon Adam received words [of guidance] from his Sustainer and He accepted his repentance: for verily He alone is the Acceptor of Repentance, the Dispenser of Grace*" (2:37). Thus, the fall of Adam does not cut him off from his Creator. In spite of his fall, assurance of guidance is given: *Down with you all from this [state], there shall, nonetheless, most certainly come unto you guidance from Me: and those who follow my guidance need have no fear, neither shall they grieve* (2:38). In case man follows the guidance, he is free from any fear for the present or the future, and any grief or sorrow for the past.

Explaining the reason for Adam's temporary inability to cope with satanic temptation Allah (SWT) says: "*And, indeed, long ago did We impose Our commandment on Adam; but he forgot it, and We found no firmness of Purpose in him*" (20:115). On this verse Mohammad Asad comments: "negligence of spiritual truths is one of the recurrent characteristics of the human race which is symbolized here- as in many other places in the Quran- by Adam" (483). This verse justifies human inability to maintain the purity of his soul continuously. Because of his inherent weakness humanity may stumble temporarily. Here lies the inevitable need for divine guideline in such difficult situations. Muhammad Asad says:

Again, ...- the faculty of conceptual thinking is man's outstanding endowment, his "forgetting" God's commandment- resulting from a lack of all "firmness of purpose" in the domain of ethics - is an evidence of the moral weakness characteristic of the human race (cf. 4: 28- "man has been created

weak”): and this, in its turn, explains man’s dependence on unceasing divine guidance. (483)

Now, in the case of Yusuf (pbuh), we see the instance of how reliance on divine help saves humanity from the snare of evil. In fact, in the story of Yusuf good and evil contrasted in many different ways. In his childhood, as the consequence of the conspiracy of his half-brothers, he was taken to Egypt and sold to the Aziz¹ of Egypt. In the house of the Aziz he grew up safely; but when he attained his full manhood, he faced there a very difficult situation. The holy Qur’an gives the account of it in the following verses:

But she in whose house he was living [conceived a passion for him] sought to make him yield himself onto her; and she bolted the doors and said, “Come thou unto me”. [But Yusuf] answered: “May God preserve me! Behold goodly has my master made my stay [in this house!] verily, to no good end come they that do [such] wrong! And, indeed, she desired him, and he desired her; [and he would have succumbed] had he not seen evidence of his Sustainer’s truth! Thus [we willed it to be] in order that we might avert from him all evil and all deeds of abomination—for, behold, he was truly one of Our sincere servants. (12: 23 – 24)

It is very important to notice here that as soon as he faces the temptation, the first thing Yusuf does is he immediately seeks for the help of Allah (SWT) – “*May God preserve me*”, then he tries to draw the attention of the tempting woman to the fact that it would be a notorious piece of betrayal from his side to a man who generously helped him in his days of desolation: “*goodly has my master made my stay [in this house!]*”, finally he warns her about the consequence of such betrayal – “*to no good end come they that do [such] wrong!*”. But she was blinded with passion, and his appeal to her good sense had no effect on her. Yusuf was a human being after all, and her passionate love and her beauty placed a great temptation in his path. But he had a sure refuge – his faith in Allah (SWT). His spiritual eyes saw something that she did not see. She thought no one saw as the doors were closed. But Yusuf knew that Allah (SWT) was there, that realization made him strong against temptation. Significantly, in the Quranic text we see that as the woman “*desired him*”, ... [*and he would have succumbed*], but the protection here is that he saw “*evidence of his Sustainer’s truth!*”. This is the moment when he receives the required divine help and guidance. As he is sincere in his relationship with his Creator, and seeks His grace to protect him, he obtains purification from all influences of evil and achieves moral victory. In his commentary on this verse, distinguished Quranic scholar Zamakhshari points out that “the moral significance of ‘virtue’ consists in one’s inner victory over a wrongful desire, and not in the absence of such a desire”. (qtd in Asad 340)

Yusuf faces a second tempting situation – the allurements of the society women. After the first incident, as the innocence and loyalty of Yusuf became clear to every one, the Aziz apologized to Yusuf and begged him to give no further thought to that matter. He also asked his wife to seek forgiveness for her sin. But the matter did not end here. As the wife of Aziz was being severely criticized by the ladies in the society for running after a slave, she invited them to a party and trickily arranged some situations to justify her position to them. It brought great success for her. Here in the Quranic text, though we find her speaking in the monologue, her speech expresses the collective mentality. Commentator says:

The women all agree that no man has a right to resist their solicitations. Beauty spurned is the highest crime. And so now she rises to the height of tragic guilt and threatened Yusuf. She forgets all her finer feelings, and is overpowered by brute passion. After all, he is a slave and must obey his mistress! Or, there is prison, and the company of the vilest. (*The Holy Qur’an ...* 636)

Yusuf, showing moral firmness and still keeps seeking divine help, characteristically prefers imprisonment to yielding to their temptation:

O my Sustainer! Prison is more desirable to me than [compliance with] what these women invite me to; for unless thou turn away their guile from me, I might yet yield to their allurements, and become one of those who are unaware [of right and wrong]. And his Sustainer responded to his prayer, and freed him from the threat of their guile; verily, He alone is all-hearing, all-knowing. (12: 33- 34.)

Here Yusuf is quite aware of the weakness of human nature. He knows very well that he is not totally free from inner evil. That is why he does not rely only on his own strength against the whole assault of evil. He prays to Allah (SWT) to turn evil away from him. Here also he gets the required divine help.

Finally, after a long time, when Yusuf’s interpretation of dream impressed the Aziz, he sent a man to free Yusuf from prison and to bring him to the Aziz. But Yusuf sent the man back with a counter request to the Aziz to take the testimony of the women who earlier blamed him of wrong doing. Now the wife of Aziz unequivocally acknowledged her own guilt and exonerated Yusuf from the blame she earlier put on him. Thus the innocence of Yusuf is clearly vindicated. But he does not take the credit on himself for his being saved from sin. Rather he gives all credit to the help of Allah (SWT) that he received in the critical moment he was in. He says: “*And yet I am not trying to absolve myself; for verily, man’s inner self does incite [him] to evil, and saved*

¹ ‘Aziz’ is not a proper name here. It was the official title of the Head of State of the then Egypt.

are only they upon whom my Sustainer bestows His grace. Behold, my Sustainer is much-forgiving, and Dispenser of grace” (12:53). Mohammad Asad comments on this verse:

Man’s inner self is indeed wont to command the doing of evil - is filled with impulses which often conflict with what the mind regards as a moral good. ...Yusuf’s stress on the weakness inherent in human nature is a sublime expression of humanity on the part of one who himself had overcome that very weakness; for, as the consequence shows, he attributes his moral victory not to himself, but solely to the grace and mercy of Allah. (345)

From all three instances of the encounter between good and evil— one imaginary study, and two factual evidences- we can see that facing evil temptation is a recurrent phenomenon in human life. It is, indeed, in the arrangement of our Creator to test humanity. So, facing evil temptation itself is not a sin. Rather, accommodating the temptation is a sin. Here the important point is how a human being acts or reacts in face of evil temptation. Our Creator wants us to win the battle. That is why He gives an account of all sorts of subtle ways with which evil forces may tempt mankind. At the same time, He shows us the ways to cope with the evil forces. He puts immense emphasis on the necessity of seeking refuge in Him against all evils. In Surah An Nas, Allah (SWT) instructs: *Say: I seek refuge with the Sustainer of men, (1) the Sovereign of men, (2) the God of men, ... (3)* (114: 1-3). Here, Allah (SWT) refers to three relations that mankind has with Him: i. *the Sustainer of men* ii. *the Sovereign of men*, and iii. *the God of men*. The very mentioning of these three relations puts emphasis on some important points. Firstly, the ways of evil are so subtle and vicious that against them only one protective measure is not enough, rather multi-dimensional safeguard is required. Secondly, however vulnerable mankind may be against the allurements of evil, still they do not need to be afraid of it as they have got many-fold relations with Allah (SWT). In the next three verses, Allah (SWT) discloses the nature and identity of the enemy against whom He asks mankind to seek His refuge: “*from the evil of the whispering, elusive tempter, (4) who whispers in the hearts of men, (5) from all [temptation of evil by] invisible forces as well as men (6)*” (114: 4-6).

So, according to the Quranic idea, the agents of evil can be from nature – *men*, or they can be supernatural-*invisible forces*. Again, from the realization of Yusuf (pbuh), as recorded in the holy Quran,- “*...man’s inner self does incite [him] to evil,...*” (12:53) - we understand the nature of inner evil. In case of *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth represents evil in human form, and the witches represent supernatural evil. Along with them, Macbeth’s own inner self also tempts him. Wilson Knight says: “the instigation ...comes partly from within, partly from without” (139). At least in three forms Macbeth is tempted: first of all, his own ambitious self, secondly, the prediction of the witches and finally the instigation of Lady Macbeth. As Howard observes:

Evidently, he and Lady Macbeth have previously considered murdering Duncan; the witches appear after the thought, not before. Lady Macbeth reminds her wavering husband that he was the first to ‘break this enterprise’ to her, on some previous occasion when ‘nor time, nor place / Did then adhere, and yet you would make both’ (I. vii. 49-53). Elizabethans would understand that evil spirits such as witches appear when summoned, whether by our conscious or unconscious mind. (1258)

We observe a very close resemblance between these forces of inner evil and outer evil manifested in *Macbeth*, and the Quranic concept of evil. Macbeth’s ‘Vaulting ambition’ (I. vii. 27) is the inner evil tempting him. We see the presence of such powerful inner temptation in Adam, and Yusuf also. In case of Yusuf it is his youthful impulse, and in case of Adam it is the desire for eternal life. These different forms of inner evil subtly determine their respective course of action. Again, as far as outer evil is concerned, we see that Satan in the form of an adviser, the wife of Aziz, and Lady Macbeth play very strong roles in determining the action of Adam, Yusuf and Macbeth in their respective cases. Satan, hiding his real purpose and swearing by the name of Allah, very subtly gets Adam eat the fruit of forbidden tree. Lady Macbeth whets Macbeth’s murderous impulse by hitting him on his personal ego. The wife of Aziz tries, with all means at her disposal, to allure Yusuf to commit the wrong deed she plans.

As Macbeth experiences the conflict between good and evil in his mind, Yusuf also experiences such a battle in his mind; just after he faces the allurements of the lady. But in case of Yusuf, he never hovers between good and evil; he identifies it as evil and immediately seeks the refuge in his Creator. But, Macbeth hovers like a pendulum. Macbeth is not an ordinary unfeeling hard-hearted criminal. His moral human impulse shows some strength against the evil temptation. Visualizing the terrible consequences, he tries to check evil; but he tries to do it with his own strength only. He is unaware of the inadequacy of his strength against the power of evil. That is why he fails to eliminate evil from the very core of his mind. Though the ethical bidding of his soul shows some strength against it, his own strength is proved inadequate to fight the inner and outer evil. Rather evil is getting stronger and stronger in him. His moral strength is gradually diminishing. On the other hand, Yusuf also realizes the terrible consequences of the deed he is invited to do. At the same time, he is quite aware of the human weakness against such temptation. He knows with certainty that his own strength and will are not enough to cope with the temptation. So, following the Quranic instruction, he immediately seeks for divine help. In spite of his human weakness, because of the divine help he sought and received, evil fails to tempt him. Thus, his moral strength gets gradually stronger and stronger and defeats the evil. After being saved the insight he got is:

“...saved are only they upon whom my Sustainer bestows His grace...” (12:53).

On the other hand, we see, according to Asad (483), that ‘negligence of spiritual truth’- a characteristic moral weakness of human race- is symbolized by Adam’s temporary inability to cope with satanic temptation. This human weakness is also dramatized by Shakespeare through Macbeth’s inability to cope with satanic temptation faced by him. Interesting to note that, both Adam and Macbeth face the temptation in the form of prophecies regarding their future. Adam gets the prophecy of eternal life, and of an opportunity to remain nearer to his Creator perpetually. Macbeth gets the prophecy of becoming the next king. Both of them face the temptation to do something that they know as forbidden. But both of them are lost in their imagination. Macbeth imagines himself as king; Adam imagines his eternal life and his perpetual stay nearer to his Creator. Because of his love for his Creator, and because of his eagerness to stay closer to Him perpetually, he eats the fruit of the forbidden Tree. This is the weakness of Adam that Satan uses to misguide him. Although he is temporarily misguided by Satan, his wrong deed is never deliberate choice of evil. He was not aware of the true consequences of his wrong deed. He thought only once he had to cross the limit imposed on him to gain something great. It is mere his error of judgment and his inability to cope with the evil. But, as soon as he realizes the wrong, he never tries to justify his misdeed, rather starts repenting for it: “*O our Sustainer! We have sinned against ourselves- and unless Thou grant us forgiveness and bestow Thy mercy upon us, we shall most certainly be lost*” (7: 23). Allah (SWT) accepted Adam’s repentance: “*Thereupon Adam received words [of guidance] from his Sustainer and He accepted his repentance: for verily He alone is the Acceptor of repentance, the Dispenser of Grace*” (2: 37). After that Allah sends them to earth with an assurance of further guidance: “*We did say “Down with you all from this [state], there shall, nonetheless, most certainly come unto you guidance from Me: and those who follow my guidance need have no fear, neither shall they grieve”*” (2: 38). Now we see that, the fall of Adam does not cut him off from his Creator. In spite of his fall assurance of guidance is given. If man follows the guidance, he is free from any fear for the present or the future, and any grief or sorrow for the past. Indeed, his whole-hearted repentance obtains his Sustainer’s forgiveness and keeps him with humanity. That is why evil cannot take the possession of him. So, we can say that if ‘negligence of spiritual truth’ is a ‘characteristic moral weakness of human race’; repenting for one’s misdeed is also a human characteristic. Even after the initial fall of a man, if he tries to come back, realizing his sin and repenting for it, still there is opportunity for him to regain the lost status.

But, if a man deliberately chooses to take the side of evil by forsaking the side of humanity, he is doomed. Here the situation of Macbeth is different from that of Adam. Macbeth has consciously given his ‘eternal jewel’- his humanity- to ‘the common Enemy of man’ (Satan)(III. i. 68). He never tries to take his soul back from Satan. Rather he continues his evil deeds with more determination. No more we see the psychological conflict in him. Evil takes total possession of him. Now we find him rejecting human characteristics and practising satanic traits one after another. Now he has become part of satanic forces. Had he repented after his first crime- murder of Duncan, his repentance would have saved him from more crime. He could have regained his lost humanity. But, instead of repenting, he tries to defend his first crime with more murders. With his subsequent murders Macbeth simply widens the gap with humanity which his first murder created. In fact, he is now in utter despair. He thinks that there is no returning from his murdering journey:

I am in blood

Steeped in so far that should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o’re. III iv 137-9

His despair is responsible for his subsequent murders and it leads him to total degradation. Earlier the witches came to him to misguide him. But, he associates himself with the forces evil so much that now he goes to them to seek their advice: “I will to-morrow / (And betimes I will) to the Weird Sister: / More shall they speak” (III.v.132-4). Interestingly, as Macbeth is planning to go to the witches, the witch-queen Hecate also takes preparation to meet and to lead him to total confusion:

...thither he
Will come to know his destiny.

...
Shall draw him on to his confusion,
He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear
His hopes ’bove wisdom, grace and fear; (III. v. 15-31).

There they give him some equivocal advice which makes him more murderous. Here the remarkable shortcoming in Macbeth is that he helplessly lacks spiritual guidelines. His going to the witches for advice shows that he terribly feels the necessity for guidelines, but he seeks it from wrong place. So, instead of saving him, it brings about his total destruction.

To understand the point why Adam and Yusuf are safe and why Macbeth is doomed, we have to analyze all three instances in the light of Satan’s challenge, and the counter-challenge of Allah (quoted earlier). Satan’s relentless endeavor is to mislead the children of Adam. But the true servants Allah are under His protection.

Here humanity is in between the challenge and the counter-challenge. The determining factor is its freedom of choice- which side it takes willingly. Satan can have authority only over those who *“put themselves in the wrong and follow thee (Satan)”* (15:43). Macbeth is an example of such human being who forsakes the side of humanity, and takes the side of evil deliberately. That is why evil is able to take total possession of him. On the other hand, in the cases of Yusuf and Adam we see that evil fails to mislead them. Because they do not forsake the side of Allah. Rather, both of them are sincere in maintaining their relationship with their Sustainer. Here we find the justification of the counter-challenge of Allah: *“For over My servants no authority shalt thou have...”* (15:43).

Now the question is who we identify ourselves with. As Harold Bloom says, “we identify with him (Macbeth)” and he terms it as “universal reaction to Macbeth” (517). He further observes, “Shakespeare rather dreadfully sees to it that we are Macbeth;...” (517). Once again he comments, “the dreadful is about to happen, and that we have no choice but to participate in it” (535). Definitely we find human impulse in Macbeth in his initial encounter with evil and in the conflict he experiences between good and evil in his mind. We identify ourselves with Macbeth only as long as he is being tormented in the inner conflict; he experiences it like a human. At this point his moral human self temporarily wins. But very soon he deviates from this position and accommodates evil consciously, and continues doing satanic deeds one after another. Thus, gradually he goes away and away from us. Moreover, we do not share his helplessness for spiritual guidelines. We have guidelines in the scripture to follow in such situations.

Again, as far as the question of our ‘choice’ in face of evil is concerned, we can say, from the Quranic point of view, that we have choices. First choice is to reject the evil temptation by taking refuge in our Sustainer. Here the following verse of the holy Quran is the guiding light: *“And for such as had entertained the fear of standing before their Lord’s (tribunal) and had restrained (their) soul from lower desires, their abode will be the Garden”* (79: 40-41). Initially, Macbeth has the fear of facing judgment ‘here’ and ‘in the life to come’ (I. vii. 7-8) that is *“the fear of standing before their Lord’s (tribunal)”*, but he fails to restrain his soul from lower desire. Although Macbeth fails to take this choice, we do not feel frustrated. The success of Yusuf encourages us in this regard. Furthermore, if we are temporarily defeated by evil, still we have the second choice of repentance. The holy Quran encourages repentance: *“Turn to Allah with sincere repentance: in the hope that your Lord will remove from you your evil deeds”* (66:08). Here we do not find Macbeth; we find the success of Adam achieved through repentance. Besides, in no way we can give in to despair like Macbeth. Despair is strongly forbidden and repentance is encouraged in the following verse: *“O my Servants who have transgressed against their souls! Despair not of the Mercy of Allah: for Allah forgives all sins: for he is oft-forgiving, most Merciful”* (39:53). Once again we feel here a remarkable distance from Macbeth because of his despair.

Now, as far as Jean E. Howard’s comment ‘Macbeth is more representatively human ...’ is concerned, we can say that he represents humanity only partially, not in totality. He represents only the weakness and vulnerability of humanity against evil. But humanity has another side- that of its spiritual strength. The spiritual strength comes from the breathing of the Spirit of its Creator: *and breathed into him of My Spirit”*. (15: 29) Viewing humanity by only the lower side- his weakness (made of clay), and ignoring its higher side (the faculty brought in from the Spirit of the Creator) is not the proper way of evaluating humanity. Again, regarding the view of Howard where she considers Macbeth’s failure in coping with evil as representing ‘human failure’, we can say that we have many more examples of human success against evil forces than the failure of Macbeth. In fact, we are more encouraged by the success of Yusuf (pbuh) against the evil he faced, and by the instance of Adam (pbuh) in achieving forgiveness of Allah (swt), even after his temporary failure in dealing with evil, than experiencing a sense of frustration for the failure of Macbeth as an *‘unnerving account of human failure’* (Howard, 1257).

From the above discussion we observe that as the matter of good–evil conflict is there in the original plan of the Creator, human beings cannot remain free from evil temptation. Again we see that the encounter between human beings and the forces of evil can be of three types. In the first one, a human being is tempted by the evil forces, but he is able to resist it. In such situation he, instead of trying to resist the evil with only his own strength, seeks refuge in his Creator, and is successful in fighting evil. In the instance of Yusuf we have a glorious example of it. In the second type, a human being is tempted by evil forces, but he fails to resist it. Being entrapped by evil he commits some sinful act. But, as soon as he realizes this, he repents with utmost sincerity and his repentance amends the loss. The instance of Adam exemplifies it. The third type is where a human being is tempted by evil; realizing the consequence of it he tries to resist the temptation. But because of inherent weakness he succumbs to the temptation and commits sin. After that, instead of repenting, he rather gives in to despair. His despair cuts him off from humanity and associates him with Satan. The instance of Macbeth exemplifies it. The first two types are representative human conditions in inevitable battle with evil. But the third one, though initially represents human condition, pathetically stands for a deviation from humanity. So, if we are to imagine a representatively human character facing evil temptation and dealing with it successfully, we find perfect examples of it in Adam (pbuh), and Yusuf (pbuh). But, in Macbeth we find only the representation of the vulnerability and helplessness of humanity in the face of evil. This is a partial representation. So, we finally

observe that Macbeth faces evil temptation as a human being- he makes mistake as a human being, but he fails to make amends for the mistakes as human beings are supposed to do it.

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End Notes:

ⁱ All quotations of Shakespeare's plays are from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 5th Edition, Edited by David Bevington. New York: Longman (2003).

ⁱⁱ The English translation of the Quranic verses, all are put in italics, is taken from i. *The Holy Qur-an, English translation of the meanings and Commentary*. Revised and edited by the Presidency of Islamic Researches, IFTA, King Fahd Holy Our-an Printing Complex. Al-Madinah Al-Munawarah (1411 H) and ii. *The Message of the Qur'an*, translated and explained by Muhammad Asad. Dar Al-Andalus, Gibraltar. (1980).

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