

“Fair is foul, and foul is fair”: Themes of Loss and Death in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

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Abstract

William Shakespeare is arguably world's best "poet of nature", who in his plays laid bare various facets of human nature, which is why his works appeal audiences of every age and culture. The miserable end of the protagonists of his tragedies, unlike those of Greek tragedies, is not caused by destiny, but the makings of their own follies. In *Macbeth*, the main character falls from grace because of his indomitable ambition for power, propelled by evil prophesies of the three witches coupled by his ruthless wife Lady Macbeth's persuasions. The article focuses on the themes of loss and death in *Macbeth*, one of Shakespeare's *magna opera*. The article explains why neither the three witches nor Lady Macbeth can be blamed for Macbeth's downfall; rather they are the manifestations of his own evil instincts.

Key Words: death, tragedy, human nature, *Macbeth*, William Shakespeare

1. Introduction

Ambition is a common desire among men of all ages. A man is born with the wanting psychology shaping his personality adorned with a wide variety of longings to gain as per his physical and social needs of circumstances. His desires are replete with the endless claims of huge amount of material or immaterial demands engulfing his life one after another. *Macbeth* appears to be one of the most studied dramas of Shakespeare highlighting man's inner longing for power. With an appeal of philosophical and psychological or socio-political contexts *Macbeth* has been studied and researched as an epitome of the power mongers engaged in struggling to win power and leadership. *Macbeth* is the symbol of ambition. There is a Macbeth in every man when it refers to possessing ambition in the real sense of the term. The presence of evil power can be traced in the beginning of the play (Act I Scene I) through the line, "Fair is foul and foul is fair"(Muir, 4). This darkness is prevailing everywhere in the play and Shakespeare has introduced some agencies which force this darkness to come into action.

2.Shakespeare: The poet of Human Nature

Basic instincts of human nature are a mysterious abode which gets changed with changing of environment; hence it can be said that change is the unchanged thing in the changing personality of a human being who may be defined as a prey to his own whims going beyond his control. In his plays, William Shakespeare portrayed various facets of human nature, and so is duly credited as the poet of human nature. He has viewed human nature in the light of the basic instincts leading his psychology to the negative or positive consequences.

Human nature has both visible and invisible aspects that contribute to the aftermath he faces consequently. In the plays, Shakespeare has projected the aftermath of the characters usually faced by the people in the real life. In the play, *Macbeth*, Shakespeare has portrayed a man's longing to gain power by unfair means; to continue enjoying power by any means, fair or foul.

Human nature gets changed when impelled with certain incentives to gain something based on certainty of no failure, which happened in the life of Macbeth when the predictions created untold reactions of the unknown thrill mixed with the feelings of achieving something that was apparently impossible for him. In fact, at that time he was not mentally prepared at all to entertain such indulgences as rising to the apex of power; that is why he wrote letters to his wife giving the details of the supernatural agents that came to him in the shape of witches. The three witches are the supernatural agencies of darkness who form the media for Macbeth to interact with his future (Malas, 2012). In *King Lear*, we see a father, who is unable to differentiate between appearance and reality, believes the oral expressions of love by his two elder daughters Regan and Goneril, but was totally blind to the true love and care of his youngest daughter Cordelia who in real sense of the term devoted herself for the mental comfort and physical care of her old father, keeping herself totally unexposed when her old father Lear was resolved to test his daughters. King Lear's tragedy occurred due to his mentally collapsed state aided by both physical weaknesses caused by his old age as well as his being incapable of handling the stately affairs; hence, old age contributed to the vulnerability of his being ill equipped to reign as a king. He was presented by Shakespeare in two appearances---a father as well as a ruler; the playwright presented Lear as a victim of tragic consequences of both being a father as well as a ruler. Lear's life was affected by the 'two' storms---one physical and the other internal---and was devastated both externally and internally. He was greatly unsettled by the forces of nature externally the tempest itself as well as the 'inner storm' that shattered his life giving him new experiences and the knowledge he lacked in diagnosing the very true definition and nature of life.

A nature poet's tag is usually assigned to the Romantic poet William Wordsworth, who was addressed as a 'poet of Nature' by PB Shelley, for his devotion to the supremacy of nature and his worshipping attitude; however, Shakespeare's sense of nature has placed him a man of deeper understanding of human nature as well. Shakespeare used the external aspects of nature in order to portray the human nature, which is both visible and invisible, and contains a rapport with human mind as well as human nature involving both the external and internal forces. Dr. Johnson rightly said, "Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, and the poet of nature, the poet that holds up his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life." (Woudhuysen, 1990)

3. Universality of *Macbeth*

Longing for power was a common theme in most of Shakespeare's plays. He has dealt with the basic instincts of human nature. His plays are of universal appeal because of his projecting the inner psychological propensities of man. Shakespeare has portrayed both the negative and positive aspects of human mind. The devil or evil in the inner abode of a man's psychology is duly exposed in the manifestation of his characters with a variety of moods and reactions. There is no way of denying the fact that human psychology is truly portrayed by Shakespeare and he seldom hesitates to expose the inner instincts of a man in relation to his attachment to domestic, familial or national life. There cannot be expected any unhealthy relation between brothers of the same parents or sisters or between father and daughters or husband and wife or between the family members of same parents, but nonetheless, Shakespeare has created and presented his characters possessing unfriendly, or relation of enmity, relation of conflicts. Macbeth, as per the order of his rank and position as a general or soldier was entitled to remain close to power or leadership, which were the normal harvest of a warrior of the King Duncan.

Macbeth's three witches are the messengers of the tidings of evil, while the King Duncan represents the image of generous ruler full of bounty for Macbeth that deserves the goodness from Macbeth; but in reality Macbeth was allured by the depraved message of the witches which were mechanized or propelled by his most beloved wife Lady Macbeth who engineered her husband to materialize the dream that grew in him for the predictions of the unreal witches. The fact that Macbeth is fully aware of the gravity of the sin he is going to commit and his fear of being exposed is evident in his soliloquy " Stars, hide your fires; let not light see my black and deep desires" (Act 1, Scene 4). In fact, the unreal witches may be apprehended as the inner psychological agents and Lady Macbeth may be termed as the real agent contributing to the tragic consequence of his own that Macbeth had to face inevitably.

Appetite or hunger is a common instinct of man which keeps him busy to find out the means to mitigate but when it takes the abnormal course, there comes the break as a result of which the breaker of normality has to undergo immense suffering. The main theme of Greek plays was that a wrong doer must suffer or a sinful act must not go unpunished. The idea that a sinner must pay the price of his deeds is a universally acknowledged phenomenon in the contexts of all religious credence.

Macbeth had no lack of physical hunger or appetite that led him to be greedy for 'power', but it was mainly his own mental hunger and appetite for power that he wanted to gratify. It is said that after the three witches, there appears the fourth who was supposed to be represented by his wife Lady Macbeth, who motivated her husband in executing the inner longing for being the king even by applying the unfair means or the ways 'foul or fair'. Physical appetite can be mitigated or quenched by physical substance like food items, but mental hunger has to be appeased with both mental food as well as physical ones. Hence, Macbeth's mental hunger and appetite led him to go astray and that drove him to attain the power of a king by means 'fair and foul' or by killing people whoever come on his way to the throne.

Macbeth was a human being and not a being like the three witches, but the witches were not to be blamed for the killing of King Duncan and others; they simply predicted the future in the form of tidings that germinated the seeds of ambition. The witches never engineered the way Macbeth applied ultimately in killing King Duncan who was entitled to receive humanitarian and formal behavior as per the constitutional rank. Macbeth violated the universal norms by killing the guest who had upgraded his position and rewarded him with due appreciation, which can be cited as the heinous act.

Hence, his ambition led him to kill the guest which is a grave sin and a sinner is sure to suffer as an inevitable consequence. Hunger and appetite concerned with one's mind cannot be quenched until it finds its way of being fulfilled. There was a common psychological appetite for Macbeth to be promoted to the higher rank but he never thought of being the ruler of the kingdom; maybe he was encouraged to be the chief general or commander in the battle field that was a common trend and normal procedure to attain military protocol, which was violated by his being ambitious as well as believer of the predictions of the witches who found him easy going in trusting their predictions. Macbeth's ambition was invigorated by Lady Macbeth as she was successful in making her husband convinced in killing the innocent guest. Lady Macbeth's connection to the witches has, of course, long been noted by Shakespearean scholars. Frances Dolan, for example, groups Lady Macbeth with the witches as catalytic agents who incite Macbeth's ambition (Dolan 1994). A Macbeth's inner greed for being

instantly the king appeared to be an image of an invisible witch, i.e. 'The Fifth witch' ; hence, it can be stated that Macbeth's high ambition itself was the 'invisible' witch if Lady Macbeth is to be considered as the 'fourth witch'. Macbeth's ambitious appetite was not mitigated even though he was successful in attaining the supreme position of the kingdom.

4. Death in *Macbeth*

Death is an experience having no repetition. Death is a one way experience but tragedy occurs when it is experienced or faced by Macbeth, the tragic hero falling a prey to inevitable death in his consequence as an aftermath of his being entangled with the power trap engineered by himself. In Shakespeare's plays death is shown not merely as a result of disease or illness, rather it is shown as a result of certainty or inevitability that cannot be ignored or escaped although death itself is of inescapable nature. This raises an obvious question whether Shakespeare accommodated the nationalistic spirit through the projection of his characters or not.

But Shakespeare has given the world a sense of justice, reason, rights for rights, power and politics, prudence, vile instincts like jealousy, high ambition, that can be measured as the sources of growing the awareness of the nationalistic spirit when thoughts of the characters with their conflicts of both negative and positive spirits portrayed by Shakespeare are expected to have reflected among the people with the realistic aspects. Like greed for power, high ambitions beyond reach, inner envy and jealousy along with the reconciliation, love and affection as the human power came to be common phenomena in Shakespeare's plays.

From the historical evidence, it is clear that the name of Shakespeare used to grow an excitement of prudence; there also grew one kind of sense of thrill as soon as the name of Shakespeare was cited. The utterance was a matter of glowing matured explanation of the taste and rich choice of life and society. There used to be recitation of Shakespeare even at the court while the proceedings of prosecution were on. People used to cherish the strength to endure the realities which ease and appease the crucial aspects of life, and lessen the severity and intensity in interpreting the harshness of life with the empathy of naturalness.

5. Conclusion

Shakespeare has presented the image of death in various shapes, which centres round the inevitability of the circumstances caused by the weaknesses or vulnerable aspects of one's character shaped to face that. Shakespeare has not displayed death to be like the Greek mythological events or circumstances destined to die, but his projection of the image of death; for example, in *Macbeth*, death is presented as something deeper, something like psychoanalysis of the human reality.

The witches were not responsible for the death of either Lady Macbeth or her husband, but Lady Macbeth suffered immensely the pangs of death before she died physically. Death appeared as the terminator of untold suffering and irremovable pain that neither she could tolerate nor could erase it any way. Death to her was one kind of reliever of the torments and pains she was undergoing. Macbeth's suffering was different as he never was mentally prepared nor he ever imagined to face the loss of power although death of Lady Macbeth made him accept the reality of his wife's demise. Macbeth's death appeared as an outcome of his defeat both physically and militarily.

His 'military death' refers to his loss of political leadership as well as the rise of the opponent as he was predicted. Macbeth was supposed to be convinced to believe that the moment he statured enjoying the blessings of power as a king as the mark of the predictions; in the same way, he should have understood that the other predictions referring to his end could not be avoided. However, Shakespeare has presented the image of a consequence of caused both by the inner instincts of human psychology and outer circumstances that were sure to engulf Macbeth's life with no exception.

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Biography

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