



SHAKESPEARE AND THE MATRIX OF HUMANISM

Dr S. M. Basha

(Associate Professor, Department of English, Osmania College (A), Kurnool (AP)

drsbasha@gmail.com

ABSTRACT



The article "Shakespeare and the Matrix of Humanism" is an attempt to explore the relevance of Shakespearean readings in terms of their contemporaneity vis-a-vis Shakespeare's universal appeal and the wider readership. It tries to evaluate Shakespeare's dramatic artistry as well as the spirit of his art besides analyzing the intrinsic matrix of humanism with special reference to his tragedies. While accounting for his timeless themes and imaginative flights, interwoven around the quintessential humanistic concerns, it upholds the endearing traits of Shakespearean art and its immortality.

Keywords: *Shakespeare, Humanism, Human Values*

Citation:

APA Basha, S.M. (2017) Shakespeare and The Matrix of Humanism. *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature- JOELL*, 4(3), 35-38.

MLA Basha, S.M. "Shakespeare and The Matrix of Humanism." *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature- JOELL* 4.3(2017):35-38.

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Socrates' prophecy that "the greatest tragic writer should also be the greatest comic writer" (Plato's *Symposium*) comes true in the case of William Shakespeare who could combine both tragedy and comedy in the same play. Very truly Shakespeare's universal appeal as well as contemporary relevance remains unfazed and unabated even after 400 years of his death and this statement encapsulates that the entire gamut of literature from the Elizabethan times to the present

day is "shakespeareized" to a significant extent in one way or the other.

Shakespeare's eternity as predicted by Ben Jonson "He was not of an age but for all time" has its sway still and holds good, despite the burgeoning growth of multitudes of writers and also with the emergence of an equal number of genres and techniques in the realm of literary creation. One of the reasons for his universality and a wider readership across the globe, setting aside certain lopsided critical accolades, is the element of



humanism and essential human values that are being matrixed by dramatic artistry of his works.

Irrefutably everyone aspires for happiness which is the definitive goal of human existence. Happiness which is consequent to one's deeds lies in the state of mind and the essence of life depends on how one establishes and restores equilibrium internally while maintaining harmony at various levels viz. individual, family, society, and Nature. The imbalances, resultant of one's incapacity in managing the inner conflicts and situational drifts and drags, quite often result in tragic flaws engulfing not only the individuals but also other persons, objects, and entities that remain in unison. Obviously tragic flaws are the byproducts of subsequent violation of humanistic concerns, erosion of human values and infringement of humanism. Shakespeare very dexterously and scrupulously infused humanism in his works, while especially his tragedies revealing the consequences resultant of the loss of humanism. Hamlet suffers from procrastination, Othello from suspicion, Macbeth from overvaulting ambition, and King Lear from pride, arrogance, and misjudgments and Antony from infatuation. *The Tempest* as the supreme work of humanism is full of love of humanity and demonstrates that forgiveness is the ultimate joy one can find within oneself and outside. Similarly the essence of quality of mercy is quite touching and appealing in Portia's speech of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Talking about the uniqueness of *Hamlet*, A.C. Bradley opines: "It was not that Hamlet is Shakespeare's greatest tragedy or most perfect work or art: it was that Hamlet most brings home to us at once the sense of the soul's infinity, and the sense of the doom which not only circumscribes that infinity but appears to be its offspring." (A. C. Bradley, *Critical Essays: Classic Essays*) He accounts for Hamlet's melancholy from psychological point of view as the centre of the tragedy which is resultant of the longing for death, annulling one's sense and intellect, and becoming the reason for one's incapacity and irresponsible behaviour. It is obvious that Hamlet's melancholy is different from the madness which he pretends. All the tragic characters of Shakespeare are the greatest slaves of tragic passions. However, Hamlet's inaction is attributed to

too much of his humanistic concern; though his pathological condition is inversely proportionate to the severity of accomplishment of the assigned action which is being repeatedly reinforced by the ghost's commandments, "Remember me," and "Do not forget." Hamlet's attitude or his lassitude though he has "cause, and will, and strength, and means, to act?" prompting him to indulge in inaction may be attributed not to his consciousness which warrants him but to his conscience that is committed to humanism.

The spirit of Shakespeare's art as perceived in his masterpiece, the "Mona Lisa of Literature" by Eliot "an artistic failure" is further accused of lacking in objective correlative. The play set though not in relation to Christian pattern of values but to humanism is to avenge the most "unfair, strange and unnatural deed" which is murder. This is akin to Macbeth's "unnatural deeds do breed unnatural troubles," (*Macbeth* Act V, Scene i. 75-76) involving the classical values. More strikingly, the idea of revenge in ghost's long narrative becomes weakened and gets relegated to the background, leaving his mother to her conscience and to heaven. "Leave her to heaven,/And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge/To pick and sting her." (*Hamlet* Act I, Scene v, 86-88)

Susan Snyder feels that "heroic extension largely depends on the tragic events" and one in troubles and turmoil embarks on the journey of heroic deeds and accomplishments. "Oedipus becomes wiser in his searching and suffering than was the confident ruler who opened the play. Macbeth in his agony of conscience and his full experience of despair has explored more of the human condition than the admired military man whom we first meet." (Susan Snyder, *King Lear and the Psychology of Dying*) King Lear is rescued and forgiven by the rejected Cordelia who is not regarded for her virtues and frankness. The loss of humanism in the plot is summed up in the words of Par Albany: "It will come, / Humanity must perforce prey upon itself,/Like monsters of the deep (*King Lear* Act IV, Scene ii. 50-52). Albany's words remind us of the natural course of action: "All friends shall taste/The wages of their virtue, and all foes/The cup of their deservings." (Act V. Scene iii, 303-305)



The indignation suffered by the old Lear which is “too deep for tears” and the greatness of Cordelia remind us of the essential human values. The play makes us think “Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?” (Act III.vi 77-79) Cordelia is one among the innocent victims who were killed for no fault of theirs like Ophelia or Desdemona and Lear is a “man more sinned against than sinning.” Lear’s exclamation, “How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is/To have a thankless child!/Away, away!” (*King Lear* Act I. Scene iv, 287-288) may be weighed under the indignation and misjudgment that he suffered and in the backdrop of “Rancorous malignity” of Regan and Goneril. William Hazlitt says that “the third act of *Othello* and the three first acts of *Lear* are Shakespeare’s master pieces in the logic of passion.” Iago’s villainy, his persistent manipulations in turning Othello blind to truth and honesty, the telling effect of revenge are seen in “The Moor already changes with my poison.” (*Othello* Act III, Scene. 373) Othello cries before he kills himself, “Whip me, Ye devils,/... roast in sulphur/Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire” (Act V, ii. 280-83) are suggestive of his anticipatory punishment for his unnatural deed.

Charles Lamb’s argument “Lear is essentially impossible to be represented on a stage” holds good to all the Shakespearean plays that deal with strong feelings, ebb and flows of emotions, moral verities, and agitating passions. Whether the promised end in Lear which calls for the “virtue to be rewarded and vice punished” is in tune with Johnson’s interest in poetic justice is debatable. Further, it is subject to argument whether the disturbed mind or turmoil in Lear’s mind is due to discrowning or rejection of his daughters.

Shakespeare was a liberal Christian though his works are not free from Biblical references and psalms. A close reading of his works proves that he stood above religion, theology and philosophy in his appeal to humanism. He borrowed his sources from the Chronicles of Holinshed and Ballads. It seems that he borrowed the skeleton and put flesh and blood into it. He had also adopted “the psychomachia” which reminds one of Soren Kierkegaard’s statement that the “whole life is a trial.” (Vivent F. Petronella, *The Ruined Crown*)

While describing the multifaceted nature of man “What a piece of work is a man!/. . . / And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?” (*Hamlet* Act II, Scene ii. 303-307) Shakespeare sounds to be more philosophic. This bears a parallelism to “Tomorrow, and tomorrow and tomorrow/ Creeps in this petty pace...Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury./Signifying nothing.- (*Macbeth* Act V, v.19-28) in striking a pessimistic note. The “damn’d spot” of Lady Macbeth’s hands is symbolic of the eternal condemnation on the part of humanism. Lady Macbeth worries that Macbeth’s nature “too-full o’th’ milk of human kindness” is being relegated and she is determined to transform him. The guilt of murder is apparent when lady Macbeth utters, “Here’s the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand./ Oh! oh! Oh! (Act V, i. 53-55)

Macbeth’s susceptibility to external forces, like three witches and the lady Macbeth; Lady Macbeth’s firm resolution in “unsex me, here, / .../ Come to my woman’s breasts, / And take my milk for gall/” (Act I, Scene v. 41-48) in her invocation to the spirits, are the best examples of radical metamorphosis suggestive of man’s degeneration towards the attainment of debased values. Duncan’s murder is against the principles of natural justice and “sacrilegious violations of the divine laws.” This is another example of psychological perversions giving rise to physiological corruption.

Macbeth as a “study of moral reprobation,” seeks to justify the telescoping of the earlier refrain “What’s done, is done” into the final “What’s done cannot be undone.” Macbeth’s dormant desire seems to be ignited by the third witch’s prophecy, “All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!” (Act I, Scene iii.50) and he is coaxed more and more by the Lady Macbeth who may be regarded as the “fourth witch.” The murder of Duncan is suggestive of how the divine human nature full of love, mercy, is taken over by “fiendish nature.” Killing of Duncan is being imposed as the test of Macbeth’s “virility.” Whether Macbeth gets provoked by his dormant ambition or deeply instigated and spirited by the fourth spirit, his humanism never prevents him from imagining the consequences of committing the killing of a king. “That tears shall drown the wind.” (Act I,



vii. 25) The doctor's diagnosis of Lady Macbeth's somnambulism as religious despair, resultant of guilt, weighing upon her heart, gets remedied in "More needs she the divine than the physician." (1.64) and he begs for forgiveness.

To probe into the genuineness or ingenuity of-whether Marlowe is Shakespeare or Bacon is behind the mastermind of Shakespeare, Shakespeare existed at the behest of other ghost writers, Shakespeare a copy cat or a manipulative genius, so on and so forth - seems to be an entreating as well as excruciating exercise in literary criticism and its allied spheres. Instead, enjoying Shakespeare in terms of "Cleopatra's infinite variety" while his works continue to feed the appetites, making the readers hungry "where most they satisfy," will be a far more rewarding journey as enjoying Shakespeare is different from studying Shakespeare.

Bernard D. Grebanier writes: "Shakespeare is perhaps the perfect expression of Renaissance humanism. His profound sympathy for humanity enabled him to pierce to the very core of his characters; his unexcelled gifts as a poet made his men and women unforgettable creatures of flesh and blood. This may be said as much of the best of his earliest plays as of *The Tempest*, where Prospero is himself a kind of incarnation of the best of what the Renaissance had extended to mankind" (Bernard D. Grebanier, 242) Shakespeare remains Shakespeare because he is a combination of "philosophical tolerance, .../ is able to express himself more vividly and than anyone else in language. (JJM Tobin, *Shakespeare's Life*)

While holding objection to Johnson's lament that Shakespeare "sacrifices virtue to convenience" and is fond of "pleasing than instructing," Brian McClinton argues that Renaissance habit of "instructing by pleasing" is adopted by Shakespeare. He goes on to say that "by exposing the weaknesses, the cynicism and evil in the world and the destructive consequences which they inevitably produce, the playwright is educating his readers to avoid the same mistakes." (Brian McClinton, *Shakespeare's Humanism*) The problems and the tensions that surface out in each of the tragedies are not confined to only those created characters in the given situations but they are of every person's, and

not a no man's problem. Everyone in their lifetime must have faced such upheavals, the tragic dilemmas, the emotional encounters, naturalistic allusions, psychological delusions, the engagement with internal as well as external conflicts and ultimate resolutions that seem to be placing one on an oscillatory mode. Undoubtedly, Shakespeare's timeless themes interwoven around humanism, the pertinent ethical and moral concerns, and the immortal characters that he created do endear Shakespeare to readers forever.

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