



AN ANALYSIS OF SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGIC HEROES: (SPECIFIC STUDY OF MACBETH, HAMLET, OTHELLO AND KING LEAR)

DR. ANAND KUMAR MINJ ¹

¹ ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, GOVT. GAJANAND AGARWAL PG COLLEGE, BHATAPARA (C.G.)

ABSTRACT:

William Shakespeare is highly appreciated as the greatest writer in English. His writing style of the time Derived from the usual style. He is best known for his work as a playwright. He wrote tragedies, jokes and historical plays. Hamlet, The Tempest, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth are most famous for his tragedies. He died. almost 400 years ago, but people all over the world still celebrate his work. Venetian merchant, Romeo and Juliet, The Tempest, Othello, King Lear, Midsummer Night's Dream, Macbeth and Hamlet Three main types. The rest are all subtypes, and there are subtypes in the subtypes as well. The three major genres are Prose, Drama, and Poetry.

In this study, I have attempted to interpret Shakespeare's tragic heroes by casting light on their attitudes towards perfection. After what has been so famously said by Aristotle about the hero of high estate and by Bradley about a 'world travelling for perfection, not to mention the innumerable thinkers over the ages who have chewed the cud of the perfectibility of man, the subject of perfection in the tragedies of Shakespeare, to my mind, is very appealing . It will be a matter of great pleasure if this study arouses the reader's interest and is of some use to him. My very humble endeavour is to focus upon the relation of action, which is eternally tragic for a Shakespearean tragic hero; with circumstances in which they are placed and to justify that their magnitude of punishment is, however, greater than their magnitude of crime.

The present study is the refined observation of the tragic character with all their inherent virtues and vices, to bring to light their ideal tendencies transforming into degraded ones.

KEYWORDS:

TRAGEDY, PERFECTION, CIRCUMSTANCES, TRAGIC HEROES, PUNISHMENT.

PAPER ACCEPTED DATE:

20th January 2024

PAPER PUBLISHED DATE:

22nd January 2024

INTRODUCTION

A tragedy is basically a serious story which often involves the death of one or more characters and it generally has a tragic end. The word 'tragedy', a genre of popular literature, is generally associated with any serious and dignified drama that illustrates a conflict between the hero (protagonist) and a superior force (destiny, chance, society or God) and reaches a sorrowful conclusion that arouses pity and fear in the audience. The idea of tragedy involves a concept that is based on the possibility that a person may be destroyed precisely because of his attempt to be good and who considers himself much better than most people, but not perfect. In a way a tragedy implies a conflict between human goodness and reality.

Plato criticized the appeal of tragedy and declared:

"Art is the imitation of an imitation...twice removed from the reality...the natural hunger for weeping and lamentation, which we keep under control in our own hearts of unhappiness, is just what your poets gratify and indulge...poetry feeds and waters the fashions, weeds that should rather be killed by drought."¹

Plato's distrust of emotions was a challenge for Aristotle who repudiated his master and affirmed that although tragedy is an imitation of life, yet it is not removed from reality; on the contrary it is patterned after real life and shows men better than what they are.

The concept of tragedy in English literature is seen in Aristotle's views expressed in his famous 'Poetics'. It should be noted here that Greek conception of tragedy was different from the modern conception. Today, we regard tragedy as a story with an unhappy ending. But this was not the Greek conception. For the Greeks, tragedy simply meant, one of the three serious plays presented before the satyr-play at a dramatic festival. Greek tragedies were serious in tone but many of them had happy endings.

The function of tragedy is to evoke feelings of pity and fear. We feel pity for a person who is very much like us and we are full of fear to see his downfall when we identify ourselves with him. The appropriate tragic hero, then, is the "character who sits between these extremes. He is not prominent in virtue and justice, but on the other hand, he

is not guilty also of vice or depravity, however, he is a person of some importance, coming from a highly renowned and prosperous place, say, a king, like Oedipus. He must be a person of some status, may serve as a model to society in general.

The second attribute about the tragic hero is the appropriateness of his character. Here also Oedipus stands out as a high-class tragic hero as he shows the appropriate stateliness and intelligence that we can expect from the ruler of a great city.

The third attribute about the tragic hero is he should not be God like, not like the mythical heroes of the legend but like the real human beings. To take the example of Oedipus here again, he is obviously human. He has the strengths and weaknesses of a human. There is nothing that seems extraordinary in him. His personality his compassion, honesty, pride, and determination-is humanly familiar to us.

The fourth quality over which Aristotle lays stress is the consistency of character. The term consistency means once a character is established as having certain traits, these should not suddenly change. Taking Oedipus again here, the traits of his character, either good or bad, remain consistent, as revealed throughout the play.

A typical Shakespearean tragedy is single star. The story leads up to and includes the death of the hero at the end. Shakespeare's conception of tragedy is medieval, for like the moderns he is not concerned with the fate of the common man, with their sorrows and sufferings. The tragic heroes are all conspicuous persons who stand in a high degree. They are kings, princes or great military generals, indispensable for state. Thus, 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 Antony is the 'triple pillar of the world. These exalted personages suffer greatly: their suffering and calamity is exceptional. Thus Macbeth, after the murder of Duncan, suffers the tortures of hell, as if there were scorpions in his brain; Othello is on the wreck with jealousy for the greater part of the play; Lear goes mad and raves; and Hamlet's soul is torn within. Their suffering is contrasted with their previous happiness. The hero is such an important personality that his fall affects the welfare of a whole nation.

HIGHNESS OF SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGIC HERO

MACBETH

Shakespearean tragic heroes are all great and eminent persons, Kings, Monarchs, Princes or great Generals. For this, Shakespeare was indebted to the Greeks who said that tragic hero should be someone of high fame and flourishing prosperity. Shakespeare's tragic heroes are, therefore, all eminent persons-Lear is a mighty King, Macbeth a renowned General, Othello an unchallenged Warrior and Hamlet the Prince of Denmark.

Macbeth was a noble and highly respected figure in King Duncan's reign. He lived a brave and honest life, serving

the king and his country against all evils and dangers. The seeds of tragedy of Macbeth were sown with his first encounter with the three weird sisters in the wilderness. Evil began to overpower Macbeth, and he was doomed to the witches' prophecies until his death: There is no doubt that, at the beginning of Act one, Macbeth was a great, noble man at the pinnacle of his career. This is clearly shown in the battle in Act I, Scene II, further described by the wounded captain before the king:

"For brave Macbeth well he deserves that name-
Disdaining Fortune, with his brandished steel,
Which smoked with bloody execution,
Like valour's minion carved out his passage
Till he faced the slave.

Which never shook hands, nor bade farewell to him."

The captain describes, 'Brave Macbeth' as 'disdaining fortune. He was invaluable to the king. Shakespeare wanted to convey to the audience that Macbeth possessed ruthlessness, blood-thirst and nobility-all the important qualities in a true leader at that time. Shakespeare wanted the audience to feel that Macbeth was doing God's work. He also wanted them to feel that Macbeth had great potential. The reason for Shakespeare wanting all this is quite simple. Macbeth is a tragedy. It is the calamitous tale of the gradual deterioration of an inherently good man into a heinous murderer. So, for the audience to feel the tragedy of Macbeth's demise, he must be presented as a man of great potential at the beginning.

HAMLET

It is said that action speaks louder than words but in Hamlet's case, words speak louder than action, for it is the words of Hamlet that reflect the virtues bestowed on him. It has been shown that Hamlet has displayed different virtues with different characters. There seems to be one for whom they appear to be common virtue, which was revealed with each character encounterment respect. Hamlet seems to respect his family and friends through the thick and thin of things because he knows them for who they are.

Hamlet is patient, sympathetic and tolerant. He avoids the rashness of a man of the street, and sets an example for those who have been deceived likewise, how Hamlet behaves like a genuine noble hero and displays his endurance and sublimity to be tested on the bases of the internal and external conflicts he is involved in.

Coleridge and Schlegel consider Hamlet to be a "tragedy of reflection" and point out that Hamlet delays because he thinks too much. He over-refines thought and loses the power of action in the energy of resolve. He refuses to kill the king at prayer, his desire to ascertain whether the ghost was a 'true' one or a 'devil' are instances of such over-refining, of his vacillation from "sensibility." Lost in thought he forgets action.

And thus the native hue of resolution is sicklied over with the pale cast of thought. However, what is wrong with Hamlet is not that he thinks too much, but that he thinks uselessly and hence sees no course clear enough to satisfy

his understanding. It is mental dissipation and not logical thinkings and analysis leading to concrete results. His thought process is diseased: the more he thinks the more muddleheaded and dull does he get, and the more the issue is lost in the thick mist of thought. His thinking is dull, "brooding apathy" and not thought in the real sense of the world. It is like tossing on a sick bed. In the play Hamlet does much, more than anyone else, but all his actions are impulsive done under the pressure of necessity.

He suffers from spiritual torture and his character, his "fine, noble nature" gradually deteriorates. His humour grows sarcastic and bitter, he loses confidence in himself and in the world; becomes first an unbeliever and a sceptic and then fatalist, and is driven to cunning and cruelty. Secondly his irresolution has tragic consequences both for himself and others. It results in his own death as well as in the deaths of Polonius Ophelia, Leartes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and the Queen, his mother, No doubt, ultimately he has his revenge, but at what a terrible cost. Prompt action would have prevented all these mishaps.

Hamlet presents the picture of a sublime character by overcoming his inner sickness created by his own mother and the world outside. It really requires a heroic heart to overcome one's internal malady. To undertake the cleansing of his mother's soul and to get reconciled with her is a unique task performed by Hamlet. One can easily defeat one's enemies with the help of a sword. But to win over one's heart is a difficult deed. Hamlet's courage in this sense stands unsurpassed where he unlike a common warrior fights his enemies unweponed and gets reconciled with his mother as well as with the world outside him, here he shows the courage of a man in love with humanity.

This feeling of heroism, to a very great extent, lessens the painful effect of the play. Hamlet is absolutely fearless. Physical or material loss has no meaning to him since his objective is to preserve the higher values of life. His whole attention is concentrated on keeping them intact; to great extent he has been triumphant in his efforts winning our admiration and applause.

OTHELLO

A man who is virtuous and has many sympathetic traits, a person with flaws people would consider fatal, a person wounded by experience: that person is a tragic hero, and a tragic hero is perfectly shown by Shakespeare's Othello.

Through Othello Shakespeare introduced the first coloured protagonist or rather first celebrated black tragic hero of English literature. Othello takes different aspects of love and romance as its major theme. Love, sacrifice, jealousy, betrayal, mutual trust etc. are all displayed in an extremely subtle perspective by Shakespeare in 'Othello'. When, why and to whom one falls in love is rather effectively dramatized in the play; according to Brabantio Othello is "the sooty bosom of such a thing as thou? to fear not to delight"(Act I, Scene II). However, it is Desdemona who was in need of marrying Othello than Othello himself, according to Iago the marriage is "an old black ram" marrying a "white ewe" (Act I Scene I). The tragedy is

usually a downfall of a man of high standing due to a tragic flaw; the tragic flaw of Othello is famously identified as sexual jealousy.

Othello is a noble man, one who has grace with the ladies but also possesses all the virtues of a military leader that he is. He is a general who is experienced in the battle. He is well reputed and shows in the play that he is reliable and well known in the military. His magnetic personality is something that draws people towards him, as it does for Desdemona when she is asked whom she would prefer to go with after the controversy between Othello and her father.

Bradley believes that Othello, like Hamlet, is a man exceptionally noble and trustful. The main problem, with regard to the character of the hero, is not linked with his passion of jealousy but with the qualities of endurance and sublimity, which make him suffer. That Othello is jealous or is made jealous is as good as saying that Hamlet is sick, or is made sick, or Macbeth is ambitious or is made ambitious, or Lear is rash or made rash. The proper study of the characters of Hamlet, Macbeth and Lear is made on the bases of the relationship of their internal or external conflicts as opposed to the study of respective flaws. Similarly, the character of Othello can be analyzed only in the light of the internal and external conflicts he is placed in. Shakespeare has depicted Othello, like Hamlet, Macbeth and King Lear, as a man of endurance who manifests sublimity in all walks of life.

Although Othello has been through a lot, Ann has many flaws; his biggest flaw is the way he allows himself to be controlled by Iago. Iago skillfully exploits Othello through his dextrous use of words. Earlier in the play, Othello refuses to believe Iago and about his wife but Iago manages to overpower Othello and deceive him Iago manipulates him through his words. Othello allowing himself to be manipulated like this shows the level of gullibility he has because of his being tricked into what leads to him being driven mad and him killing his wife and himself.

Othello, too, remains the same even after suffering intensely. Sublime as he is, he cannot lose grandeur even though he faces an enemy like Iago. The pictures of Othello, as a man of endurance and sublime in character, which we get before the conflict remains unchanged till the end.

KING LEAR

As a tragedy, King Lear portrays a protagonist whose fortunes conditioned by his hamartia. As defined by Aristotle, the protagonist of a tragedy should be a person who is not eminently good or just yet whose fortune is brought about by some error or frailty. This error is not necessarily a character flaw; hamartia can be an unwitting misstep indefinite action or the failure to perform a definite action. Lear's hamartia is the capricious division of his powers and kingdom before his death-more particularly, the disavowal of Cordelia because she will speak "nothing."

The proper blending of 'endurance' and 'sublimity' in Lear

makes him a tragic hero of the highest order, despite his being choleric, property sick, reckless and insane. Through all his fits of hatred and repulsion Lear keeps on surviving. This shows his great endurance. It is, indeed, wonderful that he endures so long and never feels like committing suicide unlike Hamlet and Othello who are young enough to bear their anguish and suffering. Since the opponents of Lear are more wicked and this of Hamlet or Othello, the battle of Lear is also mightier than that of the two.

To balance the stock characters, Shakespeare also used characters that were consistently good or evil in their intent, echoing the pattern of a morality play. Edmund, Regan, and Goneril embody avarice, envy, anger, lust, and pride, while Edgar and Cordelia embody faithfulness and unconditional love.

King Lear does not faint like Othello in his moments of intense grief. He knows very well that what cannot be cured must be endured. He also knows that to shed tears is unmanly; that is why he keeps his manliness in his suffering and cannot forget that he is a king. He prays to gods to grant him strength to fight against social tyranny and the ingratitude of his daughters. He fights hard to check his madness although he cannot resist it, yet his contact with reality is never completely lost. He is, truly speaking, the pattern of all the physical and spiritual strength. He endures because he has such vitality as no other tragic hero of Shakespeare possesses.

WEAKNESSES OF SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGIC HEROES

Though Shakespeare's heroes have greatness, nobility and virtues yet each tragic hero has a marked weakness in him, which leads him to his tragic end. Macbeth possesses indomitable and insatiable ambition; Othello is a man of suspicious nature; Lear is proud and haughty, and Hamlet possesses a wavering spirit. These tragic traits are not great in themselves but they become fatal under the circumstances in which the heroes are placed. Shakespearean tragedy implies the ruin of a grave and noble nature through the existence of some serious, inherent weakness drawn into contact with the special hostile circumstances calculated to defeat it.

Therefore, tragedy falls on the Shakespearean hero not from above but proceeds from the character and actions of the hero himself. The hero is confronted, as a rule, with grim fate, malicious superhuman agencies and hostile circumstances in the hands of which he acts like a puppet and meets his doom.

CONCLUSION

All Shakespearean tragic heroes have a remarkable capacity for suffering and enduring pain. Their experiences are commented on by certain Britons as being "life's bitterest sorrows". We consider the Bard to be the only person to have achieved the required mastery in crafting tragic hero characters. These characters are not simple to understand on account of their extremely complexity.

There are several differences between these tragic heroes, and yet, they have enough commonalities that permits us to generalize their character traits. So it can be understood that the tragic heroes are committing venial, or forgivable, sins due to their passion removing their reason and ability to choose while the antagonists are committing mortal, or fatal sins that are unforgivable in their resolute excessiveness. It can truly be concluded then that Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth, all being robbed of their reason are truly victims-victims of passion.

Thus we see that Shakespearean hero is himself responsible for his tragic end. He has some flaws in his own characters that lead to his death. For example Othello has suspicious nature which leads to his death. In case of Hamlet, he is unable to take a decision. This inability to take decision causes his death. So in every character we find some flaws in his character that lead to his death. Since the tragic hero is a man of high position, his death shatters the whole nation. The whole nation mourns his death. In his greatest tragedies, Shakespeare wants to convey the idea that in this world striving for good is always thwarted by evil and man's heroic action is always wasted because nature is always hostile to human beings. The disastrous failure of the tragic hero leads not only to his death but also to the death of many others.

REFERENCES

1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Trans. W.D. Ross. London: Oxford UP, 1925.
2. *King Lear*, Ed. Kenneth Muir, London: Methuen & Co, 1963.
3. *Othello*, Ed. M. R, Ridley, London: Methuen & Co, 1964.
4. *Antony and Cleopatra*, Ed. J.D, Wilson, London: Cambridge University Press, 1968.
5. *Hamlet*, Ed. J.D, Wilson, London: Cambridge University Press, 1969.
6. *King Lear*, Ed. J.D, Wilson, London: Cambridge University Press, 1969.
7. Battenhouse, Roy, W. *Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Art and Christian Premises*, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1969.
8. *Macbeth*, Ed. G. K, Hunters, London: Penguin Books, 1970.
9. Badawi, M.M. *Background to Shakespeare*, London: Macmillan. 1981.
10. Bayley, John, *Shakespeare and Tragedy*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981.