

# Tragedy and Spirit of Major Shakespearean Tragic Hero

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**Abstract** - The Shakespearean tragedy registers a great advance on the tragedies of Kyd and Marlowe. While keeping to the old medieval conception of tragedy as covering the lives of great princes, kings and generals, he formulated the new theory of the tragic flaw responsible for tragedy. Marlowe had introduced the change in his tragedies. Shakespeare only carried it forward, and laid the responsibility of the tragedy primarily on the hero's own frailty. Chance element and supernatural forces no doubt had their part in bringing about tragedy, yet the primary emphasis was on the tragic flaw in the hero's character. Inordinate ambition in Macbeth, indecision and ventilation in Hamlet, incredible credulity in Othello and senile madness in Lear brought about their doom.

**Keywords** - Hamartia, Destiny, Transcendental, Ambitious, Transmute, Ambitious, Catharsis.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In European literature tragedy starts with the Greeks and the theory of tragedy with Aristotle. Aristotle defined tragedy as “an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate part of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting, the proper Katharsis, or purgation of these emotions[1].” The first implication of this definition is that tragedy deals with the serious aspects of life as opposed to comedy which deals with the trivial and ludicrous aspects. Action implies a human individual in action. The tragic sufferer, like the subject of the tragedy, must have some stature or importance. He should be a man above the average, serious, elevated and dignified. Though not pre-eminent in virtue, he should be good enough to rise above vice or depravity. In other words,

he should not be “a man of flawless perfection, not yet one of consummate villainy [2].” To evoke pity, he should be “brought low through some error of judgment or short-coming” or some tragic flaws in his character (*hamartia* in Aristotle's language) are lack of insight within the character that results in some catastrophic action. Thus, the possibilities of tragedy lie within human nature itself.

One of the most debated clauses of this definition is the last, concerning the function of tragedy that is the proper *Katharsis* of the emotions of pity and fear. Aristotle has nowhere defined or elaborated this term. All his commentators and critics have agreed that tragedy produces the definite moral effect through the “purification of the passions”. But what the precise effect is, and what are the passions on which tragedy works has been variously interpreted. Whether *Katharsis* means the purging away of the emotions (which seems to be quite improbable) or purifying them by purging away the dross, providing an outlet for emotions which are a part of man's nature—these interesting questions we leave to those who are concerned with the pathology of art or to the unfortunate students who may be required to apply the theory of *Katharsis* to the tragedies of Shakespeare in the examination hall. “If calm may properly be predicated of that tragic experience,” suggests Dr F. R. Leavis, “it is certainly not calm of mind, all passion spent in the natural suggestion of the phrase. According to what seems valid in the current notion of the tragic there is rather something in the nature of an exalting effect. We have contemplated a painful action, involving death and the destruction of the good, admirable and sympathetic, and yet instead of

being depressed we enjoy a sense of enhanced vitality.”[3]

## II. CORE OF SHAKESPEARE'S PHILOSOPHY

In James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*, Stephen Dedalus tries to explain the twin emotions of pity and terror which are revoked by tragedy. “Pity,” he says, “is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites with the secret cause.”[4] Thus tragedy involves a double vision of human suffering and the secret cause. Though the cause is destructive and its immediate effects, yet this cause affirm that there is some universal order of things existing in the universe. The main problem before a tragic writer is how to adjust this secret case with the human sufferer.

The Greek masters of tragedy- Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides- on whom Aristotle based himself, identified this secret cause with Faith or Fortune whom they regarded as the presiding genius of tragedy. A man, who committed some sin, was bound to get punishment by the Goddess Nemesis. The Greek tragedy involved the religious ideas of sin and punishment. It was thought that the blind goddess of Fate “smiled upon men, flattered them with the allurements of promised happiness, then changed her countenance, revealed her fickleness and cast down those whom she had lifted up. Her wheels revolt without ceasing; men rose with it to its summit and swiftly descended nights irresistible sweep (Shakespeare, 07).” [5] They tried to fight against this mighty power but were helpless like a puppet whose strings were in the hands of someone else. Ultimately, they were bent and broken.

Schopenhauer was of the opinion that the representation of a great misfortune is alone essential to tragedy, and that blind Fate might be the agent of it. Shelley argued that event crime, in the Athenian drama, is disarmed of half of its horror and all its contagion by being represented as the fatal consequence of the unfathomable agencies of nature. Nietzsche held tragedy to be the dancing ground of divine accident. And Milton

allowed to Fortune, a power beneath the moon, and said that tragedy treats.

## III. OF FATE CHANGE IN HUMAN LIFE

Even Shakespeare was fully conscious of Fortune's capricious power. The conception of undeserved, unexpected and crushing calamity, for which the name of Fortune was an emblem, enters very deeply into his work. It is omnipresent in his present days as well as his comedies. There are allusions to the arbitrary decrees of Fate and her irresistible power is felt by Shakespeare's heroes at the very crisis of their story. Romeo exclaims, ‘O, I am Fortune's Fool!’ His very words are echoed by King Lear, ‘I am even the natural fool of Fortune.’ Similarly in *As You Like It*, *Henry IV*, *Hamlet* and *The Tempest* there are frequent references to Dame Fortune. Shakespeare speaks of Fortune “as a power higher than the human will, by which men are blindly controlled, their purpose overthrown and misery brought upon them.” But it would be a misrepresentation of Shakespeare to suggest that his tragedies are merely a blank and bleak expression of cruel destiny. He did not regard man as helpless in fortune's presence. Fortune could be controlled, He thought it, a man could control himself. This conclusion is the very core of Shakespeare's philosophy, if any.

The theme of Shakespearean Tragedy is the struggle between good and evil resulting in serious convulsions and disturbances, sorrows, sufferings and death. Its subject is the struggle of good and evil which permeate in the world simultaneously in all ages and times. It depicts men and women struggling with evil and finally succumbing to it with resultant deaths of innocent characters and harmless creatures. Through their heroic struggle we rely the immense spiritual potentiality of many Shakespearean tragedies never lives behind. Addressing effect, it soothes consoles and strengthens. In his tragedies he presents a rich series of excitements, which rouses pity and sympathy in the audience. The themes of all the four great tragedies are sensational for example Macbeth has its witches, its ghosts and apparitions, its murder in a darkened castle its

drunken partner and its thrilling sight of lady Macbeth walking in her sleep.

In Hamlet we have the ghost and the grave diggers and in Othello night alarms and sword fights. Every one of his tragedies is an expression of some human passion of failing and its disastrous consequences.

In a figurative sense a tragedies (from classical Greek, "Song for the goat) is any event with a sad and unfortunate outcome but the term also applied specially in western culture to a form of drama defined by Aristotle characterized by seriousness and dignity and involving a great person who experiences a reversal of fortune.

Tragedy depicts the downfall of a noble hero or heroine, usually through some combination of hubris, fate and the will of the gods. The tragic hero's powerful wish to achieve some goal inevitably encounters limits, usually those of human frailty.

Aristotle says that the tragic hero should have a flaw and make some mistake hamartia. The hero need not die at end, but he or she must undergo a change in fortune. In addition, the great tragic hero may achieve some revelation or recognition.

Thus in ancient Greek tragedy the evil is more embedded as character types, where as in Shakespearean tragedy the evil is largely permeated by the weaknesses inherent in man. In the English literature the most famous and most successful tragedies are those of William Shakespeare and his Elizabethan contemporaries like, C.Marlowe and John Webster. Christopher Marlowe was the most significant of Shakespeare's contemporaries. He possessed a supermen quality which enabled him at one. To lift drama into the sphere of high literature. The last scenes of Faustus are among the most pathetic and most grandiose in Renaissance drama. They are unsurpassable even by Shakespeare.

#### IV. MAN THE NUCLEUS OF ALL SHAKESPEARE'S WRITINGS

Man is the nucleus of all Shakespeare's writings- poems, songs, sonnet or plays. The recurrent themes in all of his plays are invisible forces of character that shape the destiny of man. The ancient Greek dramatists pitted man against the divine forces, but Shakespeare presents the struggle of man fighting against himself. He presents the drama of the struggle of man fighting against the contending forces within his own psyche. Here man battles not against gods or against super natural agencies but against himself. Shakespeare intuitively knew more than four hundred years ago, as an expert in modern psychology knows today that the different psychic forces determine human behavior. Hence his plays deeply explore human motive and emotion, both conscious and unconscious; He borrowed the bare skeleton of plot from different sources, but by the alembic of his genius transmuted it into a true to all time story of man.

Bradley stated about Macbeth "The bold ambitious man of action has within certain limits, the imagination of a poet" an imagination on the one hand extremely sensitive to the impressions of a certain kind and on the other, production of violent disturbance both of mind and body.

Shakespeare strictly follows Hamlet's advice to the actors: suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature, consequently his characters reveal truths of human nature. And, that is the secret of Shakespeare's greatness and universal appeal. [6]

Here Macbeth speculates about the future. Similarly, in his famous soliloquy "To be, or not to be" - Hamlet speculates about the future. The difference is that Macbeth Contemplates the crime of murder and its consequences, which he is afraid, may extend beyond this lie, and he quails at the idea of this, while Hamlet, oppressed by the burden and mystery of life, contemplates suicide. Macbeth is urged on to the fulfillment of his ambition by the instigation of his wife and the supernatural soliciting of the witches. He begins

with a crime and then he has to secure himself by a repetition of crime at last the doom falls on him, wrought as it is by his imagination and sensibilities and also by his external agency of the witches. Now in Hamlet there is the same supernatural soliciting, the revenge motive is supplied by the ghost of Hamlet's father. It is sacred task, imposed upon Hamlet and in carrying it through; he meets with obstacles both internal and external. It is easier for Macbeth to attain his object through a crime; if he has moral scruples in the beginning, they are swept off by the chiding tongue of his wife. Hamlet's sacred duty to his father sanctified by the motive of revenge. The question why Hamlet has not been able to execute his revenge with one stroke puzzles critics. But delay is the very essence of a revenge play such as Hamlet is.

But Hamlet and Macbeth are romantic-tragedies, making use of the supernatural machinery. There is finer touch and delicacy in the supernatural of Hamlet; the physical loath sameness of the weird sisters in Macbeth can never be overcome but the ghost in Hamlet is a being aloof from us a phantom, provoking in us "thoughts beyond the reaches four souls"- It is a more effective use of the supernatural in any case.

The other tragedies, with which we may compare Hamlet, are Julius Caesar and King Lear. In Julius Caesar there is the ghost of Caesar and Caesar dead seems to be more powerful the Caesar living. The spirit of Caesar rowing about for revenge is a figure as impressive as the ghost of Hamlet's father demanding of his son duty of revenge. Brutus has compared with Hamlet. There is an idealistic strain in both speculations as opposed to being dominant in both. When we compared Hamlet with King Lear, we find that both are plays of dark menacing and violent passion. Perhaps King Lear has a greater tragic grandeur when he raves in unison with storm and thunder on a blasted heath then vehemently reproaching himself for the failure of his task. [7]

The society is created with Shakespeare's fullest power. It is the image of the world as intellect is made to feel it. It is a society governed by the enemies of intellect,

by the sensual and the worldly by deadly sinners and philosophers of bread and cheese.

We can see in Shakespeare's works a gradual development which in a sense parallels the historical development of dramatic literature.

Shakespeare's subject matter is not the peregrination of the soul beyond the quotidian view to unfamiliar horizons, or "transcendental realities", or "Primal feelings, or "Spatial experience", like that of Dante or mystics of the East, it is also not supra-human. "In the greater-Shakespearean tragedy "says Charlton" [8], man enthalls the attention more than does his universe for Shakespeare's attention more than does his universe for Shakespeare's world is moral rather than theology and religion, men more than angles, earth than heaven.

## V. CONCLUSION

In the Shakespearean tragedy, therefore, leaves the impression of a spiritual leaves at the fall of the curtain and impresses us with deepest paths and mystery of life.

The case with Macbeth is slightly different. The hero in this tragedy is by no means a noble man like Hamlet or Othello, though he is great like them. Shakespeare has so presented his hero that he at once enlists our sympathy and admiration in spite of all his villainy and treachery. Boas says that "Two things are necessary to arouse tragic emotions when a villain is the hero of a play: the hero must have so much greatness in his character as to call forth our admiration and make us conscious of the possibilities of human nature and there must be an internal struggle represented. Shakespeare has done something more to enlist deeper sympathy and admiration for his hero.

## V. REFERENCES

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