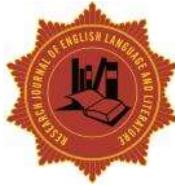


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TIMELESS TREASURE: RELEVANCE OF SHAKESPEARE'S MACBETH IN DAY-TO-DAY LIFE

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Abstract

That Shakespeare is so popular anytime anywhere, is primarily due to the universal elements in his plays. Everyone, irrespective of time and space, can identify himself or herself with the situations in his plays. In case of *Macbeth*, Shakespeare fills it with scenes, situations and characters with which one can easily relate to. His treatment of friendship, love, betrayal, treachery, loyalty, patriotism, ambition, pride, meekness, genuineness etc. is so unique and so universal in the play. The tragedy also teaches us a lot of things which may help us in day-to-day life. There are advices, warnings, cautions, genuine concerns, prick of conscience, retribution and so many things which are equally relevant in this present time. Through textual analysis of *Macbeth*, the paper will try to point out those timeless treasures which give it the necessary impetus to remain timeless, universal and relevant even today, after 400 years of his death.

Keywords: Universal, day-to-day life, relevant, timeless, today.

William Shakespeare, the Bard of Avon, is unparalleled as a master dramatist and a supreme poet. His appeal is universal – he crosses the boundary of space and time and soothes every heart. He is able to touch every human emotion and feeling and his writings are a storehouse of all passions and aspirations. He is “a universal genius of the highest order” (Daiches, 246). Shakespeare’s poetry and plays pleased the Elizabethans and continue to attract and please the readers and audiences ever since. Critics have found many elements which have made them popular and universal through ages. His texts are like an ocean which can absorb all kinds of interpretations. Apart from their own aesthetic pleasure, various critical

theories and ‘-ism’ can be applied to them. Indeed, his writings have been interpreted from several angles like Marxism, Formalism, Postcolonialism, Feminism, Absurdism, Ecocriticism etc. Shakespearean plays, particularly his great tragedies generate new meanings though the society, politics and life in general are changing so fast all over the world. His tragedies were relevant to the time and society in which they were produced, and they are equally relevant to the contemporary life and world. The aim of this paper is to search for those elements which are responsible for their steady popularity through ages, universality and relevance in the contemporary life and society. Among many things, the great tragedies contain enormous teachings,

preaching, common sayings, maxims, precepts, advices, warnings etc. which appeal to the kings and the clowns alike in all time. Everyone can identify himself or herself in these.

Shakespeare's human vision is essentially broad and all-encompassing. His tragic stage is big, eventful and populous. His representation of the human world is unequally varied and rich. His harmonies comprise more voices than of other dramatists and weaved with more dissonances. "His human stories are told with an abundance of details and particulars, and his plays contain a wealth of such stories enacted simultaneously. The world he sees is of infinite variety, and he surpasses all other writers in the ability to paint it. He creates a wider range of human beings than any other writer, and catches all their different voices with endless dramatic resource" (Long, 5). Thus, Shakespeare represents human beings from all the strata of society. Apart from his famous heroes, heroines and villains, who are immortalized in his tragedies, there are many so called 'marginal' characters who also make themselves immortal through their brief appearance, a couple of scenes or sentences. Through the wonderful breadth of his tragedy, Shakespeare presents characters, dialogues, scenes and situations in such a manner that everyone can identify himself or herself to these all-over the world at any time.

We are in the age of democracy, and monarchy has almost become part of history. So, question may arise what is the relevance of studying Shakespearean plays which are full of royal characters? In the age of democracy, monarchy has lost its relevance and has practically become obsolete all over the world. But still Shakespeare is so popular in the contemporary world. Still his plays are read, staged and adapted in various forms in different countries. So, the reasons of their popularity are to be sought elsewhere. Simply they are popular as people find them to be appealing and relevant even today. Here lies the universality of Shakespeare. That is why Ben Jonson said, "He was not of an age but for all time!" (Jonson, 2).

Among the great tragedies of Shakespeare *Macbeth* occupies unique place. *Hamlet* has the

popular fame, partly because it is full of 'quotations' and *Othello* arouses our pity very keenly. And *King Lear* may be regarded as more universal in its scope than these other tragedies. But *Macbeth* has the concentrated action and splendid poetry. In *Macbeth* Shakespeare, through brilliant artistry, presents the eternal questions of evil and suffering. And the perennial appeal of tragedy to the human mind lies in the manner of his presentation. Apart from the artistic form and marvellous poetry and presentation, *Macbeth* is so enriched with ordinary advices, common sayings and universal utterances which have the power to appeal to all. Sometimes they take shapes of passing comments, sometimes they appear to be warnings to us and often they are ironical and have deeper underlying meanings and implications. Indeed, they are the touchstones through which we can have some glimpses of Shakespeare's greatness and universal vision. In fact, these ordinarily extraordinary statements are the hallmarks of Shakespearean great tragedies.

Macbeth is the shortest of Shakespeare's great tragedies. "It is the most vehement, the most concentrated, perhaps we may say the most tremendous, of the tragedies" (Bradley, 278). Undoubtedly, it is one of the most theatrically satisfying of all his plays. It has a dramatic impact which is accentuated by its striking visual and symbolic qualities. It is "swift and utterly single minded" (Long, 4). Audiences are struck by its compactness and the powerful and fierce pace it generates from the very beginning. And within this swift and condensed action the varied phenomena and manifold conditions of human life are vividly presented. Here, Shakespeare skillfully portrays the everyday processes of life. The characters, speeches and comments in the play prove that it is both of the Elizabethan age and for all time. We can identify and recognize ourselves with the characters in the play – their speeches, their thoughts and feelings. We feel and share with Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, we are moved by their actions and suffering. Not only the chief protagonists, we feel Lady Macduff's castigation of her husband, her fear, helplessness, isolation and motherly concern. We can also identify ourselves with Macduff's grief for the country and his "pretty chickens and their dam" (Shakespeare,

181). In fact, all the characters in *Macbeth* do awaken in us some sorts of feelings through which we find affinity with them.

There are speeches, comments and observations in *Macbeth* which are universal in nature and true to all time everywhere. Many of these are very ordinary, yet pregnant with further meanings and implications. Some of them are in the manner of warnings from which we may learn lessons if we wish. Some others are useful advices which can guide us safely in our life's journey. The last two lines of the opening Scene of the tragedy, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair:/ Hover through the fog and filthy air" (Shakespeare, 96) sums up the spirit of the play. In the play's context this speech throws light on the nature of the witches – their perversion and different morality. Ironically, it also points to the heinous crime that Macbeth, the 'valiant cousin' and 'worthy gentleman' will do later. But this speech has a permanent and universal value. It has its relevance all time everywhere, especially today it is so difficult to distinguish between 'fair' and 'foul'. 'Foul' often takes the disguise of 'fair' and performs all the mischiefs and crimes in our society as seen daily everywhere in the world – be it New Delhi or New York. On the other hand, 'foul' may not actually be bad always. Thus, this speech of the witches is a very significant warning to all of us.

There is, of course, dramatic irony in Duncan's speech when he says, "There's no art/ To find the mind's construction in the face:/ He was a gentleman on whom I built/ An absolute trust" (Shakespeare, 108) and instantly Macbeth enters. But these lines sound so true even out of the context. It is, indeed, as we know very well, hard to trust a person based on his/her appearance. Apparently, a person may look to be a perfect gentleman, yet actually he/she may be dangerous or wicked. So, we should be very careful before fully trusting anybody, otherwise we may be deceived. Thus, what Duncan utters in the play is not limited to the Elizabethans in England, but is equally applicable to us today. Duncan does not learn from his mistakes, but we may, if only we be aware. This is the lesson we may learn. And when Lady Macbeth advises her husband "To beguile the time, / Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye, / Your hand,

your tongue: look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under 't" (Shakespeare, 114), she confirms how evil can put on disguise.

Many a times we can identify ourselves with Macbeth. It seems that Shakespeare particularly focuses on Macbeth's vacillation before the murder of Duncan and on his thoughts just after the murder. These are the moments where people in general can recognize themselves. In the famous soliloquy Macbeth wishes "If it were done when 't is done, then 't were well: if the assassination/ Could trammel up the consequence, and catch/ With his surcease success; that but this blow/ Might be the be-all and the end-all here" (Shakespeare, 116), but knows very well "this even-handed justice/ Commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice/ To our own lips" (Shakespeare, 116). And here Macbeth becomes an everyman figure – who wishes not to be punished for misdeeds but sadly realizes the actuality. Immediately after the murder Macbeth feels remorse and he recoils "I am afraid to think what I have done" (Shakespeare, 126). This is not the fear of the dead body, as Lady Macbeth thinks to be. It is certainly the prick of conscience for murdering Duncan who was in his castle "in double trust" (Shakespeare, 117). These moments and thoughts in the play is so universal that anyone can identify himself/herself with these. These make the play timeless and relevant even today.

Unlike their father, Malcolm and Donalbain are clever and cautious. To be safe they plan to escape to England and Ireland, after the assassination of Duncan. Donalbain in his comment, "There's dagger in men's smiles: the near in blood, / The nearer bloody" (Shakespeare, 133), does not only suspect Macbeth, but also reveals a fact that is so common today. Now-a-days, the daily newspapers are full of such news where relatives are involved in bloody misdeeds – brother killing his brother, son killing his father or cousin killing his cousin. This is almost the order of the day. And what Malcolm adds can be a valuable advice to all of us: "This murderous shaft that's shot/ Hath not yet lighted, and our safest way/ Is to avoid the aim" (Shakespeare, 133). Through their initial doubt and suspect Malcolm and Donalbain seem to teach us that we should be careful and cautious in building

our full trust on someone. King Duncan made the mistakes more than once and he had to pay the price finally through his murder. The choice is ours – whether we will follow Duncan or his sons.

After Duncan is murdered and his sons fly abroad, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth become the new King and Queen as they ambitiously desired to be. Earlier they thought that kingship will make them happy and satisfied forever. But their feelings after gaining the kingship are totally opposite. Now, Lady Macbeth thinks, “Nought’s had, all’s spent, / Where our desire is got without content:/ ’T is safer to be that which we destroy/ Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy” (Shakespeare, 142). Macbeth’s feeling is almost the same, “better be with the dead, / Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace/ Than on the torture of the mind to lie/ In restless ecstasy” (Shakespeare, 143). He even helplessly envies dead Duncan: “Duncan is in his grave;/ After life’s fitful fever he sleeps well’ (Shakespeare, 143). Hearing the news of Fleance’s escape Macbeth reacts, “I had else been perfect/ Whole as the marble, founded as the rock, / As broad and general as the casing air” (Shakespeare, 148). This is his running after perfection, which he thinks, remains unfulfilled for very little again and again. These kinds of feelings and realizations are so familiar to all of us. We too feel, like Macbeth and Lady Macbeth that gaining something will make us fully satisfied and perfect. But, after grasping that we get disillusioned and realize the difference between desire and actuality. This hankering after happiness and satisfaction is so common in the present consumerist culture.

The situation in which Macbeth finds himself after he sees the ghost of Banquo in the Banquet Scene is very similar in which we often find ourselves. What happens here is beyond his expectation. He thought that Banquo and Fleance will be murdered as per his directions and he will get rid of his insecurity and live happily ever after. But things happen otherwise. He comes to know that Fleance escaped and the ghost of Banquo returns “With twenty mortal murders on their crowns, / And push us from our stools” (Shakespeare, 151). He is so helpless and frustrated to find this. He can well understand his position in the end of the Scene: “I

am in blood/ Stepp’d in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o’er” (Shakespeare, 154). And his realization, “We are yet but young in deed” (Shakespeare, 155), is so universal. Of course, these speeches are significant in the context of the play. But these are true everywhere. In fact, there is hardly a person who does not find himself, at any point of his life, in a similar problem or situation.

Even the domestic Scene between two minor characters, Lady Macduff and her little son, seems to give us some messages. The way Lady Macduff complains about her husband’s flight to England, the way the child outwits her mother through questions are all so familiar. When she is informed about some approaching danger, Lady Macduff comments, “Whither should I fly? / I have done no harm. But I remember now/ I am in this earthly world; where to do harm/ Is often laudable, to do good sometime/ Accounted dangerous folly: Why then, alas, / Do I put up that womanly defence, / To say I have done no harm?” (Shakespeare, 170). This observation is so true and relevant now-a-days. Indeed, this is the picture of the present-day world where misdeeds or criminal activities are often praised and good deeds or honest practices are regarded as ridiculous and become the cause of danger. It is Shakespeare’s brilliance that he paints the grim and corrupted picture of the-then society which is equally true today, even truer. And that truth he presents through the mouth of a minor character.

The long Act IV, Scene i, in which Malcolm tests the genuineness of Macduff, seems dull and forced to many. But we may learn great lessons from Malcolm here, who unlike his father, is cautious, suspicious and calculating, as has already been seen. He doubts Macduff as he may be Macbeth’s spy: “something/ You may deserve of him through me, and wisdom/ To offer up a weak poor innocent lamb/ To appease an angry god” (Shakespeare, 172). In order to be fully satisfied, Malcolm subjects him to thorough test and gives a false and lurid picture of himself. He projects himself as full of all sorts of vices and a worse villain than Macbeth. He says, “I have none: the king-becoming graces, / As justice, verity, temperance, stableness / Bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness, / Devotion,

patience, courage, fortitude, / I have no relish of them, but abound/ In the division of each several crime, / Acting it many ways..." (Shakespeare, 175). When Macduff becomes frustrated and shows his holy wrath, Malcolm gets rid of his suspicion and finally withdraws all his false allegations against himself. Here Malcolm teaches us to be cautious and calculating, not to build absolute trust on someone. We may avoid some impending dangers if we follow such process and lesson of Malcolm.

The famous Sleep-walking Scene is an ironical commentary on Lady Macbeth. Unconsciously she confesses all the crimes here. Indeed, as the Doctor thinks, "unnatural deeds/ Do breed unnatural troubles..." (Shakespeare, 184). That may be looked upon as justice or retribution. She is disturbed, as she imagines, by the spot of blood in her hand and constantly rubs her hands. Later she is offended by the odour of blood: "Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand" (Shakespeare, 184). Of course, there is no blood in her hands, the spot is in her mind. That is why it cannot be removed easily. Such is the fearful effect of crime and guilt which haunts the criminal. It may serve as a warning to all that crime can lead to retribution and has devastating psychological effect on the mind.

Towards the end of the play Macbeth sadly realizes his position now. Now he understands what a mess he has done. But already it is too late. He painfully observes at the fag-end of his life: "I have lived long enough: my way of life/ Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf; / And that which should accompany old age, / As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends, / I must not look to have; but, in their stead, / Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath, / Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not" (Shakespeare, 188). After his tyrannical rule and demonic activities, Macbeth now becomes an ordinary human being with ordinary realization and longing at life's end. We, like Macbeth, after living long enough, do expect honour, love, obedience and friends to accompany us in our old age. This is the sense of identification that we feel with Macbeth. But Macbeth knows very well that people curse him instead.

When Macbeth senses the approaching danger, he becomes so desperate and helpless. This is so familiar to us. He shows his anger to the servant, to the Doctor and others. He is now almost fully seasoned with fear and horror. Nothing can further impress him. He has "forgot the taste of fear" (Shakespeare, 191). He does not start at horrible things as he has "supp'd full with horrors" (Shakespeare, 191). These are tragic enough to make us feel pity towards Macbeth. And Macbeth's last soliloquy is so deeply true and universal that it forces us to rethink our life philosophically. From birth to death, whole human life is encompassed here. Of course, this is the tragic vision of life and Macbeth thinks of life through the lens of his own experience. Nevertheless, there is truth in his vision of life, to which many of us can identify ourselves: "To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow, / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day/ To the last syllable of recorded time, / And all our yesterdays have lighted fools/ The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle! / Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player/ That struts and frets his hour upon the stage/ And then is heard no more: it is a tale/ Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury; / Signifying nothing" (Shakespeare, 191-92). This famous soliloquy has all the potentiality to exist independently of the play as a magnificent poem. The pessimistic view of life that is expressed here is, of course, not of Shakespeare, but of Macbeth at this particular moment. However, this view of life is very popular in contemporary thought and forms the basis of existentialism and absurdism. The relevance of this speech also becomes all the more significant when today we find our hopes to be constantly thwarted, our waiting for betterment ends in void and our noisy speech and violent words actually want in sense. Here lies the excellence of *Macbeth* as a tragedy and Shakespeare as a playwright.

From the textual analysis of *Macbeth*, it is clear that the tragedy contains so many universal elements which are timeless treasures. Anyone can relate to these anytime anywhere. The themes, issues, characters, situations, speeches etc. are equally relevant even today. In a word, *Macbeth* encapsulates Shakespeare's vision of life which can serve as a guide to our day-to-day life.

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