

Knowledge begets Power and Power begets tragic flaw: Power and Knowledge in Shakespeare

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Abstract

Shakespeare's plays, which include his comedies, historical plays, tragedies and tragic-comedies, are replete with the inter-related and inter-dependant theme of power and knowledge. The relation between power and knowledge in Shakespeare's works is very close. Shakespeare is realistic in his construction of plot and characters. He draws each and everything from the society and from human behavior very minutely. We all know that there always exists a game of power and politics in our society and power-politics is everywhere, even at our homes. So, Shakespeare picks this power game from the society and expounds it in most of his plays, even in his comedies, where we witness this power game between men and women. But by power Shakespeare doesn't mean the physical or military power, although he relates power with knowledge. He presents his philosophy, through his plays, that whosoever has the knowledge will have the power; whosoever has the power will definitely have some tragic flaw. And the knowledge of that tragic flaw helps the other characters to attain power. For example in King Lear, the tragic flaw in Lear is excessive egoism and ungovernable temper.

Not only in his tragedies and comedies, even in his historical or chronicle plays we witness the same power-knowledge relationship. The historical plays fall into two distinct groups, the one presenting studies of kingly weakness, the other of kingly strength. Thus, this power-knowledge relation in Shakespeare's plays is very delicate and flexible as knowledge begets power and power begets tragic flaw. But the master planner is always the God or some supernatural power in his plays.

Keywords:- Power, knowledge, republic, dictatorship, tragic flaw and tragedy

Introduction:-

William Shakespeare is a greatest dramatist and his greatness lies in his depiction of reality with perfect amalgamation of his imagination, which is very tough to separate with each other. He draws characters and dramatic colors from his imagination according to his own ideals. He has always been in favor of Republic state but the actual condition of the prevailing society made his dreams shattered. Through his plays he wants to show the real picture of his society but at the same time he wants to display his vision of republic state. In some of his plays, he reveals his idea of republic state openly while in some other plays he gives this idea in a hidden manner. In order to show his vision of republic state, Shakespeare chooses the theme of power politics from the society. This theme of power politics is prevalent in most of his plays, especially historical tragedies and comedies. In this paper, we will discuss this theme of power politics under the subtitle power and knowledge in relation with Shakespearean concept of Republic. Although, this theme of power and knowledge can be seen in most of Shakespearean

plays including his comedies, histories, tragedies and tragi-comedies, but in this paper we will discuss his two famous plays - one is historical tragedy and other is a tragedy. The historical tragedy that we will discuss is Julius Caesar and the tragedy is King Lear. Let us first of all consider his historical tragedy i.e. Julius Caesar.

Julius Caesar, a famous drama of Shakespeare, shows his vision of Republic state very clearly and vividly. The need of Republic state in Rome has been discussed predominantly in the play. The play deals with the murder and the revenge of the murder of the great general of Rome, Julius Caesar. Brutus, the close friend of Caesar, feels that Caesar is going to be a big threat to Rome. Due to Caesar's ambitious and arrogant nature, he thinks that Caesar is going to be a tyrant dictator. As a true lover of his nation and as cajoled by Cassius for power, Brutus, joined with other conspirators, murders the Caesar. Here, Brutus feels that his action is for the benefit of Rome but actually he is seeking his own benefit only, as he can foresee his own future as a king after the death of Caesar. When Cassius is try to cajole him by using praise words for him and by using depreciating words for Caesar, he never feels offended. Cassius says:

Brutus and Caesar: what should be in that 'Caesar'?
Why should that name be sounded more than yours?
Write them together, yours is as fair a name;
Sound them, it is as heavy; conjure with `em,
Brutus will start a spirit as soon as Caesar. (Campbell 706)

Brutus trusts Cassius and the letter which he trusts to be send by citizens of Rome, which is actually a trap of Cassius. After getting convinced, he becomes an accomplice in the murder of Caesar. After doing so, he gives all his trust to Antony. He believes that Antony will not blame those who took part in the conspiracy through his speech at Caesar's funeral. This tragic flaw of too much trust leads Brutus to his tragic end.

In fact, this tragic flaw and tragic end is the result of Brutus' exercising of the power beforehand, which he assumes to acquire. Even before the murder of Caesar, he has started the use of his upcoming power. He dismisses the idea of killing Antony along with Caesar, which is proposed by Cassius, who fears him to be a great hurdle in his destination. Brutus says:

Our course will seem too bloody, Caius Cassius,
To cut the head off and then hack the limbs,
Like wrath in death and envy afterwards;
For Antony is but a limb of Caesar:
Let us be sacrificers, but not butchers, Caius. (Campbell 714)

Thus, it leads to a weak point in his conspiracy which then leads to the fail of his plot. Not only this, he has made a silly mistake again under the compulsion of his tragic flaw and presumed power, when he allows Antony to speak at Caesar's funeral. Cassius, who knows that Antony is a loyal friend of Caesar and is a very good orator, again asks Brutus to not to permit Antony to speak at the funeral. The fear of Cassius is visible in his speech:

You know not what you do: do not consent
That Antony speak in his funeral:
Know you how much the people may be moved
By that which he will utter? (Campbell 723)

But Brutus again dismisses Cassius' appeal. Here Cassius's insight appears stronger than Brutus. Edward Dowden in his book *Shakespeare* rightly comments, "All the practical gifts, insight and tact, which Brutus lacks, are possessed by Cassius..." (Dowden 118). Thus it is clear that on having the presumed power, which is basically the result of flattery of the conspirators which they use as a tool to accomplish their plot, Brutus' tragic flaw increases and thus receive tragic end. Tragedy of Brutus resembles the tragedy of King John, where both have committed a moral sin of murdering an innocent man. Discussing the tragedy in *Julius Caesar*, Irving Ribner also says, "In order to attain a goal of public good, Brutus commits a private crime: he murders his friend. This is his wrong moral choice and the source of his tragedy" (Ribner 60-61). Death of Cassius also generates tragic effect but in very low degree as he was a villain with a tragic flaw of higher degree i.e. jealousy and thus doesn't captures much of audience's sympathy. Although he has also participated in power-game, yet he has not made any direct claim over power.

Although Cordelia also knows the loopholes of her father but being pious and generous she does not draw benefits out of that knowledge. She is also aware of the evil nature of her sisters, still she does not complain as she does not want to humiliate her sisters in front of all. She really wants that her sisters should become pious and good natured ladies and will treat her father with proper affection. This kind and generous attitude of Cordelia is visible when she takes leave from her sisters in these words:

The jewels of our father, with wash'd eyes Cordelia leaves you: I know you what you are; And like a sister am most loth to call Your faults as they are named. Love well our father. (Campbell 885)

She again says, "Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides; Who covers faults, at last with shame derides. Well may you prosper" (Campbell 886)!

Goneril and Regan get the power by having the knowledge of tragic flaw of Lear and being evil natured they adopt a most unsympathetic and callous attitude towards their old father. At this Lear decides to leave both his daughters, though he does not know where to go, as he has himself given all his belongings to his daughters. But the two sisters feel no compunction at all at Lear's departure even though they know that a storm is about to blow. This scene is basically the reversal of what Lear has done. Here starts Lear's journey towards inner self. He starts recognizing his inner faults now. In *Shakespeare in the Light of Sacred Art*, Martin Lings in this regard writes, "In King Lear as in Hamlet Hell and Purgatory are treated simultaneously which means that the discovery of hidden faults and the transformation of those faults into virtues go side by side" (Lings 67).

Besides being jealous, treacherous and tyrant, Goneril and Regan develop a more serious tragic flaw which proves to be fatal to them and that is amorality. Both the sisters

are amoral as they, besides being married, have started an illegal love relationship with Edmund. Regan starts the love affair when her husband is dead while Goneril starts it even when her husband is alive. Due to this tragic flaw in Goneril and Regan, they meet tragic end. Goneril gives poison to Regan and she herself out of shame commits suicide.

In case of Edmund, he achieves the higher most position in a very short period of time. This happens due to his opportunist nature. Despite this fact he meets fatal end and that is partially due to his incompetency to fight against Edgar and partially due to his over-opportunist nature. His over-opportunism makes him incapable to choose between Goneril and Regan. His death at the hand of Edgar arises less tragic effect than the death of Lear, Gloucester and Cordelia, because they are kind and generous characters and thus they gain the sympathy of audience. Again the death of Goneril, Regan and duke of Cornwall arise the same effect as that of Edmund. Same is the case with Brutus, Cassius and other conspirators in Julius Caesar. So, one encounters two types of tragic characters in Shakespearean plays- one serious and other less serious tragic character. In that case their tragic flaws can also be categorized as serious and less serious tragic flaws.

Shakespeare by creating tragic effect wants to show the ill effect of dictatorship and need of republic state. He believes that dictatorship generates and spreads a power-game which is very dangerous to the society at large and to the participants at personal level. In this power-game one participant wants to overpower the other participant and this he does by getting the knowledge of other's loophole or tragic flaw. Thus one can conclude by saying that Shakespeare's plays are replete with the theme of power and knowledge and with a hidden message of need to establish republic state in society.

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