

Necromancy, Virulence and Animosity in Shakespearean Plays

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Shakespeare's tragedies are widely acclaimed as an index of the human mind and the unexplored recesses of the human psyche. At the same time, there has surfaced a spate of questions, regarding the ambience or the atmosphere, especially the ubiquity of supernaturalism, necromancy and evil premonitions in majority of his plays. Putting aside comedies in which the supernatural is based limited to dreams and fantasies, tragedies like *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and even *Julius Caesar* betray a strong presence of supernatural machinery. The supernatural, necromancy or the evil portents plays a crowning role in Shakespearean plays and it has diverse manifestations. Shakespeare was very much a man of his times and could feel the pulse of the ideas and conventions at play in the Elizabethan England. Witchcraft, necromancy and supernatural agencies wafted the public mind and Shakespeare drew upon their contrivances in his different plays. What is however noteworthy about Shakespeare's use of such machinery is that he subjected the same to the thematic and dramatic import of his plays. It is indeed intriguing that such machinery cannot be considered outside the dramatic circle of

the thematic 'motif' of any such play. It is very much a dramatic ploy, a structural *tour de force* which is part and parcel of the dramatic fabric. In *Macbeth* and precisely in *Hamlet*, the supernatural plays more than anywhere else, a major role directly or indirectly, actively or passively, in influencing the idiom of actions.

It is worth emphasising the 'normality' of witchcraft beliefs. "Although witchcraft accusations reached epidemic proportions in the 16th and 17th century Europe, witchcraft beliefs are endemic in many societies"(Peter Stallybrass). An adequate explanation of witchcraft and necromancy needs to have a double focus, and it must showcase the actual beliefs and narrate how they fit within a particular cosmology. However, the English Government had, "at least since 1300, been concerned with 'witches' - with sorcerers as they might attempt to kill the king with prophets, because they might forecast the hour of this death" (Peter Stallybrass).

Shakespeare was not unaware many of the customs, beliefs and taboos, rife in the Elizabethan times. "A deep seated belief in witchcraft, necromancy and heraldry not only prevailed amongst the common citizens and Elizabethan groundlings, but also amongst the gentry and nobility -a majority of whom formed the queen's court" (Alan Sinfield). Needless to mention again, that during the Elizabethan period, the people of England austere believed in witches, ghosts, fairies, elves, prophecies, dreams and even in palmistry and astrology. The supernatural environs all these phenomena which cannot be explained by the laws of nature. The ancient poets believed in pagan gods, but with the development of the Christian religion, the poets were restricted to the world of tradition, folk-lore and superstition.

Shakespeare's attitude towards the supernatural and necromancy can be viewed with the various stages of his life. In his youth, he regarded the supernatural agencies as the most astonishing creatures and labelled them as "evil portents" who

are the root causes of a man's forthcoming peril. They are the greatest equivocators and dupe human beings with acute dexterity. He has actively used these machineries by borrowing the ideas from the Greek mythology and draped them accordingly in the colour of his own imagination just as his dramatic expediency demanded.

However, Shakespeare has also used much of these machineries in *A Midsummer's Night Dream* where the fairies and spirits plays an effervescent role meant for entertainment. Even Prospero in *The Tempest* possesses many necromantic powers but he does not contrive any plan of taking revenge on his banisher. Ariel, the jovial spirit in *The Tempest* represents the finer spirit of the air, while Caliban represents the grosser elements of the earth. One can compare Ariel with Caliban by quoting Coleridge, "*Nothing was ever more finely conceived than this contrast between the material and the spiritual, the gross and the delicate.*"

It is striking that Shakespeare maintains an austere mark of distinction between the supernatural creatures and the human characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as he believes that the supernatural world is governed by quite different laws than those govern the natural world. The treatment of the supernatural in *Hamlet* foreshadows the gloom of *Macbeth*. He has used the ghost in *Hamlet* as a terrifying and horrifying agent, and has clothed it in a manner which is peculiar to the Elizabethan Age of superstitions and beliefs. He makes the ghost 'real' to give an effect to the play to platter the dramatic purpose. Ghosts and spirits during Shakespearean time used to appear just before some great human catastrophe in order to give a warning or to indicate some motive of revenge or the process of retribution for wrongs done to some innocuous souls. The ghost of Hamlet's father appears before the son in order to inform him about the true murderer of his father and also to instigate him further to take revenge upon the murderer.

Needless to say, I wish to delve into the veils of Shakespearean plays to unveil the rancorous and malice world created by him. Virulence, malignity and especially animosity strikes the keynote of his acclaimed tragedies. The word 'animosity' has two innuendos. First, it reflects mere spiritedness, courage or resoluteness and secondly, violent hatred leading to active opposition which may sometimes give birth to unnatural malicious crimes. Let us now try to explore some facts of the aforementioned lines.

The conventions of Elizabethan revenge tragedy were well established, drawn initially from the Senecan model of revenge where its action is typically centred upon a leading character's attempt to avenge the murder of a loved one, sometimes at the prompting of the victim's ghost. It involves complex intrigues and disguises, the quest for vengeance, insanity, sensational incidents and usually some exploration of the morality of revenge. Drawing partly on precedents of 'Senecan' tragedy the English revenge tragedy is far more blood thirsty in its explicit presentation of premeditated violence. Thomas Kyd established this form of revenge tragedy with his renowned Spanish Tragedy and Shakespeare perfected the genre with *Hamlet* which reflects jealousy, violence, incest, murder and horror. However, unlike an average revenge play, the revenge *motif* in *Hamlet* is subservient to the psychological interplay of passions and a suppressed almost morbid, libidinal force, that wants to break cover, but hesitates to emerge. The revenge devices are Shakespeare's dramatic ploy to plumb the depth of the psychological recesses of the protagonist. In the very beginning, he sets up the scene, having a ghost on a dark night. The real 'dramatic tension' of the play begins as soon as the ghost of the late king tells Hamlet about his murder- "*A serpent stung me- so the whole ear of Denmark / Is by a forged process of my death.../ The serpent that did sting thy father's life / Now wears his crown.*" The ghost also motivates and instigates Hamlet to take the revenge of his death- "*Revenge his*

foul and most unnatural murder!" The ghost also directs Hamlet to kill his mother, the root cause of all this heinous and rancorous crime- "*Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive against thy mother aught: leave her to heaven.*" And as the play ends, the spectacle of a colossal ruin looms before us. The supernatural machinery and evil omens pervades the play and it has been clearly showcased that much blood has flown, gory acts have been committed, precious souls have been left to rot, wither and waste away! Revenge was Hamlet's motive, a motive well-lost by virtue of much procrastination and indecisiveness. In the end, all the people that matter fall, as happens in a revenge play. But in Hamlet, we grow alive to the sensibility of an unfathomable waste, a feeling emanating from a death of desires, wishes and will power of the zest for life. It is a tragic spectacle bemoaning the loss of worthy souls.

A great Shakespearean tragedy is not merely a dramatic presentation of well-crafted situations and conflicts, nor is it the projection of a character at the crossroads of life's anomalies. It works on the psychic level by employing atmosphere as a dramatic *tour de force* to reveal a character inside out. The "Sleep-Walking Scene" in *Macbeth* is remarkable not because it rips open the recesses of Lady Macbeth's innermost core, but also because it throws into relief the suppressed feelings of compunction and guilt arising from a state of psychic neurosis break cover and create a pivotal point in the texture of the necromantic play.

The woman who had said that a little water would clean her and her husband of the deed of murder, now says, "*What, will these hands never be clean?*" and "*All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.*" At a glance, this scene showcases the mental collapse of Lady Macbeth and demonstrates that evil has in it the seeds of self destruction. This contradiction reveals the conflict raging all the time within lady Macbeth which she has suppressed under her tremendous will power. It makes a very interesting case in point. All the

contradictions which we perceive in this situation, appears to emanate from her inherent guilt complex, her suppression of the guilt which she has performed for the sake of Macbeth. It reflects an agitated state of mind in the throes of psycho-neurotic claustrophobia. The apostrophe to darkness is steeped in irony that darkness is invoked to shroud a dark deed, and a taper is made to burn as it were to her some amount of comfort. The process is one of inversion, in which darkness of the exterior universe gets pinned to darkness of the psychic nature from which Lady Macbeth now tries to escape. But she is already in a mesh, once she wants to "*cut it here, it grows there.*" This is akin to a state of *schizophrenia* in which the deranged self falls back upon itself and exposes in a flash all its fissures.

In Shakespeare's women there is no conflict of impulses, no mixture of motives, which lead to the complexity of character, and, therefore, they are mostly either good or bad. In *King Lear*, the characters of Goneril and Regan are very simple. They are wicked to the core from the outset and with all their evil designs, they are in the strangle hold of their own jealousy, malice and hypocrisy. Women by nature are instinctive and Shakespeare also has depicted them as such. Even Cleopatra, Portia and others are not very much under the domination of their will. Their courage also falls, their heart breaks, when the moment comes for screwing it up to the sticking place.

Finally, I would like to underline the "Banquet Scene" in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* which is endowed with the supernatural elements. The ghost in this scene is entirely subjective, and thus, a symbolic representation of the terror psychosis eating into the vitals of Macbeth. In psychoanalysis, especially in the Freudian lines, a sense of guilt combined with a fears of retributive justice, often creates what is called *neurosis*. So when the time comes, when the feelings of guilt reach their limits they break cover and create a huge

disequilibrium in the persona. Macbeth's hallucination interpreted in these lines is not simply a byproduct of his imagination but is also a reflection of his guilt ridden conscience. Banquo's ghost is an infernal illusion created out of air by demonic forces and since nobody but Macbeth can see the ghost of Banquo, the dramatist's intention is clear. The ghost is a subjective apparition, not an objective reality, as we are aware of the subjective ghost is seen only by on who suffers from mental distraction and so does Macbeth as he has murdered Banquo. Similarly, in *Hamlet*, the ghost of Hamlet's father is objective and it does not appear as the result of anybody's guilt consciousness, although it should have appeared before Gertrude and Claudius as they are truly guilty and are responsible for the murder. In *Julius Caesar*, the ghost is again subjective and appears only before Brutus, who is one of the leading conspirators and assassins of Caesar. Now, Macbeth cannot be simply termed an exploration into the world of evil, it also thrives on situational and contrapuntal irony which shows how a man of genuine attributes disposed towards evil, succumbs into it so much that he has his paroxysms of psychic fright. The "Banquet Scene" is a tell-tale of such fright. The irony however lies there as light shines over the assembled guests but what Macbeth sees is a vision of darkness. The entire ambience is charged with an element of tension and suspense, underpinned by an area of deep darkness. Underneath the ceremonious attitude of Macbeth lies the deep dark subconscious which threatens to break cover at every possible instance making the garish convivial ambience a veritable hell.

Thus the supernatural machinery, necromancy, evil premonitions, animosity, malignity, virulence and the subconsciousness (often guilt ridden mind) contributed to the most of Shakespearean plays. Its consequences may vary but the machineries enriches the textures of the plays and uplifts the tragedy to a cosmic dimension and showcases that man's

actions (might be evil) aren't isolated but closely related to various forms operating in this universe.

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