

## POETIC JUSTICE IN SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY

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### ABSTRACT

Poetic Justice in Shakespearean Tragedy has been a very contentious issue. It has drawn a line dividing the people and literature in to two groups. Some critics of literature are not satisfied with the way the Shakespearean tragedies end. They judge and feel satisfied when the tragedies follow a pattern of moral values. But in real life and actual world it does not always happen or it seldom happens.

**KEYWORDS:** Poetic Justice in Shakespearean Tragedy

### INTRODUCTION

In the present context, let us first discuss the text of four great tragedies of Shakespeare in brief..." the four that are generally recognized as his greatest: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, Of these, the first is a play of revenge after the manner of Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, the second a domestic tragedy, and the third and fourth are chronicle histories with variations." (B. Prasad 154) Regarding the last two tragedies let us add to make things clear that *King Lear* and *Macbeth* are the tragedies dealing with the conflict of interest in the monarchical order of things.

Another important thing to note is that the Shakespearean Tragedy is the tragedy of an individual, the individual is a man of great status, whose fortune or misfortune affects and decides the fate of the subject of the state. His deeds good or bad are always under the scrutiny. Willy Loman's death is a private affair as compared to the death of Lear or Macbeth. But the tragic death of Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* is no less touching than Lear and Macbeth. The question arises - Is there a poetic justice in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*? But here there is a deviation from a classical tragedy. However, Shakespearean tragedy too deviates from the Greek tragedy in many respects. Reasons for the occurrence of tragedy are different –

"In Greek tragedy the characters are the victims of an implacable destiny. Their doom is decreed beforehand and they cannot escape it. This conception is quite foreign to Shakespeare for his tragic figures bring their fate down on themselves by some error of their own arising as we have said from some inherent flaw in their nature." (B. Prasad, pp 155-156).

Over and above, the supernatural elements and chance factor too hasten and add gravity to tragedy. The above elements serve as a catalyst in bringing about the doom of the hero. We can name Shakespearean tragedy as English tragedy which appears opposed to Greek Tragedy. But demand for poetic justice in Greek Tragedies is more relevant than its demand in English tragedies.

Such a judgement has its dangers too because Shakespeare mentions in *King Lear* Destiny and Character both as the causes for human tragedy. F.L. Lucas in his book on *Tragedy* quotes two passages of *King Lear* to show the above :

We may indeed summarize the two kinds of tragedy in the words of two different passages of Lear:

As Flies to wanton Boyes, are we to th' Gods

They kill us for their sport.

That is Aristotle's 'simple' tragedy of circumstances but again:

The Gods are just, and our pleasant vices Make instruments to plague us.

There we have the 'complex' tragedy of recoil, with its peripetera; and we may be reminded of Hegel's statement of the same principle. "The character that is dramatic plucks for himself the fruit of his own deeds." (F.L. Lucas, p. 115]

To be brief, we can come to a conclusion that Shakespearean Tragedy combines the elements of both Greek and English tragedies.

In the Shakespearean Tragedy not only hero dies at the end but many more innocent and noble souls also die. This happens in both sorts of tragedies - Tragedy of Circumstances and Complex Tragedy. This uneven justice demands an answer. In *Macbeth* – Duncan, Banquo, Macduff's wife and innocent children are murdered for none of their faults. In *King Lear* Cordelia's death is tragic and Lear and Cordelia emerge as the most pathetic figures. In *Othello* – poor Desdemona becomes the victim and in *Hamlet* – Hamlet and Ophelia both end their lives in a tragic manner. Is there any poetic justice in the death of such a hero or of his associates? Only in case of *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth* – there appears a proper punishment. However *Macbeth* undergoes the stage of realization and remorse before his tragic fall. This makes *Macbeth* a grand tragic hero. Shakespeare's tragedy follows Aristotle's emphasis on "peripeteia and anagnorisis" – which provides depth and philosophy to life.

The term, poetic justice has not come from Aristotle's *Poetics* or from Greek literary traditions. Greek believed in the Goddess of Nemesis, who punished the evil in proportion to the evil doings. She has also been called Goddess of Retributive Justice.

The phrase Poetic Justice was first used by Thomas Rymer in late seventeenth century. M.H. Abrams in *Glossary of Literary Terms* throws light on this term in the following words:

Poetic justice was a term coined by Thomas Rymer an English critic of the later seventeenth century to signify the distribution at the end of a literary work of earthly rewards and punishments in proportion to the virtue and vice of the various characters. Rymer's view was that a poem (in a sense that includes dramatic tragedy) is an ideal realm of its own, and should be governed by ideal principles of decorum and morality and not by random way things often work out in the actual world." (Abrams p.p. 199-200).

Thus, we observe that Poetic Justice may be relevant in the world, where the world is governed by ideal principles of decorum and morality. This is the reason that "Dr. Johnson and others complain that Shakespeare has no moral purpose, has no just distribution of good and evil". (Dutt: 127). Not only Dr. Johnson but many more have such complaints because they believe in the world of decorum and moral order. Coleridge and Thackeray have opposite opinions about Shakespeare's best tragedy *King Lear*. In an introduction to *King Lear* Stanley Gardener writes :

Thackeray found *King Lear* 'a bore', and apologized for his 'blasphemy' in suggesting 'that a play of Shakespeare's is bad'. Coleridge on the other hand thought it the most tremendous effort of Shakespeare as a poet. The

reader of *King Lear* has support from all sorts of critics illustrious and obscure, for any view he cares to argue. (Stanley Gardner: *King Lear*, p. IV.)

Another version with the title *The History of King Lear* by Nahum Tate in 1681 was staged in London. It has a happy ending and a changed script. Charles Lamb in one of his essays has condemned *Tate's Lear*. It does not stand any comparison with Shakespeare's *Lear*.

T.K. Dutt in his book *Aspects of Shakespeare* very aptly avers:

Whatever may be the idea of poetic justice Shakespeare does not seem to have maintained this crude, primitive law of Nemesis in any of his plays because it is purely conventional and so unnatural to life. This distribution of happiness and misery in proportion to the merits and shortcomings of the agent is not corroborated by the actual experience of life. Unless we believe in pre-natal existence or in the heredity of misfortune, we cannot explain the injustice suffered by Desdemona or Cordelia or Ophelia". (Dutt, pp 71-72)

In his support Dutt quotes Bradley also to explain as to why Shakespeare has ignored poetic justice. Dutt avers:

Bradley has justly said, "That this idea of a moral order though very different from the idea of a blank fate is no solution of the riddle of life is obvious: but why should we expect it to be such a solution? Shakespeare was not attempting to justify the ways of God to man or to show the universe as a Divine Comedy. He was writing tragedy, and tragedy would not be tragedy if it were not a painful mystery." (Dutt, p. 72).

A book or a play cannot be judged on the basis of ending and poetic justice and particularly the great tragedies of Shakespeare. We do not agree with the recent article of Parvati Sharma entitled 'And in the End' (The Sunday Express Magazine. Dec. 28, 2014, p. 04).

"If an unsatisfactory book is like a friend who borrows money and does not return it .... a book with an unsatisfactory ending is the friend who takes your money and drops you from her party. You feel alone you feel betrayed. The potential and bitter Face book update is high."

We believe that even if all the world undergoes a drastic change, Shakespeare's great plays will be enjoyed for their poetry and universality.

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