The Moral World of Shakespeare’s 

King Lear

Poulomi Mitra
Research Scholar
Visva Bharati University,
Santiniketan

Abstract:

Literature since the days of antiquity has always addressed universal human values. Aristotle in Ethics conceived of poetry (literature) as a source of moral values. The Romans treated the poet with equal reverence and called him a vates or prophet, the moral guide of the community. The tragedy of the modern world is that man’s material pursuits have taken precedence over his spiritual ones. In spite of enormous material prosperity, modern man is getting alienated from his community, his inner life is an arid waste land without a moral center. The relevance of literature in the context of modern life has not diminished, rather it has intensified.

The paper purports to study the moral world of Shakespeare’s King Lear and how it impinges upon the modern reader. It begins by locating King Lear within the broad philosophical framework of the Shakespearean tragedies thereby demonstrating how the transgression of natural laws precipitates catastrophes in the human world. It then proceeds to analyze Shakespeare’s King Lear. The treatment of a very fundamental human relation, that of the parent and the child in the context of the perennial conflict between good and evil. The complex character development in the play is traced by looking at Lear as King, man and father. The paper also looks at the critical controversy that the play’s dark ending provoked and the ethical implications of such an ending. The paper would end by once again calling attention to its aim which is to establish the ethical value and universality of literary texts as addressing the archetypal human condition and therefore its significance in the curriculum.

Keywords: King Lear, moral values, King, man, father.

Since time immemorial, literature has served as a powerful guide to civil life by postulating ethical values. This begets the question, what is ethics? By ethics do we imply absolute moral rules? Literature teaches us that ethics are not absolute but relative. They are dependent on individual circumstances and cultural differences as all readers of Sophocles’ Antigone and witnesses of Orestes’ dilemma would realize. Thus, even the literary text should not be read in a pious or reverent manner, the reader should be alert and ready to interrogate the very ethical premises that the text offers. Of all art forms the one that most problematizes ethics is tragedy because its morality as pointed out by Aristotle in Poetics, is ambiguous. Tragic protagonists embody the principles of good but never in an unadulterated form, as
Shakespeare demonstrates in his plays. For Shakespeare, the world itself is a stage where reality like appearance is ambivalent. His plays embody an enormous variety of characters; the world he depicts is the real world where truth and values are relative. In this sense Shakespeare is very modern and timeless.

*King Lear* is a play that addresses a virtue that is found to be held supreme in diverse cultures throughout human history—filial piety. Filial piety as an ethical concept has a long history. Plato describes it as ‘... the honour of living parents, to whom as is meet, we have to pay the first and greatest and oldest of all debts considering that all which a man has, belongs to those who gave him birth and brought him up.....which he is now to pay back to them when they are old’ (Plato, 1988, pp 526). In the Christian tradition, the moral norms of Western society is rooted in the Bible. God promulgated to human society Ten Commandments and the fifth one is to ‘honour your parents so that your days may be long in the land that your Lord, your God is giving you’ (EX 20:12). The Fifth Commandment however is not just a ‘command’ for indoctrinating children into obeying and loving their parents, it has a never ending life. At the very moment of his crucifixion, when the world’s sin was literally nailed into his flesh, Jesus expressed his love for his mother. He said to Mary, “Woman here is your son” and to John his most trusted and beloved disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that moment on John took Mary the mother of Jesus into his home to care for her. Here we have a very basic negotiation taking place, the son who is facing imminent death acts out of love and concern for the well being of his mother is a supreme definition of the filial bond.

In *King Lear* Shakespeare problematizes filial relations. While it depicts the monstrosity of filial ingratitude it shows the failure of patriarchal institutions on the family and political level. As a story about an aging king and father who willfully relinquishes control to his untrustworthy offspring and banishes his loyal and loving child, it prompts us to ask, what about the biblical teachings to parents? To the parents the bible teaches: ‘And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath’ (Ephesians 6:4). How can the parent provoke? The answer that Shakespeare seems to give is that he can behave like a tyrant by totally disrespecting the autonomy of the child, by demanding unquestioning submission to his demands which may even be irrational and absurd. Lear in the opening scene is such a father
whose conduct could provoke wrath in the wronged child. But Cordelia is the very epitome of filial piety.

Notions of filial duty, betrayal and sibling rivalry resonate throughout *King Lear*. What Lear’s action finally triggers is anarchy and chaos both in the family and the country. Shakespeare demonstrates how the violation of the natural laws that define the parent child bond can precipitate tragic catastrophe. Nature in fact is at the very heart of *King Lear*—from portrayals of human nature to notions of god and divine nature to representations of physical nature and animal imagery. Shakespeare portrays the two extremes of the human condition: good and evil and invites the readers to reflect on what should be considered natural. The various characters in *King Lear* define what is natural from their relative positions in the play. When Goneril and Regan drive out their old father after inheriting his kingdom, human values are threatened. The monstrous daughters are repeatedly compared to wolves and birds of prey such as young pelicans who are believed to attack and kill their parents. Both Gloucester and Lear are deceived fathers who mistake unnatural behaviour (conspiracy and deceit) to be natural (loyal and loving). Good and evil nature is also explained by juxtaposing the saintly Cordelia and the treacherous son of Gloucester, Edmund by placing them in similar situations. They are both deprived of royal inheritance but Cordelia despite being Lear’s legitimate child does not follow the unrighteous course of action like Edmund. Edmund who believes that lust and passion are the natural ways of procreation, abides those very laws and questions the concept of illegitimacy when he says, “Now Gods stand up for bastards.” (Act I, ii) He views his baseness as natural when he says: “Thou Nature art my goddess.” (Act I, ii) In the characters of Goneril, Regan and Edmund, Shakespeare draws upon Machiavelli’s beliefs of human nature being evil and driven by greed and gain. Although he stated that loyalty and trust can be gained, he believed that in times of adversity people are generally ungrateful and insincere: ‘They are unthankful, inconstant dissemblers: they avoid dangers and are covetous of gain.’ (99) Cordelia also faces adversity, but contrary to Edmund, she stays true to her benevolent nature so that her character counters Machiavelli’s argument of human nature.

In antiquity the Stoics believed that the universe was ruled by reason and reason and ethics were in accordance with nature.
When Lear abdicates his power to the malignant daughters he is convinced of their love and loyalty. His judgment fails him and he cannot see their evil intentions disguised in eloquent rhetoric. As the play opens the proud king sees himself as the master of the natural world with ‘shadowy forests’, ‘plenteous rivers’ and ‘wide skirted meads’ to dispense to his children. Ironically he calls upon nature just before he conducts the unnatural love test:

“Which of you shall we say doth love us most/ That we our largest bounty may extend/ Where nature doth with merit challenge.” (Act I,i) However, Cordelia unlike her hypocritical sisters is not seduced by the promise of power. She tries to alert Lear to false flattery with her understatement that she loves him “according to the bond”. But the proud, dominating and possessive Lear who desperately seeks praise reads it as a rejection of his love. He calls upon nature to witness his rejection and vows by the sun, moon and planets to disown his parental claim and properties of blood. Lear must suffer filial ingratitude in his pelican daughters “sharper than a serpent’s tooth” (Act I, iv) in order to awaken to a painful understanding of the essential quality of love- love is selfless, without motives or expectations, it cannot be quantified.

For Confucius, the father/son relationship is fundamental not only for the individual, but also for society. Lear’s conduct has its impact not only on the family but also on the state in the form of a civil war. By abdicating his power irresponsibly and preferring the child in whom the baser nature prevails, Lear disrupts the harmony of the world. In Shakespeare’s day Nature evoked ideas about harmony and order. Natural elements correspond to the strife in the kingdom as well as the character’s inner chaos. The storm represents chaos that results from the violation of the natural order in the human world. The human world is a microcosmic replica of the macrocosm. The storm as it were cleanses the miasma in the world inflicted by evil deeds. As Lear, Kent, Gloucester and Edgar are cast out from the civilized world to wander through the wilderness, nature appears in a state of fury, an uncontrollable elemental force-the tempest. In the mind of Lear is a similar tempest unleashed by the ingratitude of his daughters. In rage Lear threatens his daughters with revenge and despite his sorrow refuses to weep: “You think I’ll weep/ No I’ll not weep” (Act II, iv), at that moment the storm with its thunder and rain breaks forth. Exposed to
the elements, Lear must suffer purgation. When he meets Poor Tom on the heath he sees himself in the Bedlam beggar whom he asks: “Didst thou give all to thy daughters? And art thou come to this?” (Act III, iv) Mad with grief Lear is at the end of his wits in the storm scene but this madness is saner than the irresponsible madness of the opening scene. Shakespeare makes the storm scene the site of Lear’s epiphany. On the heath he searches for values and justices. It is ironical that only when he is dispossessed and reduced to the state of “unaccommodated man” (Act III, iv) does he feel for the first time compassion for the destitute subjects of his country. He tears off his clothes in order to feel what wretches feel. He is also brought to the understanding of the truth that flattery is deceptive: “They told me I was everything. ..’Tis a lie…” (Act IV, vi) Lear’s dismantling is essential for his transformation which is yet incomplete. His values and beliefs shaken, he is in the grip of an insane hatred for his thankless daughters. He will renounce hate only when he is reconciled with Cordelia. When all is lost Cordelia becomes his everything. His transformation is complete when he repents before Cordelia who is the symbol of good amidst a host of evil characters in the play.

In *King Lear* Shakespeare depicts a rash, cruel, proud and childlike father who is blind to everything but the dictates of passion. To understand the dangerous consequences of abandoning reason and reverting to passion and amorality we can go back another episode that treats filial relations in the Bible— that of Noah and his sons. After the flood when Noah in a drunken stupor lies naked in his tent stripped of all respectability Ham views his father in disgrace and traffics in his shame. Thus, like Goneril and Regan in the Shakespearean play, Ham metaphorically kills Noah as a father. Noah like Lear is “unfathered”, reduced to dust is his authority as father, as guide, as teacher of law, custom and a way of life. Both the stories teach us that such acts of irresponsible passion are dangerous, they could happen in any family both from the side of disreputable fathers and from the side of impious sons. In contrast to Ham in the Noah story is his virtuous brother Shem, just as we have in the Lear story the noble Cordelia in contrast to her diabolical sisters. Shem is the son who piously covers the father’s nakedness. Noah when he awakens cures Canaan, the son of Ham, so that Ham becomes father of the Canaanites known for their abominable sexual practices. Shem becomes father of the line.
that leads to Abraham. Noah’s Dionysian weakness teaches that fathers and sons will both need instructions to promote filial piety.

Lear in the beginning shows a lack of understanding of the natural bond between father and daughter when he banishes Cordelia saying, “Better thou/ Hadst not been born than not t’ have pleas’d me better.” By the end of the play he learns through suffering the real nature of the filial bond and loves itself. In the reconciliation scene the changed father tells Cordelia: “I know you do not love me; for your sisters/Have, as I do remember, have done me wrong: You have some cause, they have not.” Cordelia replies, “No cause, no cause” (Act IV, vii). She kneels before him and entreats him to hold his hand in benediction over her thus restoring Lear’s faith in filial relations.

King Lear invited contradictory ideological positions. It has been interpreted as both a redemptive morality tale and a vision of apocalyptic doom. Some see Lear as a victim, “more sinned against than sinning” (Act III, ii) while others see him as the instrument of his own downfall. A.C Bradley calls it a play of reconciliation, Wilson Knight sees it as a purgatorial text in which redemption is earned through the purification process. Johnson opines that Shakespeare wrote without a moral purpose and yet others see Lear as Shakespeare’s Endgame, a vision of existence as a pointless joke. The death of Cordelia and the blinding of Gloucester are punishments which far exceed the crime of the fathers. Even though the villains are destroyed and evil defeated, the good are equally dead, especially disturbing is Cordelia’s death. Yet the play has enormous ethical significance. Though Cordelia dies, the human virtues for which she stood are immortalized in the play and a kind of justice prevails. The villains are destroyed by their own evil and Lear and Gloucester do not die until they are reunited with Cordelia and Edgar whom they should never have renounced. The play is ultimately about values which have been corrupted and must be restored. Though Cordelia dies, the play immortalizes through her the virtues that are in jeopardy—love, truth, piety, honour. The closing couplets of King Lear instructs those who would learn from Lear’s death and Cordelia’s assassination: “The weight of this sad time we must obey/.Speak what we feel not what we ought to say” for Cordelia after all, knew what she risked and chose to live truthfully and be the example of the supreme virtue which is filial piety (Act V, iii).
In contemporary times elderly people are increasingly being regarded as burdens as nuclear families become the norm against the backdrop of rapid economic development that is fast breaking down traditions. There are media reports every now and then about adult children mistreating and abandoning elderly parents. Old age today has become a social challenge to the extent that Indian parliament passed a new law stating that citizens who neglect aging parents could be jailed. In the present age when the mistreatment of elderly parents is so commonplace we must go back to the texts of the past like the bible and the story of Lear to regain moral wisdom which we have unfortunately lost.

References


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