



Research Article

THE TRAGIC STORY OF SHAKESPEARE'S KING LEAR: A STUDY OF MORAL BLINDNESS AND MADNESS WHICH ARE THE TWO SALIENT FORCES BEHIND KING LEAR'S ULTIMATE DEMISE

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This paper has been written to unveil the moral blindness of King Lear and the aftermath of blind judgement towards Cordelia, therefore Lear has gone through the phase of madness. In the play King Lear, moral blindness has been considered as the metaphorical blindness. Lear's blind love for Cordelia forced him to set up the love test. He was so sure about his younger daughter's declaration of love for him in a flattering way. But Cordelia did express the love for her father in a simple and lucid manner. It was the king who became blind morally after he disowned Cordelia, his youngest daughter. Without any hesitation Lear has banished Cordelia. However Kent advised Lear to reconsider his rash action and told him to see better. Instead of taking the good daughter, Lear took his evil minded daughters based on their spurious praiseworthy words to him. Besides the blindness of King Lear we have seen another example of moral and physical blindness through the character Gloucester. As we know sight does not contain the power to uplift the good judgement, but Lear was unable to see his good and honest daughter Cordelia's love towards him. As a result Lear did set his life's platform as jinx through chaotic and tragic events. However towards the end of this play, Lear has compelled to disguise himself. In a disguising way he did not able to understand the reality of life, truth and honesty, as well as his notion of wrong judgement. Most importantly his sense of realization was late indeed, and ultimately took him towards his demise.

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INTRODUCTION

King Lear's blindness was the direct reason of his massive downfall and therefore his tragic death. At the beginning of the play it has been shown that Lear presented himself as a king of ultimate power and wealth. Being a ruler it was his mandatory duty to discern the true and real ones among the evils. Once Lear has been decided to measure the love towards him by his daughters. His two daughters Goneril and Regan showered him by their false admiration. While on the other hand, Cordelia confessed her love in a simple and true manner, which made the king infuriated towards Cordelia and as a result he banished her. Lear not only banished her from sight but also from the kingdom altogether. When Kent, the faithful servant tried to take Cordelia's side, Lear also banished him as well. Kent told him to see better, that means he needs to open his eyes to the mistake he is about to make. Cordelia was the only daughter who loved Lear truly and unconditionally. But Lear's lack of insight caused him to see only the surface of the situation rather than go deep inside.

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Later part of the play *King Lear*, Lear was able to realize his mistakes when his two daughters betrayed with him and did throw him out of their houses. This unjust event caused him to go mad.

"Doth any here know me?"

Why, this is not Lear: Doth Lear walk thus?"

Speak thus! Where are his eyes?" (Act I, Scene IV, Lines: 218-222).

Lear's madness has gone to the highest peak, hence it devoured his sense as he didn't able to recognize himself anymore. This madness has happened by his moral blindness and took his entire power to do the right judgement. He felt frustrated after knowing that he is no more the powerful and beneficial ruler of Britain that once he was. When he did not able to understand his mistakes, then it was too late. Lear's notion of doing injustice became his enemy which has ended up his life and as well as the life of his beloved daughter Cordelia.

The theme of blindness in *king Lear*

In Shakespearean terms, the meaning of blindness has been defined differently.

As we know blindness means the ability to see through one's eyes but according to Shakespeare, blindness is not physical quality rather than a mental flaws. In *king Lear*, Lear was a morally blinded character and this moral blindness proved as the dominant theme of this play. Gloucester and Albany were another two characters who were also possessed the moral blindness. King Lear, Gloucester and Albany did incorporate the theme of blindness and each of the character's blindness was the predominant reason of their bad decisions, by which they all had to pay intensely and eventually came to regret. Actually these three characters were suffering from the lack of judgement and they were blind to trace the good souls. King Lear was undoubtedly the most affected one. In society, Lear was used to lead a high position. As a great king he needed to implement his wisdom and abilities to distinguish good from the bad but unfortunately he failed to do like that. His lack of sight resisted him to detect the good traits of a man. Lear's first act of blindness came at the beginning of the play. Lear has flattered by his two eldest daughters' praiseworthy words and was unaware of their deceiving nature. Lear felt those good words were the sign of true love. When the number of Cordelia came, she expressed her love towards her father in a simple and honest manner as like any honest daughter should do. Actually Lear was unable to see the real and true love of Cordelia and as a result banished her from the kingdom as well as from his life.

"...for we have no such daughter, nor shall ever see that face again. Therefore he gone without our grace, our love, our benison". (Act I, Scene I, Lines: 265-267)

Lear's blindness has been reached towards the highest level when he did banish his loyal follower Kent. Kent was the only person who was in Cordelia's side and was able to see Cordelia's love for her father. Hence he tried to protect her from Lear's irrational and blind activities. Meanwhile a prince from France asked Cordelia's hands for marriage without any inherited property of her father. Cordelia became agreed with his proposal and has left the king's palace. In other parts, Kent has created himself as disguised man and eventually hired by Lear as a servant. Here it is to be noted that, Lear's blindness was once again proved as he didn't able to recognize Kent's actual identity. As the play gradually progressed, Lear's mental blindness came to close and his true sight was actually opened. He did realize that how wicked his two daughters really were after they locked him out of a castle during a terrible and tremendous storm. King Lear was feeling absolutely regretful as he didn't able to detect Cordelia's pure and true love for him. Therefore her love was free from deceived nature and full of honesty.

This one mistake of not recognizing Cordelia caused the great disaster by giving Cordelia's life and consequently the life of himself. Gloucester was the second person in the play who was also a man of moral blindness. His lack of sight made him to believe Edmund as his good son but at the end of the play Gloucester also came to know about his mistakes as same as Lear. Gloucester did understand that Edgar was his real good son who saved his life when he was disguised as poor Tom who loved him unconditionally. When Gloucester has realized that Edmund was having plan to take over the earldom, from that moment he became stunned and accepted that Edmund was his evil son.

" I stumbled when I saw" (Act IV, Scene I, Lines: 20-21)

This above statements proved Gloucester's realization of his fault from the deep inside of his heart which was ironic. Therefore Gloucester has regained his actual sense when his eyes were being plucked by the Duke of Cornwall. But its a matter of sadness as Gloucester was unable to know his actual good son when he was having his physical sight. After all Gloucester was the only one who died as a result of his tragic flow. The third mentally blind character was Albany. Albany suffered from the extra ordinary case of blindness and eventually survived from that realm of flaws. Albany's moral blindness was centered by the issue of love towards his wife Goneril. Though he didn't approve Goneril's unauthentic activities.

" I can not be so partial, Goneril

To the great love I bear you"(Act I, Scene IV, Lines: 309-310) By these lines of Albany proved his blind love for her and was totally unaware from her evil intentions. Albany was unable to realize the vicious deeds of Goneril when she told a bunch of lies with ostentation to her father and then kicked him out of their house. Albany again felt shocked when he came to know that Goneril did plan to kill him. It was Edgar who came across as a saviour of Albany and helped him to trace his moral blindness as he showed blind love towards Goneril. Albany at last got the proof of Goneril's evil doers by a note outlining Goneril's evil plans.

" O Goneril, you are not worth the dust which the rude wind blows in your life"? (Act IV, Scene II, Lines: 29-37). Albany was the one who didn't suffer much like Lear and Gloucester. But he survived from his miserable condition thus remained the ruler of Lear's kingdom.

Lear's Amalgamation of madness and blindness

Lear has fallen into total madness after both of his daughters refused to treat him with respect and love that he didn't deserve. Eventually both the daughters did throw him out of their houses as well as from their lives. The moment Lear get realized about Cordelia's true love, and the deceitful attitudes of Goneril and Regan, he became mad. After going through the phase of madness Lear yelled,

" No rain, wind, thunder, fire are my daughters;
I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness
I never gave you kingdom, called you children;
You owe me no subscription". (Act III, Scene II, Lines: 15-18)

Here it has been proved that, Lear did able to admit his wrong judgement towards his daughter Cordelia as he banished her and instead of believing Cordelia's true words, Lear believed his evil daughters' false words. He screamed to the storm and didn't blame the storm for coming down on him. Because he contemplated that he never gave the storm his kingdom or considered it as his child, on the other hands he also pondered on his wrong decision and thought he gave everything to Goneril and Regan and instead of giving him respect they treated him with disrespect, ingratitude and disloyalty.

During the storm Lear noticed that other people were also suffering, therefore he shouted,

“They flattered me like a dog

And told me I had the white hairs in my beard

Ere the black ones were there”. (Act IV, Scene VI, Lines: 16-18). At the beginning of the play Lear was unaware and unable to perceive the flattering nature of his two daughters Goneril and Regan. So now he did compare him with dog. It is to be known that, a pet is often kept until the owner loses interest in it. Similar to a pet Lear’s daughters had no interest on him after they grabbed his kingdom and the consequence was they have forgotten the duties of daughters towards a father. Both the daughters addressed him unwise which made him angry, but inside of mind he did accept that he was not wise by giving them the kingdom. When the play started from that moment Lear didn’t recognize the goodness of Cordelia and Kent. After coming to the state of disguise Lear’s inner eyes were apparently open, he recognized Gloucester, though he was considered as a mad man. When he was in sanity he was actually mad and blind. But now when he was suffering from madness he did able to distinguish good people from bad. The story of Gloucester was parallel of Lear’s story. Gloucester was also unaware of his mistakes and considered Edmund as his good son. But soon after he became a blind man, he did realize the truth like Lear. Edmund was Gloucester’s illegitimate son who betrayed him by going to the Duke of Cornwall with a letter where it has been stated that Gloucester knew of the invasion from France. For this letter Gloucester was punished like a traitor and his eyes were removed by Regan’s feet. Gloucester cried out to his son Edmund to

“quit this horrid act” (Act III, Scene VII, Lines: 87)

After knowing the betrayal nature of Edmund Gloucester said,

“I have no way, and therefore want no eyes;

I have stumbled when i saw, full oft ‘tis seen

Our means secure us and our mere defects
Prove our commodities. O dear son Edgar
The food of thy abused father’s wrath,
Might I but live to see thee in my touch,
I’d say I had eyes again”. (Act IV, Scene I, Lines: 20-26)

These phenomenal lines of Gloucester made him powerful in his life now, but before he was not an understandable and witty person. Intense sorrow made him like that who did able to judge truly. Gloucester now recognize the truth as he said, not our means, but our defects

“Our possessions can make us over confident,

But it is only our short comings that are beneficial” (Act IV, Scene I, Lines: 22-23). Edmund was not loyal and that was his defect which has shaped him as a man. This was the main thing Gloucester saw finally. Later in act IV, when Gloucester took an attempt to suicide, king Lear was passing his path and he almost recognized the voice of king Lear and remarked him as a mad man.

Though he was blind, but still he could see Lear’s character. While Lear was near insanity at the beginning Gloucester remained blind to his son Edmund’s horrible acts. When Lear gone finally mad, then Gloucester felt bored about his eyes. Lear died in a mad condition while Gloucester has seen the virtues of Edgar whom he didn’t treat well in the past. Both of the characters were blind to realize the truth. And eventually Lear paid unjustly by welcoming his tragic demise.

King Lear revolves around the destruction of family relationship

Tragedy actually happens from the broken relationship between parents and children, and also by the fragile ties among siblings. By rejecting Cordelia, Lear proved the shattered relationship with her. This rejection has been carried out twofold. First one was the withdrawal of a father’s heart and deprived Cordelia from his wealth and inherited property. Secondly, driven by greed and ambition, Goneril and Regan turned like a dishonest and unfaithful towards Cordelia. As Lear believed Goneril and Regan but they didn’t keep this belief alive and started to treat Lear as like a servant. They both did betray with him in order to consolidate their political authority. In this way of treachery, Goneril and Regan became evil again in different issue. They both used to keep the lustful desire for Edmund. The fear of leaving Edmund made Goneril wild and as a result she killed her own sister Regan. And finally she killed herself when she came to know that Edmund was mortally wounded. In Gloucester’s family, his illegitimate son Edmund did conspiracy to lead Gloucester into disinheriting his legitimate son Edgar. In this way the relationship between father and son became shattered like anything.

Lear’s errors based on blindness and misjudgement that represents his disastrous life both personally and politically and takes him towards nothingness

When Lear gave up his power and kingdom, Goneril and Regan turned evil against him. Therefore he became isolated and mad. His mistakes made him ruined personally and as well as politically in which there was no order to guaranteed justice. Despite his repeated appeals to the Gods. Lear’s great mistake was when Goneril pronounced her love for him and the answer was nothing. The word nothing appeared constantly throughout the play in the mouths of the multiple characters. The repetition of the word encouraged the theme of nothingness. After all when everything was completely destroyed, nothing can have any meaning. The play has ended by the deaths of bad persons like Edmund, Goneril Regan and Cornwall and as well as the heroes like Lear, Gloucester and Cordelia. Here i can add the statements of Madelon Gohlke who has made a very thought provoking argument and remarked,

“If the banishment of Cordelia initiates a process by which Lear becomes psychotic, it may be argued that her return is essential to the relation of his sanity”. (Gohlke, 176). That means the play was finally able to restored through the death of wrong doers and through the sacrifice of Cordelia. Though the entire social order, good and evil were annihilated and turned to nothingness.

This concept of nothingness proved strongly when Lear did hold Cordelia in his arms and also he came to know that he has lost his kingdom completely, he then uttered, "Never, never, never, never, never" (Act V, Scene III, Lines: 372).

Old age occupies the concept of weakness for Lear and Gloucester.

From Lear's own wish, he wanted to free himself by leaving the burdens and hardship of rulinghis kingdom. This was his big mistake to consider him as old and gave up his power and authority. Goneril and Regan unkindly observed Lear's this kind of weakness. After thinking Lear as physically and mentally a weak person, Regan once mocked him.

"O sir you are old [...]
You should be ruled and led
By some discretion that discern yours state

Better than you yourself" (Act II, Scene IV, Lines: 165-169)
Regan's this type of comments proved that age should be related to give anyone respect. Lear's daughters abused him for being an old man which has made their cruel and wicked nature and also indicated their greed for having their father's kingdom and power of supreme authority. Similarly Gloucester's age also proved like having obstacles in his life. Cornwall and Regan considered him weak and brutally Cornwall plucked Gloucester's eyes when Regan plucked his white bear.

Conclusion

The play King Lear was an perfect example of moral blindness. The themes of blindness and madness were the most striking elementsin this play which has been unveiled the unkind ending of human's life. Both the themes of blindness and madness were somehow related to each other. King Lear was unable to see the goodness of Cordelia and blindly believed the false praiseworthy words of Goneril and Regan. Goneril has proved how far a person can do such spurious admiration to his father. She remarked,

"Sir i love you more than words can wield the matter" (Act I, Scene I, Lines: 53)

By hearing such types of lies Lear became overwhelmed with joy while on the other hands after knowing the simple words of Cordelia, he did banish her from his kingdom and life. In the play *KingLear*, Shakespeare has brought the concept of mental blindness which means mental flaws as refers to physicalmatter. Lear's misjudgement proved his moral blindness. He was unable to trace that Goneril and Regan were playing with his emotions which did take him towards madness and also he has lost the power over his entire kingdom. Later in the play his eyes were finally opened from heart and therefore he was able to see his daughters wickedness and cunning nature of usurping his kingdom. At last Lear did realize that what a great mistake he did by rejecting Cordelia and gave the place of love and wealth to his evil daughters Goneril and Regan. As a sub plot we can also see the another example of moral blindness through the character Gloucester. He was also blind from his heart as he didn't able to recognize his good son Edgar and believed his evil illegitimate son Edmund. As a result his eyes were plucked by the conspiracy of Edmund. In this play Gloucester was suffered and gone through the same phase like Lear. But the greatest tragedy was only with Lear, he has lost his everything and towards the end of the play King Leardid lost his beloved daughter Cordelia and hence his life as well.

This was the ultimate tragic demise of Lear, a tragic end of a father in the history of literature,

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