

# Family Relations and the Theme of Love in William Shakespeare's Tragedy KING LEAR

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**Abstract**— The current research study attempts to deal with the theme of love as portrayed in William Shakespeare's tragedy King Lear. However; it is based on the assumption that real love is instinctively universal but hate is temporally personal. The treatment of love by Shakespeare in King Lear has many shades and undercurrents. The present study tries to analyse how the daughters; Goneril, Regan and Cordelia misinterpret and exploit the genuine love of their father towards them. It also provides a scope to fix a barometer for the parental love to their children. This study is social; the data is qualitative and descriptive as well. Therefore, a careful and insightful reading has been done to have clear understanding of the role of real love in reinforcing family relationships. This study has revealed that loss of peace of mind, misery, depravity, illness and homelessness are some the consequences of unreal love, whereas rest, peace of mind, happiness occur only when real love is materialised.

**Keywords**— Real Love, Conflict, Family Relations, Hamartia, King Lear.

## I. INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare, a very well-known English poet, playwright, actor and a prolific writer, was born in 1564 at Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire in Henley Street. For education, he attended Stratford Grammar School. Then, he went to London where his acting career started. He became an actor, actor-manager and a theatre owner. At the last years of his life, Shakespeare returned to Stratford and he died there in 1616 at the age of fifty-two. He was buried at Holy Trinity Church.

Having widely considered as the greatest writer in English language, Shakespeare's works are widespread and taught in universities across the world. He wrote a variety of literary pieces including thirty-eight plays: comedies, tragedies and tragicomedies. Also, he composed one hundred fifty-four sonnets, three long narrative poems and a collection of other poems.

The earliest source of the story of King Lear is Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, written in the 12th century. In December 1606, the play was first performed and recorded. As a legendary character, the story of King Lear together with his daughters comes into sight in various fairy tales and English folklore editions. Many critics regularly argue that William Shakespeare had invented the subplot of Gloucester

from *Arcadia* (c. 1580) by Philip Sidney. Shakespeare skilfully changed his sources showing dramatic actions and new characters while introducing the traditional story distinctively. However, in 1681 his version was eclipsed by Nahum Tate's adaptation. Tate eliminated the Fool and the blinding of Gloucester, introduced a love affair between Edgar and Cordelia, and brought Shakespeare's play to a happy ending, with Cordelia's forces victorious and King Lear restored to his throne. According to Bradley (1991: 241), the plot recurrence "startles and terrifies by suggesting that the folly of Lear and the ingratitude of his daughters are no accidents or merely individual aberrations, but that in that dark cold world some fateful malignant influence is abroad ...". Critics and commentators, for centuries and up to the present, have focused on the tragic ending of the play.

## II. THEME OF LOVE IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

The plays of Shakespeare have been powerful means because the idea of love was deeply interwoven within them. Therefore, Shakespeare always gives comic or tragic elements to the theme of love as in *Romeo and Juliet*, *As You like It* and *Twelfth Night*. In *Othello*, due to over-jealousy, he makes it so tragic that love hardly renders to happen. Shakespeare has geniously made love so complex that it makes us believe that one must sacrifice for love and it should not be handed to anyone

otherwise one should bear consequences like King Lear and Gloucester. While Twelfth Night is a comedy of romance leading to romantic love, King Lear is a tragedy that shows the role of love in family relations. Love is not always seen as a bliss in Shakespeare's plays. It is depicted as a curse by some characters in many plays, claiming painful suffering from love or the unrequited love.

In Twelfth Night, Orsino (Act I, scene I) represents love gloomily as an appetite he seeks to satisfy but he cannot. However, Olivia (Act I, scene V) depicts love as a plague that causes her horrible agony. In the beginning, few characters in the play look negatively at love. However, they all find out the truth about each other and realize the meaning of the real love by the end of the play.

### III. DISCUSSION

Real love interconnects the family, the society, the nation and the world. It is a bridge that works as a problem-solving among family members. Happiness prevails only where love exists. The existence of true love develops and composes family members whereas hatred destroys families and disjoins communities. The desirable things are attainable and achievable only in the presence of real love. Real love is a central element established by Shakespeare in opposition to unreal love. Faithfulness and real love are binary opposites of selfish love and disloyalty. King Lear places himself in the position of an auctioneer looking for the highest bidder. Cordelia, with her sincerity and true love to her father, could not take part in this hypocritical bidding. False and pretentious love is a magical vehicle to build a seemingly superficial and artificial connection.

In Shakespeare's King Lear, Kent's love is combined with devotion. Kent demonstrates his real love to King Lear by his willingness to endure expulsion rather than to see him commit a mistake. He verifies his love by remaining with King Lear in disguise and serving him secretly. At the end of the play, Kent's love is obviously demonstrated when he is ready to die rather than to live without the King:

I have a journey, sir, shortly to go;  
My master calls me, I must not say no.  
(Act V.3,328-329)

In order to satisfy his desire to achieve infinite love from his daughters, King Lear has gone insane. He finds

himself whirling and whirling in an emotional storm which reduces him to a shape of a tattered flag. This study shows the consequences of unreal love like the loss of peace of mind, misery, depravity, illness and homelessness. Rest, peace of mind, happiness occurs only when real love materialised.

### IV. THEME OF LOVE

The concept of love refers to feelings, states, and attitudes that range from interpersonal dealings. Love in its various forms acts as a major facilitator of interpersonal relationships and owing to its central psychological importance, is one of the most common themes in King Lear. Over the years, it is widely known that in life protecting and taking care of children is the major role of parents. However, children's role is to respect and value their parents first and to protect and take care of them in their old age. In this study, the real love and loyalty are highlighted in opposition to unreal love, selfishness and treachery. From the early stages of the play, the theme of love is shown when King Lear (in Act I, Scene 1) shows that he does not conceive the real love concept. For him, Cordelia's true love is incomprehensible while the false love of his deceitful daughters Goneril and Regan is plausible. He sets an auctioneer for who loves him more. The first two daughters enter the auctioneer with a greedy-merchant tongue. They pay him honey from the tongue and malice from the heart. Cordelia, a symbol of true love, has no bid in that open auctioneer. Cordelia proves to her father that she really loves him the most even without public declaration as her sisters have done. She is wilfully ready to support her father when needed.

Real love is the kind of love that makes everyone feel good even if they stay apart. At the beginning of a heated conversation between King Lear, king of France and Burgundy, love has been the theme of the discussion. King Lear and King of Burgundy are bargaining for Cordelia. They considered love as a commodity that can be bought and sold. Only the king of France who recognizes the real meaning and value of love, and considers Cordelia, a lady with golden heart, a spring of real love. He wants to marry her not for money or beauty, but for her sincerity and honesty. He sees Cordelia in a different way: "Love is not love, when it is mingled with regards that stand aloof from the entire point". (Act I. 1,244).

It is important to emphasise the active role of another character, Kent who also comprehends the meaning of

real love. For him, love is blended with faithfulness. Kent's love for King Lear is very powerful to the extent that he is willing to die rather than to live without him. He says "I have a journey shortly to go, my master calls me, I must not say no." (Act V, 3). On the other hand, Gloucester has the same difficulty. He has a defective perception of love. His enthusiasm to accept Edmund's lies without any reliable confirmation reveals his damaged notion of love. The direct judge on the sudden event without taking striking evidence may lead to injustice and prejudice against other people. In King Lear, real love is undoubtedly symbolised by three characters, viz., Cordelia, Edgar and Kent. All of them suffer banishment and rejection. They are forced by one means or another either to adopt a disguise or leave their own position so as to preserve love and loyalty. On the other hand, the concept of anti-love is portrayed by the characters: Goneril, Regan and Edmund.

## V. THE CONFLICT BETWEEN REAL LOVE AND UNREAL LOVE

Human beings are social creatures and where there is no love and harmony, there is no happy life. Without real love, one lives in darkness, sailing alone in a stormy ocean. When our children behave badly, they are only reacting to the dearth of real love which they need most in order to behave well. Love ordinarily contains the magical element of physical attraction. It has its roots in many sources, viz., parental, fraternal, familial and friendly relationships. Greg (2005: 431) confirms

Without Real Love, we try to fill our emptiness with all the praise, power, and pleasure we can find. We lie, attack, act like victims, and cling in order to earn the attention of other adults, but we soon find those efforts exhausting, and we discover that the Imitation Love we get is unpredictable.

He concludes "That's why relationships struggle and fail. Two people without Real Love can't possibly have a truly loving relationship."

In most cases, parents/family are the primary cause and the main source of love. The hate or anger one feels towards others results from their childhood experience and the surrounding environment. Our inclinations and decisions to love or hate others interrelate and intersect with our experience with real love in our life. Greg (2003:55) in response to the question: "So why do we continue to do the things that make others and ourselves unhappy? Why don't we just freely admit our

mistakes?" He replies "Because we've learned from a great deal of past experience that when we make mistakes and inconvenience the people around us, they consistently express their disappointment and irritation toward us."

Real love is unquestioning self-devotion and untiring self-sacrifice. It cares about the welfare and happiness of others voluntarily and unrewarded. True/real love is the genuine remedy that transcends all the barriers among nations and overcomes their cultural differences, religious bigotry and ethno-geocentric conflicts. Love begets more love; hate begets more hate.

Without real love, life is increasingly painful and unsafe. Greg (2003:77) says

We really are wrong on so many occasions - irresponsible, not loving, less than considerate -so why not admit it and enjoy the freedom and growth and acceptance that follow. The real tragedy in making mistakes is denying them. Then we can't do anything about them, nor can we feel the Real Love available to us.

## VI. LOVE AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIP

The relationships among siblings of the same gender and their parents are one of the recurring themes in Shakespeare's play King Lear. In the course of the play, these relationships as parent-child alter and love is very basic in this connection. Through the play, parents, viz., King Lear and Gloucester realise the actual and true feelings that children have towards them. They find out that the most loved and trustful children are those who have betrayed them in the end. The three daughters of King Lear have different interest in making love to their father so living together becomes almost impossible. In King Lear, there is parallelism in the parent-child relationships in which both characters of King Lear and Gloucester are carefully attentive to verbal words and false love instead of action and real love. The dependence on the false, hollow words of deceitful children results in the collapse of both powerful men. Even though, the assistance and affectionate actions of Cordelia and Edgar come too late to avoid the tragic ending of the play.

Children become more independent when they grow older. Therefore, they have the ability to take care of themselves and others as well. On the other side, parents grow older, and they are unable to take full care of

themselves. Thus, during this period there is a switch in the rights and responsibilities of children and parents. When children become fully independent on their own and matured, caring for their elderly parents is a basic responsibility. Consequently, the parent-child relationship in the main plot is duplicated in the sub-plot. The tragedy of King Lear and Gloucester deals with the theme of filial ingratitude, the appearance and reality of parent-child relationship.

## VII. BLIND LOVE AS A TRAGIC FLAW (HAMARTIA)

Hamartia is very basic concept to the tragedy. It is defined as a serious moral or intellectual error caused by deliberate or accidental ignorance or misjudgement of the protagonist. This usually happens in protagonist's character and it causes its catastrophic downfall. In other words, it is referred to as a tragic flaw which is a defect in the personality of the hero. This is happened when the hero commits an error with disastrous results which lead to his/her inevitable doom. This downfall is often known as a 'reversal of fortune'. In his famous book, *The Poetics*, Aristotle described the tragic protagonist as a good-natured character of noble rank and whose misfortune is brought about by some error of judgment (hamartia), (Aristotle, 2006).

As a feature of Greek tragedy, the hero is deliberately designed to undergo hamartia that results in tragic effects when the protagonist could not perceive the truths or facts that would have saved him/her if predicted early. Therefore, the concept of hamartia is often ironic in its sense. When the errors in judgment reach a critical juncture, it becomes an unbearable pain leading to massive destruction, overwhelming everyone in its path. The protagonist's grief and its wide consequences are a result of this flaw. Some external forces such as chance and necessity play a major role in causing the tragic catastrophe as well.

The tragedy, King Lear depicts the protagonist whose misfortune is judged by the idea of hamartia. King Lear, the protagonist is a person who is not just, yet his misfortune is a result of human frailty. In his weakness, he divides his power and kingdom between two evil daughters who pretend to love him and discards the third daughter who loves him most. He banishes his loyalist servant, Kent. He shows too much pride and confidence that causes him ignore warnings and law. He disinherited his most devoted daughter, Cordelia as she has not accepted to flatter him and pour sweet words to

him like her sisters. King Lear values Reagan and Goneril's mere flattery of loving him over Cordelia's sincere true love and filial duty. He is stubborn and more susceptible to flattery and false love rather than reality and real love. He supersedes his judgment that prevents him from seeing the true faces of those around him.

Hamartia arouses the feeling of pity and fear among the audience (or the readers). They feel pity for the misfortune the hero undertakes. Likewise, when the audience witness a tragic hero suffering from his own fault, they might fear a similar fate if they would involve in a similar action. Therefore, hamartia is used to give a moral lesson; to inspire individuals improve their characters and avoid flaws and faults that might cause them a tragedy in life. Consequently, the audience of King Lear becomes aware of the destructive role of fake love and the sore need to real love to bring happiness, and consolidation.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

A detailed analysis of the notion of love has been attempted in this study proves that real love insulates a man from committing any sin. The play barely touches on Cordelia's role as a lover and wife, focusing instead on her relationship with her father. The scene featuring their reconciliation is regularly referred to as one of the tenderest and most moving in all dramatic literatures. Cordelia, Kent, and Edgar express real love by maintaining the primary relationships of an ordered society. Both Goneril and Regan express their love in flowery language, saying that they love their father boundlessly and infinitely. They -in fact- do not love their father but his wealth and kingdom. Goneril, Regan and Edmund emphasize the reversal of roles in the play between parents and children. To conclude, this study shows that consequences of unreal love like the loss of peace of mind, misery, depravity, illness and homelessness. Rest, peace of mind, happiness occur only when real love materialised.

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