INTRODUCTION

The Elizabethan Age was an era of peace and prosperity, coming as a tranquil aftermath to the hectic, trouble-torn years of the Hundred Years War with France (1337-1453) and the Wars of the Roses among the English Lords (1455-1475). But apparent peace at the political level did not signify a serene flow of religious and social life for men and women of the 16th century. At the religious front, it was an era of doubt and mistrust, of disillusionment and dissatisfaction. The Roman Catholic faith was being questioned by the newer concepts of Calvinism and Protestantism. The Universities in England, i.e. Oxford and Cambridge were the seedbeds of all religious dissensions, and this found a reflection in the varied aspects of social, political and literary life of the nation. Calvinism questioned the basic Catholic concept of sin and damnation, and the “doctrine of pre-destination” was much circulated among the scholars. Similarly, the Puritan preachings were extremely popular and caused much heart-burning for the Catholics.

But the common people still believed God to be central to the universe in which man occupied a special position. Theodore Spencer in *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man* presents the idea that Aristotelianism, Platonism,
Neo-Platonism, Stoicism and Christianity – all contributed to the weaving of a pattern wherein man was placed for a specific purpose. Spencer says:

There was an eternal law, a general order – in the universe, in the ranks of created beings, in the institution of government – and it was the business of thoughtful men to discover it and describe it so that through knowledge of it they could fulfill the end for which God had made them.(1)

But men alone did not constitute God’s universe. If they represented the general order, then the other aspect was the supernatural, which served as a balancing force in the order of the universe. Spencer points out:

For order is behind everything. It is order, says Sir Thomas Elyot, “which in things as well natural as supernatural hath ever had such a pre-eminence, that thereby the incomprehensible majesty of God, as it were by a bright leme [gleam] of a torch or candle, it declared to the blind inhabitants of the world”. (6)

So the supernatural was as much an integral aspect of the Renaissance worldview as human beings, and hence has been the often-repeated subject matter of literature of the age. H. Littledale in “Folklore and Superstition: Ghosts and Fairies: Witchcraft and Devils” discusses how the supernatural exerted a profound impact on all literary luminaries of the age. He comments:

Shakespeare and his contemporaries bountifully illustrate the superstitious credulity which guided their contemporaries’ conduct, moulded many of
phenomena. Superstition which crystallized into folklore absorbed much that passed for scientific observation even among the educated. (529)

Thus the Shakespearean world was full of supernatural beliefs. Men believed whole-heartedly in ghosts and witches, evil omens, curses and necromancy. Sorcery was a common feature of medieval Europe. Christianity, with its narrow outlook further enforced this belief in supernaturalism – it preached that every man who is not a Christian must be an agent of Lucifer. Shakespeare grew up in this age and clime. The fairytales and stories of magicians such as Agrippa, Marlene and John Dee were enough to stamp his impressionable young mind with a definite faith in the so-called negative forces of the universe. And these negative forces, namely, the witches, ghosts, omens, prophecies and curses together constituted the so-called “dark forces” of society. They present a domain of the human subconscious that is unknown, mysterious and strange, and therefore, may be called “dark”.

But there exists a dichotomy or ambiguity in the use of the coinage “dark forces”. A close study of social history of Shakespeare’s England reveals that operative behind these supernatural forces were certain powerful organs of the age. A close link is often found to exist between the royalty
The English government had, at least since 1300, been concerned with 'witches' – 'with sorcerers, because they might attempt to kill the king, with prophets (including astrologers) because they might forecast the hour of his death'. The Duke of Buckingham, accused of treason in 1521, had been encouraged by a prophecy that he would be king, although he had been warned that the prophet, a Carthusian monk, 'might be deceived by the devil'. In 1558, Sir Anthony Fortescue was arrested for sorcery, having cast a horoscope which stated that the Queen 'should not live passing the next spring', and in 1580, Nicholas Johnson was accused of 'making her Majesty's picture in wax'. (26)

This shows that the royal powers forever existed in fear of being ousted from their privileged seat, which they tried to safeguard by propagating the theory of “divine right” and any person who posed a threat to their supremacy was castigated as a witch or a sorcerer. So supernatural accusations became a dark ploy for safeguarding the royal self-interest.

Similar was the case with another powerful faction of society, i.e. the clergy. In ancient times there used to be a distinction between the two kinds of witchcraft: “white witchcraft or the craft of healing, and black witchcraft or maleficum” (Lerner:3). But the Church looked upon any kind of power projection (other than its own) as evil and hence they eradicated any distinction between black or white witchcraft. Christina Larner says:
Far from being an experience of village life, it [witchcraft] was evolved by Churchmen and lawyers from Christian theology, canon law and certain philosophical ideas. It differed also in content. Christian witch theorists gave a central position to the idea of demonic pact. The witch became a witch by virtue of personal arrangement with the Devil who appeared to his potential recruit in some physical form. (3)

So power politics employed by the Church was very much instrumental in galvanizing witchcraft persecutions into a mass epidemic.

Thus interpreted, the “dark forces” in the 15th and 16th century England refer to not only the unknown supernatural powers, but also the actual powers behind the accusations – the royalty and the clergy. A close study of five Shakespearean plays, namely, King Henry VI, Part 1, King Henry VI, Part 2, King Richard III, Hamlet and Macbeth, reveal the ambiguity and complexity in the master dramatist’s use of the supernatural in his plays.

The Christian belief in the supernatural is split into two opposite phenomena – the divine and the diabolical. The first one is manifested through divine miracles and other good works of wonder. The fairies and other innocent gnomes and spirits (some of whom we find in Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream and The Tempest) belong to the first category,
perspective of my dissertation is partly drawn from the supposed activities, influences and powers of these elements – John Lawlor defines them as “the dark powers, the ‘spirits that tend on mortal thoughts’” (107). I have however extended this concept and re-defined it for my purpose, since in Shakespeare's plays (Julius Caesar, Henry VI Part 1 and Part 2, Richard III, Hamlet, and Macbeth) these “dark powers” are found to be not so “dark” as the human agents. In Chapter One entitled “The Forces of Darkness: Meaning and Legacy” I have tried to trace the legacy and history of the dark powers embodied in the witches and other such agents; I have also tried to redefine the real meaning of the “dark forces”.

King Henry VI, Part 1 introduces the episode of Joan of Arc to challenge, at the very beginning of Shakespeare's career, the “witch concept”. This play deals basically with the events covering the Hundred Years War with France leading up to the terrible Wars of the Roses, and here Shakespeare goes against historical truth to make Joan a central character in this play of Talbot's exploits. There is ambiguity present even in the treatment of Joan's character, in her being both a holy virgin and a strumpet; a divine patriot and a Devil's agent. Ultimately, she is burnt at the stake as per a devilish plot laid against her by the English Militants and the French
Eleanor Cobham is trapped by using supernatural ploy, thereby ending the political career of the Duke of Gloucester. This has been treated exhaustively in Chapter Two entitled “The Dark Powers in King Henry VI, Part 1 and Part 2: More Mundane than Supernatural?”

Shakespeare’s King Richard III is a play dealing with a completely evil ruler, deformed both physically and mentally. He uses the epithet “witch” to condemn his enemies – both Queen Margaret and Queen Elizabeth. Here Shakespeare shows how the clergy work in close alliance with such an evil ruler and are even instrumental in crowning him. They serve as religious props to whiten the otherwise dark image of the King. Moreover, Shakespeare here also employs supernatural omens to predict the fall of the hypocritical lords, intending thereby to present these omens and curses as good forces within society bringing to an end the evil regime. Ghosts also appear in this play but they act primarily as divine, retributive spirits leading to the destruction of the evil power. The Third Chapter titled “King Richard the Third: A Study of Richard’s Heart of Darkness” deals with this study.

Another play where the Ghost performs the role of a medieval scourge leading a justified battle against the evil forces of society is Hamlet. Though there is critical dissension regarding the role of the Ghost, yet a close study
of the social picture of Denmark reveals it to be a “rotten” state where incest, licentiousness and mistrust prevail. Shakespeare presents a world where brother kills brother and wife marries her husband’s murderer. Thus, when the Ghost urges Hamlet to avenge the evil murder, he is in fact performing a deed as pure as religious purification, so it is not to be identified with the actual dark forces, which are embodied by Claudius. I have studied Hamlet from this angle in the Fourth Chapter entitled “Hamlet: A Prince with the Sword of Darkness Against the Powers of Darkness”.

Macbeth, on the other hand, deals with both ghosts and witches, but there is ambiguity in Shakespeare’s treatment of them. A deconstructive study reveals the existence of parallel texts, which point to the fact that the witches are not really responsible for the murder of Duncan. Rather, they are instrumental in bringing about Macbeth’s fall. They represent a fraternal feeling, as opposed to the human world where mistrust and hypocrisy dwell. There is ambiguity in the presentation of the rulers too. Duncan is not as good as he appears to be. His sudden decision of declaring Malcolm the Prince of Cumberland is very much responsible in bringing about his catastrophic end. An analysis of Macbeth in the light of the above premise has been done in Chapter Five entitled “Macbeth: A Villain-hero’s Tryst with Darkness”.
Thus interpreted, the five plays clearly reveal that the supernatural, as used by Shakespeare, is not as evil as it is made out to be. Rather, they often act as retributive forces that work to bring an end to evil operative in the world of man. So the witches and ghosts are not in reality the “dark forces”. It is the power-hungry individuals represented by the royalty and the clergy who constitute the actual “dark forces”.

A considerable number of critics of the 20th century have worked on the subject of Shakespeare’s use of the supernatural. For instance, Cumberland Clark has made an in-depth study of the various aspects of the supernatural in *Shakespeare and the Supernatural*, and F.W. Brownlow has tried to exhibit a relation between Shakespeare’s use of the devil and Harsnett’s treatment of them in *Shakespeare, Harsnett and the Devils of Denham*. Greenblatt has attempted a study the origin of Hamlet’s Ghost in *Hamlet in Purgatory*, while the editorial introduction of Susanne L. Wofford to *Hamlet by William Shakespeare* also discusses the Ghost. The role of Joan in Shakespeare’s *King Henry VI, Part 1* has been discussed by Nancy A Guiterrez in “Gender and Value in 1 Henry VI: The Role of Joan de Pucelle” and in Gabriel Barker Jackson’s “Topical Ideology: Witches, Amazons and Shakespeare’s Joan of Arc”. *Macbeth* is one play whose supernatural aspect has faced a plethora of critical analysis. Works, such as, Michael Goldman’s

But in none of these works has an attempt been made to present the supernatural (the so-called “dark forces”) as victims of the far darker forces who operated in the Elizabethan Age (and always operate) to fulfill their own selfish ends on the social and political arena of power struggle. Neither in course of my study have I come across a critical text where an attempt has been made to link together a number of plays and thereby establish this concept of the “dark forces”, not as an idea depicted in a particular play, but rather, as a generalized concept of Shakespearean supernaturalism. Herein lies the novelty of approach in my thesis, and the following pages are an attempt to establish that critical argument.
Methodology and Approach

In this dissertation I have followed the research methodology of searching primary and secondary materials on William Shakespeare – his plays in particular, different critical books and articles on Shakespeare, and a comparative analysis of them. I have followed the style sheet given in MLA Handbook (sixth edition) in respect of the format of writing and documentation, referencing and citing sources.

The approach of my study followed is mainly interpretative and analytical. Since my main focus is on the supernatural in Shakespeare, I have tried to textualise and contextualise all the points and findings from my analysis.
WORKS CITED


• Guiterrez, Nancy A. “Gender and Value in 1 Henry VI: The Role of Joan de Pucelle”. Theatre Journal. 42.2 (May 1990).

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