

Chapter Three

KING LEAR

3.0 Introduction to King Lear

Bradley states:

King Lear has again and again been described as Shakespeare's greatest work, the best of his plays, the tragedy in which he exhibits most fully his multitudinous powers; and if we were doomed to lose all his dramas except one, probably the majority of those who know and appreciate him best would pronounce for keeping *King Lear*. (205)

King Lear is shown to be a man who wants to retain his status and title while dividing his kingdom among his three daughters, who will rule their respective regions. He wants to hand over the actual charge of ruling. The opening scene starts as a kind of auction to see which of the three daughters get a larger portion based on her words that indicate her love towards her father, Lear. It is important to know that Lear already has made his mind regarding the division. Bradley says:

The dependence of the division on the speeches of the daughters, was in Lear's intention a mere form, devised as a childish scheme to gratify his love of absolute power and his hunger for assurances of devotion. (210)

He wanted to give equal shares to Goneril and Reagan while giving richer portion to the youngest of the all, Cordelia. It is asked if he has already made his mind then why he bothered to hear the words from his daughters. Some are of the opinion that Lear wanted to verify his decision. But as it turns out the events take a different turn. Lear hears his first daughter and gives her the share. Then he hears the second daughter expressing her love for him and he announces the share. It is said that Lear knew that these daughters are going to flatter him and he enjoyed that. He actually wanted to hear about the real feelings and real love of Cordelia for which he organized the occasion. His own words are:

What can you say to draw

A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak (Shakespeare, *King* 9).

Lear prepares himself to hear his praises but ends up hearing 'nothing.' Upon hearing this he casts her off without any consideration and delay. His fault of pride is also accompanied by rashness of his decision. When Kent speaks on Cordelia's behalf, Lear banishes him too. The Duke of Burgundy, who was ready to marry Cordelia, hearing the king's decision also leaves her. King's pride of self receives a blow and he reacts without self-control. This is not only because he is going through the old age but because "he hath ever but slenderly known himself" and "the best and soundest of his time hath been but rash" (Shakespeare, *King* 22).

Apart from the main plot of the play where alienation among characters is visible, the story of Earl of Gloucester and his sons (Earl of Edmund, Earl of Kent), also contributes heavily to this theme of alienation between self and society. As the play moves forward, both Goneril and Regan ill-treat Lear making him understand that it was his biggest mistake to give them the power to control. He also realizes how he was mistaken in case of Cordelia. In a confrontation with Regan, Lear decides to leave her castle in a stormy night. He gets angry against his mistreatment and says in *King Lear*:

You unnatural hags,
I will have such revenges on you both,
That all the world shall – I will do such things –
What they are, yet I know not, but they shall be
The terrors of the earth! You think I'll weep,
No, I'll not weep.
I have full cause of weeping. But this heart
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws. (93)

The storm outside is raging like him. He goes out to face it and Gloucester follows him. "This is both prophetic and self-revelatory. Only a hard heart could shatter into 'a hundred thousand flaws'. It is in the light of Lear's own unyielding pride and hardheartedness that we should read his query at the end of the mad trial scene, 'Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?' It is a two-edged and most significant question." (Bennett 152). Many scholars say that King Lear doesn't go out to seek help and comfort from anyone else other than his daughters. He wants to expose is rage against the rage of nature. The audience finds it clear to draw

analogy between these two rages. According to Bradley, A “conflict between imagination and sense will be found if we consider the dramatic centre of the whole tragedy, the Storm-scenes. . .it is the powers of the tormented soul that we hear and see in ‘the groans of roaring wind and rain’ and the ‘sheets of fire’” (224-225). The storm is said to be the external manifestation of internal disaster of Lear. Lear appeals:

And thou all-shaking thunder,
Strike flat the thick rotundity o’ the world!
Crack nature’s moulds, all germens spill at once
That make ingrateful man! (Shakespeare, King 99)

Shakespeare gives his judgment on the existence through Lear who cries: “No, no, no life! Bradley in this regard says that “such feelings as these possess us, and, if we follow Shakespeare, should possess us, from time to time as we read King Lear. And some readers will go further and maintain that this is also the ultimate and the total impression left by the tragedy” (Bradley 229). Further, Lear invokes heavens and says:

Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters:
I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness;
I never gave you kingdom, call’d you children,
You owe me no subscription: then let fall
Your horrible pleasure: here I stand, your slave,
A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man:
But yet I call you servile ministers,
That have with two pernicious daughters join’d
Your high engender’d battles ’gainst a head
So old and white as this. O! O! ’tis foul! (99-100)

After this, Cordelia has come with the forces to defend his father and take back what belongs to the King. Gloucester joins Lear who is accompanied by Poor Tom, who actually is Edgar but Gloucester fails to recognize him. Tom and Lear have spent some time together and “In Tom, . . . Lear has found a kindred tormented soul, and the two of them exchange apparently mad banter that suggests the pain of alienation from affectionate and fair intercourse with others as well as the vileness of

the human soul, issues tearing at both their hearts” (Bloom 8). *King Lear*, through many of its passages can be said to have presented a bleak picture of humanity. It shows how a human can commit horrible acts to get in power. And when one gets in power he in a way becomes blind. His own blood relations become meaningless not to talk of other common people. It may be said that Gloucester saying “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, They kill us for their sport” is wrong because most of the time it is the people themselves who are responsible for all the sufferings in the play *king Lear*. Had the characters- Lear, Edmund, Cordelia, Gloucester and others acted in a different way, the horror of existence would not have been that is presented in the play. Lear, Gloucester, Edgar, and Cordelia among others appear as the existential characters who reflect on human state, existence and on their own predicament. This way they become aware of their alienation from themselves and other humans. They experience a profound sense of estrangement in different ways only to know that they are a kind of alien in this strange universe. Their desire for explanation of this world only leads them to utter frustration. Suffering and death seem to be only certainties that accompany them. When they come across all these realizations, they get stripped of their illusions about themselves and they face their own insignificance. They feel themselves alienated from existence.

3.1 Alienation in King Lear

John Dover Wilson says that the “absurdity of Lear’s conduct in the [first] scene is such as to induce some critics to say that the scene is ‘improbable.’ Thus Coleridge declared that ‘Lear is the only serious performance of Shakespeare the interest and situations of which are derived from the assumption of a gross improbability’” (Wilson xviii). About Lear’s madness and its importance to the play all over as Bradley remarks:

Lear’s insanity is not the cause of a tragic conflict any more than Ophelia’s; it is, like Ophelia’s, the result of a conflict; and in both cases, the effect is mainly pathetic. If Lear were really mad when he divided his kingdom, if Hamlet were really mad at any time in the story, they would cease to be tragic characters. (8)

The intensity of alienation and existential crisis is scattered over many places in course of the play. Towards the end of the play this intensity reaches to new heights

when Lear is reunited with his daughter, Cordelia. The dialogue between father and daughter in *King Lear* reveals this:

Pray, do not mock me.
I am a very foolish fond old man,
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more, nor less.
And to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
Methinks I should know you, and know this man,
Yet I am doubtful. For I am mainly ignorant
What place this is. And all the skill I have
Remembers not these garments. Nor I know not
Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me,
For (as I am a man) I think this lady
To be my child Cordelia.
Cordelia. And so I am. I am.
Lear. Be your tears wet? Yes, 'faith. I pray, weep not.
If you have poison for me, I will drink it.
I know you do not love me, for your sisters
Have (as I do remember) done me wrong.
You have some cause, they have not.
Cordelia No cause, no cause. (167)

Cordelia saying "No cause, no cause" is a painful reply from a heart-broken daughter. Shakespeare has taken a masterful stroke in depicting the feelings that show the empathy of one person towards the other. There is a mutual understanding of existential concerns between father and daughter.

It is clear that we meet Lear in the beginning as a person who is foolish and it is the extreme suffering and the existential issues that teach him some kind of wisdom. Even then he is alienated from his self and the rest of the society. It is through extreme suffering that Lear finally comes across the miserable conditions of life. He understands that though he is a king, he is essentially a man. He becomes a man who has feeling for his fellow men in distress. In this regard, Harold Bloom says that the theme of "self-abasement is essential if one is to achieve essential humanity.

Paradoxically, throughout the play, those who hold themselves high are like brutes, while those who allow themselves to be humbled achieve a tender humanity” (Bloom 6).

There are dual forces at work in each human being that guide or misguide him at every point of time. Similar is the case in *King Lear*. Most of the characters in it are caught in this web. “Man is situated between angel and animal. The best that is in him approximates him to the angelic: we recall Hamlet’s ‘how like an angel’, and we remember that Lear, wise after suffering, calls Cordelia ‘a soul in bliss’” (Wilson xlvii). Throughout the play, Shakespeare knowingly uses this ‘angel and animal’ system. Famous Shakespearean critic, A. C. Bradley thus says:

Goneril is a kite: her ingratitude has a serpent’s tooth: she has struck her father most serpent-like upon the very heart: her visage is wolvis: she has tied sharp-toothed unkindness like a vulture on her father’s breast: for her husband she is a gilded serpent: to Gloster her cruelty seems to have the fangs of a boar. She and Regan are dog-hearted: they are tigers, not daughters: each is an adder to the other: the flesh of each is covered with the fell of a beast . . . As we read, the souls of all the beasts in turn seem to us to have entered the bodies of these mortals; horrible in their venom, savagery, lust, deceitfulness, sloth, cruelty, filthiness. (223)

A thorough study of *King Lear* makes it clear that Shakespeare had interest in this fact that self of the human being is made of nothing. It is interesting to see how this fact comes out of Fool’s mouth. He addresses King Lear and says:

Fool. Thou wast a pretty fellow when thou hadst no need to care for her frowning. Now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art now. I am a Fool, thou art nothing. (45)

This sarcasm from Fool has various philosophical connotations. Because if we study the play closely we will come to know that this idea of ‘nothing’ does not only stand for the concept of nihilism. The text of *King Lear* suggests that the concept of nothingness is very significant in all spheres. In the beginning of the play, Cordelia is asked by Lear to reveal the extent (by claiming something extraordinary) as to how

much she loves him, she answers simply “Nothing, my Lord.” (Shakespeare, *King* 9). This nothingness makes King’s blood boil and he takes the measures which he regrets towards the end of the play.

Albert Camus, in his famous book, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, writes:

In certain situations, replying ‘nothing’ when asked what one is thinking about may be pretence in a man. Those who are loved are well aware of this. But if that reply is sincere, if it symbolizes that odd state of soul in which the void be-comes eloquent, in which the chain of daily gestures is broken, in which the heart vainly seeks the link that will connect it again, then it is as it were the first sign of absurdity. (10)

It is this ‘nothing’ that forces the action of the play. And it is this expression that leads King to the insanity and he recognizes the dreadful absurdity of this world. In the play, Lear and the Fool talk about this:

Lear: Doth any here know me? This is not Lear.
Doth Lear walk thus? Speak thus? Where are his eyes?
Either his notion
Are lethargied.
.....
Who is it that can tell me who I am?
Fool: Lear’s shadow. (Shakespeare, *King* 47)

A shadow of a person is a silhouette of the self that has no worth of its own. In this regard, Kierkegaard once said that:

The individual is not an actual shape but a shadow, or, more correctly, the actual shape is invisibly present and therefore is not satisfied to cast one shadow, but the individual has a variety of shadows, all of which resemble him and which momentarily have equal status as being himself. (Pattison 91)

Hence, the character of Lear and others also fall into this definition of being nothing and eventually getting alienated from self and society. We can understand here that the issue of saying that self is nothing is much complex. On analysing we can see that jester’s consideration of Lear being ‘shadowy.’ Shakespeare presents it in

such way that shows that his thoughts about self and subjectivity were advanced even at that point of time.

Jeffrey Kahan remarks that “in writing these late plays, Shakespeare was working out his own situation, imagining and rehearsing scenarios in which he—like the wandering or alienated kings and princes of his own plays—longed for reunion and reconciliation with his daughters, then it is clear that Shakespeare saw himself as Lear and expected no happy ending for himself” (Kahan 361). Shakespeare masterfully wrote *King Lear* as a monarch who alienates his power and property and then consequently suffering from immense personal alienation. The theories on the issue of property have advanced a lot and can let us understand the problem of Lear as well.

3.2 King Lear’s Alienation in Multi-Disciplinary Discourses

Margaret Jane Radin in her marvellous book, *Reinterpreting Property*, comes up with dual meanings of property and double connotations of alienation. She in her collection of essays shows how they are interrelated. Regarding property and its two meanings, she says:

In the legal and moral discourse of private property—that is, when we are speaking of property law or of the justification of property—the word property is always identified with something owned, an object of ownership. . . This meaning of property I shall call the “owned object” aspect, or the “object” aspect for short, and sometimes refer to it as “object property.” The second meaning of the word “property” is not found in the legal and moral discourse of private property, but rather in other philosophical discourses such as metaphysics and the philosophies of mind, language, and personhood. Here property means an attribute: of a thing, concept, argument, person, etc. This meaning of property I shall call the “attribute-property.” (Radin 191-192)

Similarly, she goes on to define the two meanings of alienation. In the area of law, alienation is linked with the transfer of property and linked with the capitalist ideology. She argues:

Alienability of property rights, or freedom of alienation with respect to property, is one of the most important indicia of liberal (capitalist) private

property. The infrastructure of the free market is a system of private entitlement linked to a system of private transferability: private property plus free contract. Freedom of alienation of property rights expresses the “free contract” part of this nexus. The market theorist argues both that in order for private property to be complete or well developed it must be freely alienable and that in order for free contract to flourish there must be a well-developed system of private entitlements. Everything must be both ownable and saleable. (Radin 192)

And regarding the second meaning of alienation that includes the psychological estrangement, she remarks:

It is more familiar to users of ordinary language. Alienation in this sense means estrangement, painful or hostile isolation of the self, a feeling of being cut off or ostracized from one’s appropriate social environment, a psychological malaise caused by lack of commitment or loss of meaning in life. (Radin 192)

She says one type of alienation is “contract-alienation”, and the second type is “estrangement alienation”. She links “contract-alienation” with object-property as it involves the transfer of goods. The “estrangement-alienation” becomes active the moment self of a person is devastated and is linked to attribute-property. She further comments that “contract-alienation and estrangement-alienation are linked by the general notion of separation. In the free-contract aspect of alienation, a separation of an entitlement, and hence a property object, from its holder takes place when it is transferred to another holder” (Radin 193). It was this alienation of property and self that was very much emerging in the English society of sixteenth century.

Adam’s elimination from the Garden of Eden had a lot of connotations. It is considered that they (Adam and Eve) lost their innocence and hence were cast in this world. Chaos and confusion entangled the people in their web. The concept of private property was justified to establish peace. The scholar on the concept of property A. J. Carlyle says:

When men were innocent there was no need for private property, or the other great conventional institutions of society; but as this innocence passed away,

they found themselves compelled to organize society and the diverse institutions which should regulate the ownership and use of the good things which men had once held in common. The institution of property thus represents both the fall of man from his primitive innocence, the greed and avarice which refused to recognise the common ownership of things, and also the method by which the blind greed of human nature may be controlled and regulated. (Carlyle 122)

Having said this, we can say that the moment Lear alienates from his property, he gets alienated from his own self. It is because his self and his property are bound together. Shakespeare here shows us the consequences of attachment to one's property and how it affects the personality if there is any problem in it. A good reading of the play reveals that property is a tricky business; when Lear and Gloucester had it, it brought them power and comfort; and when they were separated from it, they paid a terrible price: estrangement between daughter and father, estrangement between son and father, even between the self and the person. Estrangement of Edward, illegitimate son of Gloucester, is of crucial importance as Bradley rightly remarks:

Edmund's illegitimacy furnishes, of course, no excuse for his villainy, but it somewhat influences our feelings. It is no fault of his, and yet it separates him from other men. He is the product of Nature – of natural appetite asserting itself against the social order; and he has no recognised place within this order. So he devotes himself to Nature, whose law is that of the stronger, and who does not recognise those moral obligations which exist only by convention. (255)

As it has been discussed in the preceding chapters the central concern of existential philosophy man's reality in this world. If a person closely examines the life he will come to know that there are a lot of limitations imposed upon human beings. It is bound by birth at one point and by death at other. Humans cannot escape time and space. There are various stages that come forward while defining the existential nature of man. First, he is born and finds himself/herself here. Second, finds his being with others who are like us- bound. Third, he has to deal with certain emotions of love, fear, hate, and most importantly anguish. Lear in an existential style says:

Thou must be patient; we came crying hither.
Thou know'st, the first time that we smell the air,
We wawl and cry.
...
When we are born, we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools. (Shakespeare, *King* 157)

The second category of finding one's being in relation with others is extensively depicted in this play. The relationship of daughters with their father, sons with their father, and subjects with their king. Then there is the category of emotions. The play is obviously full of emotions. Lear's hate for Goneril and Regan after the division of property. Lear's love for Cordelia after he suffers. Hatred between Goneril and Albany and many other likes are evident to this existential feature. And as far as important of them all, anguish, is concerned, Lear is full of it. G. Wilson Knight in his famous book, *Wheel of Fire*, says: "Lear's anguish, we know it to be the central thing in the play, the imaginative core and heart of the rest" (Knight 230). Similarly the anguish of Gloucester in the play is also worth mentioning. Regarding this existential issue, James V. Baker in his essay, "An Existential Examination of King Lear" says, "Literature is an existential art and to see feelingly is not only what imaginative literature is about . . . *King Lear* is an infinitely rich play since in it Shakespeare deals profoundly with the existentials of the human condition" (Baker 550).

Understanding Lear's madness is a key factor to comprehend the play with its essence. A lot studies have been devoted to the interpretation of the external happenings in the play and consequently less interest is shown towards the internal conflict within characters, especially Lear. Analyzing Lear madness in the play, Josephine Waters Bennett explains it as in the process of intensifying, clarifying, and interpreting Lear's struggle with himself, Shakespeare makes use of the Gloucester plot, the Fool, and madness. The use of the Gloucester plot is the most obvious of the three.

If we focus our attention on the external conflict, on the cruelty of his children and the pitiable fate of the helpless old man, we fail to see how deeply the play probes into the nature of man and the experience of life: and if we do not see these things we miss the greatness of the tragedy. In the opening scene we are shown, not only that

Lear does not know his children, but that he does not know himself, his responsibilities and his own best interests. Thereafter we see the tragedy of old age and ungrateful children, but this is the outside only. The core of the play is not what happens to Lear but what happens within Lear. (Bennett 149, 151)

By reading Shakespearean tragedies one can say that man is open to far-reaching change and that he is unstable. Of all characters it seems that it is Lear in whom the dramatic and the human merge. Each of characters suffers from the suffering of solitariness. Edgar says:

Who is't can say 'I am at the worst'?
I am worse than e'er I was.
And worse I may be yet. The worst is not
So long as we can say, This is the worst. (Shakespeare, King 130-131)

He realizes that there is no boundary for human suffering in this world but one has to endure because there is no second option:

Men must endure
Their going hence, even as their coming hither.
Ripeness is all. (Shakespeare, King 174)

Ripeness can be understood as maturity and one cannot achieve maturity unless he suffers. He must learn how to endure hardships. The resulting alienation is an issue that has received a lot of diverse perspectives among theorists and writers. In his essay, "The Cultivation of Anxiety: King Lear and his Heirs", Stephen Greenblatt argues that:

The very practice of tragedy depends upon a communal conviction that anxiety may be profitably and even pleasurably cultivated. That is, tragedy goes beyond the usual philosophical and religious consolations for affliction, and both exemplifies and perfects techniques for the creation or intensification of affliction. (91)

The disorder depicted in 'abandonment scene' has a great significance with its theatrical representations of human independence mismatched not only with the partisan ideologies of a culture, but also with it comes the freedom of others as is seen

in the works of Shakespeare. Cordelia's failure to familiarize Lear's wishes is the perilous time that sets the tragedy in motion with devastating ramifications. She says to her father: "I love your majesty / According to my bond, nor more nor less" (Shakespeare, King 9), and then says in *King Lear*:

Good my lord,
You have begot me, bred me, loved me.
I return those duties back as are right fit—
Obey you, love you, and most honour you.
Why have my sisters husbands if they say
They love you all? Haply when I shall wed
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty.
Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all. (10)

Generally critics and interpreters have taken Cordelia's behaviour from two diverse views, both of which do not convey the full power of her reply to her father's cry for love. Jonathan Dollimore says, "Lear's behaviour in the opening scene presupposes first, his absolute power, second, the knowledge that his being king constitutes that power, third, his refusal to tolerate what he perceives as a contradiction of that power. Therefore what Lear demands of Cordelia – authentic familial kind-ness – is precluded by the very terms of the demand; that is, by the extent to which the occasion as well as his relationship to her is saturated with the ideological imperatives of power" (Dollimore 198). On the other hand, Peter Holbrook says that "One of the most thrilling moments in all Shakespeare comes when Cordelia insists upon speaking in her own voice rather than another's. Lear wants the usual rote: sham words and speeches that Cordelia's wicked and two-faced sisters are only too willing to supply. But Cordelia won't – perhaps can't – play the game, though it would be easier for everyone around her (hence, arguably, more moral of her) if she did" (Holbrook 15). It can be seen that interpretations like these two do not adequately show how Conderlia's rejection to take part in the love test is actually a radically charged political act. Cordelia refuses to become another part in the degraded system of human relationship that have become Lear's universe. By doing this act she in other words lets her father know love and devotion cannot be

commanded and that a human being cannot force another human to love him. In doing this act she destroyed the corrupt understanding of human love and devotion. In fact, Cordelia is an existential rebel. Albert Camus says:

In every act of rebellion, the rebel simultaneously experiences a feeling of revulsion at the infringement of his rights and a complete and spontaneous loyalty to certain aspects of himself. Thus he implicitly brings into play a standard of values so far from being gratuitous that he is prepared to support it no matter what the risks... But from the moment that the rebel finds his voice—even though he says nothing but “no”—he begins to desire and to judge. The rebel, in the etymological sense, does a complete turnabout. (Camus 19)

3.3 Existential Analysis of King Lear

The study of plots, characters and other issues in King Lear shows how Shakespeare had a tremendous ability to understand and describe the world in existential terms. The play speaks volumes about the alienation of almost all characters from their own selves and from the society as well.

Maynard Mack gives various examples to show how this alienation has taken place within various characters of the play. With each character there are different circumstances that bring change in his thinking about his self in particular and about society in general. He observes following about Edgar:

Edgar stripping down to become Poor Tom, on the other hand, obviously stands very near the pole of representativeness. He acts out for us the forced alienation of the good man (or at least the man more sinned against than sinning) from security and civility in a corrupted world, a theme which is to be repeated almost immediately, in a far more realistic style, in the stocking of Kent, the repudiation of Lear, and the expulsion of Gloucester. (Mack 67)

Similarly, Mack draws an interesting analogy between Shakespeare's Lear and Coleridge's Mariner. He shows how both of these characters regret their actions and through suffering they end up alienated. He writes:

The wilful act of the mariner in shooting down the albatross has a nightmarish inscrutability like Lear's angry rejection of the daughter he loves best; springs from a similar upsurge of egoistic wilfulness; hurls itself against what was until that moment a natural "bond," and shatters the universe. Nor do the analogies end with this. When the mariner shoots the albatross the dark forces inside him that prompted his deed project themselves and become the landscape, so to speak, in which he suffers his own nature: it is his own alienation, his own waste land of terror and sterility that he meets. Something similar takes place in Shakespeare's play. Lear, too, as we saw earlier, suffers his own nature, encounters his own heath, his own storm, his own nakedness and defencelessness, and by this experience, like the mariner, is made another man. (Mack 97-98)

Lear is a remarkable character not only in English literature but also in the world literature. Maynard Mack further writes about him:

He has allied himself with those who in the world's sense are fools; and he is prepared to accept the alienation from the world that this requires, as the famous passage at the opening of the last scene shows. In this passage he puts aside Goneril and Regan forever; he does not even want to see them. He accepts eagerly the prison which marks his withdrawal from the world's values, for he has his own new values to sustain. (Mack 113)

Lear has the feeling of hatred, fear and alienation, these feelings closes all the possibility of giving and receiving love or any other good quality. He sees the world as completely incapable of love and understanding. From existential point of view, he sees it as full of hypocrisy, greed, nihilism, yet he cannot do anything about it, the only option is to tolerate it. S. L. Goldberg says about it:

For all Lear's detachment from the world he generalizes about, he is mad - mad precisely in being so detached from it that his thoughts are not free, even if they do have a ghastly sort of patience. What he says may have a kind of 'reason in madness', as Edgar puts it; but he is too insanely 'objective', too alienated, to see more than a part of the truth, just as it is less than the whole of himself whose image is stamped upon it. (Goldberg 136)

For the time being Lear gets out of his alienated condition and gets into a new space where he sees the world with a new vision. But it does not last for long. Seeing his dead daughter sends him to a space where he is pushed back to the state of eternal alienation and estrangement. About him Millicent Bell says “Edgar’s disguise and apparent madness are theatrical. Edgar’s impersonations and simulated state of possession are a reminder of how alienable—rather than the reverse—is the core of self we call character” (Bell 150).

From a general point of view, the play presents itself in such a way that one can declare it to be a story of growth, suffering, and alienation. The protagonist commits the mistake and suffers himself for that and eventually that mistake proves to be fatal for almost all characters in the play. His mistake starts a chain of horrible events that bring disaster for them. When claims of the King Lear are not honoured by his daughters, his pride is shattered and he is caught in the forces of anxiety and estrangement. He attempts to redo the things and bring order to his life but is unable to do so and finally becomes mad by it. Cordelia’s pardon provides a new hope and meaning to Lear’s crisis, it seems that his crisis has passed. However, the moment she is killed, Lear falls deep into the abyss and dies into the dismal state. It can be said that Lear is most complex among tragedies. We may come across a lot of debates about what kind of world was Shakespeare trying to reveal. Among other things, the death of Cordelia is a crucial issue. The triggering event in this drama of Shakespeare is not the murder of one’s father and the second marriage of mother with one’s uncle, or a calamity in receiving elevation, or a loss of faith in one’s wife but a strange case of a loving daughter who fails in the sycophancy. The resulting events reveal the irrationality on part of Lear. If one wonders about why Lear acts in a strange manner he has to understand what Cordelia and her actions meant to him.

Lear is essentially a narcissistic man whose psychological ability is deeply ruined by the practice of acting the king. His supremacy has brought corruption to his mind and to his actions concerning others. It is one of the main reasons as to why he gets estranged and alienated as soon as he is detached from this power. He comes to realize the bleakness in world which hovers over everyman who is powerless and is dependent on others. He understands the conditions of a man with regard to the limitation put on him in this world. Lear says:

With a white beard? They flattered me
like a dog, and told me I had the white hairs in my beard, ere
the black ones were there. To say “ay” and “no” to everything
that I said. “Ay,” and “no” too, was no good divinity. When
the rain came to wet me once, and the wind to make me
chatter, when the thunder would not peace at my bidding,
there I found ’em, there I smelt ’em out. Go to, they are not
men o’ their words, they told me I was everything. ’Tis a lie, I
am not ague-proof. (Shakespeare, Lear 153)

3.4 Summing Up

King Lear obviously has been so unaware of the tough truths of life. He simply doesn’t understand what really the world is or what is to live as a man who has nothing. He lives in a kind of fool’s paradise. While in power, his wants and his words were final laws which were to be followed then and there. He had the impression that all things are easy as that. Towards the middle of the play, he comes across the reality of limitations. First, he tries to blame others for his mistake but soon he realizes that a man himself is responsible for his actions whether they be good or bad. At first, he is surrounded by all praise and accolades, so it not hard to understand why he gets estranged so quickly from the whole society and from the people living in it.

Lear had lived his whole life like spoiled child; as a consequence, it is not difficult to understand why he acted like a child with no concern of maturity. He saw others as people who are born just to serve him and listen to his foolishness. And if they failed to carry out his ideas they did not deserve to live. In the first two acts of the play, we see that he is full of impatience demanding service and attention of everyone who is under his order. He showed himself as a typical of narcissistic person. He took his crown and his country as his personal belongings. He did not understand that people around him other duties than to be at his beck and call. This is the reason he is shocked to see the behaviour of her daughters, Cordelia, Goneril, and Reagan. Lear is show as violating his powers and his duties as a father and as a king. He pays the price for all this later in the play. Many scholars ascribe this behaviour of his to ethical issue but it is more related to psychological concerns. Lear appears to

have a lot of motives for leaving his authority and distribute his empire among his three daughters. The main purpose he puts forward is that he desires:

To shake all cares and business from our age,
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
Unburthened crawl toward death. Our son of Cornwall,
And you, our no less loving son of Albany,
We have this hour a constant will to publish
Our daughters' several dowers, that future strife
May be prevented now. (Shakespeare, Lear 6)

Notwithstanding his later period of time, King Lear is not portrayed as someone who is unable to carry out the functions of a king but he is shown to be having the excuse of age. He wants to have all the luxuries and bliss without being held responsible for any action. Instead of taking care of his whole kingdom, he wants to enjoy and get cared for by Cordelia and other two daughters. He wants to stay free for pleasures and amusements like hunting and roaming. He does not understand that he is in fact abdicating his power and control; he is living in fool's paradise that he still will be in power and there will be people to follow him. He is aware of the fact that he is not going to live forever. So he decides to get away from power himself and does not want to be stripped of it by death. His stepping down from throne is not a submission to providence, but it is an action to his mastery over it.

It is also important to note here that Lear apart from narcissistic comportment, he also has a self-estrangement factor in his behavior as well. It seems clearly evident that he greatly desires the devotion of his daughters and that he feels insecure regarding it. It can be said that while aging and moving towards death, he feels more dependent than ever and wishes to have their love and care by his side all the time. It is relevant to say that he might be even aware about his deficiency in proving himself to be a good father especially to Goneril and Reagan. He wants to show that he is a loving father by giving them a handsome share in the kingdom. But this does not bring any betterment in the relations, it in fact worsens the case. But again, if that is the case he again proves to be a bad father, thinking of favoring Cordelia more over her sisters. In this process he loses all three of his girls resulting in his alienation and estrangement. Lear proposed a plan, a test of love, from the speeches of his daughters.

This eccentricity of looking for love in speeches is strange as he has already decided who gets what. Though it is very much clear what Lear wants and adores: the hollow speeches from Goneril and Reagan, who by the way had outstanding understanding into his philosophy. They give him precisely what he wanted. On the contrary he wanted to hear extra praise and show from Cordelia, and when she speaks, she precisely says everything that is contradictory to what Lear wanted to receive. Millicent Bell says, "Lear's is the representation of that self-alienation that he already suffers from before he seems literally mad. It is no mere verbal extravagance on Kent's part to say, in the very beginning, 'Be Kent unmannerly / When Lear is mad.'" Only after the passing of that outer storm that also represents his madness are recognition as well as self-recognition fully recoverable" (Bell 157). Some critics are of the opinion that Lear is not the only person who is to be blamed for everything. He commits mistake by giving her no share at all but she too proves to be rigid and lacks tenderness towards his aging father. She could have avoided all the fuss by handling the issue with care and intelligence. Not that she was to say something which she did not mean but she should have taken into consideration the age of his already demanding father to make all the parties happy. Deiter Mehl writes that "a majority of readers and spectators have felt that in King Lear Shakespeare presents extremes of human suffering and cruelty that touch the very confines of dramatic art and may well tempt one to try and escape into falsifying harmonization" (Mehl 77). A. C. Bradley says something same:

Its final and total result is one in which pity and terror, carried perhaps to the extreme limits of art, are so blended with a sense of law and beauty that we feel at last, not depression and much less despair, but a consciousness of greatness in pain, and of solemnity in the mystery we cannot fathom. (230)

It is Cordelia's anxiety that prevents her from comforting her father after he has been offended and from endeavouring to mitigate his anger. It is obvious that Cordelia has been kind-hearted toward her father in the preceding years, and It is seen that she behaves in a most affectionate way when she is about to get back to England. When Cordelia expresses her opinions, she tries to protect herself contrary to Lear's dissatisfactions and she tries to keep it certain that France discerns Cordelia is on right track and has committed not error, as quoted in *King Lear*:

I yet beseech your Majesty,
If for I want that glib and oily art
To speak and purpose not, since what I well intend,
I'll do't before I speak-that you make known
It is no vicious blot, murder, or foulness,
Nor unchaste action or dishonoured step,
That hath depriv'd me of your grace and favour;
But even for want of that for which I am richer
A still-soliciting eye, and such a tongue
As I am glad I have not, though not to have it
Hath lost me in your liking. (19)

She is shown as articulating egotism in herself for not behaving like her two sisters and is, in a way, telling him that she would instead lose his favours than become like Goneril and Reagan. Cordelia does not try to calm Lear down, or to remind him of her devotion in the retrospect. It may seem peculiar that even before France comes forward, by choosing Cordelia to be his wife, to rescue her from the wrath of Lear, Cordelia does not seem to be slightly disappointed about what has took place. She was treated very fraudulently, but she did not protest for the loss of kingdom's share and father's favours. Lear's expectations from his closest people were unveiling as he had imagined it would turn out till he comes across Cordelia's "nothing." It is so hard to believe this "nothing." This very moment marks the beginning of his frustration from humanity. He considers it a grave issue because if his most loved daughter can have "nothing" what could he expect from others. This is the beginning of his estrangement and alienation and it does not stop there. It takes shape in various forms and thus making the whole course of the play potent with alienation and estrangement of Lear as well as other characters.

Works Cited

- Baker, James V. "Existential Examination of King Lear." *College English* 23.7 (1962): 546-550. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 July 2017.
- Bell, Millicent. *Shakespeare's Tragic Skepticism*. USA: Yale University Press, 2002. Print.
- Bennett, Josephine Waters. "The Storm Within: the Madness of Lear." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 13.2 (1962): 137-155. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 July 2017.
- Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2013 ed. Print.
- Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's Shakespeare Through the Ages: King Lear*. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008. Print.
- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. New York: Vintage International Edition, 1991. Print.
- . *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower. London: Penguin, 2000.
- Carlyle, A. J. "The Theory of Property in Medieval Theology." *Property: Its Duties and Rights*. Ed. C Gore. London: Macmillan, 1915. Googlebooks.
- Dollimore, Jonathan. *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Print.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*. London: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- Goldberg, S. L. *An Essay on King Lear*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980. Print.
- Holbrook, Peter. *Shakespeare's Individualism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Print.
- Kahan, Jeffrey. Editor. *King Lear: New Critical Essays*. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- Knight, G. Wilson. *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy*. New York: Routledge Classics, 2001. Print.

- Mack, Maynard. *King Lear in Our Time*. London: Methuen and Co Ltd., 1966. Print.
- Mehl, Deiter. *Shakespeare's Tragedies: An Introduction*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1986. Print.
- Pattison, George, "Art in an Age of Reflection." *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*. Eds. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Print.
- Radin, Margaret Jane. *Reinterpreting Property*. London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. United States of America: R. R. Donnelley and Sons, 2007. print.
- Wilson, John Dover. *King Lear: The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare Volume 17* New York: Cambridge university Press, 2009.