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## PROBLEM OF UNDERSTANDING THE SELF IN SHAKESPEARE'S KING LEAR

Anshu Kumari

**Abstract:**-In the plays of Shakespeare the problem of man's understanding of himself is associated with that of man's insecurity, and it is treated in the larger frame of the difficulty of understanding the truth in general. This context is also present in the baroque tragedies, but the lack of self-knowledge is here intensified and shown to have gigantic consequences because of the tremendous will and passion of the heroes. In *King Lear* the lack of self-knowledge is treated tragically. It is thought by many to be the greatest of Shakespeare's plays. It has everything: sibling rivalry, parent-child conflict, love, hate, greed, ambition, good versus evil, illegitimacy, adultery, suicide, compassion, Fortune, questions of fate and faith, politics, poverty, deprivation, madness, vanity, senility, cruelty, loyalty, devotion, ageism, dignity and the loss of dignity, examples of the best and worst of humankind.

**Keywords:** King Lear, legitimate and illegitimate, wisdom, self knowledge, justice.

### 1.INTRODUCTION :-

The first scene of *King Lear* makes the strongest statement about lack of self-knowledge anywhere in Shakespeare, so strong a statement that it comes close to being psychologically improbable. A man who arranges a contest of love protestations among his daughters and, as a result, disinherits his favorite at the spur of the moment may be thought, from the point of view of strict realism, to be too foolish to be a tragic hero. Here, Shakespeare has his king commit a well-nigh inexplicable blunder, enhanced by a public display of gigantic wrath. The love declarations, a private matter, become a ceremonious rite of kingship arranged for no better purpose than the satisfaction of Lear's ego after the *fait accompli* of the division of his kingdom. His outbreak of anger is punctuated by the violent oath with which he disclaims propinquity and paternal care of Cordelia. Lear's folly is underlined by his parallel reaction to Kent's courageous warning to "see better." When Lear swears "by Apollo," the asseveration must have struck many in Shakespeare's audience as ironic because the ancients had thought that *nosce teipsum* emanated from this very Apollo. As Kent says, Lear swears his gods in vain. The truth, which Lear says shall be Cordelia's dowry, is irreconcilable with the demands of his ego. His lack of self-knowledge is monumental.

The setting of the scene is a ritual, ceremonious and splendid; but the public show is punctured by elemental passions. The moral and emotional coloring is heightened above realism. Goneril and Regan protest their loves in hyperbolically hypocritical ways; Cordelia, confessing her love for her father in asides, is uncompromisingly forthright in her insistence that she can say nothing to compete with her sisters; Kent minces no words when he calls Lear "mad" and "old man." Will impacts on will, and the clashing forces—evil and good, treachery and loyalty, self-seeking and altruism, hate and love—are irreconcilable. Between these stands Lear, as extreme in his passion as is Cordelia in her low-voiced patience. He is an elementary human force, a creature of a distant and pagan past; when he casts Cordelia from his heart as if she were a "barbarous Scythian," he characterizes himself as barbaric, primitively irrational in his hatred. But this hatred betrays an equally elemental love from which it springs, an unreasonable, egotistic love that demands what it has no right to ask. We cannot but accept Regan's judgment: he has ever but slenderly known himself.

Not enough is one such demonstration of folly; the second scene presents a similarly gigantic blunder. On the basis of the forged letter given to him by his bastard son, the Earl of Gloucester concludes that his legitimate son is a villain who seeks to conspire against him to bring about his death. Edmund pushes the unbelievability of the situation to the degree that he alleges this letter was thrown into his window in what, from a realistic point of view,

must appear to be an unnecessary and inexplicable conspiratorial furtiveness. But Gloucester accepts this monstrous lie as truth; he trusts where he should suspect and suspects where he should trust. Even on Edgar, who enters almost immediately after Gloucester leaves, the villainous practices of Edmund ride easily. The tragedy of Gloucester, which will vie in intensity with Lear's, has begun.

As Lear sharply contrasts good and evil, knowledge and ignorance, patience and passion, so it groups the major characters according to their capacity or incapacity to reevaluate, to suffer, and to learn. Obviously, the irremediably evil ones, Regan, Goneril, Edmund, and Cornwall, do not learn. They "understand themselves" in the sense in which Iago does; they cannot comprehend that feelings and thoughts beyond egotistic desires have beauty and value. Yet, Shakespeare was never simple and schematic, and he gave at least Edmund a last-minute change of mind and perhaps of heart when, against his "nature," he tries to save Cordelia, whose death he has ordered. Yet even this seeming inconsistency helps to point up the destructive consequences of learning nothing or learning too little and too late: Cordelia is already dead. Contrasted with the wicked that refuse to learn are those characters that are sent to school: Lear, Edgar, Gloucester, and Albany. Each of them can be said to fail a test: Lear and Gloucester that of recognizing truth and falsehood, loyalty and treachery; Edgar that of courage and cowardice; Albany that of decision and indecision. Yet each of them also progresses beyond the lowest point, most spectacularly Edgar, who becomes a teacher of patience to his father and, in the end, the prosecutor and judge of the wicked. Two characters need not learn since they already possess truth and goodness, the old Kent and the young Cordelia. They represent virtue by what they are.

The program of self-knowledge inherent in this tragic vision is humanistic in the two major, and not always compatible, senses in which the word is used for Shakespeare's period. The program is humanistic in the sense of this study inasmuch as it contains values championed by the Christian humanists; but it is also humanistic in the sense that the way to self-knowledge is not illuminated by a theologically conceived universe that cooperates in man's plan. The *Deus absconditus* who is enthroned over Lear's England, does not reveal his design. Some time before *Lear*, as we have noted, Shakespeare had dissociated the search for self-knowledge from the purposes of the universe and the dispositions of heaven. But *Lear*, like other plays of Shakespeare, does measure men, not with a divine measurement but with one obtained by a sympathetic and yet firm view of humanity. Much of this measuring is done by the way the characters are compared and contrasted with one another. Man, in *Lear*, is as he values himself and others and is valued by them.

In *Lear*, more than elsewhere, the measuring and valuing proceeds by way of paradoxes. The most sympathetic characters often take positions that contrast with common opinion, and they make us take their perspective. The action itself is constructed on the pattern of a huge paradox that tests the characters by turning them into the opposites of what they were or appeared to be at first. A powerful king, whose every word is a command, becomes a despised old man subjected to the inclemencies of the weather. From the center of his kingdom, he is thrust to its periphery; from a demigod, he plunges to being hardly more than a naked animal. Analogous paradoxical transformations, arising from Lear's and Gloucester's follies, are undergone by others. The two daughters whom Lear has enriched turn against him in boundless cruelty, and the one he has deprived and rejected becomes his last joy. Cordelia, at first Lear's most-loved daughter, then his most hated, is, in his deprivation, his consoler and temporary healer. Kent, the king's favorite nobleman, is made into an outlaw; then, in disguise, he becomes the faithful companion of the king who outlawed him. Gloucester, who like Lear is part-agent of his downfall, descends from a mighty duke to a blind old man, pursued by the bastard son whom he has made his heir, but saved and guided by the legitimate son whom he has disinherited. Edmund, the treacherous bastard, becomes "the legitimate," and, at least briefly, Earl of Gloucester. Edgar, the true and loyal son, finds himself a man without a name, a fugitive who masquerades as a crazed beggar. Yet when all seems lost, he turns into an executor of justice who, although he cannot prevent the death of innocents, exposes the evildoers and brings about their punishment. This outcast of society, Edgar, becomes in the end the ruler of England.

#### CONCLUSION:

Thus King Lear is not merely a call for social justice; it is also an anguished outcry against an unjust cosmic order. Out of Lear's suffering, questioning of necessities and his quarrel with his gods come a proclamation of human fellowship for the achievement of a distribution more nearly equal of the means for happiness. And yet, as I shall argue in the next chapter, our understanding of the meaning of this prayer would be incomplete without some sense of what it does for Lear's own soul. Edgar, who aids the others in their search for self-knowledge, also has to pursue his own quest, and strenuously so. It does not, I think, lead to a certainty of achieving self-knowledge. It does lead, of course, to success in an outward sense by his finding of himself in a significant role, a greater one, indeed, than could have been envisaged before. He resembles the traditional hero of a legend, who has lost his inheritance and suffered much, but who has won a greater gain. Thus he embodies the paradox of *The Defence* that "it is better for a man to lose his worldly estates and dignity than himself to be lost and destroyed forever." But when it comes to describing what Edgar has won, internally, the skeptic reader of the play can hardly be certain. It may be said, perhaps, that he has won "ripeness," the goal that he holds out to his father when the latter falls once more into his fatalistic despair after the lost

#### Problem Of Understanding The Self In Shakespeare's King Lear

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battle: "Men must endure / Their going hence, even as their coming hither: / Ripeness is all". But the content of this ideal ripeness is hard to define; it varies according to the perspective from which we approach it. We must think of it presumably as a concept that merges the best of paganism and Christianity, as do other of the values suggested by the play. We may say that ripeness includes a patient but not fatalistic endurance of life, an altruistic conception of man's role in the world, and a sympathy with all suffering humanity. Admittedly, this is vague; but to go much beyond it is to risk substituting one's own goals for the vaguer, but also more provocatively suggested, ideals of the play. In Edgar, Shakespeare did not portray a pattern that embodies all the wisdom self-knowledge could be made to include, but he created a dramatic character who struggles, in a particular context and under particular circumstances, for the achievement of such wisdom. It would be presuming too much to say that he achieves it; but his career implies that the struggle does avail. A man may find himself, as much as he ever can be said to, even in the naturalistic world of Lear when character and fortune cooperate. The success of Edgar brightens the otherwise somber and tragic ending and increases the feeling created by the play that learning how to evaluate one-self and others justly is important.

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