

## **HUMANISM IN KING LEAR**

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We must needs deal with humanism before locating it in King Lear. Humanity is a word that possesses many meanings. One of the meanings of the word that is current and adhered to fondly is the state of being human. The term is apt to be interpreted as a concern for the welfare of human beings. If we take the second meaning into consideration then being humanistic comes close in meaning to humanitarian. But being humanistic distinguishes itself from being humanitarian by pertaining to an educational programme that stems from the study of Greek and Latin classical literature birthed in Italy in the fourteenth century. Humanism can be interpreted in a larger sense as any philosophy that stresses nature and human action. 'In contemporary society,' we are told by Michael D. Bristol, reference 'Humanist Interpretations' (2007:333), 'some conservatives have opposed the influence of "secular humanism" as an orientation that weakens the authority of religious institutions.' 'In a way,' Britol goes on, 'these critics were quite right, since humanistic interpretations, even of sacred scripture, are strongly distinguished from any type of theological exegesis.' (P.333). Humanism binds itself to a strong view of freedom and liberty which guarantees autonomy. This view finds itself expressed in the Oration on the Dignity of Man, a finely-tuned famous public discourse framed and delivered in 1486 by Pico della Mirandola, an Italian scholar and philosopher of the Renaissance, popularly called the 'Manifesto of the Renaissance'.

As we all know 'liberation' is originated from the Latin 'liberare' 'Liberare' is formed from the Latin 'liber' which, besides meaning 'free', means 'a book'. So we can rake it for granted that humanism also deals with the connexion between human liberation and the library. Humanists believes that men and women can properly equip themselves with a sense of freedom by carefully studying the great written traditions fondly preserved on poetry, philosophy, rhetoric and even in political writings. The traditions enshrine in themselves the basis for a common and universal literature.

The humanism discussed above in a nutshell is often found inherent in folk psychology. Shakespeare scholars' attention zooms in on Shakespeare's characters as they put to use what is called a folk psychology in interpreting the dramatic language and the action needed to portray the characters in the situations in which they are placed. 'Folk psychology is based ,' in the words of Michael D. Bristol, 'on the assumption that people have reasons for what they do, and that those reasons can be inferred from what they say..' (P.335). They, Shakespeare scholars, tend to rely on beliefs and desire and desire and in particular on the 'complex states of mind such as purposes, intentions, and strategic calculations' to explore and examine the reason for an action. We must needs make ourselves enlightened on the nature of folk psychology in King

Lear. If we ask ourselves why Macbeth killed Duncan we shall think of the feasible reason why Macbeth killed Duncan. The reason for killing Duncan is because Macbeth wanted to be king and to become king necessitated the killing of Duncan, There was an inherent ambition dormant in Macbeth's mind to be king and the witches fuelled it. Hence his killing of Macbeth. In King Lear the ambition of Regan and Goneril to grab the property and their green-eyed jealousy on the score of Cordelia because Lear loved her the most are the offshoots of folk psychology. Goneril and Regan waited the opportunity to get their ambition fulfilled and their green-eyed jealousy soothed. It was Lear himself who provided them with the opportunity. Propelled forward by the emotion that clung to Cordelia he arranged a love-profession test for his daughters to show how much they loved him and to prove particularly to his guests that Cordelia loved him the most. His over-indulgent emotion blinded him to the nature of true love. True love remains unuttered and expresses itself in one's behaviour and manners. Regan and Goneril verbalized their false love in the manner designed to deceive King Lear and the king Lear easily stepped into their net of deception. This over-indulgent emotion led the action to move towards the catastrophe.

Folk=psychology reigns supreme in King Lear. As we all know Shakespeare drew upon many variants of a folktale in writing the play King Lear. Let us now talk about the intrusion of the folklore into the play on order to locate the humanism in the play.

I should like to stress the fact that the incursion of a folktale into the play King Lear serves to distinguish the play from other tragedies and characterizes it as a colossus at the centre of Shakespeare's achievement. Since it reveals the grandest effort at imagination and takes within its purview a whole range from king to beggar and beckons at us to move in our imagination from a royal palace across a vast spectrum of social milieu down to a hovel or a bare heath. Its emotional range elongates off the extreme of violent anger on to the tenderest intimacy of the loving reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia who he had banished. The play bespeaks vividly and powerfully the anguish of suffering that has resulted from the inhumanity from man – man and woman – to man, as is evident in the exposure of Lear to the storm and the blinding of Gloucester on the stage. The play reveals a sternness in depicting human cruelty and misery as much as it shows the richness in portraying goodness, loyalty, devotion and self-sacrifice. Writes R.S. Foakes in the introduction to the book King Lear (2000:1)), "Through the Fool's commentary, Poor Tom's 'mad' sayings and the insights gained by Lear and Gloucester suffering, the play vividly exposes human folly, greed and corruption." "It incorporates aspects of pastoral and romance," Foakes continues, "recalls morality plays, has a protagonist of 'epic' stature, and these features, together with the astonishing imaginative range of its action, its languages and its imagery, have encouraged many to see the play in terms of universal values, as a kind of subjective correlative for the spiritual journey through life of suffering Man." (P.1). It is often said of a folktale that it contains universal values.

I had rather summarize below the story of the play in the manner of a folktale to show how the play opens and ends, as does a folktale. Once upon a time there lived a king called Lear who ruled Britain. He had three daughters, Regan, Goneril and Cordelia, but had no son to bequeath the throne to. He was extremely fond of Cordelia for her exquisite beauty, simplicity and honesty and it was because of his bias towards her that Regan and Goneril grew jealous of her and bore secret grievances against their father.

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When Lear grew old he decided to distribute his power and realm among his three daughters, declaring that he would give the largest piece of his kingdom to the daughter who would excel the other two daughters in professing love and they would have to face a test of professing love. He was cocksure that Cordelia would beat the other two daughters down in the profession of love. Regan and Goneril, unscrupulous and mendacious as they were by nature, resorted to a blatant falsehood to beguile their father into believing that they loved him the most. But Cordelia, honest and honest as she was, told him she loved him as should a daughter, not more nor less. This simple and honest reply so much infuriated him that he disowned Cordelia. His fury did not calm down at the disowning of his favourite daughter; it revealed itself more arrogantly when the Earl of Kent, himself Lear's dear friend, interceded with him on behalf of Cordelia. He banished him without second thoughts.

In the meanwhile the King of France, present at court at that time, found himself so charmed at the clear evidence of Cordelia's honesty and virtue that he asked for her hand, knowing though he did she was deprived of a sizable dowry. Cordelia accepted his proposal and left her father to the mercy of her two cunning sisters. Kent, though banished by the unwitting king, stayed on, disguised as one of Lear's servants so that he could try to protect the king from the evil designs of Regan and Goneril. The moment Lear had turned all his wealth and land over to Regan and Goneril, their true nature showed itself in broad relief. Lear with some knights, a fool and Kent disguised as a servant, went over to live with Goneril, but she told him blatantly to his face that she would treat him as the old man he was and nothing more, should he care to live under her roof. Disappointed, Lear sent Kent ahead to inform Regan of his arrival at her house. When he arrived at her house a horrific surprise awaited him. Kent had been "placed in stocks". Kent was, however, set free. Before trying to investigate who had "placed his servant in the stocks", Goneril arrived, giving him the impression that she and Regan were conspiring against him.

Gloucester arrived at Regan's house to hear that the two sisters were conspiring to murder Lear. He rushed immediately over to tell Kent of their conspiracy to kill Lear and told him to send Lear over to Dover where he would be protected. Kent, Lear and the fool left at once for Dover, leaving Edgar behind in the shadows. But Regan and Goneril meantime got to know of Gloucester's having warned Lear of their conspiracy to kill him and Cornwall, Regan's husband, gouged Gloucester's eyes out. A servant, while trying to save Gloucester, attacked Cornwall and dealt him a fatal blow.

News poured in that Cordelia raised an army of French troops and the army had already landed at Dover. Regan and Goneril marshalled their own troops to fight the French army out and started for Dover. Kent had also heard of Cordelia's return and set off with Lear in order that Lear and his daughter could get reunited. Gloucester, too, was going over to Dover and met on the way with his own son, Edgar.

Tired of the ordeal he had faced, Lear slept through the battle that was raging between Cordelia and her two sisters, and woke to hear that Cordelia had been defeated. Lear took the news happily, happily in the sense that he would be imprisoned with his beloved Cordelia far away from the flagitiousness of his two evil daughters. But to belie his expectation Cordelia was put under order for death.

But close on the heels of their victory, Goneril and Regan fell victims to their own evil natures. Both fell in love with Gloucester's conniving son, Edmund who had given order for Cordelia to be executed. Goneril poisoned Regan to remove her from the love contest, and killed herself when she had learned that Edmund had been fatally wounded by Edgar.

Before taking his last breath Edmund repented having given the order for Cordelia to be executed and reversed the order. But the reversal came too late to prevent Cordelia being hanged. Lear appeared, the body of Cordelia carried in his arms, and bent, maddened by grief, over her bed, feeling for a sign of life in the body. He succumbed to the intense grief and fell on top of his daughter. Kent declared that he would follow his master into the world of the dead. The noble Edgar became the ruler of Britain.

It is really surprising that a realistic play about suffering should begin as a fairytale. Pointing at the love-test of Act I and Scene I, Coleridge wrote: "The play is based on a gross improbability. Nursery stories (fairytales) are not a fit subject for tragedy." Several folktales have plots akin to that of King Lear. In one plot the royal father stages a love-test in which his favourite daughter tells him, "I love you as much as salt". Infuriated at this analogy, the king banishes her. After a period of absence the princess returns in disguise to seek employment in the royal kitchen. I remember having read a folktale attributed to the Bengali folklore, dealing with the same theme with a slight variation, variation towards the ending.

In this context is necessary a detailed and elaborate discussion of Act I and Scene I which directs a spotlight on to the conscious incursion of a folktale whose different variations exist in the folklores of different countries, that of Bengal, India for example.

"The opening scene of King Lear," I quote Michael Mangan (2003: 166), to begin with, as saying, "bears a structural similarity to Act I Scene ii of Macbeth. Both are royal occasions of a royal proclamation and state ceremony – and are in fact mirror images of each other in this respect. In the earlier play Claudius addresses the court on the occasion of his taking up the reins of office; here Lear is making his retirement speech, as he is about to pass his crown on to the next generation." In both the scenes it is initially the monarch who arrogates to himself the task of speaking and controlling the scene, the control being challenged by another character who purports to be a minor character in the scene, a member of the royal family. The inky cloak that Hamlet wears emphasizes his dissatisfaction with his step-father and the words he speaks naturally get spiky and bad-tempered. Cordelia, on the other hand, looks inclined to sink into anonymity. Yet Hamlet, by having recourse to aggression, and Cordelia, by maintaining her pained silence, both throw a challenge at the authority of the King, but in the end Cordelia's challenge proves to be the more damaging of the two and devastates the authority of the king.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century folklorists perceived the connection between the old Leir story and the Cinderella tale. Although Shakespeare is not known to have made a direct use of these versions, it is likely of Geoffrey of Monmouth to have alluded to a related body of folklore and folktales, but there is not available on record any evidence to substantiate this view. The correlation between the story of King Leir and his three daughters and the ancient Cinderella tale accounted for the interest roused in anthropologists and psychoanalytically oriented literary critics who have centred their attention on incest motif quiescent in the tales and in the Shakespeare tragedy, king Lear as well.

Our endeavour to locate the nature of humanism links itself to a careful thinking about the exact nature of family obligations and the others associated with the family. We should

consider in our endeavour about the specific kinds of things we owe to persons we love, that is, our dear and near ones. Reciprocity determines the kinds of love that we proffer to our loved ones. Profound relationship is tagged on to family living. The idea of the ‘profound’ in ‘profound relationships’ is so deep and obscure as well that it tilts the balance in the give and take of everyday life. The love of Cordelia for King Lear is profound in herself and obscure to King Lear and, thus, the balance is upset. Profundity of Cordelia’s love expresses itself in the fact that she risks everything by refraining from saying anything. She did not say anything because she desired to put an end to the family bargaining practised and wanted it replaced with more genuine form or reciprocal acknowledgement. The reason why she did not say anything is because she loved her father, King Lear according to her bond. Says Michael D. Bristol. “‘Bond’ comes from the verb ‘bind’, and the past participle of ‘bind’ is ‘bound’, a word that refers both to obligation –what I am bound to do – and to boundary – where I stand as a separately embodied self in the sense of a limit or bourne. A bond is also a pledge or a promise. And in the sense that a bond represents a kind of material value the idea is related to the notion of ‘boon’ or a ‘bounty’, which is Lear’s word for his gift to his daughters.’ (2007: 341). The constellation of words that Michael D. Bristol has talked to us about has given us an insight into the complexity of the family dynamic and explains why Cordelia declined to acquiesce in ‘the bidding for her father’s bounty.’ Humanistic interpretation of the bond that determines the family relationship in King Lear can be applied to the intuition that we can recognize, if we apply our minds to recognizing, the concept of bond in the dramatic situation in the play King Lear. To many readers King Lear is likely to appear as a story telling of ordinary domestic life such as we are wont to live, of family bargaining, of feelings hurt and love unrequited and of an ageing old man who, by demanding, excessive love sort of effaces ‘the elements of trust, openness, and mutual forbearance that constitutes the minimum conditions for any kind of genuine social existence.’ (2007:345).

King Lear deals with two kinds of love: love in human relationship and love in family dynamics, It should be borne in mind that no family, be it famous, rich or royal, is not exempt from family problems. In fact the problems that we are confronted with are all more or less familial. The first scene of King Lear illuminates the dysfunction of two families, one of King Lear and the other of the Earl of Gloucester.

We should concentrate our minds on the dysfunction of the family of King Lear and shall try to give a humanistic interpretation to the dysfunction.

In the opening scene of play Lear, in order to legitimate love, arranges the love-profession test in which he prevails upon each of his three daughters to compete with her other sisters in declaring the greatest amount of love she professes to her father so that the winner can get the largest third of his kingdom as ‘bounty’. Regan and Goneril willingly and happily participate in the competition, for the competition offers them the competition they have been waiting and resort to blatant lies to deceive King Lear.

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