

CONCEPT OF WISDOM AND FOLLY IN SHAKESPEARE'S KING LEAR

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There is a thin line between wisdom and folly. Shakespearean complexity in the presentation of wisdom and folly and their crossing-over the thin line of wisdom and folly reflect Shakespearean scholars as fools and the fools as scholars. The psychological conditions of the characters at various levels *i.e.* physical or metaphysical communicate Shakespearean treatment of wisdom and folly well. In his famous play '*King Lear*', almost all the characters are in pendulum like state tolling from wisdom to folly and from folly to wisdom.

The chief character of the tragedy *Lear*, a king, classically illustrates Shakespearean concept of wisdom and folly. *Lear*, as an ardent scholar passes the judgment of his daughters but fails badly in his judgment and scholarship. This egoist scholar, marred by his own understanding and error in judgment, ironically becomes fool. *Lear*, who wants to get rid of all of his responsibilities, observes wisdom in leaving all the tension of the kingdom. Undoubtedly, the decision of *Lear* is full of wisdom in spiritual context for he does so to '*Shake all cares and business from his age*' but it proves to be a blunder and he comes to us as a fool who sets his own house on fire by his own hands.

In the very first act of the play *Lear* appears as an ardent scholar with map in his hands and a good knowledge of political boundaries in his brain. Like a competent judge, he passes the announcement for the division of his territory:

Give me the map there. Know that we have divided

in three our kingdom: and 'tis our fast intent. (Shakespeare 861 Act-I. I)

Ironically, this passionate judge fails to comprehend the basic truth that the responsibility of a king is to integrate its Kingdom, not its division. Consequently, *Lear* becomes a fool. The expulsion of *Cordelia* was simply an expression of his ego-stricken intellect, which afterward proves to be his folly for which death of *Cordelia* comes as penalty. The wisdom of king bears no fruit but causes death and destruction. Famous Greek playwright *Sophocles* writing about such wisdom says: 'When wisdom brings no profit, to be wise is to suffer.' (*Sophocles* 34) *Lear's* wisdom, bringing sufferings thus, provides evidence of his folly. Marred by his manly effort and ego-prone intelligence, *Lear* expels *Kent* away but accepts the disguised *Kent* as his servant. Here *Lear* is doubly fool first not to recognize the inner spirit of *Kent* and second not to recognize his closest server when in disguise. *Lear*, though, accepts disguised *Kent* out of his folly, yet it proves to be an act of his wisdom, a blessing in disguise. *Lear* now honors the same expelled *Kent* by prizing him and gives him the treatment that *Kent* actually deserved.

Fallen in the trap of worldly consciousness, *Lear* expects his daughters to praise him. Why a father should expect such wooly expression from his daughters? It is a relationship of affection and not that of praise and flattery. *Lear's* wise decision of distribution on the base of

‘that glib and oily art’ consequently, comes out as his folly and soon after division and distribution, he is respected neither as a father nor as a king. Had he not been a real fool, he would at least have not lost his respect as a father.

In the process of distribution, Lear’s wisdom fails as he starts making distribution with his oldest daughter by saying: ‘Goneril, Our eldest-born, speak first’. (Shakespeare, 861, Act-1.1). The common sense says whenever there is question of election and distribution the youngest is given first chance but Lear opts the eldest first. It further proves that wisdom of Lear was the metaphor of his folly. The psychology of Lear as a king and Lear as a mad man further stands in a sharp contrast. We see mentally disturbed Lear expressing wisdom, for he gains real wisdom after losing his kingly mental balance. This time he is not a king but a human being, who offers fool to enter in the cage first. The same king who passes judgment in the opening of the play now requests *Fool* and Kent to be his judges and has conviction of reality that he is no more than “A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man.” (876 Act-III.II) Lear who consecutively speaks eighteen lines out of his scholarship in the first scene now decides: “No, I will be the pattern of all patience; I will say nothing.” (876 Act-III.II) Thus, in a condition like fool, Lear performs the acts full of wisdom, reflecting Shakespearean treatment of wisdom and folly.

Lear, who fails to understand Cordelia and expels her, later, fights to save her life but fails. Now Lear carrying dead Cordelia into his arms tries to find some sign of life in her. In metaphysical context, death here depicts the ultimate reality and the remembrance of death is true wisdom. Life, which shall perish finally, represents false wisdom, a folly. Lear’s state of mind now tolls between the death and life, between wisdom and false wisdom. Poetic justice finally takes King Lear to death. Death takes him away from the mundane world. His repose into the nature after shows Shakespearean wisdom transcending from this world to that world.

The Shakespearean concept of wisdom and folly becomes more complex and deep when the character of Lear comes in comparison with the character of Fool. The presentation of Fool is quite paradoxical to its title. The character entitled *Fool* indeed reflects wisdom throughout the play. Shakespeare entitles him directly as *Fool* to elaborate the paradoxical state of the wise. Fool here leaves the notion that how all the wise men were living in the company of *Fool* or in the company of their own folly and were pleased of the same. Thus, Fool represents the consciousness of the wise. In the play, the discourses of *Fool* are full of wisdom and truth. We must focus on a point that *Fool* is not simply a fun creating or amusing character in the play but it also serves as an icon of faith and loyalty too. He is loyal to his master and seeks to lighten the pain that Lear was suffering from. *Fool*, through his wit, alarms Lear of his folly repeatedly. Apart from his witty and funny remarks, his quips have been a pestilence gall to Lear. The reference to jester about fool in Act-1, Scene-II makes clear it that he is not a worldly character. His dialogues are full of wisdom but he is aware of his wisdom. In comparison to wise men, his serious comments justify the same:

Fools had ne'er less grace in a year;
For wise men are grown foppish,
They know not how their wits to wear,
Their manners are so apish. (867 Act-I.IV)

Fool being source of enjoyment, for kings, comes to us as a subordinate and submissive figure dispensing human love and affection to others. Whenever the fool utters, brings

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consolation, awareness and delight. His words are too witty to create harm. From this aspect he was the wisest, not to bring any loss and still reminding Lear of his folly:

Thou shouldst not have been old
Till thou hadst been wise. (869Act1.IV)

Fool is wise not only from worldly angle, but from metaphysical angle as well. His disappearance from the play after his alarm to go to bed in noon reflects a mystic idea that his purpose in the drama of life was served. In Act-III, Scene -I *Fool's* mystic remark that night pities neither wise man nor fool communicates that all the wisdom and folly ultimately leads to death. *Fool* here reminds of final reality and ultimate truth of the universe. Thus the Shakespearean complexity in the representation of wisdom entitled as '*Fool*', justifies his paradoxical concept of wisdom and folly. This complex treatment of wisdom and folly shows its right image in the storm seen as Lear and Fool enter; Kent questions that who was there. *Fool* answers:

Marry, here's grace and a cod-piece;
That's a wise man and a fool. (876Act-III.II)

Now here who is wise? Lear! No he can't. He has lost his mental balance. If Lear is fool then who is wise? If not *Fool* then who else? Thus, Shakespearean concept of treatment of wisdom and folly synchronized into each other is revealed out. It is none else but *Fool* who recognized Edger disguised as mad man. Watching the condition of Lear and Edger *Fool* gives witty remarks justifying Shakespearean treatment of wisdom and folly: 'This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen'. (877 Act-III.IV) Thus Shakespeare's *Fool* is wise and wise Lear proves to be a fool.

The heroine of the play Cordelia further corresponds to the Shakespearean concept of wisdom and folly. She is sincere, straightforward and righteous lacks in worldly wisdom which leads her to tragedy and problems. Had she understood the psychology of her father, she would have never treated so sternly. She would have averted the self-ruin and destruction of others. Her virtues do not lead to any progression and lack of her worldly insight brings a train of plight and woe. Consequently, the metaphysically wise Cordelia turns to be a big fool:

Truth is not the only good in the world, nor is the obligation to tell the truth the only obligation. The matter here was to keep it inviolate, but also to preserve a father. (Bradley, 320)

The same thought of Cordelia's folly after her death is reminded when Lear says: 'And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no life!' (Shakespeare 891 Act-V.III) In metaphysical context the worldly unwise Cordelia comes to us as figure of truth and her life becomes a symbol of truthful daughter and her death, a metaphor of sacrifice of the Christ. The King of France who takes her as wife judges the true wisdom of Cordelia and thus, by the dint of her righteousness Cordelia gets true loving husband. Had she used that glib art, she would have lost herself to Duke of Burgundy who loved her wealth more than herself.

As far as the question of physical and metaphysical relationship of wisdom or folly is concerned, the king of France and the Duke of Burgundy stand in a sharp contrast to each other. Duke of Burgundy under the influence of worldly wisdom rejects the hand of Cordelia for she was deprived of any kingdom and his worldly wisdom says to Lear:

Pardon me, royal sir;
Election makes not up on such conditions (862ActISceneI)

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But paradoxically this wise fellow turns to be a fool .As for as the true wisdom is concerned, his undane eyes fail to observe the latent virtues of Cordelia and thus by his folly he loses a sincere and loyal lady. The King of France through the eye of his spiritual wisdom is able to see the qualities of Cordelia and takes her as wife by saying:

Love's not love
When it is mingled with regards that stand...
She is herself a dowry. (862ActISceneI)

The Character of Gloucester further represents the Shakespearean treatment of transcendentalism of wisdom and folly. When Gloucester uses his brain ignoring the voice of his heart, falls into wrong dealings and ultimately by his worldly wisdom he meets with a downfall. The playwright justifies it by the act of gauzing of his eyes, for Gloucester lacked insight. The loss of his physical eyes brings to him the real insight, the real wisdom. At the question of Lear that how a blind man can see. Eyeless Gloucester answers: 'I see it feelingly' (885 Act IV.VI)The act of his decision to commit suicide further represents is manly effort, his worldly wisdom to get rid of the pain in a materialistic way but the divine wisdom in the personification of his legitimate son Edger saves him though a reference of supernatural miracle. Finally, when Edger reveals himself to Gloucester, latter psychologically tolls like a pendulum of wisdom and folly expressing his feeling like: 'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief' (891Act V.II). Ultimately he over comes the material barriers and dies naturally with a smile on his face. His mature satisfied and calm death takes him to divine shelter and his idea of 'ripeness' refers to the real wisdom because ripeness and maturity.

The contrast between characters of Edger and Edmund, further elaborates the same concept of wisdom and folly. Edmund who is a great opportunist and knows how to get benefited of each situation, through his wit and manly effort raises the slogan in his mind:

My practises ride easy! I see the business.
Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit:
All with me's meet that I can fashion fit. (865ActI.II)

What of his worldly effort, his influence of worldly love is so strong that he invites the divine power to help him in his acts of treachery. Through his cunning wit he prays: 'Now, gods, stand up for bastards!' (863ActI.II) Edger though wise, marred by circumstances, turns to be mad and acts like a fool. He has to become mad in the name of - *Mad O' Bedlam*'. But turning mad paradoxically symbolized his wisdom through which he manages to convince his blind father and thus his folly leads to wisdom. In the disguised of '*Tom O' Bedlam*', he delivers the deep and mystic discourse: 'Edgar I nothing am' (872Act II.III). His nothingness denotes loss of his identity, escape from the world and entrance into the mystic world of nothingness. Thus, his madness is the metaphor of his wisdom. Edger being a wisely mad man does not disclose his identity to his father for a long time. He was wise enough not to disclose his identity for his father shall be ashamed of. Finally, after Edmund's death when he discloses his identity in Act-IV, Scene-III, Gloucester receives the mixed feelings of grievance and joy. Throughout the play, the character of Edger comes to us as wise character. Ultimately, virtue is rewarded. Until the play lasts, only Albany and Edger preserve and Edger takes the command over.

Kent in the play comes to us as a straightforward character who, in spite of his loyalty, fails to convince others for the want of flexibility and worldly wit .Out of sincerity he points out Lear about his folly but gets banishment and thus paradoxically becomes fool. Kent as he lacks

in flexibility, bears numerous problems. His rigidity symbolizes lack of worldly wisdom that puts him into chains but from metaphysical aspect, his rigidity is his determination. He serves his master through thick and thin.. Serving master for him is the service of god- The supreme master. In mystic context, when Albany offers him to take the command over, he denies this worldly status by giving mystic remarks:

I have a journey, sir, shortly to go;

My master calls me, I must not say no. (892Act V.II)

Here his journey is the journey of unknown world towards his master-God .He leaves the world. The character of Kent thus, represents the amalgamation of wisdom and folly in both, material and spiritual context.

Geoneril, Regan and Cornwall in the play are depicted as ‘wicked three’ these characters have involved themselves in worldly matters in such a way that they cannot care for divine justice .Indeed their worldly wits and vicious practices had turned their wisdom to Satanic wisdom. Their wisdom dwells in fulfillment of conspiracy, hypocrisy and. intrigues. They were too worldly wise to receive metaphysical pleasure. Consequently, their love for satanic wisdom is similar to that of Doctor Faustus, who being wise owes his soul to Satan. Finally their satanic wisdom ends in catastrophe, proving their ultimate folly.

Thus the analysis made through the study of various characters in the play *King Lear* from their psychological aspects in relation to treatment of wisdom and folly reflects the complexity of the characters of the play and it is revealed that Shakespeare has presented the wise as fool and the fool as wise.

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