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NOTE OF ANXIETY AND UNCERTAINTY IN SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

ABSTRACT

Shakespeare's 154 sonnets have been the subject of much critical debate and controversy. Endless discussions often offer to resolve issues as to whom Shakespeare addresses in his sonnets. But no discussion is clever enough to make us fully accept what it says. Perhaps it is the Bard of Avon's artistic skill that brings such enigma. An undercurrent of anxiety and uncertainty flows through many of the sonnets to add to the mysterious nature making scope for diverse interpretation and explanation. This paper seeks to reflect the anxious and uncertain atmosphere that pervades the sonnets. My study will show why the dominant tone is full of anxiety and uncertainty and how it relates to the general atmosphere of the sonnets.

Keywords: debate, enigma, undercurrent, pervade

Introduction

In spite of diversity of interpretation prevalent among the sonnets, We can bind them with a single string that aptly and deftly foregrounds a sense of frustration and unfulfillment that unmistakably ring the note of anxiety and uncertainty now under my discussion. The sonnets were fruits of the pen of the great master artist who took a number of years to compose them. In fact, they do not have a continuity which one might expect from a collection. It is the sense of anxiety and uncertainty in the individual sonnets and also in their co-relation with other sonnets that arrest a careful reader's attention. This point of view gathers strength and vindication while having a close and minute perusal of this literary creation.

Shakespeare perfectly blends the lyrical and the dramatic in the sonnets expressing a strong personal emotion and feeling which amount to anticipation of some misfortune and purposelessness. This tone becomes evident in the procreation sonnets that span from no. 1 to 16. In these sonnets Shakespeare admits in unambiguous terms the failure and transitoriness of his verse. He urges his friend, Mr. W.H to get married and produce children in order to preserve the latter's beauty in progeny. All these sixteen sonnets expose the utter despair and helplessness of the artist. He puts more faith on biological preservation of beauty than on beauty sought to be immortalised in arts. It is his sense of uncertainty that becomes largely audible in these sonnets. In sonnet no. 16- *But Wherefore Do Not You A Mightier Way* – as in other procreation sonnets – Shakespeare's frustration reigns supreme. He admits that Mr. W.H can battle against 'this bloody tyrant time' by only getting married and producing offspring. Nothing can express more vividly his diffidence in his verse when he talks of his 'barren rhyme'. The use of the very word 'barren' implies stagnation and infertility resulting in transience. When a writer writes and sees the futility of labour, we can feel the agony of his heart and art. In this very sonnet he talks of his 'pupil pen' that signifies immaturity and lack of knowledge. He further admits that he can portray neither inward worth nor outward beauty of his friend in his verse. The biological means alone can provide a way to escape from transitoriness and decay. A poet like Shakespeare can think in this way only when he is steeped in anxiety and uncertainty. This spirit gets further highlighted in sonnet no. 17 – *Who Will Believe My Verse In Time To Come*. The poet here acknowledges that 'in time to come' his verse will be worthless and people will not have the least faith in and attraction for his verse. He frankly says "The age to come would say this poet lies". It is true that he suspects next generation of taking his verse as 'lies'. A man should believe himself and only then he can expect of being believed by others. In this case the poet has no faith in himself and out of this lack of self-confidence arise the anxiety and uncertainty that finally lead him to think himself a liar. Moreover, he is anxious that his verse will be 'scorned' by people. The fear of being scorned takes one to the verge of life and existence.

Thus the procreation sonnets underline the marks of anxiety and uncertainty that surround his creation. All the sonnets in this group seek to highlight the poet's failure and frustration as an artist. It seems to me that those sonnets emphasise more on the dejection and disappointment of the poet as an artist than the love he professes to nurture for his friend. There will be no exaggeration in the statement that it is his feeling of anxiety and uncertainty that made him write those sonnets. In this case his creativity emanates from gloom and despair.

Shakespeare seems to get lost in despair and despondency in other sonnets as well. In sonnet no. 18 – Shall I Compare Thee To A Summer's Day – the same note of anxiety and uncertainty can be sensed by a perceiving reader. The poet is reluctant to compare the beauty of his friend, Mr. W.H to that of a day in summer. He thinks that his friend is more mild and lovely in temper than the summer. During summer the rough winds shake the buds, and the period of summer is also very short. In summer the sun is often too hot and often is covered with clouds. But the beauty of his friend always shines steadily. The beauty of his friend will not diminish unlike that of summer. All these are points to justify his claim that a summer's day cannot be given equal weightage with his friend in terms of beauty and acceptability. This is quite strange. Nature is always beautiful and pleasant. We talk of even horrible beauty of nature. The word beauty is part and parcel of nature. Human beauty easily gets denigrated before natural beauty. But in this sonnet Shakespeare does just the opposite. His thought flows in contrary course. It is anxiety and uncertainty nibbling on his mind that does not allow him to see what is right. The faults that Shakespeare highlights to belittle summer are not the blemishes of summer but the real beauties that characterise nature in its ideal and pleasant form. Under a depressed mood the poet prefers human beauty to the beauty of soothing, relieving and ever consoling nature.

In sonnet no 19-Devouring Time Blunt Thou The Lion's Paws-anxiety and uncertainty take another form. He urges Time in humble tone: "O carve not with thy hours my love's fair brow,/Nor draw o lines there with antique pen". The poet here wants, as it were, to stop time. Time is impregnable and it goes on flowing. It cannot be stopped. Immediately after this thought he pretends to throw off anxiety when he says: "yet do thy worst old Time: despite thy wrong /My love shall in my verse ever live young". This is not certainty and assurance but an utmost effort to escape from the embarrassing request he made to Time a while ago. The poet is ashamed that he has failed to differentiate between possibility and impossibility due to his own despair and despondency that make him lose the light of reason.

Anxiety and uncertainty enter the ambience of sonnet no 54-O, How Much More Doth Beauty Beauteous Seem- in a different guise. A beautiful thing strikes us as being more beautiful when the quality of truth embraces it. Then beauty becomes much more admirable. The three quatrains of the sonnet seek to amplify this with the help of a prolonged contrast between the wild rose having no odour and the sweet-scented rose that charms us with its beauty and fragrance. The poet is anxious to have an ideal amalgamation of truth and beauty. But he cannot find. He is attracted by the outward beauty just like the beauty of a wild rose but gets frustrated when he cannot find truth. He hankers after the Ideal but the Real stands in

the way. We are reminded of John Keats' *Ode On a Grecian Urn* where the urn delivers priceless knowledge to mankind very briefly but with full significance: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty".

The conflict between what we have and what we aspire to have is eternal. In the sonnet this struggle is vividly exposed. The wild rose has no odour. It "lives unwooded and unrespected fade". The poet is pained to see such a helpless condition of the wild rose that gets little honour and respect. While sweet scented rose gets due honour even after its death: "of their sweet deaths are sweetest odours made". Here the division is on the basis of possession. Anxiety and uncertainty engulf the poet when he sees growing divergence between the Haves and the Have Nots. Trade and commerce in Elizabethan period created on the one hand a rich merchant class and on the other a group of poverty-stricken people. The gulf in natural objects seems to have semblance in human society. A poet like Shakespeare cannot help being anxious and despondent in such a society.

Sometimes anxiety and uncertainty put on mask to dodge easy identification as in sonnet no. 55-"Not Marble, Not The Gilded Monuments".The marble *statues and* beautifully ornamented monuments of kings and rulers will not have longer life. The destructive war will eliminate the marks of civilization. 'War's Quick fire will engulf every sign of civilization. Men themselves will destroy the fruits of men's labour and perseverance. Nothing can be more agonizing than this. The present glory easily fades when one anticipates of death, decay and destruction. The reference to Mars, the god of war adds to the atmosphere of destruction. The final confirmation of the immortality of the poet's verse is only a faint consolation projected by the poet himself.

Sonnet no 60- "Like As The Waves Make Towards The Pebbled Shore" explicitly deals with issues of anxiety and uncertainty. Shakespeare here draws exquisite word picture to give vent to inherent note. This Sonnet describes the high speed at which time travels fast to bring about a positive change in the life of a man and then travels more speedily to cause decline in his life. The first twelve lines of the sonnet express this idea convincingly. The minutes of our lives pass quickly to bring our lives to an end just as the sea waves advance towards the seashore on which lie pebbles. Each minute of our lives quickly follows the one which has just passed. Each minute tries to run as fast as possible to replace the one which has already passed. We rejoice the birth of a child. The gradual growth of a child towards maturity fills us with complacency. After he has reached the pinnacle of his life time begins to strike him hard: "And nothing stands but for his (Time's) scythe to mow". We lose everything in course of time. The thing that pleases us today will be engulfed by cruel jaws of

time tomorrow and subsequently it will be exported to the world of oblivion. This is quite heart rending. This anxiety of decay and uncertainty of existence is voluble in the sonnet.

A parallel note is found in sonnet no. 64- “Where I Have Seen By Time’s Fell Hand Defaced”. Here the poet witnesses the disfigurement caused by the cruel hands of Time. Tombs and monuments which were once held in awe and wonder are dashed to the ground. Many tall towers that once raised their heads in pride and glory are brought down to the ground by the passing of time. Monuments made of brass constantly suffer damage due to the devastating wrath of death. The image of the hungry ocean encroaching upon the land and the land encroaching upon the sea is very beautiful. But the underlying meaning is full of anxiety and uncertainty. The sea is not satisfied with its boundary. So it wants to encroach upon the land. The land also does the same thing. Thus the feud goes on forever. Nobody listens to none. This only causes havoc to either side. The poet sees the destructive effects of time and ponders over the fact that his friend Mr. W. H will also one day pass away: “Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminat/That Time will come and take my love away”. Even the concluding couplet overtly highlights the note of anxiety and uncertainty in the poet: “This thought is as a death which cannot choose/But weep to have that which it fears to lose”. The poet admits that the knowledge of death causes him so much pain that he cannot help weeping over the possession of a friend whom he is afraid of losing. Anxiety and uncertainty here make Shakespeare ‘weep’.

Sonnet no. 73- “That Time of Year Thou Mayst in Me Behold” is perhaps the most touching example of the dominant note discussed so far. The poet is passing through the unhappiest time of his life. Perhaps death is approaching to take him away. The feeling in this poem is again one of sadness and here it culminates to despair. The poet has reached the autumn of his life. During autumn trees became bare. Nature loses beauty. Some of the remaining leaves become yellow. The poet compares himself with autumn. The second quatrain carries forward the same note of decay and despair. He has reached the twilight of his life. He will soon be taken away by ‘black night’: “Death’s second self that seals up all in rest”. The poet is waiting for final rest in death. The third quatrain presents the image of a dying fire. The poet is now “consumed with that which it was nourished by”. His friend Mr. W. H. Clearly perceives this condition of the poet. The concluding couplet is pregnant with meaning: “This thou perceives, which makes thy love more strong,/To love that well, which thou must leave ere long”. The poet is on the verge of death. He is tired of his existing life-in-death situation. Even his friend’s love that is ‘more strong’ cannot rescue him from the anxiety ridden state.

Sonnet no.77-“Thy Glass Will Show Thee How Thy Beauties Wear” is quite interesting in which an entirely different idea has been expressed by Shakespeare. Here the poet advises his friend to maintain a diary in which the latter can take down his thoughts and actions. With the passage of time the beauties of his friend will gradually diminish and one day fade away. Furthermore, time is inexorable and relentless. The example of the mirror and the sun-dial are most appropriate to convey the passing of time. “Times thievish progress to eternity” is a commendable phrase that aptly brings out swift but unseen flow of time. The poet is too much worried at the fleeting beauty of his friend.

Again, sonnet no. 81- “Or I Shall Live Your Epitaph To Make”- directly broods over death. If Shakespeare survives his friend Mr. W.H, he would write the epitaph to be inscribed on his friend’s tomb. If the friend survives, Shakespeare, the latter would be buried in a common grave and be rotten and completely forgotten. He talks of his power of pen to immortalise his friend. But in fact, Shakespeare unconsciously emphasises the thought about the death of his friend. The poet is quite uncertain when he will lose his friend. He is anxious so much so that he cannot forget the darkness of death.

In sonnet no.100- “Where Art Thou Muse That Thou Forgetest So Long” the anxiety and uncertainty arise out of quite different situation. The Muse of poetry has forsaken him. He cannot write good sonnet in praise of his friend Mr. W. H. The poet has turned infertile. He is uncertain whether he will be able to write good sonnet in praise of his friend. He calls the Muse ‘resty’ that indirectly suggests that his own genius has become inactive. Such a poetic infertility is quite unbearable to a poet like Shakespeare. No other situation can make him more anxious pushing him to the realm of uncertainty.

Apart from the individual sonnets being steeped in the note of anxiety and uncertainty, a general string of frustration and failure strongly ties the sonnets together. In fact, each sonnet is a step that unmistakably leads us to the depth of his heart. It seems to me that a particular sonnet cannot be read and tasted in isolation as the unbreakable chain binds them together. The sonnets are the place of getting into personal touch with the poet. Unlike the plays, each sonnet of the sonnet series is the most important flower that makes the garland of anxiety and uncertainty. Each sonnet contributes at different level and layer. Sometimes the cause of anxiety and uncertainty is social and sometimes natural. But mainly it is the personal cause. And this personal cause is perhaps the main push behind any literary creation. Our saddest feelings pave the way for sweetest literature. The sonnets of Shakespeare are no exception to this.

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