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Reflection of various traits of Shakespearean Characters in Modern Literature

Abstract

Character forms an integral part of a piece of a literary work. Literature presents us the picture of different types of character, which we perceive also in real life. Shakespeare painted the visages of a myriad of characters, the reflection of which we find through the ages. The characters portrayed by the master dramatist in the Elizabethan age find an echo in the modern age. Different traits of human character like vacillation, vaulting ambition, shrewdness, mistrust and obsession have always been prevalent in the human world. The modern people possess the above mentioned traits as genuinely as did the Elizabethan people. One's suffering from indecision is true throughout the ages and so is one's craving for excessively high demands. One becomes cunning by virtue of one's situation and is also ensnared by the feelings of faithlessness and excessive passion for someone or somebody. These traits have always dominated man through time immemorial.

Keywords: Character, vacillation, vaulting ambition, shrewdness, mistrust, obsession.

Introduction

Character, as put forward by Aristotle in his The Poetics (Ch. XV), holds a very important position in literary works, next only to plot. In Greek tragedies, character used to be "good but not too good", having a flaw, *hamartia* (Rees, P-50) that compels him to break *themis* (Rees, P-50) or moral order to be ultimately punished by Fate or *Nemesis* (Rees, P-50). Characters were considered as dependent on destiny. But Shakespeare introduced that characters were themselves responsible for their downfall. Characters were consistent and true to life. So they used to be more appealing to the audience. Various aspects of the human

psyche could be seen in the characters-vacillation, obsession, shrewdness, mistrust, and vaulting ambition. Shakespeare created characters with a psychological appeal. Different facets of characters, mentioned above reflect the real picture of the human psyche. These pictures are echoed vividly also in the literary works of modern artists.

This article presents a comparative analysis of the works of Shakespeare and Modern writers focusing on the similarity between the two. The traits-vacillation, obsession, shrewdness, mistrust, vaulting ambition, highlighted in the works of Shakespeare are echoed in modern literature.

Vacillation

Vacillation is that aspect of human character, which presents an indecisive mind. One's procrastination leads him to excessive speculation, resulting in inactivity. This rouses a sense of dilemma in a character, preventing him from taking drastic steps. In Shakespeare's Hamlet, the protagonist is found engaged in several speculations about his father's murder and being certain about the real accused. He is seen to display a strong dilemma regarding his course of action to avenge his father's death. He chastises himself for lacking promptness in his action. Yet he vacillates-to act or not to act. His reflective nature gives way to philosophic speculations. He is found to be incapable of formulating and executing any effective plan. This leads to delay and deferral of activities. He finds great difficulty in accepting the harsh situation of his uncle murdering his father and marrying his mother. At first he is in search of authentic evidence but even when he gets it, he is hesitant in taking any drastic step to avenge his father's assassination. This sensitivity and reflective nature of Hamlet leads to his tragic end.

This aspect of vacillation is very much relevant in modern context. Modern man is too much speculative and is very often unable to take the right step at the appropriate time. Modern man is characterised by vacillation, procrastination and existential crisis. Eliot's The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, vividly portrays this indecision and delay in execution of plan. He thus oscillates, "to be or not to be" in close association with women "who come and go". The

repetition of his inactivity reveals his oscillation of mental disposition. Just like Hamlet, Prufrock keeps on procrastinating but he wonders "Do I dare?" He is never strongly resolved to "Disturb the universe." On another occasion, Prufrock comments:

"In a minute there is time

For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse" Eliot (Lines 46-47)

He is always waiting for the right moment to react just as Hamlet who engages in unending array of decisions and revisions. His expectation that there will be time to act and his immediate reiteration upholds his indecision. This is the reality of modern man, getting engaged in prolonged speculation, pondering over events and actions, leading to just a labyrinth of indecisions, inactivity and postponement. The image of a cat used to describe the descent of a sluggish evening and fog's leaping, curling and sluggish movement reflect man's lack of promptness regarding diligence. Irresolution leading to deferral in work is evident in the lines:

"There will be time, there will be time

...

There will be time to murder and create,

And time for all works and days of hands

...

And time yet for a hundred indecisions,

And for a hundred visions and revisions," Eliot (lines 26, 27-28, 32-33)

The lines present a reverberation of Hamlet's thoughts. One never knows when and how to begin, whether to execute or not. Man is always bewildered like Prufrock:

"Then how should I begin

...

And how should I presume." Eliot (lines 58, 61)

His denouement results from his inertness, digressions and indecisions.

Vaulting Ambition:

Vaulting ambition has been prevalent throughout the ages. Shakespeare dealt with this emotion in his Macbeth, through the protagonist Macbeth, who leads to his downfall owing to his excessive ambition for power. The prediction of the 'instruments of darkness' reveals the darkness of the innermost core of Macbeth's heart. They predict Macbeth would be 'king hereafter' and Banquo-a father to a lineage of kings. Macbeth at once tries to turn it to a reality. Macbeth disturbs cosmos to create chaos. Instigated by his wife, he assassinates Duncan to gain kingship. He moves forward to fulfil his "black and deep desires". Despite knowing that he would have to pay a high price for murdering Duncan, he is unable to control his overleaping ambition:

"I have no spur

To prick the sides of my intent, but only

Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself

And falls on th' other--" (1.7.25-28)

His conscious mind is in a continuous conflict between his uncontrollable, unconscious desire for adopting vile means and the prick of his conscience that reminds him of dire consequences. Macbeth moves to execute "the swelling act of the imperial theme". The 'horrid images doth unfix' his hair and makes his firm heart shudder 'against the use of nature'. His vaulting ambition makes him makes him surrender to his unconquerable aspirations, Macbeth comments:

"Stars, hide your fires:

Let not light see my black and deep desires:" (1.5.50-51)

He moves to the extent of murdering Banquo, later Macduff's wife and children to ensure that his royal stature is not disturbed. In the end , he turns a tyrant, a fanatic murderer. He is put to death in the end by Macduff.

Thus, vaulting ambition makes a man lose his rationality. This situation is also found in Raju, the protagonist of R.K. Narayan's The Guide. Raju also succumbs to his vaulting desire for

attaining popularity through economic upliftment when he goes to the extent of forging Rosie's signature to be at par with her. Raju, a tourist guide steers Rosie to the fulfillment of her desire to become a dancer but himself goes astray to become a greedy forger. Once a sincere lover, Raju becomes a greedy money-monger. Raju empathises with Rosie, helps her cultivate her dancing potential, provides her inspiration and gives impetus to her latent talent. He gives her moral as well as physical support. He castigates society as well as familial allegations of being 'ensnared by a serpent girl' and assists her to cope up with her tumultuous life. He acts as a valiant warrior who wins the battle against social extortion of a woman to enable her to reach the acme of success. Her increasing popularity increases Raju's unconscious desire for earning money to such an extent that he forges her signature to misappropriate her jewels to convert them to easy money. His craving for wealth prompts him to commit an offence and thereby distorts his morality. He is imprisoned. Rosie rejects him for his falsehood. He has to pay a huge penalty through his captivity. His excessive desire of raising his socio-economic status leads him to an irrecoverable hiatus with Rosie. The guide for tourists, Raju, has to pay for his own misguided efforts.

Shrewdness:

Shylock's shrewdness in taking revenge on Antonio for insulting him and his race is vividly portrayed in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice. The outburst of Shylock presents the conflict between the Jews and the Christians. Cruelty shown towards him by the Christians has turned him into an antagonist. This makes him demand a pound of flesh from Antonio's heart in return of a loan. His shrewdness and vengefulness is a product of injustice he has suffered in the hands of the Christians. He attempts to take revenge on Antonio by murdering him. Shylock retorts that Antonio had called him 'misbeliever, cut throat dog' (1.3.106) and had 'spit' upon his 'Jewish gaberdine' (1.3.108). Antonio has also 'void his rheum upon' his beard and 'spurned him' (1.3.113). Shylock agrees to lend him three thousand ducats for three months and adds that if he fails to pay the debt in the stipulated time, he would have to forfeit one pound of flesh from his heart. Antonio's act of disgracing him, laughing at his losses, scorning his nation, heating his enemies just for being a Jew, provokes Shylock to make the full use of opportunity to take revenge. Shylock's dreadful pact arises out of a fire of vengeance fanned by prejudice. His vengeful attitude transforms him to a devil incarnate, asking for one's life on being unable to return a debt. If social prejudice turns Shylock into an

inhuman cunning fellow, then we can say that circumstance transforms man's nature. External environment brings huge change in the internal framework of human mind and transforms into a shrewd beast.

Thus circumstance ushers in shrewdness in man. This is evident not only in Shakespearean "Shylock" but also in modern literature. Kurtz in Conrad's Heart of Darkness, is a vivid portrayal of shrewdness. Once a noble-minded, lofty being, admirable and efficient merchant, Kurtz turns to be a shrewd dealer of ivory, who does not hesitate in killing the natives to fulfil his demands. Entering into the heart of darkness, Kurtz gets entangled in cannibalism of the tribes of Congo to become a cannibal himself. He mercilessly kills the protestors and hangs their skull on poles to make a fence round his hut. The savagery of the wilderness gets it complete hold over Kurtz. He comes from a civilized world for trade but takes to barbarism in the interior of Congo. His pamphlet "Exterminate all the Brutes" reflects his shrewdness. After his prolonged stay among the savages, Kurtz himself becomes a savage. He identifies himself with them to such an extent that they begin to consider him as one of them. He presides over their unspeakable rites and participates in human sacrifice to appease their gods. His primitive appetites and lusts find their gratification in the primitive tribal world. His dying words "The Horror! The Horror!" (Conrad, 100) reflects his return to civility on the one hand and the extent of brutality he has reached under the influence of the dark world on the other. The external dark nature brings to light the internal darkness of human nature that thrusts one to fanaticism. Shrewdness in Shylock and Kurtz present the presence of shrewdness in man throughout the ages.

Mistrust:

Mistrust is that aspect of human psyche that arises from as well as results in betrayal. This is detrimental to human relationship and emotional bond between characters. All through the ages, various literary pieces have portrayed mistrust through characters as a chief motif. Mistrust has been the basic theme in Shakespeare's Othello and E.M. Forster's A Passage to India.

In Shakespeare's Othello, Mistrust leads to disastrous catastrophe of the protagonists. Othello mistrusts his wife Desdemona about a liaison with Cassio. He is led to this anomaly through the traitor, Iago. Othello's extent of mistrust directs him to take the life of his wife as well as

himself, when anagnorsis eventually reveals the honesty of Desdemona and Cassio. Iago connives to convince Cassio to drink and engage in a brawl provoked by Roderigo. Iago uses Othello to meet his selfish ulterior motives, who demotes Cassio. Othello's sense of insecurity regarding Desdemona's commitment towards him makes him commit the mistake of trusting a traitor, Iago. Iago acquires a special handkerchief which Othello had given to her as a token of love. Iago makes it appear Desdemona has given it to Cassio. This makes Othello doubt about an illicit relationship between Desdemona and Cassio. He never demands an answer from her and starts mistrusting her fidelity. This Hamartia of Othello leads to dire consequences.

Othello doubts Desdemona so much that he falls prey to the contriving Iago. He is overthrown from the banks of love by the surging conspiracies of Iago. Miscommunication dismantles Othello's love for Desdemona. Iago manipulates an imaginary relationship between Desdemona and Cassio to make Othello's love for Desdemona appear false and trust his greatest betrayer Iago. He does not totally scrutinize the evidence as to the information provided by Iago. He blindly believes in Iago's allegations. Mistrust forms the very basis of the play. The way to the human heart is choked through mistrust. Born out of the crafty mind of Iago, mistrust makes its way into Othello's heart and mind to prevent spontaneous journey of faith into the hearts of Desdemona and Cassio. Mistrust distorts love as well as friendship.

Mistrust also forms the basis of E.M. Forster's A Passage to India. The 'passage' to human psyche through the passage to the Indian landmass and culture faces the hindrance of mistrust. The Europeans mistrust Indians and enslave them. They bring false charges against the honesty and character of the Indians. So is with the Indians too. This lack of trust prevents the two nations from meeting with each other. Dr. Aziz, representing Indian culture, moves away from Fielding, portraying European culture. This happens when Aziz is falsely accused of molesting Adela Quested, a European lady, who has come with Mrs. Moore for her engagement with Ronny. A clash occurs between the two nationalities. Adela later admits her lie but a fissure is created between the two fiends, Aziz and Fielding. The English women always suffer from a sense of insecurity and feel they might be assaulted by the Indian males. Thus the seed of mistrust prevents them from actually knowing the Indians. The very plinth of mistrust never allows the erection of the edifice of the union of the two cultures, nationalities and temperaments.

Obsession:

Another aspect of human character is obsession. Obsession is a strong sense of feeling for something or somebody that makes one lose his or her sensibility, rationality, turning him into an irrational and insensible being. Obsession leads one to dire consequences. This is a fact to be found in Shakespeare's Antony and Anita Desai's Maya.

In Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra, Antony is obsessed with his sensual love for Cleopatra. He becomes obsessed to such an extent that he forgets, rather disregards his royal stature and duties towards the nation and family:

"Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch

Of the ranged empire fall" (1.1. 34-35)

Emotion overpowers his reason. Getting entangled in an affair with Cleopatra, Antony loses his own self. This leads to his downfall. He sacrifices his military position by allowing Cleopatra to determine his course of action. His obsession is highlighted at the very onset of the play:

"...you shall see him

The triple pillar of the world transformed into

A strumpet's fool." (1.1.11-13)

Antony even later admits his sword has been made weak by his affection.

This speech reveals Antony has lost all his self-control and imperial responsibility because of his obsession for the Egyptian queen. Antony permits her to exercise her full hold over him. He suffers from frustration for his inability to liberate himself from the entanglements of Cleopatra's sensibility. In the end, he wishes to commit suicide. He loses self-confidence and social position. The god-like triumvir, Antony diminishes to a mere hedonist. The exotic, intelligent, beautiful and sensual Cleopatra wins over his heart. She totally emasculates him through her manipulations.

Obsession has been a dominating emotion even in modern ages. In Anita Desai's Cry, the Peacock, Maya, the protagonist presents a woman's predicament of struggling to find

liberation from the restrictions imposed by a male chauvinistic society. Having led a motherless childhood, she tries to seek refuge in a father-figure. Just as her father has steered her to youth from childhood, she expects her husband to lead her from insecurity to safety. She suffers from a strong sense of insecurity.

"Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour? I am in need of one. I am dying, and I am in love with living. I am in love and I am dying."(84)

She is entrapped in the obsession of fear—fear of death as predicted by an astrologer. She receives a comfortable upbringing but the high intensity of mental agony, resulting from her husband ends in an explosive denouement.

A 'magician' had foretold that either she or her husband would die after four years of their marriage. She becomes too obsessed with the apprehension of death. This results in the increase in hiatus between the couple.

"One of us will win, the other must lose."(97)

Her obsession makes her morose even at the death of her pet. She considers it as an evil omen, suggesting the inevitable end of one of them. She has always been treated as merely a child living in a fanciful world of dreams and illusions. She considers her life to be an illusion, which calls for an unstable, transitory, immaterial existence. Her immaturity and excessive obsession of fear of death is detrimental to her psychic development. Engrossed in the 'albino's prophecy', she rejects the real world to create a world of her own. She makes her own interpretation of the cry of the peacock before the monsoon as symbolic of her disastrous consequence. The sunset and the purple hue create an indelible impact on her mind of an unavoidable demise. She becomes obsessed with darkness. The darkness of her mind hinders her from all sorts of exposure to illumination. She confines herself in a world of superstition and is unable to do away with the constraints of the society. She is unable to overcome her fears and baseless beliefs. The gloomy state of affairs is unacceptable to her. She thinks of how a peacock seizes a snake and breaks its body to relieve its own pain. She craves for an immediate outlet. Under the spell of delusion, she kills Gautama, her husband by thrusting him down from the terrace. Her unconscious desire to kill her husband was

directed by a strong sense of revenge on her frustration from an unhappy, married life, unfulfilled longings and Gautama's unresponsive attitude to her. She kills him and brings an end to her anxiety for 'one and had to die'. Later she finds relief from intense anxiety and agony through her suicide. Tortured by negligence and ignorance, she is thrust into emotional vacuity and superstition, accompanied by illusory creations. She is unable to find respite from the seething inward trouble of her psyche and gets obsessed with impracticality.

CONCLUSION

Thus, we see that certain aspects of human characters are prevalent throughout the ages. The aspects revealed by the protagonists are true for both Elizabethan and Modern eras. The emotions of vacillation, vaulting ambition, shrewdness, mistrust and obsession always prevail in the human mind. The human psyche is never disentangled from the vicious shackles of these negative impulses. It seems to be in a firm grip of these uncivilized aspects however sophisticated it becomes through culture or practice. Thus Hamlet's vacillation finds an echo in Prufrock's procrastination, Macbeth's vaulting ambition seems to find its reflection in Raju's craving for popularity, Othello's mistrust is also found in the mistrust of Adela, Shylock's shrewdness finds repetition in Kurtz's cunning nature and last of all, obsession is true in case of Antony as well as Maya. Everyone suffers for these traits but these traits do not die with their death. These traits are eternal. They continue to rule human psyche throughout the ages.

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