

Power Theory in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Othello*

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Abstract

The Power politics play an important role in our life. Twentieth century has witnessed the role of power in all the sections of life. A whole power theory is based on this topic. But the roots embracing this power can be found in the works of Shakespeare. The researcher wants to establish the eminent role of power suggesting authority in political as well as personal level through the works of Shakespeare. Shakespeare being a revolutionary had started many new trends. He is known for his characterization, stage techniques, psychological understanding etc. But he also understood the role of power in human society and politics. One can clearly see the dominance of power and consequences in his plays. He created the foundation in establishing the power theory through his plays like *Othello* and *Macbeth*.

Key Words: Power, authority, gender conflict, race, ambition, desire

He breathed upon dead bodies and brought them into life. Nor sequent centuries could hit Orbit and sum of Shakespeare's wit.- Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), *May-Day and Other Pieces*

Shakespeare is considered as one of the most influencing creator of the era. He brought a new vibe through his out of the box attitude. Drama and Poetry are both indebted to him. He is like a potter who moulded the shape and form of his works and created something which was aesthetically, psychologically, and philosophically- poetry in itself. Shakespeare was born on 23th April, 1564 and brought up at Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire. By early 1590's he became a partner in Lord Chamberlain's Men, an acting company in London. His most famous works are written between 1589 and 1613. Interestingly, very little is known about his personal life. He is legendary through his literary works. After writing comedies and tragedies in his

lifetime, he also wrote many tragicomedies during the later years of his life.

It is true that the plot structure of many of his dramas is influenced by Greek classics but however the originality in the treatment of these dramas resulted in the overwhelming response and success of it. Elizabethan age is remembered greatly as a golden age for Literature. Shakespeare was just one among the other gifted literary personage but what separated him was his sheer talent of projecting the unseen and making it extraordinary. This talent is often criticized over centuries but it has not created any change in his stature.

Greek dramas dominated the field of entertainment till Elizabethan age. The audience considered dramas as an aspect of royal personage. These dramas provided entertainment, but were surreal to the audience. Their inner core remained untouched. Shakespeare changed this scenario. He brought dramas to the level of common man. His projection of characters

was realistic and natural. The aura thus created made the audience apprehend to the drama as a part of their own life and the character seemed to be a part of their own soul. He provided common man a platform in his drama.

His plays were not just an enactment of story. They added quite more flavour than that. He understood his characters to their core. Their happiness, sorrow, guilt, kindness, jealousy, greed, pathos, love, hate, revolt etc. was not treated just as an emotion but as an integral part of his character. He provided reasoning to such emotions. This reasoning made the character more reliable and this reliability made it more presentable and acceptable. His drama was nothing but permutation and combination of versatile emotions overlapping in depiction of a character. This aspect is more appreciable because he discovered this yin and yang side of human psychology far before the existence of this subject. This is the reason his characters are not just famous but they are 'Legends' in history; no matter how positive or negative they might be.

Role of Power:

In social science and political theory power is the ability to influence or control the behaviour of the people. In spite of its negative persona it becomes an important element in structuring the human society. In society there are diverse interests. When there are conflicts among them one interest dominates over the other and becomes superior. Thus, power creates as well as resolves conflicts. Political power is the capacity to affect behaviour of others by some form of sanction in order to achieve desired results. Sociological power is the ability to have one's own decision, select

alternatives or reduce complexities for others.

Michel Foucault, the French Postmodernist, has been hugely influential in shaping the understandings about 'Power'. According to him, Power is yielded by 'episodic' or 'sovereign' acts of domination and coercion. It requires both constraint and enablement. Power exists only in relationship or interaction between two elements or actors. It does not have a specific centre due to unequal distribution. Power is never permanent. It changes from time to time and shifts its source.

'Power is everywhere' and 'comes from everywhere' so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure (Foucault 1998: 63).

The role of power has always fascinated Shakespeare. It could be the power of politics, power of authority, power of love or power of masculinity. He very well understood that power plays an important role in the life of humans. It is the driving force of nature. We are surrounded by power. Humans are attracted towards it as it is manifested in their psyches since the dawn of civilization.

Power can be moulded in both positive and negative direction. Shakespeare has realised its importance and allowed its characters to realistically modify their traits with its emergence. This is the reason that instead of being centuries old, these characters still holds the same impact in reader's mind. With every reading they have the capability to project something new to us.

Role of Power in Macbeth:

Macbeth was written early in 1606, and the earliest recorded performance was in 1611

at the globe theatre, London. Shakespeare took the story from the Chronicles (1577), a history mainly written by Raphael Holinshed and thus known by his name 'Holinshed'. Shakespeare portrays Macbeth as a divided man. On one hand he has a moral code which recognises his duties as host, subject and kinsman to Duncan, but on the other hand his burning ambition to get the powerful position of king leads him to act against his better nature.

During the Elizabethan age Kingship was said to be bestowed by God. If defiance occurs in this rule it results into disturbance of social and religious order. Macbeth kills Duncan and becomes king. Thus, he is defying God's order and the social power structure is disturbed. Macbeth subconsciously is aware of this corrupted state and thus he becomes an atrocious ruler in order to save his position on throne. The infertility of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth further correspond the idea of nemesis for the power corruption.

Power proves as a corrupting agent in human behaviour. Macbeth's need for power drives him to corruption leading him to destroy anyone who stands in his path. Banquo and Macbeth represent the ultimate change in relationship due to power. In the beginning of play their friendship is strong but as soon as the three witches tell them prophecies; power enters in their relationship and destroys it. Macbeth realises that the witches' prophecies were coming true and this sprouts the seed of ambition and power inside his mind.

Power can be constructive as well as destructive. It can build kingdoms as well as ruin kingdoms. The whole perception of humans can be changed with the help of

power. The most fitting example of this trait can be found in the character of Lady Macbeth in the play Macbeth. Macbeth was a loyal and noble soldier in the beginning. When the witches told him about the three prophecies and about him being the King, his mind got corrupted with ambition. Lady Macbeth was the driving force for him in fulfilling his ambitions. She persuaded him to kill Duncan and plotted all the paths in achieving the authority and kingdom. She is introduced in the plot of the play in Act 1 Scene 5. In her soliloquy she expresses her fear of Macbeth not being able to fulfil the prophecies because of his kind nature. She advances her and her husband's ambition to gain power in a devious and fascinating way. She advances Macbeth to kill Duncan through rhetorical manipulation by telling him to 'be a man'. This was a harsh insult for Macbeth. His 'Masculinity' was challenged to kill Duncan and it became the only way to prove her his worth as he was unable to give her a child. She not only crosses boundaries of wife and morality, but also relies on demonic forces to fulfil her ambition.

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and
shalt be What thou art promised. Yet
do I fear thy nature; It is too full o'
th' milk of human kindness To catch
the nearest way. Thou wouldst be
great, Art not without ambition, but
without The illness should attend it.
(1.5.15-20)(Shakespeare, Macbeth)

Shakespeare has beautifully constructed the character of Lady Macbeth. She takes the role of Man in the relationship. Her desire overpowers the feminine grace and she sows the seed of ambition in Macbeth resulting in the death of Duncan whom she

considers a fatherly figure. She is generally considered as a monstrous figure but Shakespeare marked her more human than evil. She erred in her judgement but was subconsciously aware of it. Her guilt subconsciously converted her desire into death. Shakespeare has fantastically depicted the insaneness in her behaviour and her slow deterioration. She calls upon the spirits to take away her female identity in order to commit the crime of murder but she is subconsciously aware of her deed. When her conscience returns and pinches for the instability in the natural power structure, her mental condition deteriorates and she becomes pathetic.

Role of Power in ‘Othello’

The Tragedy of Othello – the Moor of Venice by William Shakespeare is believed to be written during 1603. It was first performed on November 1, 1604 at Whitehall Palace in London. Othello is a moor who reaches the position of General in Venetian Army. He marries Desdemona, the daughter of Barbantio. The turn in their relationship creates the basic structure of the plot. Race and Gender prove to be the eminent tool of power structure in society for the fatal consequences in the play.

In Othello, we can see the Power struggle of masculine identity. The relationship between Othello, Desdemona and Lago represents the gender based conflict which centres on power. Desdemona and Othello are deeply in love with each other. In the beginning of the play we can make out that both are different in their own respective manner but these differences complement each other resulting in the formation of a strong bond between them. Othello considers Desdemona as an entity of feminine grace. This love and respect

shatters when the power play of gender identity enters in their relationship. Lago might be the reason for this conflict but he wanted the power and status which Desdemona holds in Othello’s life. Othello kills Desdemona in order to prove his superiority and authority over her. Lago has a peculiar notion about humanity. He cannot think of love above sexual appetite. According to him, men and women can never have a relationship other than sexual desires. He imagines a rival in every male who is not a certified eunuch.

The dramatic significance of the ‘murder scene’ lies in the fact that it brings out the most mysterious forces in various shapes and forms conspiring against the very existence of man; that even the most innocent and honest, loyal and faithful and otherwise basically good human beings can sometimes become victims of villainous and mischievous designs due to the emergence of power. The potentialities of evil once unleashed obliterate whatever the good forces might be pulsating with life.

Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!—

It is the cause. Yet I’ll not shed her blood;

Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,

And smooth as monumental alabaster.

Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men.

Put out the light, and then put out the light:

if I quench thee, thou flaming minister,

I can again thy former light restore,
Should I repent me: but once put out

thy light,
Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling
nature,
I know not where is that Promethean
heat
That can thy light relume. (5.2.2-12)
(Shakespeare, Othello)

The relationship between Lago and Emilia suggests the role of power in gender conflict. Lago considers females to be mere means of sexual appetite and despises any prominence given to them. On the other hand Emilia remains just a puppet of Lago's hand. Their relationship describes the domination and tyranny of masculinity towards feminine identity. Lago despises Othello for submerging himself into feminine emotions like 'love'. Lago's relationship with Othello becomes a power struggle where he attempts to denigrate Desdemona in order to position himself.

Othello is in a vulnerable state due to the realisation of his differences. It is unlikely for a man like him to attain such position in that society. Desdemona's pure love makes him feel conscious about his own fate. This disbelief becomes the tool for Lago to turn Othello's feelings. Social perceptions play a powerful role in creating trust over individual identity. The characters referring Othello as a moor or devil actually imposes their racial superiority over him. Even Desdemona's father feels that it is impossible for his daughter to fall in love with a man like Othello. He suspects her daughter is under some spell or supernatural power. Racial identity is thus a crucial aspect of power politics.

Conclusion:

Elizabethan age is known for the dawn of power in social, political as well as literary field. Shakespeare was aware of the reasons as well as consequences of power. He understood it not just as a human trait but also as a factor affecting the various sections and changing the scenario. Michel Foucault presented the theory of power in modern age but its reflection can be clearly seen in the works of Shakespeare. The Researcher has taken two specific plays; Macbeth reflecting the power play in fulfilling desire and ambition as well as Othello in usurping and declaring the dominance of masculine identity and the effects of power structure causing gender conflict.

Although Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are confident and ambitious they have to accept defeat in front of Power structure and fate. In order to re-establish social structure, their death becomes inevitable at the end. Othello on the other hand has to bow down at the end due to his overpowering masculine identity. Power stabilises its structure in any form or condition. It is certainly impossible to eradicate its existence. Its balance is the driving force of human existence.

Power is embedded as a crucial element in the formation of Shakespeare's plays. His characters establish a psychological understanding which is relative even in today's world. It is naive to underestimate the consequences of its effects. The Power theory suggests the relationship of social and political background with a new light. Shakespeare is said to be a master dramatist because of his crucial understanding of the minute details of life. He was the beginner in showing this new direction for which we are indebted to him even today.

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