

Pre deterministic Catastrophes in the Life of Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: An Analytical Study in Indian Vedic Perspective

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Abstract

In the new context of Shakespeare's study and criticism, this paper is prepared and entitled Pre deterministic catastrophes in the life of Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: An Analytical study in Indian Vedic Perspective. It is designed to focus new light on the causes of tragedy in the life of Shakespeare's tragic heroes. It seeks to compare and contrast playwrights' fatalistic view of human suffering with Indian Vedic concept of pre determinism.

Key Words: Pre deterministic Catastrophe, Shakespeare, tragic hero, Vedic perspective

In the new context of Shakespeare's study and criticism, this paper is prepared and entitled Pre deterministic catastrophes in the life of Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: An Analytical study in Indian Vedic Perspective. It is designed to focus new light on the causes of tragedy in the life of Shakespeare's tragic heroes. It seeks to compare and contrast playwrights' fatalistic view of human suffering with Indian Vedic concept of pre determinism.

The term pre determinism is a modernist conceptualization. It emerged out of the post-colonial cultural and literary movements. Since its coinage as a term of modernist philosophy, it has been frequently used in the plays and novels by the modernist critics in the context of human existence and survival.

The term Pre determinism used by the Western and Eastern critics of philosophy and literature implies that all human activities good or bad, incidents happy or unhappy are predetermined by antecedent causes and inscrutable omnipotent force over which man has no control. Even the most powerful man is rendered powerless and helpless by this deterministic force.

In the light of this theory of pre determinism, let us analyze the factors that contribute to evolution and intensification of tragedy in the life of Shakespeare's tragic heroes. These tragic heroes are portrayed as ill-fated personalities born to suffer inextricably and perennially in life. Their tragedy cannot be ascribed either to tragic flaw according to Aristotelian concept of 'hamartia' or to some fault in action according to Bradleyan view. They unwarrantably become victims to wrath and onslaught of cruel fate and undergo suffering for no fault of theirs. Hence, we have every reason to assume from the view point of the theory of determinism that all calamities, incidents and human actions are predetermined by God and hence man's struggle against hostile and subversive forces ends disastrously and precipitates his ruin. Despite his noble nature, noble will and objective the outcome of his action invariably proves abortive and disappointing. Hamlet a young educated prince of noble intention procrastinates will fully in executing vengeance on his uncle Claudius and his lethargy and inaction intensify his agony and drift him to his doom. Othello blindly

reposes credence in Iago a demi-devil and brings upon him his own calamity by killing his innocent wife Desdemona out of jealousy and thereafter kills himself out of repentance and remorse. Macbeth invites his own disaster and death by perpetrating the murder of Duncan and Banquo with avarice for crown. King Lear commits a great blunder by dividing his kingdom between his two daughters Goneril and Regan depriving his third daughter Cordelia of her legitimate share. This childish action begot his suffering and led him to his doom.

According to the theory of determinism all the calamities and catastrophes referred to above were predestined in the life of Shakespeare's heroes and hence on this account of divine providence they had to suffer doom inextricably and inexorably in the inclement hands of fate without resistance, defiance and challenge. Unlike them, Marlovian heroes Tamburlaine and Barabas braved all calamities with courage and fortitude without resignation to fate. They are Promethean, presumptuous and self-confident in their ambition. They are not tragic but villainous, monstrous, intractable and destructive in action. They are monster of villainy and blood thirsty like Chengiz Khan. Unlike Shakespeare's tragic heroes, Tamburlaine and the Barabas face death daringly and never suffer emotionally or psychologically. They turn out to be misanthropic and subversive in their attitude and activity. They, therefore, hardly draw any sympathy of the audience.

In *Tamburlaine*, the hero typifies himself as a blood thirsty tyrant, who tyrannizes over his kingdom with cruelty and ruthlessness. It is a story of Timur the Tartar, who begins his life as a shepherd

chief and rebels against the Persian king whom he triumphs over. Intoxicated by his avarice for power Timur rushes over the whole East like a tempest. He subjects the captive kings of the Turks to draw his chariot seated by him. He flings to the spears of his horse men the virgins of Damascus, who approach him for his clemency. He burns down the city in which his lady lover Zenocrate dies. He boasts of his power which overrides all things. He is much more than a mere out Heroding Herod. Tamburlaine defies the gods and threatens to "*chase the stars from heaven with the sun bright armour of his forces*". He speaks egoistically and boastfully "*To be a king is half to be a God*" and "*A god is no as glorious as a King*". (1) Towards the end he is irrecoverably afflicted with disease and desperately raves against gods and challenges them to overthrow them. Finally he meets his tragic death but his suffering does not evoke any sympathy of the audience.

Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* is a tragedy of a great scholar who like Tamburlaine cherishes superhuman ambition to rise to the greatness of a superman. He practises necromancy inspired with megalomania in order to acquire uncommon knowledge by virtue of which he would be able to achieve his extraordinary aspirations and desires. With this end in view he invokes the devils and craves for enormous knowledge. He goes to the extent of bartering his soul to the devils defying the warnings sounded to him by the angels of Christ. This greed for extraordinary knowledge led him to suffer inextricably in the hands of the devils. His tragedy arises when Dr Faustus repents for his misdeed and his mind is tormented by an intense fear of damnation. He deliriously cries for

redemption from the sin of blasphemy against God and deliverance from the torture of the devils but his cry dissolves in the wilderness of his helplessness. Dr Faustus deserves our sympathy to some extent because of his innate human weakness.

Marlowe's other tragedy is *The Jew of Malta* which is a drama of avarice for wealth. In this play the hero the Barabas appears as a valiant enemy of the people. The Jew is unjustly dispossessed of his goods by the Christians as a result of which he vindictively indulges in a series of crimes perpetrated by him in order to avenge himself on them. He develops a misanthropic attitude towards mankind in general. His crimes multiply until he delivers his kingdom Malta to the Turks and then the Turks make over it to the Christian. He falls in a cauldron of boiling water in to which he had schemed to throw his last enemies. He meets tragic death without pity and sympathy.

Marlowe's tragedies are all one man's tragedies in which the tragic hero dominates over other characters and dwarfs them by his towering and dominating personality. Each of his tragedies revolves round the activities of the central character who is consumed by the lust for power or beauty or knowledge. Thus, Marlowe's heroes are swept by the current of fate to their disaster. They suffer because of some human weaknesses which they cannot overcome in as much as they are predetermined to suffer tragedy in life and meet their tragic death.

In early tragedies most of the heroes are depicted as tyrants even the good heroes like Hieronimo or Titus Andronicus are forced to commit shocking murders reinforced by several villains. M C Bradbrook' comments "In Elizabethan

tragedy the villain is usually the most important figure and heroes are as common as tragedies of the virtuous hero". (2)

Thus, the illustrations of the suffering of Marlowe's heroes authenticate that these protagonists deliberately commit crimes and blunders against humanity and God that lead them to unfathomable sufferings. In this context Dowden remarks "Greek concept of tragedy was that it was a dramatic presentation of crime and punishment working in a background of unpredictable and cataclysmic change"(3). Their tragedy does not arouse any sympathy of the readers.

In striking contrast to Marlovian protagonists, Shakespearean heroes deplore their misfortune and endure all adversities with passive resignation. When they cannot endure afflictions any more they end their life in a dastardly spirit and with defeatist pessimism. Shakespeare's protagonists mourn their discomfiture in the battle against unforeseen and hostile forces that conspire to ruin them. The pessimistic view and attitude with which Shakespeare depicts his heroes lead us to assume that the playwright was basically a fatalist in his conception of human predicament and existence. He is believed to have derived his theory of fatality and pre determinism from the medieval Christianity. He postulates the omnipotence of fortune and its tyranny over noble personalities of higher social status. This belief of Shakespeare in the dominance of destiny manifests in the speeches of his protagonists and in the delineation of catastrophes in plays. A few lines from his tragedies can be extracted in this context to substantiate the pre deterministic views on his tragic

heroes. In the tragedy of *Hamlet* the protagonist accepts the role of fate:

There is a divinity that shapes our ends
Rough-hew them how we will (Act-V-
Sc.II)

In the conversation between Hamlet and his friends Guildenstern says:

We are not over happy on fortune's
cap. Hamlet replies to Rosencrantz:
What have you my good friends
Deserved at the hands of fortune
That sends you to prison thither (Act-
II Scene-II)

Again Hamlet refers to the supreme power of fortune in the following lines

To be or not to be: that is the question
Whether it is nobler in the mind to
suffer
The stings and arrows of outrageous
fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of trouble
by opposing them. (Act- III Sc-I)

The concept of predeterminism is crystallized in Hamlet's speech on the accidental murder of Polonius in his hands.

I do repent; but heaven hath pleas'd
To punish me with this and this
with me
That I must be their scourge and
minister. (Act- III SC-IV)

These lines suggest that Polonius's death in the hands of Hamlet was predetermined to punish both the hero and his victim. Hence, Hamlet cannot be blamed in as much as he merely acted as an agent of fortune and executed the divine decree.

In the tragedy *Othello*, the hero believes in the supreme power of fate and cries out "Who can control fate?" The universal reply is none.

Among other elements that are suggestive of fatality and pre determinism are

prophesies, augury, oracle, astrology, astronomy and supernatural phenomena like comet, eclipse, dream and nightmare. Gloucester's reference to eclipse in *King Lear*, the forecast of witches to Macbeth about his prospect of being the ruler of Scotland, Soothsayer's warning to Caesar about the danger awaiting him, Artemidorus's letter of warning to him, Cleopatra's nightmare of Caesar's murder and soothsayer's prediction of Antony's downfall are some of the prognoses illustrative of Shakespeare's belief in the theory of fatality and pre determinism.

Since the tragic incidents and tragic heroes in Shakespeare's tragedies closely correspond with those of Greek tragedies, there is every reason to infer that Shakespeare might have appropriated the Aeschylean and Sophoclean theories of fatality and pre determinism and exploited them in portraying his protagonists in the same mould. Oedipus, Agamemnon, Orestes and Odysseus became victims to the attack of misfortune and faced catastrophes in mundane life. In Greek tragedies, Teiresias's prediction of Oedipus's suffering in future on account of his patricide and incest and Cassandra's forecast of Agamemnon's suffering and her own prophesy of her death testify to the theory of pre determinism. According to the prophecy of Teiresias and Cassandra, Aeschylean and Sophoclean heroes had to suffer stoically without redemption. All these references and illustrations cited above strengthen our assumption about Shakespeare's pre deterministic views on his tragic heroes.

Now we can interpret Shakespeare's conception of the tragedy of his heroes in terms of Indian Vedic theory of Prarabdha and Paramartha. The

conceptual implication of these two terms is more comprehensive than Western concept of Pre determinism.

Before we apply these theories in the particular context, it is prerequisite to explicate the implication and significance of these terms Prarabdha and Paramartha. Prarabdha as a term in the Vedic philosophy presupposes the repercussion of human being's good or bad deeds of previous birth on the present life. One has to reap in the present life the consequences happy or unhappy or his pious or impious deeds of his previous birth. According to this belief, tragedy befalls a man in the form of calamity, illness, frustration, failure and death as an outcome of his sins committed in previous life. As regards his noble deeds, he reaps the harvest of bliss by way of success, satisfaction, prosperity and happiness. In terms of deeds good or bad, all human activities in the present life are predetermined by Almighty. The repercussion of Prarabdha cannot be averted and surmounted. One has to experience it in his or her life. Nevertheless the suffering as a punishment for the sins of previous birth can be alleviated to some extent but not wholly through self-atonement and penance.

Paramartha on the other hand implies man's spiritual consciousness of the chief goal of life. While reaping the consequences of Prarabdha if one gets detached from the weal and woe of life and makes it the sole and paramount goal of life to realize God, it is called Paramarthic objective. It is the summum bonum of human life. This path of Paramartha opens the spiritual door for man's escape from the cycle of rebirth and suffering.

In the light of these theories, the tragedy of the heroes of Hindu mythologies is ascribed to their Prarabdha Karma. All mythical figures like Dasarath, Ramchandra, Ravana, Kansa, and Harishchandra, had to suffer disasters in their life on account of this Prarabdha Karma. All the unhappy incidents of their life were prophesied earlier by the gods and goddesses and saints. Indian mythologies are replete with the accounts of the tragedy of heroic figures of virtuous character. In order to get rid of this perennial suffering that results from Prarabdha Karma Indian saints like Buddha, Sukadev, Jangyabalka, Parakhit, Janaka, Sankara, Ramakrishna Vivekanand and Sri Aurobindo traversed along the yogic path to achieve Paramartha in life and escape the cycle of rebirth.

Now we can exploit these theories to investigate the causes of tragedy of Shakespeare's protagonists like *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*. Every catastrophe and unhappy incident that came about in the life of these heroes can be attributed to their Prarabdha Karma that rendered them mentally, psychologically and physically helpless to grapple with their adversities. According to Aristotle's concept of hamartia Hamlet suffers due to his over scrupulousness and lethargy. Macbeth suffers deliriously out of agony and fright and meets his tragic end due to his over-ambition and greed for crown and power. In the case of Othello his over-credulity, gullibility and stupidity drifted him to his ruin. King Lear brought upon him his doom due to his moral weaknesses such as his folly, gullibility and susceptibility to adulation. All their human weaknesses of these heroes are common to all human beings and hence these lapses cannot be

accounted for as causes of their sufferings. All these heroes are drifted to their tragedy on account of their Prarabdha Karma and never due to their moral weaknesses or fault in their actions.

With regard to Aristotle's doctrine of hamartia, Hardin Crag comments that the idea of tragic flaw belongs to the subject of the ethics rather than of the poetics.

This theory concedes the probability that a man may triumph over destiny by his quality of sound reasoning and by overcoming weaknesses. But it fails to account for the suffering of innocent and virtuous characters like Cordelia, Desdemona, Romeo and Juliet who suffer in life for no tragic flaw of theirs. Similarly Indian epic figures like Rama and Sita, who were immaculately the epitome of all exemplary qualities and virtues had to endure stoically the blows of misfortune by reason of their Prarabdha Karma.

But Senecan tragedies impress on us the fact that man's discomfiture in the struggle against misfortune is inevitable. It is obvious that the Elizabethan playwrights had a fatalistic theory of human tragedy remotely derived from stoical theories of Seneca and the medieval Christian theory of sin and punishment. According to these theories human calamities are irresistible, inescapable, vulnerable and inevitable. But an Aristotelian can attribute the cause of hero's sufferings to his flaw in him? It is only in terms of the theory of predeterminism that we can ascribe his sufferings to his Prarabdha Karma.

In the context of the tragedy of Shakespeare's tragic heroes A.C. Bradley offers a psychological interpretation and points out that hero's action begets his sufferings. He states that calamities in the life of these heroes result from their

imprudence or fault in their action. With this assumption Bradley denies the role of fate and the theory of predeterminism. He states. "We find practically no trace of fatalism in its more primitive crude and obvious form. Nothing again makes us think of the actions and sufferings of the persons as some now arbitrarily fixed before hand with regard to their feelings and resolution"(4).

But Bradley cannot account for the sudden occurrence of certain unpredictable calamities and mishaps which come about in human life without any antecedent motive or fault. For example he cannot give a convincing and logical explanation of the factors of the murder of Polonius in the hands of Hamlet and his rescue from the ship by pirates, Desdemona's loss of handkerchief and its discovery by Bianca, Romeo's misfortune in not receiving Friar's message about the potion, delay in Juliet's waking from sleep and delay in Edgar's arrival at prison to save Cordelia's life. All these incidents are interpreted by Bradley as mere accidents. His interpretation of calamity as a matter of chance or accident is nothing more than the impact of the wrath of fate. Any chance or an accident that befalls a tragic hero is an outcome of the manifestation of fate in as much as occurrences of such providential accidents or mishaps cannot be provisioned and averted. Their occurrences are predestined and beyond human imaginations or anticipations.

Finally A. C. Bradley had to admit the role of fate in the life of Shakespeare's tragic heroes. He states "there is a divinity that shapes our ends". He accepts the concept of fate and remarks in this regard "the idea of fatality has to be accepted. The hero is in some sense a

doomed man and that he is drifted to destruction like helpless creature borne on an irresistible flood towards a cataract"(5). H.B. Charlton supports the view of fatality by attributing the suffering and the death of the hero to the operation of universal law. He comments "the dramatist simply reveals his hero's death as the inevitable outcome of the primary universal law" (6).

Indian astrology and the Vedic theory of predeterminism attribute the occurrence of disasters and accidents in human life to Prarabdha Karma. They are interpreted by Indian saints and astrologers as predetermined factors and such phenomena and disasters are astrologically predicted and previsioned by the mystical power of sorcery, witchcraft, magic and Indian tantric devices. From this view point Bradley's view of human suffering as the cause of accidents cannot be entertained as a plausible interpretation. In this context it is relevant to quote the version of Raghukul Tilak. He says that "a character is not entirely responsible for the tragedy. A profound sense of fate or destiny underlies all the tragedies of Shakespeare. Shakespeare is almost a Greek in creating a strong impression of fate in his tragedies"(7).

Another version of human tragedy is offered by Hegelian theory of moral law and law of justice. It approximates to Senecan theory of stoicism, medieval Christian view of crime and punishment and Indian theory of Prarabdha. Hegelian philosophy corresponds to a great deal with Indian view of sin and damnation. Although Hegel does not obviously acknowledge the role of fate and pre-determinism, his belief in the prevalence of moral law and law of justice tacitly implies the Indian theory of Prarabdha.

According to Hegel, Shakespeare's tragic heroes suffered in life by ignoring these laws and for not visualizing the consequences of thoughts and deeds. Julius Caesar too ignored his wife's presentiment about his imminent danger.

He was forbidden by his wife to go to senate on the ground of her having perceived ominous phenomena that foreshadowed the impending death awaiting the arrival of the emperor. But Caesar boldly flouted her forecast and foreboding and left for senate to face his doom. Since his death was predestined, he had to ignore her forecast and meet his death in the hands of the conspirators. This unpredictable death of Caesar, which he faced stubbornly, leads us to the conclusion that the tragic hero is bound by fate to take a faulty decision or commit an error of judgment or perpetrate a crime that gives rise to his tragedy. His tragedy is inevitable because of the role of fate and hence the hero's action or decision cannot be attributed as the cause of his tragedy.

Similarly Macbeth turns out to be a conscienceless criminal inspired by his greed for crown. Under the lure of kingship and its power he successively assassinates three personalities one after another and invites his disaster and death. This crime can be accounted for his evil deeds in previous life that drove him to perpetrate these murders treacherously and monstrously because his present suffering that resulted from his crimes committed in his previous life was predetermined.

King Lear also committed the blunder of trusting his two daughters Goneril and Regan and divided his kingdom between them without visualizing their evil motives. These two daughters turned out villainous against him and brought on

him untold suffering. In this case King Lear cannot be blamed for his wrong decision because he was constrained by fate to take such a decision to disrupt his life and intensify his tragedy. In this case his suffering in the hands of his daughters is believed to have been predetermined.

Thus, the weaknesses of these protagonists, which are attributable to the cause of their sufferings, are regulated by the unforeseen power of fate. All their faulty decisions and actions are inevitably predetermined and hence the heroes are bound to undergo unabated suffering till they meet their tragic death.

A tragedy is a play of the ruin of a great soul through some weaknesses or fault deeply rooted in the character combining with hostile circumstances over which the protagonist has no control. Circumstances and tragic flaw conspire to bring about his doom caused by tragic vices or weaknesses begotten in his previous life. "There remains the brooding sense of an inscrutable power controlling our fate through unforeseen circumstances. It overpowers the freedom our will clouds human conscience and drifts a man to the jaw of disaster"(8).

According to the Vedic theory of Prarabdha, Shakespeare's heroes cannot exercise their free will and discretion. They suffer unwarrantably like Indian mythical characters Harishchandra, Sabya, Rohita, Dhruva, Prahlad, Ramchandra and his wife Sita. The Indian predestinarians always attribute human tragedy to divine punishment for their sins of previous life. In Indian perspective, Hamlet's delay in the execution of revenge on his uncle from this view point of fatalism was preordained and hence the hero had no free will. Romeo and Juliet were also predestined to commit suicide. With

regard to this tragedy F.S. Boas remarks "there runs the note of tragic predestination" (9) Similarly Desdemona's unwarranted murder by Othello and commission of his own suicide resulted from the sins committed in their previous life. The same doctrine of Prarabdha also applies to the tragedy of Macbeth and King Lear. Many critics of the West and the East accept the Vedic theory of Pre determinism. G. Wilson Knight and F.S. Boas are the critics who support this view. In the context of Edmund's denial of fate, G.W. Knight comments "Edmund's mistake is that he recognizes no fate but free will" He further adds "that is Bradley's mistake when he analyses the Shakespearean universe" (10). St. Augustine's doctrine of existence of God further supports the theory of pre determinism. He believed and stated that God has predestined the destiny of all human being and brutes. The stoics too stated the same version that "Everything is absolutely predetermined, even the human will" (11). The Greek philosophers, playwrights and the Senecans believed in the theory of fatality and pre determinism.

With regard to Indian theory of Paramartha it can be explained that human beings can get rid of the cycle of suffering only by resorting to practice of Yoga and by way of self-detachment and attainment of salvation. None of the Western theories of fatality and pre determinism propounds such a theory of Paramartha as a means of self-deliverance from the world of sorrows and suffering. Only Indian saints like Buddha, Sankaracharya, St. Gyaneswar, Ramkrishna, Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo have enlightened the people of the world with the spiritual knowledge of redemption from suffering. Those, who

follow this path of self-enlightenment, transcend the sphere of suffering and punishment and become masters of fate. either the Greek dramatists nor Shakespeare had any knowledge of these Indian Vedic theories of Pre determinism. If Shakespeare had acquired such spiritual knowledge of self-deliverance from suffering, he would have portrayed some of his heroes as Gyaneswar, or

Sankaracharya or Vivekananda and enabled them to conquer destiny.

Thus, the relevance and justification of applying the Vedic theory to the interpretation of Shakespeare's tragic vision of life cannot be denied and refuted in terms of any other Western theories of Pre determinism.

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