

The Imperative of Insanity: An Introspective Study of Shakespeare's Critique of Madness in King Lear

Mrinal Sarkar

M Phil Scholar at Rabindra Bharati University

West Bengal, India.

mrinalsarkar10@gmail.com

Abstract

The primary aim of this analysis is to strike at the very core of the age old belief of insanity to be something of an evil. This analysis strives to show how W. Shakespeare in King Lear questions the very idea and definition of madness. It shows how madness can have a healing touch of liberating a soul which had been trapped for years of stubbornness and ingratitude. This analysis finds madness to be perceptive, self analytical and sometimes unflinching. Insanity is not the last reserve of an old man but a chanced opportunity of looking at things which have been overlooked for years. Things which can mean a lot if given due acknowledgement. Insanity has been given a new definition by Shakespeare. It is a positive energy, a life force unlike anything. It is one of those rare moments of creativity in which man understands the meaning of life. At times Lear's insanity kept him going; it adds a meaning to his life which is unshackled, undeterred and foresight.

Key Words: Natural/unnatural, Self-knowledge, Redemption, Perception and Insanity

Shakespeare's King Lear is one of those plays about which critics usually do not shy away from criticism. The criticism starts from the date of its publication which however, according to William J Rolfe, is between 1603 to 1606 (10). The play is neither about an elderly parent relinquishing his title and land in order to show love for his children, and in the process becoming dependent upon them, nor is it a play about good being rewarded or evil people being punished. The play is significant in the sense that it puts forward a lot of questions and it also encourages us to do the same. What is "natural" or "unnatural"? How should we differentiate between appearance and reality? When should a person be called blind? Has blindness everything to do with not having eye-sight? What is love? What is judgment? Does it deliver at all? What divine justice is there in killing Lear, Cordelia and Cornwall's servant? However Edger thinks that the Gods are just after defeating Edmund. So there are contradictions in the play and that is why it is so interesting. But the question to

which the following strives to find an answer is: What madness is. Why do we even need speculation on such a theme as madness? Lear also asks the question of the role the Gods play in human affairs. Joseph Carroll in *An Evolutionary Approach to Shakespeare's King Lear* maintains that there is no place for Draconian moralism - that is justice can only be enforced by a court, in Shakespeare's plays (84). Delivering justice is something which is always out of the reach of mortals as far as Shakespeare is concerned. These are questions which have been figuratively asked time and again in the play for us recognize the value of it. Hazlitt in *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* says:

We wish that we could pass this play over, and say nothing about it. All that we can say must fall far short of the subject; or even of what we ourselves conceive of it. To attempt to give a description of the play itself and of its effect upon the mind is mere impertinence: yet we must say something. (153)

In the first scene of *King Lear* the focus of dramatic interest shifts from concern with a particular man to such universal issues as justice, order, madness and redemption in the mad and bad world of *King Lear*. Kenneth Muir Shows profound insight into the madness of Lear, questioning whether the madness which Lear suffers in is an ingenious one or a mere senility of his character (162). '...Be Kent unmannerly when / When Lear is mad...' (Shakespeare I. I. 17). In this line we get the first seed of Lear's descending into madness, is clearly marked by Shakespeare. After Cordelia's banishment Kent tells this to Lear. It is obvious that Kent does not regard his master as insane but does a justice by correcting his own attitudes toward king. Later Goneril and Regan complain that the choleric years have made an injustice to Cordelia and whose side-effects negatively influence the other characters throughout the play.

Lear let the doom spread over him by disowning wronged Cordelia. He is persuaded by the other two daughters' rhetoric which is really nothing vis-à-vis the word "nothing" uttered by Cordelia who could have given Lear the thing he needed the most, had he been able to see the difference between flattery and love. He gets the first shock of Goneril's refusal to continue to abide by the arrangements according to which Lear was entitled to maintain hundred knights at his daughter's expense to attend upon him. When Goneril seems to ignore his feelings, Lear has been reduced to, as the fool states, merely a shadow of his former self.

In the next scene, his recognition of his folly comes full circle, he says: 'I did her wrong' (I. v. 24). At the end of Act one he has his first suspicion of coming insanity: 'O let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!' (I. v. 45). The second great shock comes when Lear

finds Kent in the stocks. The insult to his royal dignity causes the physical symptoms of hysteria. The shock is unexpected attitudes of Regan and Goneril which follows immediately. Critics like G. Wilson Knight do not sympathize with Lear. Rather they blame him for his downfall:

Lear is Selfish and self-centered. He understands the nature of none of his daughters and demanding an unnatural and impossible love from all three, is disillusioned by each in turn. The disconnected energy of madness spins and the unguarded revolutions of it are terrible and frantic. This is the basic of the play: greatness likened to puerility. (183)

His refusal to ease his heart by weeping is accompanied by the first rumblings of the storm which reminds us of the physical battle between the forces of Macbeth against Macdonald and the battle rising inside Macbeth – good versus evil. We get a microcosmic projection of the battle, which is going to be fought between Macdonald and Macbeth in a macrocosmic level, with in Macbeth's psyche. The battle that is being fought in the battle ground has reflection in mindscape of Macbeth. Somewhat similar a war also raised in Lear's mind which left him restless. A war, an insanity whichever it may be, it made him think what he had done for which he received such treatment from his daughters. The battle inside of right and wrong made him insane, but it also gave him the anagnorisis which earlier had escaped him. However, the unnatural deeds find reflection in unnatural events.

In earlier scenes, Lear was projected as an egoistic, arrogant character who does not have any concern for others and one who knows only his selfish ends to fulfill. But he calls himself 'a man more sinned against than sinning' (III. ii. p.63), readers tend to change their thinking, because there is a sea change which has taken place in Lear's character, where he claims he is over burdened by the punishment which he does not deserve as he has committed much less crime compared to his unfathomable punishment. Lear's plea reminds us the biblical character of Job in The Book of Job, where Job is ruined by his predestination.

During the storm Lear again appears to be a man of volcanic passions and a tempestuous nature. He throws a challenge at the violent elements of nature, defying them to do their utmost against him. His own rage and fury at this time match the rage and fury of the elements of nature; but as an old man he cannot remain unaffected by the violence of nature. Under the stress of storm and his daughters' ingratitude, he shows signs of becoming somewhat philosophical. We perceive the dawning of a new Lear when he makes his first moralizing speech in which he declares that in the terrible storm which is blowing, the great Gods will find out who their enemies are. The murderer, the hypocrite, the pretender to virtue, the incestuous man, and other criminals, and sinners of the same kind will surely

expose themselves during this dreadful storm. A.C. Bradley pronounces Lear's madness from a different angle which highlights the shades that remained in darkness:

The rage of power and the poetic grandeur of Lear surpass even that of Othello. He comes in his affliction to think of the others first, and to seek in tender solicitude for his poor fool. He even scorns his shelter for beggars like Tom and has learnt to feel and pray for the miserable and houseless poor to discern the falseness of flattery and all things in this world as vanity except love. (377)

However, some critics differ from the above point of view. They say it is not right to say in the sequence of this play's events a process of purification. They opine that Lear in his madness does little more than follow the beaten track of the melancholy type. Lear's attacks on society, however, profound they may seem, are the results of his mental disarrangements; and at the end of the play he is not purified by suffering but rather a nature completely transformed, whose extraordinary vital forces are extinguished or about to be extinguished. Critics conclude the play by regarding Lear as greater at the end than the beginning of his madness. On the other hand Joseph Carroll opines that:

Lear is mad long before his wits begin to turn in the storm. When Goneril and Regan say they love him more dearly than life itself, he actually believes them. At Dover, he announces to Gloucester that they were untruthful in telling him he was everything (95).

This realization makes Lear see through life which is not in any way less severe to him. Life with all its illness affects as much Lear as anyone else. But Lear has not always been like this especially if we consider the opening scenes of the play. Carroll further points out that in the first phase of his madness he fails to form a community. He thought his desires to be non-negotiable. He thought his regal authority unquestionable. (95). Meanwhile what happens is that he gets mixed up. He takes his personal identity for his public persona. He loses the touch of reality: who he really was, and what he has become now. In fact he did not even have the faintest idea of who he really was to begin with. Whether Lear has been mad all along or will become one in the course of life is something debatable but there is question that seeds were in him buried deep within, waiting for the time to sprout:

“Does any here know me? This is not Lear.
Does Lear walk thus, speak thus? Where are his
eyes?
Either his notion weakens, his discernings
Are lethargied—Ha! Waking? ’Tis not so.

Who is it that can tell me who I am?" (I. iv. 31-37).

Lear too could not escape from the consequences of his actions. Lear could neither know his daughters nor himself. But his daughters knew who he really was. Goneril and Regan once said in the play that He had hardly known himself and must suffer for his folly. Regan thinks it is because of the infirmity of his age. But infirmity of his age should not be blamed only. It is his lack of perception and self-knowledge that has brought him to this stage of life. Lear was not the only one who became delusional, when Edgar made Gloucester believe that he fell from a steep cliff at Dover, Edgar's father believed it. Here delusion saved his life, but the same is not true for Lear. At Lear's age delusion is sometimes fueled by rage: something like this happened to Lear when he was on the heath. He sympathized with a beggar when he saw he hardly had anything to wear. He tore his clothes off his body in a rage. Some critics maintain that he unclothed himself in order to gain the lost innocence. Again Joseph Carroll states that Lear cast off his clothes to defy the convention (95). The convention does not believe in an old Lear. The convention which thinks madness is something to be an evil; something needs a treatment immediately, something harmful. Interestingly Lear was comparatively less harmful when he was considered mad. It is the old Lear, who we had seen at the beginning of the play, was capable of causing more harm than the older one when he was considered mad and bad. By taking off his clothes Lear tears all the normative thinking which has been piling on over the years on what is sane or what is insane, and what is harmful to humanity.

The approach of this critic would naturally lead us to take Lear's madness in a pessimistic point of view. But this approach is itself unconvincing because Lear being old is steeped with the old man's creative frenzy for which once W.B. Yeats craved in his *An Acre of Grass*. The old age is not a burden to him. Yeats sees old age is an opportunity, perhaps the last one. It is the chance which the poet does not wish to slip through his fingers over temptation. This is not the age or time to run after temptation. This is the time to remake to forge self anew. It is the restless impulse that haunts the poet for an adequate literary expression:

'Give me an old man's frenzy
My self must I remake
Till I am Timon And Lear...' (Yeats 316)

The madness is an initiative in Lear that also transforms him a man which was a far cry in the Lear we observed at the very beginning of the play. The state of degeneration leads to the state of regeneration.

The madness of the fool is professional; the feigned madness of Edgar and the madness of Lear together comply the break-up of society and the retreat with the universe itself under the impact of ingratitude and treachery. At the end Gloucester appears confessing that he is almost mad and the grief of his son's treachery has crazed his wits. It is as if madness is a disease that contaminates the play; only Kent is left sane. At the end, Fool also fades from the picture when he is no longer needed, since Lear replaces the fool; Lear's tragedy is the investing of the king with motley: it is also the Crowning and apotheosis of the fool. Though the play is not entirely the crowning and the apotheosis of the fool but it is true that a time comes when he does not need the fool anymore. He is now worldly wise and the suffering of the want of love of Cordelia has taught him to value love what he failed to do at the outset of the play. This suffering also gives him that with which he can at least look at him ever so closely. In madness Lear is free from the conventional decorum of society. Now he is able to see more clearly than the sane who buy their peace of mind by adjusting themselves to the received ideas of society. He sees the hypocritical pretension of society with regard to sex and its treatment of criminals. Lear's insanity did not torment him nor did it teach him noble anger but it leads him to the greater truth where the concept of sanity and insanity turns upside down. Being insane he acts sanely and gets the power of judgment to reconcile with Cordelia.

In the end Lear achieves "An old man's Eagle Mind" (Yeats 316), with which he acknowledges how wrong he had really been not to see the love of Cordelia in the first place. Ironically it is madness which has enabled him to connect the chord with his daughter. In other words he needed the madness to live, to find love and to find meaning in life. If madness is an evil, it proves to be a necessary evil for King Lear, for it is madness he has found the meaning of sanity and more. This "evil" gave him the strength to live. Joseph Carroll describes madness "...as the essence of the human condition. Sanity, decency, and charity exist all around the fringes of the madness" (100).

How can anybody be sure of what is madness and what is not madness? The mere attempt of differentiation would be seemingly impossible. For Lear this feeling remained with him for the very last moment. While being insane he finds the true meaning of life, he finds the love of Cordelia.

Works Cited:

"An Evolutionary to Shakespeare's King Lear" Academia. n.p. n.d. Web. 19 August. 2015.

- Bradley, A.C. Shakespearean Tragedy. London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 1904. Print.
- Hazlitt, William. "Lear." Characters of Shakespeare's Plays. London: C. H. Reynell, 1817. Print.
- Knight, G. Wilson. The Wheel of Fire. London: Routledge Classics, 2001. Print
- Muir, Kenneth: Shakespeare's Sources I. London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1957. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. Ed. Barbara A Mowat and Paul Werstine The Tragedy of King Lear. Folger Shakespeare Library. Web.
- (1903) "Introductions." The Tragedy of King Lear, ed. William J Rolfe, New York: American Book
- "The Book of Job." Good News Bible: The Bible in Today's English Version. New York: American Bible Society, 1976. Print.
- Yeats, William Butler. "An Acre of Grass." The Collected Poems. Adelaide: Univ. of Adelaide, 2014. Web.