

## **Shakespearean Tragedy with particular reference to ‘Hamlet’, ‘Macbeth’, ‘Othello’ and ‘King Lear’**

Shakespeare, the greatest dramatist the world has ever produced, has left behind a number of tragedies to his credit. It is, however, usual in examining his tragedies to consider the four that are generally recognized to be his best: ‘Hamlet’, ‘Macbeth’, ‘Othello’ and ‘King Lear’. Of these, the first is a play of revenge after the model of Kyd’s ‘Spanish Tragedy’, the second and the third are chronicle-histories with variations, and the fourth is a domestic tragedy. All, of course, are built upon a common plan, which is briefly analysed here.

Shakespeare’s tragedy introduces though a long list of *dramatis personae*, it is chiefly concerned with only one character, the hero, whose fate is its real theme. It is not for nothing that all the four greatest tragedies of Shakespeare are named after the principal figures. It is only in his love tragedies, like ‘Romeo and Juliet’ and ‘Antony and Cleopatra’ that the heroine is as much the main personality as the hero. Elsewhere, the importance of the heroine is far below that of the hero.

Shakespeare’s tragic hero is not an ordinary mortal. Nor is he a superhuman like the Marlovian hero, but his rank and gifts raise him above the ordinary mortals. What, therefore, happens to him is of public interest. Hamlet is the Prince of Denmark, Lear the King of Britain, and Macbeth and Othello, when we first meet them, are distinguished soldiers.

But, Shakespeare’s mighty hero is an exceptional personality in his merits as well as in his defects. Hamlet has the ‘courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s eye, tongue, sword’, but he suffers from an indecision that proves fatal in the end. Othello is a ‘noble and valiant general’ whom the ‘full Senate of Venice’ calls ‘all-in-all sufficient’, but he is a credulous fool who becomes slave to jealousy.

Shakespeare’s heroes fail where failures are very costly, and where even a common man may succeed. It is from these errors and failures that their tragedy ensues. Here comes the question of the role of the hero in his own tragedy. With Shakespeare, character is always destiny. Unlike in Greek tragedies, in a Shakespearean tragedy, the hero himself, and not an implacable Destiny, is responsible for his tragic end. The element of ‘*Hamartia*’ or ‘error of judgement’ is always prominent in the Shakespearean tragedies.

Shakespeare, of course, allows some supernatural elements or accidents to play a role in the tragedy of the hero. But, they do not form the actual cause of his tragedy. They merely quicken the fall of the hero and serve to bring out what is worst in him. The unfortunate loss of Desdemona’s handkerchief is an accident. This helps Iago to convince Othello of her unchastity, with a ready proof. But, this alone does not bring about the tragedy of Othello. His tragedy is the result of his hasty, headstrong and credulous nature.

The Shakespearean tragedy ends with the death of the hero. But, the hero is not the only person whose life is forfeited. The last scene of ‘Hamlet’ closes with four dead bodies on the stage. In ‘Macbeth’ Banquo, Lady Macduff and her son, and Lady Macbeth herself – all die before Macbeth is brought to his account. The gory sights, however, did not repel the Elizabethan playgoers as they might do the modern audience.

The Shakespearean tragedy may appear to be lacking in poetic justice. But, our moral sense is never given a shock. Though much good is perished, the evil do not go unpunished. In the hands of the rare genius Shakespeare the spectacle of noble and powerful characters at war with evil forces always strengthens and exalts the spirit.