
Relevance of Shakespeare in Contemporary World

Dr. Peena Thanky

Lecturer in English

R C Technical Institute, Ahmedabad.

Abstract:

Shakespeare, unlike many preceding playwrights, set an extremely high benchmark for plays in both the modern and Elizabethan era, revolutionising and being the driver for many common terms and phrases we use today - "More sinned against than sinning". Despite the belief of many, Shakespeare is undoubtedly a playwright of all time, with themes relevant to modern society, memorable linguistic devices and composition, and the major impact on the current English language. His major themes like - love, greed, ambition and power are relatable in current society. His unique writing style and composition makes this playwright the foundation of further years of teaching and understanding - a true playwright of all time. This paper aims at bringing out the relevance of Shakespeare in contemporary world.

Relevance of Shakespeare in Contemporary World

Shakespeare is undoubtedly the world's most influential poet and dramatist, leading Ben Jonson to note that, "He was not of an age, but for all time!" Even today, Jonson's words still ring true. Shakespeare's skilful and psychologically-astute characterization is utterly remarkable because it was written hundreds of years before the concept of psychology was invented. Shakespeare's collection of 154 love sonnets is possibly the most beautiful written in the English language. Although not necessarily Shakespeare's best sonnet, *Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?* is certainly his most famous. The sonnet's endurance comes from Shakespeare's ability to capture the essence of love so cleanly and succinctly. Shakespeare is best known for writing the greatest love story of all time: *Romeo and Juliet*. Thanks to Shakespeare, the name Romeo will forever be associated with young lovers and the play has become an enduring symbol of romanticism in popular culture. This tragedy has entertained across the generations, spawned endless stage versions and film adaptations including Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film classic.

Literary works reflect contemporary society, but a few gain universality and timelessness. Some of them are Shakespeare's works. Actually Shakespeare was never especially relevant, and that's probably the secret of his longevity. Compare and contrast him with a much lesser but still great playwright, George Bernard Shaw. To properly enjoy Shaw you either need to have a) lived through the period c.1890-c.1940 or b) mugged up on the currents of thought (socialism, the works of Nietzsche, eugenics, etc) swirling around back then. Not many folks are into Shaw these days. Shakespeare on the other hand appeals to people whose historical knowledge of the reigns of Elizabeth and James is thin to non-existent. It doesn't hurt to know that plays like *Henry V* and *Richard III* have a vein of propaganda running through them, but it doesn't help that much either. As a playwright Ben Jonson belonged more to his age than Shakespeare did which may explain why modern audiences find it harder to "get" his plays. Nabokov wrote that genius is an African who dreams up snow. I think that describes Shakespeare's gift very well.

The language is now archaic, 500 years since the plays were first performed in Elizabethan England. Why is the average English literature student still studying Shakespeare today? The Bard has not become obsolete because he wrote about human issues that have remained unchanged over the years. There are few, if any, other authors who can claim to be truly of universal significance, whose

work has stood the test of time, overcoming the fickle goddess of passing fashions and changing tastes.

Universal in the sense that different cultures and successive generations have found inspiration in their works and have decided to re-interpret them again and again. Even without the magic of his language, his tales have traveled well through space and time: across cultures, across generations, across mediums. The plays and their countless transformations into dramatic movies bear witness to that universal appeal. A Russian Hamlet, a Japanese Macbeth, an Egyptian Lear, a French Romeo.... Shakespeare is vast enough to engender all of that and more...

Let me now analyse the reasons for William Shakespeare's relevance in contemporary world.

It's said that all great stories already have been written, either by the Greek authors of classical Greece (Homer, Sophocles, Euripides, and many others) or by Shakespeare himself. All that modern writers can do is to rewrite them in a different setting because the fact is that all technology in the world can't change the motivations, fears and strengths and emotions of mankind.

His connections of themes with modern reality make him a worthy candidate of an enduring playwright—one that expresses important aspects of life; transcending time. The prominent themes which are universally explored in the plays are justice, ambition, love, revenge etc and the connected themes are like betrayal, greed and madness. The initially explored theme is one which can be paralleled in contemporary society—the theme of justice. For example, King Lear is undoubtedly a play of pain, agony and avoidable disasters – or human unfairness. As Gloucester states: "*As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport*", he soon realises that his current era is one that does not comply with the fair etiquette of human rights and justice – rather a world of unfairness (powerless wanton boys) and undeserved cruelty – humans are killed for enjoyment. Mike Moeller, an online critic, states that (through Gloucester's quote), Gloucester outlines a "sheer nihilistic theme" (Moeller, 2009) present in the play – where Mike also believes that the gods provide no reason for this cruelty. The enduring feature is the connection of the theme: justice, with the modern world; with contemporary society now being overrun with injustices (suggested thoroughly in King Lear – human cruelty), based on political, cultural and racial agendas. This connection allows humans to develop an understanding of the consequences of cruelty, and recognise mistakes suggested in King Lear and avoid them.

Another theme which periodically develops is greed. The contemporary relevance is evident in the slowly progressive, yet evident development into betrayal, madness, and then tragedy in King Lear. The relevance with contemporary life is extremely subtle, yet fully relevant. In King Lear, and reality, political agendas are the most affected by this process of development. During King Lear, once the kingdom is divided amongst the daughters – greed soon follows (driven by power). This leads to the betrayal of their father, through events such as disallowing him to reside within his own home. The betrayal soon develops into madness – as suggested by the storm: "*Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout, rain!*" which indicates Lear's inner turmoil, thus leading to tragedy – death. The connection of this theme with the modern era, is prominent in being a timeless playwright. For example, in current political agendas, issues such as overtaxing citizens – later leads to tragedy: economically and politically.

Shakespeare presents a plethora of compelling characters which not only share similar problems to modern day, but describe varying forms of character in the world. A noticeable factor in his plays is that the characters have the same motivations, emotions, flaws and weaknesses as members of a contemporary society – an enduring factor. Many people can see themselves as a placeholder for King Lear: the protagonist who is lied and deceived to by his daughters – a relevancy to the modern world or Julius Caesar who is deceived by his dear friends or Hamlet who is indecisive in fighting struggles of life

Furthermore, through characters such as Lear, society can both understand and avoid mistakes which were suggested in the play. One of these mistakes include the test he had devised to measure his

daughters' compassion for him; a motive which led to tragedy. This test of love suggests that one cannot "heave their heart into their mouths"—a notion popularised in the 21st century, where love is expressed in a more non-verbal fashion: such as showing loyalty or compassion. This quote simply suggests that no matter what Cordelia says, he will never fully understand her feelings for him.

On the flip side, however, there is a betraying antagonist – Edmund, who betrays his brother and deceives his father. The relevancy of Edmund's actions with contemporary society is unmatched. He promotes themes of greed and betrayal, but overall, he is troubled with love, and is narcissistic and egocentric: "*Now, then, we'll use/His countenance for the battle, which being done,/Let her who would be rid of him*", where we wishes to only use Albany for his own sake (his authority). This is not only linked with contemporary events—such as political vain (which, like Edmund, normally leads to tragedy), but can relate to relationships in modern society. A narcissist in any contemporary relationship, who is rather interested in caring for themselves rather than their partner, can cause deterioration and tragedy in any loving connection. Overall, social likes, distastes and ambitions have all remained equal, no matter which time period. Shakespeare—through his astounding depth of description in *King Lear*, devised a set of characters which not only represent similar human issues, but display similar emotions and mistakes to individuals in a contemporary society—a timeless playwright.

The characters in Shakespeare are like you or me, even though they may be kings, queens or noblemen and women. They are fallible in many ways, like Macbeth, who comes to grief because of ambition, or Hamlet, who struggles with the death of his father. One of the reasons that Shakespeare is said to be a writer of "timeless" literature is that his topics and, especially his characters, speak to a modern audience just as forcefully as they did when the Bard was writing. If we look to Shakespeare's characters, we find that some of the men have the best of intentions, but are brought down by the evil of those around them, as seen with Hamlet, the "haunted" prince of Denmark in the play by the same name, and Brutus in *Julius Caesar*. Hamlet wants to avenge his father's murder while avoiding the forfeiture of his eternal soul (as killing a king—Claudius—was considered at the time to be a mortal sin). Brutus' part in the assassination of Caesar can be seen as an act of treason, but begged the question of the Elizabethan audience as to whether it was lawful to depose or kill a king (or queen) if that person was a danger to the state. It was for this reason that Brutus joins Cassius—Brutus fears what Caesar will do to Rome if he is declared "king," while Cassius is simply jealous and resentful toward Caesar, wanting him dead simply for Cassius' personal gratification. Brutus sacrifices everything for the noble purpose of protecting Rome, which he loves more than his own life.

Our society is not without its villains, and we can see such in the person of Macbeth, who kills his king to become the ruler of Scotland. Shakespeare describes tyrants other than Macbeth: King Lear who is a tyrannical father; and, Duke Frederick who grasps at the reins of power by usurping his own brother and exiling him. (There are many more examples in Shakespeare's "historical" plays.)

Shakespeare's women provide a colorful tapestry of characters we can identify with: Lady Macbeth is a schemer and willing partner in her husband's murder of Duncan; Gertrude marries her brother-in-law, committing incest (as the Elizabethans saw it) after her husband, Old Hamlet, dies—she is a woman trying to survive in a man's world; Ophelia, Hamlet's sweetheart, is destroyed by the machinations of this man's world, losing her mind as she is toyed with and heartbroken; she drowns and the men around her (especially the Church) insist she committed suicide when a branch she sat on broke and she fell into the water. We are mesmerized by the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* who play with Macbeth's mind and induce him to sacrifice his soul to be king; and we are further haunted by the witches' queen, Hecate, who wants nothing more than to destroy Macbeth motivated by pure evil. The audience sees innocence destroyed by the fighting of families in *Romeo and Juliet*.

The plays of Shakespeare are replete with various characteristics of man: how moral weakness can possess the mind and lead it to annihilation; and the question of 'moral choice' in all issues and circumstances. In particular, Shakespearean characters like Othello, Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, King

Lear and Brutus, are noble in nature, yet are destroyed by their own emotional actions which often lead to the destruction of those close to them as well. Here rises a question: What are those emotions? Undoubtedly, the characters become prey to the internal emotions which are called as Arishadvargas (inner enemies), i.e., kama (lust, desire), krodha (anger, hatred), lobha (greed, narrow-mindedness), moha (delusory, emotional attachment), mada (arrogance), maatsarya (envy, jealousy).

One common lament of students is that they cannot understand the 'gibberish' of Elizabethan language. Shakespeare's real gift, though, was the sound of his language. In part, that's the Elizabethan sound, which is still familiar to us through the King James Bible. Something about that language is fundamentally stately, broad, and bold; it's literally the Voice of God for many, even before it grew the patina of 400 years. And Shakespeare was the master of it. He knew how to make it click in the brain. Despite 400 years of language evolution, it often still does. Shakespeare is credited with coining scores of words still in use. He has nearly 2,000 entries in Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, even more than the Bible. Hamlet, it is sometimes joked, is nothing more than a string of clichés; practically every word in the play sticks in your brain. In the hands (and mouth) of an actor, those words can do amazing things. They simply "feel right" as you're saying them. But it was Shakespeare's particular gift of language that still thrills actors, and that soaring language conveys to audiences and readers as well.

William Shakespeare's genius and recognition dominantly lays within the magnificent use of unique language as well as plot-enhancing linguistic devices such as imagery and metaphors, leading to climactic moments and a satisfying resolution. This opens his texts up for interpretation and study in the modern era. His use of language and devices had influenced the creation of at least 3000 modern English words and phrases. In Act 2, Scene 4 of King Lear, William Shakespeare demonstrates the use of his complex language and metaphors in conversations between King Lear and his daughter, Goneril. Shakespeare uses King Lear's language –which include metaphors and multi-layered writing in order to portray an image of a beast which holds similar characteristics to her –greedy and betraying, those which were portrayed through the betrayal of her father: "*struck me with her tongue,/Most serpent-like, upon the very heart*". Shakespeare, unlike many preceding playwrights, set an extremely high benchmark for plays in both the modern and Elizabethan era, revolutionising and being the driver for many common terms and phrases we use today - "*More sinned against than sinning*"

Shakespeare is still so popular because he understood the human character and its weaknesses and imperfections. He also poked fun at all the social norms of the day so some of his plays are quite humorous. He also writes in very expressive tones that make for some good acting. Another good quality is that so many of his plays are believable and teach a moral or lesson.

William Shakespeare's poetry and, particularly his plays, are still among the greatest ever, and his work is unmatched in the history of the English language. It is no wonder that students around the world are still studying and reading his works, and it is only because of the high quality of his writing that his popularity has continued.

There is a depth of thought and feeling, and a magnificent manipulation of the English language by Shakespeare that transcends time. The renowned critic, Harold Bloom declares that "...no one, before or since Shakespeare, made so many separate selves." Thomas Carlyle declared that Shakespeare had "superiority of intellect." Further, Bloom asserts,

"Shakespeare will abide, even if he were to be expelled by the academics, in itself most unlikely. He extensively informs the language we speak, his principal characters have become our mythology, and he, rather than his involuntary follower Freud, is our psychologist."

There is a universal appeal to Shakespeare's diverse and yet so human characters, who teach so many about human nature, its virtues and its foibles.

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