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KING LEAR AS A WIDOWER: HIS MISJUDGEMENT AND THE CINDERELLA COMPLEX

M. Sri Nandhini,

Ph. D. Research Scholar
Department of English
Annamalai University
Tamil Nadu, India.

Dr. K. Rajaraman

Professor
Department of English
Annamalai University
Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract

With the ever-growing accolades from all over the world for his unique characterisation in the dramas and one hundred and fifty-four sonnets, William Shakespeare has the world at his feet. Four major tragedies of Shakespeare namely Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth, each infused with a specific characteristic trait, speak till date the exact reflection of human tendency in general. The purpose of this paper has twofold: to study the age-old king, namely King Lear from the perspective of him being a widower and how his spouseless life made him feel vulnerable in terms of his relationship towards his three daughters in the family, thereby becoming a victim to what Colette Dowling identified as "The Cinderella Complex," in her article entitled The Cinderella Syndrome published in The New York Times. With this consideration, this paper attempts to trace out the reason for the abandonment of his daughter Cordelia and tries to absolve King Lear from his error of misjudgement.

Keywords: The Cinderella Complex, Widower, Vulnerability, Dependent, Misjudgement, King Lear.

KING LEAR AS A WIDOWER: HIS MISJUDGEMENT AND THE CINDERELLA COMPLEX

- M. Sri Nandhini
- Dr. K. Rajaraman

It has been many millennia since William Shakespeare produced a plethora of literary works in English literature that, through his characters, witty dialogues and other literary devices, precisely reflect human intricacies, vices, and follies. The four classic tragedies- *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*- each saturated with the themes of procrastination, suspicion, ambition, and misjudgement respectively are reputedly the bedrock of the fundamental design of a human kind. When all these tragic heroes with the exception of King Lear encounter their downfall, pity and terror are strongly evoked since audience learns that one must avoid these tragic flaws that caused these great heroes to perish in their life. However, in the case of King Lear, pity is evoked but not terror for he died not because of the misjudgement in abandoning Cordelia and got taunted by his two merciless daughters but greatly as a widower and a helpless widower who believed his favourite daughter would come as a saviour to rescue him.

Unlike the original version of the play *King Lear*, where the abandoned Leir gathers an army against the wicked sons-in-law, Shakespeare's characterisation of King Lear is such that he does not exact revenge against Goneril or Regan, instead waiting upon for someone to come to his rescue, probably Cordelia herself. With the traits of dependency over his daughter Cordelia and an inability to take independent actions, it is possible to examine King Lear under what Colette Dowling identified as "Cinderella Complex" in her book entitled *The Cinderella Complex: Women's Fear of Independence* published in the year 1981. With the above the present article attempts, firstly, to show the similarities of misjudgement in *The Cinderella* story and *King Lear*, secondly, how Shakespeare's characterisation of King Lear paves a greater way for analysing him under the light of Cinderella Complex, and thirdly, it analyses how he was greatly inflicted by the Cinderella Complex therefore unbounding King Lear from

his error of misjudgement, by examining the character of Cordelia who actually was responsible for the downfall of King Lear.

The two great literary pieces namely *The Cinderella* and Shakespeare's *King Lear* are adjacent to each other as the theme of misjudgement, ill-treatment, dependency, unwillingness to take immediate actions despite knowing the painful situation well, and waiting for a hero or a saviour to extend help predominantly exist in both of these works. The Cinderella complex that King Lear integrates in himself is made obvious when the plotlines of the two works, namely *King Lear* and *Cinderella or The Little Glass Slipper*, are compared, along with some of the parallel elements that drive the stories. At first, with the exception of conclusion and few other character alterations, the two tragedies share similar causes. The core reason for disintegration in Lord Tremain and King Lear's family is erroneous decision. For instance, Sir Francis Tremain's remarriage to a wicked woman was his misjudgement since he believed she would be a loving mother to his daughter, but he did not live to witness the consequences of his poor judgement. In the case of King Lear, he misjudges his favourite daughter Cordelia and regrettably ends up a victim to his own actions. Both Lear and Sir Francis Tremain, who have failed to see the reality and have overlooked the underlying sufferings which were brilliantly screened by the sycophantic speech of Goneril, Regan and Lady Tremain respectively, are father figures. The former loses his daughter and his own self to the other two wicked daughters while the latter loses his daughter to his second wife, a witch like woman. The Cinderella and King Lear differ in a way that two victims lead their life. In the former, the daughter leaves the place with her new partner, for whom the pain must not be as horrible as the young Cinderella, whereas in the latter the young daughter is left abandoned to carry out all the household works, she is devoid of any true hear to console her. Thus, the theme of error, wickedness and ordeals are highly evident in both the works.

Old age is the toughest phase in one's life since dependency encroaches as age increases. From the beginning of the play itself, right from the point of dividing the kingdom to the three daughters, we see King Lear as not an old king who wanted to hand over his responsibility to his posterity, rather we could see him a father who is

much curious to know about the love his daughters have on him. He just wanted to know to whom he must depend on, probably looking for the best daughters even though she had a special affection on Cordelia.

LEAR. Peace Kent!

Come not between the dragon and his wrath.

I loved her most, thought to set my rest

On her kind nursery. (1.1.)

Shakespeare's version of the play *King Lear* gives much space on the part of the readers to identify King Lear as a widower, as he has led his life as a lonely man, -how long is unidentifiable, long suffering from the loss of his wife whose loss he is trying to balance in the presence of his most loving daughter Cordelia. As he is growing old and senile, his feeling of being unsecured and dependency take roots in him strong enough that he wanted to conduct a contest like thing to choose the right person for him to depend upon in his last days. This particular characteristics of him is implicitly seen in the first scene of the very first act, when he wants to choose the best daughter to rely on. The criticisms directed at King Lear for misjudging Cordelia disregard the need to divide the kingdom based on the daughters' expressions of love for their father. It is necessary to consider the cause for the division of kingdom before analysing the tragic flaw of King Lear. His status as a widower would be the primary motivation to do so. If at all he had his wife alive, he would not have considered dividing the kingdom. He did so because he lacked love, support of a wife, and the contest conducted by him among the daughters was only to identify on whom he would rely upon in his remaining days. This status of him being a widower led him to make such things. Due to the fact that King Lear's wife is no longer alive, there would have certainly been a family conflict following his demise. When King Lear is viewed from the perspective of a widower, his action of looking for an ideal companion(daughter) to be with him in the future ahead and his intention to prevent the family conflict are absolutely reasonable. Kenneth Muir in his book entitled *Shakespeare: King Lear A Critical Study* praises the decision of King Lear for brilliantly

planning in prior to decide the inheritance before his daughters and sons in law would make it a family feud. He writes:

Kent and Gloucester express surprise that Albany and Cornwall receive equal shares, but they do not disapprove of the plan of dividing the kingdom. Lear's motive -to avoid future strife- was perfectly sensible. If he had died, or become incapable without arranging the succession, there would certainly have been serious trouble. (10)

On a scale with other tragic heroes namely Othello, Hamlet and Macbeth, King Lear stands out as a lonesome character. He is devoid of intimate love by his wife and her moral support. Macbeth had Lady Macbeth, Othello had Desdemona, and even Hamlet had Ophelia, but King Lear has no marital partner. The play *King Lear* begins with an unduly bland scene which immediately reveals the play's tension. The audience had no means to confirm what had transpired prior to King Lear taking decision to divide the kingdom or how he had lived his life. Perhaps, King Lear would have considered Cordelia as his confidante, indicating his closeness to her and expressing his fear of loneliness in his approaching old age, and then at some point of time, the decision of dividing the authority would have been made. Since, King Lear is shown to reject Cordelia right away in the first scene of the first act, Cordelia gains sympathy from the audience while King Lear earns criticisms. If Shakespeare had included some background on King Lear's relationship with his three daughters and his life as a widower it would have been convenient for the audience to determine who is to be blamed. The opening scene of King Lear is evaluated by John Cunningham in the following words:

The simplest view is that Shakespeare made a mess of it; and it is right that we remind ourselves of a truth – he did not always write well or even carefully: but this play is so immense and powerful that it is hard to suppose he did not take care over the opening. (*King Lear: the opening scenes* 20)

As one could see from the opening scene of King Lear that, the father, since growing old, wanted to hand over all his responsibility and be taken care of by his

daughters. He can be called as the most sympathetic character due to his portrayal of leading a lonely life in the absence of his partner. In his moment of outrage, King Lear misjudged Cordelia, and she complied with his order to leave the place but what transpires in the ensuing acts is in part due to the Cinderella complex that the old king acquired, as well as the negligence on the part of the abandoned daughter. The longing for love and care, to be taken care by others are the two main aspects of the Cinderella complex. Colette Dowling defines the complex in the following words:

The Cinderella complex – a network of largely repressed attitudes and fears that keeps women in a kind of half-light, retreating from the full use of their minds and creativity. Like Cinderella, women today are still waiting for something external to transform their lives. (21)

While expressing her affection for her father, Cordelia says “nothing” which would have surprised her father who had earnest faith that she would act as his saviour in dire circumstances even though she is aware of her father’s unwavering love for her. Instead of characterising this abandonment of his daughter as misjudgement, it would be credible to represent King Lear as making a snap decision because he firmly believed that his words were only temporary and Cordelia whom he believed to have resolute understanding of him would rescue him if things went wrong. However, the reversal of action put King Lear on the downscale and Cordelia earned the sympathy from the audience. Even when he abandons her, he knew she would turn up for him and he actually waits until she does so because his love on her was “too far from plain love of father for daughter” (The Avoidance of Love by Stanley Cavell, *Twentieth Century Interpretations of King Lear* 85).

In an article entitled “Cinderella Complex: Theoretical Roots to Psychological Dependency Syndrome in Women” by Sneha Saha explains one of the major symptoms of idolizing the partners, preferably the male partners, which can be taken to be the cause of Lear’s action of misjudgement:

Most doctors believe that women who suffer from this complex usually have other deep-seated emotional problems such as low self-esteem and dependency issues. Some women who suffer from the Cinderella complex

are unable to accept the men in their lives in a healthy way. Rather than seeing them as normally flawed individuals, they often idolize them. This type of idolization often leads to expectations that are unrealistic and impossible to meet. A woman with these unrealistic expectations may become emotionally wounded by behaviours. For women who suffer from Cinderella type complexes, dependency and low self-esteem seem to be the root causes of the problem. (120)

Lear's failure to act swiftly against every evildoer in his realm is another instance of his Cinderella complex. He remains inert until he finds a compatible partner in Cordelia. Not only does he feel guilty, but also, he fears being too independent to give any orders to the knights he had with him, throughout his exile, which prohibits him from contacting his daughter, who has been banished.

If King Lear who loved his Cordelia more than the other two daughters is to be held accountable for his error in judgement, then examining what and how Cordelia loved after being abandoned and conjoining with her new partner is equally important. Cordelia's silence necessitates a close observation. Criticisms failed to look into the impassiveness of Cordelia which primarily led to King Lear's downfall and which served as the basis for what is known as the tragic flaw of the tragic hero in *King Lear*. Cordelia's true colours get revealed when she bids farewell to her sisters.

CORDELIA. The jewels of our father, with washed eyes

Cordelia leaves you. I know you what you are,
And like a sister am most loath to call

Your faults as they are named. Love well our father.

REGAN. Prescribe not us our duty.

It is apparent from Cordelia's words that she is cognizant of the scenario surrounding King Lear and her sisters. Owing to this nature of Cordelia, it allows us to consider her as the main reason for her father's downfall. Despite knowing the true motivations of her sisters, how the distribution of throne would become a big issue, she just leaves with the duke, concealing her inertness in the pretext of following her father's command. It is not the first time she has shown disinterest in her father, but

when he is mistreated by her sisters whom she knew well before, and she chooses not to intervene to defend King Lear. After being abandoned by King Lear, she gets into scene only at the close of the play. Cordelia escapes by saying that she does not have the facundity to convince her father how much she loved and made a claim:

CORDELIA. Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave.
My heart into my mouth: I love your majesty
According to my bond; nor more nor less.

Though her speech projects her as a highly practical woman, who does not want to make any spectacular actions in expressing her emotional love, this aspect of her is what overshadows the Cordelia and her follies. In fact, she has the ability of putting words in a more harmonious way that even sounds poetic in a sense. Cordelia who could say only “nothing” in expressing her love and blamed herself of her deficiency in speaking flowery language actually towards the conclusion of the play speaks like a poet. For instance, at the end of the play, when she issues an order to bring back her mad father she says:

CORDELIA. All blessed secrets,
All you unpublished virtues of the earth,
Spring with my tears...

Cordelia’s expression of “nothing” refers to unwillingness to compete with her treacherous sisters for an equal share of the throne because she contends that there are other ways to express her true adoration for her father and that she lacks “glib and oily art”. However, when Lear is being tortured by Goneril and Regan, she is nowhere to be found in the play to stand by him. She is aware of how vicious her sisters are and does not wish to stoop to their level to succeed the kingdom. The downfall of the king was primarily because of her nothing rather than accusing the king’s misjudgement. In R. S. White’s *Innocent Victims: Poetic Injustice in Shakespearean Tragedy* R. S. White exposes the authority Cordelia had to bring any odds under her control including Goneril and Regan.

Every disaster that occurs in King Lear can be traced back eventually to one word, and it is Cordelia’s, as she struggles to be truthful to herself. The

word is 'nothing'. Without that word, it is conceivable that she may have become a healthy factor in the balance of power that follows Lear's partition of Kingdom, a force to keep Goneril, Regan and Edmund in check; the king would not have been thrown on the hospitality of his less loving daughter, and would not have suffered the mental anguish of an emotional break with his dearest daughter and Cordelia herself would not have died in the way she does. (99)

King Lear's idolisation of Cordelia in his imagination to a perfect daughter and his serious sense of dependency on her and his waiting for a saviour to rescue him from all his troubles, and his vulnerability display that he is a victim of Cinderella complex.

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