

DR. SARADA BALAJI THALLAM

From Darkness To Light: Shakespeare's *King Lear* and the Indian Gunas

Abstract

This paper analyses Shakespeare's tragedy *King Lear* in the light of the Indian Guna theory to depict the process of inner maturity that takes place within the hero's mind. Shakespeare's focus in this play (as with his other tragedies) is on the soul of the hero where the real action takes place. In probing into the core of the king, the ace dramatist delineates the process of a gradual evolution of Lear's consciousness from a dark state of Tamas, through the active Rajas, and its final state of Sattva and beyond. The soul of this powerful tragedy lies in Lear's transcendence even beyond the Sattva, which alone proves that "ripeness is all."

Keywords: Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Indian Gunas, Guna theory-Indian philosophy-ignorance-darkness-realization-transformation-consciousness, Shakespearean tragedies, Alfred Harbage, *Conceptions of Shakespeare*, Kabuki Shakespeare, Russian Shakespeare, African Shakespeare, Indian Shakespeare.

From Darkness To Light: Shakespeare's *King Lear* and the Indian Gunas by Sarada Balaji

Alfred Harbage's *Conceptions of Shakespeare* (1966) is an important starting point for any contemporary re-reading of the eternal bard:

*It may well be that Shakespeare's idolatry
is drawing strength*

*from something other than in its roots.
Having lost their anchorage*

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

in the faith of their fathers, many are seeking a substitute in secular

literature, and perhaps, in a materialistic age . . . on Shakespeare(s).

Besides, faith should begin when we reach the limits of knowledge. (38)

Harbage's quasi-theological stance is hardly different from Keats who stated that "Shakespeare's significant life transcends the world of specific personal experience", thus paying rich encomiums to the bard who is an "abstract of that which makes men, men." Divested of historical specificity and cultural particularity, Shakespeare is an "Everyman" whose plays reflect the highest engagement with human life, that delineate the labyrinthine human experience in a mode of signification that transcends the bounds of human thought, even after six centuries of his demise.

The semiotics of a Shakespearean theatre establishes a direct communication across the globe in all ages, thus donning him in numerous avatars. Hence we have a Kabuki Shakespeare, Russian Shakespeare, African Shakespeare and an Indian Shakespeare. India witnesses a splendid panorama of Shakespearean performances which include an endless array such as the Elizabethan-like performances by numerous theatrical groups largely concentrated in the Indian metros, the adaptations by numerous classical dance groups like Kathakali and Yakshagana which have made Shakespeare their own, and more recently the Bollywood adaptations of the Shakespearean plays as seen in *Omkar* and *Haider*.

The bard's roots in India can be traced to the Empire's cultural enterprise in the year 1775, the age of the American war of independence and, and the age of Johnson and Garrick in England. Despite the current age's tendency to view all aspects of the colonial enterprise as being rooted in the twin malaises of

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

Orientalism and Postcolonial epistemic violence, Shakespeare's introduction in India is undoubtedly perceived as a boon to a nation that abounds in a plethora of philosophical schools and creative writings in numerous languages. Moreover, Shakespeare's imperishable empire transcends spatial and cultural boundaries, thereby establishing his works across nations.

The bard's presence has been a continuous one in India since his inception. The English-educated Indian intelligentsia have remained enticed by the poet's inexorable genius partly due to its variety, and largely because his esemplastic philosophy permits numerous interpretations from Indian perspectives too. It is widely believed that Gandhiji penned an essay on *Hamlet*, (Naiker 2) and one of the greatest Indian tributes to Shakespeare is to be found in Aurobindo's *The Future Poetry*. Aurobindo perceives the bard's literary accomplishments as being on par with the "legendary feat of the impervious sage Viswamitra," since Shakespeare's all-encompassing vision has created a heterocosmic universe into which one can delve into as long as humanity ever exists on this globe. Aurobindo discerned in Shakespeare a "hiranyagarba" the primordial source of creation, that had an apriori existence before Creation itself: "This is not Virat, the seer and creator of gross forms, but Hiranyagarbha, the luminous wind of dreams . . ." (8).

The Indian philosophical and literary firmament devoured Shakespeare with a ravenous appetite since his inception. His popularity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth Bengal (the cradle of Indian renaissance), the performances of Shakespearean plays by Chowringee Theatre, Metropolitan Academy and David Hare Academy in Bengal, which later spread to the other parts of the nation, can hardly be underestimated. Apart from the compulsory inclusion of the bard in Indian academics, India has also witnessed a multitudinous splendour of Shakespearean adaptations in its Indian languages

such as Hindi, Sanskrit, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada languages, to name a few. Moreover, the seer's deep philosophical vision that touches the soul of eternal human dilemmas and ponderings provide a facile ground for an interpretation of his works from numerous schools of Indian philosophies. This paper is one such attempt at viewing Shakespeare's *King Lear* as a play of progression from darkness to light. Basically all Shakespearean tragedies delve deep into the recesses of the hero's inner self, through which the dramatist aims at unravelling the highest truths of human existence. Aurobindos' *Future Poetry* pays a rich tribute to this power of the Shakespearean drama:

*His development of the human character
has a sovereign*

*force within its bounds, but it is the soul of
the human being*

*as seen through outward character,
passion, action - the life*

*soul and not either the thought-soul or the
deeper psychic*

*still less the profounder truths of the
human spirit. (79)*

The bard's focus on the fruition of human life in the play offers an apt ground for the application of the Indian *guna theory*. Had the play's focus been on the biological or temporal maturity of Lear, it would have long perished into dust. But the dramatist's oceanic mind focuses on the inner ripening of Lear as a contrast to the temporal maturity of the ageing Lear, as he is in the twilight of his life since the beginning of the play. Despite his age, Lear continues to inhabit a world of metaphoric darkness, until a greater light draws him to a state of *nirvanic* illumination thus rendering this masterpiece the possibility of interpreting the work in terms of the Indian *guna theory*.

A brief survey of the theory would not be out of space. According to the Gita, the *gunas* or the primary qualities of Nature are three in number: the *Tamas*, *Rajas* and *Sattva*. They are born from *Prakriti* and hence exist in all living creatures including human beings in varying degrees. The fourteenth chapter of the *Gita* presents a detailed picture of the *gunas*. The *Tamas* or the lowest state symbolises the darker and cruder human nature, having its origins in *ajnanam* (ignorance). It is imbued with the qualities of lulling our souls to a state of comatose existence and indolence. (14.8) The *Rajas* (or the intermediary state) teems with passion that emanates from *thrishna* (thirst or intense desire) and *sanga* (attachment) or action wherein the human soul remains inextricably and deeply bound with attachment and action (14.7). *Sattva*, the highest state on the other hand remains imbued with a pure illumination that binds the human souls with joy and realization. (14.6). As a part of *prakriti*, the *gunas* determine our actions. The *Gita* aims at unfettering human life from these templated actions since even *Sattva* is not an end in itself; but an instrument for self-realization, since one's soul needs to transcend all the three *gunas* to attain unfettered freedom. (14.20) Shakespeare's *King Lear* offers an appropriate ground to trace the evolution of an old man's consciousness from the state of ignorance to realization through the *guna* framework.

Lear's unripe and indolent mental state, that is oblivious of the higher truths of human existence is evident even in the opening scene of the play. As Lear enters the stage with his three daughters and attendants, his opening lines state his "darker purpose" (I, 137). The term "dark" though meaning "hidden" intentions in the play's context, is a significant term in the *guna* theory connoting "darkness" with an inertia-filled unilluminated state of mind. Akin to a child distributing toys to his friends, Lear rashly divides his kingdom between his two elder daughters. Lear's *tamasic* mind fails to apprehend the silent love of Cordelia since her "love's more ponderous than [her] tongue."

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

(I, ii, 85). Her metaphoric declaration of "nothing" fails to appeal to the ignorant Lear, and hence he utters his vindictive statement that "nothing will come out of nothing." While Cordelia's "nothing" is loaded with a deeper significance of unfathomable love, Lear's literal understanding of the same is an ample proof of his unawareness that fails to perceive Cordelia's mental ripeness which transcends her tender frame:

Lear: So young and so untender?

Cordelia: So young my lord, and true.

(I, i, 118-119)

In the supposed damning of Cordelia, Lear's *agnana* fails to perceive his own doom. Raging with anger and prey to obvious flattery, his judgement is blurred so much so that he fails to innately perceive the obnoxious realities behind glib talk. Kent's comments on Lear's lack of judgement thus:

*KENT: ... when Lear is mad . . . what
would's't thou do?*

. . . . duty shall have dread to speak

When power to flattery bows...

When majesty falls to folly . . .

(I, i, 163-167)

Kent's deeper understanding of the silence of the sincere Cordelia forms a stark contrast to the "empty hearted" glib speeches of Goneril and Regan, which are laden with cunning and deceit. As a stark contrast to Lear's initial abandonment of Cordelia is Kent's perception of Cordelia's moral fibre. In fact Kent's paternal benediction on Cordelia which says: "The gods to their dear shelter take thee, maid." (I, i, 206) is a stark contrast to the impulsive destitution of Lear.

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

Shakespeare's prime focus in the first act of this tragedy is Lear's inner darkness and a *tamasic* ignorance that renders him incapacitated to perceive virtue. Lear's unevolved dark state of mind in an old frame is contrasted with an evolved awareness in younger frames like Cordelia and Duke of France. Cordelia's plain talk that lacks the sheen of "glib and oily art." (I, i, 258) appeals not to the ignorant Lear but also to the Duke of France who pays rich accolades to her inner attributes thus:

*Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich being
poor;*

*Most choice forsaken; and most loved,
despised,*

Thee and thy virtues have I seized upon.

(I, ii, 290-292)

From the first to the fifth act, the play is a constant progression of Lear's state of mind from an abysmal pit of servile passionate bondage, to a state of *nirvanic* freedom.

Lear's inner sojourn which begins in the first act, culminates in the final one. From a *tamasic* darkness in the first act, he goes through a *Rajasic* activeness in the subsequent acts. It is with an eagerness that Lear seeks shelter and paternal hospitality in the homes of Goneril and Regan, only to be rejected by them. The Fool's wise counsel aids in Lear's quicker recognition of the filial impiety of the two elder daughters:

All thy other titles thou hast given away

That thou was born with.

(I, iv, 153.)

Not only does the "Fool" perceive the innate deceits of Goneril and Regan, but he also recognizes true merit of Cordelia. Thus, the inner ripeness of Cordelia, Kent and the Fool are juxtaposed to the lack of mellowness and faulty judgement in Lear. Lear's

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

evolution towards a *Rajasic* activeness, is initiated by the dramatist even towards the end of the first act when Goneril's diabolic nature unfolds itself to him. It is the beginning of his inner journey from a state of ignorance, passion and impulsiveness towards a state of higher realization. It dawns on Lear the difference between Cordelia's genuine "nothingness" and the empty platitudes of the earlier daughters:

O most small fault

How ugly didst thou in Cordelia show

(I, iv, 278-79)

But his realization is never complete since he remains ignorant of the fact of a similar fate awaiting him in Regan's place too. But the wise Shakespearean fool clearly predicts that

"She will taste as like this as a crab does to a crab." (I, v, 18). When Regan orders Lear to return to his eldest daughter, Lear kneels to her:

Dear daughter, I confess that I am old

.....on my knees I beg

That you'll vouchsafe me raiment, bed and food.

(II, iv, 173-75)

His unevolved consciousness is clearly evident when he childishly comments to Regan thus:

... Her eyes are fierce, but

thine

Do comfort and not burn

(II, iv, 194-95)

But Goneril's unmoving attitude only aids in Lear grasping her true nature which is described in a retinue of diseased imagery

like "plague", "boil", "embossed carbuncle" and "corrupted blood." Branding his two elder daughters as "unnatural hags", Lear's continually evolving consciousness realizes that "man's life is cheap as beasts." (II, iv, 307).

King Lear stands unique in the enigmatic canvas of Shakespearean tragedies since it is the only tragedy with two parallel plots that reinforce the theme of human "ripeness" and the evolution of human consciousness to the highest plane. If the main plot concerns Lear and his three daughters, the sub-plot of the play concerns the life of Lear's bosom pal Gloucester and his relationship with his sons Edgar and Edmund. Gloucester's past life of lustful passions is emblemized in Edmund, his bastard son. Edmund remains the parallel of Goneril and Regan in the sub-plot. While the two daughters of Lear drench the gullible father with phony statements of love, Edmund misguides Gloucester against Edgar through a forged letter. Parallel to Lear's castigation of the flawless Cordelia in a moment of thoughtless rage, Gloucester abandons Edgar. While Lear's *tamasic* mind fails to recognize a "soul in bliss" like Cordelia, Gloucester also falls short in his judgement of Edmund. Shakespearean tragedies are a complex world of contrasts juxtaposing extreme evil with extreme virtue. *Othello*, for instance, presents one of the world's most obnoxious villainy in Iago, (only next to Milton's Satan), contrasted with the peerless Desdemona. Similarly, the world of Lear presents the acme of evil as epitomized in Goneril, Regan and Edmund as against the blemishless Cordelia. The realization of the irredeemable evil against unfathomable virtue aids in the spiritual mellowness of the two old men. If Lear's Tamas and Rajas are to be epitomized in Goneril and Regan, Gloucester's is found in Edmund.

When deceived by the two elder daughters and banished into the wild, Lear's unabated grief and dignified self-esteem averts his act of weeping, but creates a fury within. Lear's highly charged emotional state finds a semiotic parallel on the stage in the form

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

of a raging tempest. The sturdy and proud Lear now "break(s) into a hundred thousand flaws."

The third act forms the soul of the tragedy since it graphically depicts Lear's turbulent state of mind. Rejected by his trusted daughters and having abandoned the truly virtuous Cordelia, Lear is mercilessly thrown to the primal elements of Nature, red in tooth and claw. The once proud Lear, surrounded by royal splendour now stands divested of power, strength, royalty, pomp, retinue and even basic human contact. No other Shakespearean tragedy effectively deploys Nature as an objective correlative of human nature as this tragedy does. The storm forms a symbolic medium to purge the errant soul of its hero. Shakespeare's deft handling of the ecological forces as a primal transformative tool that propels the hero to a higher plane of consciousness as in this play is unparalleled. If Arjuna had received the Gitopadesa in the battlefield and Karaikkal Ammai had composed her lofty devotional hymns for Siva in a cremation ground, Lear attains summits of realization in the bare heath and the raging storm. Lear's mind is put to a state of continuous purgative turbulence—a prerequisite for his forthcoming elevated consciousness. His heightened self-awareness on a bare and desolate heath is a logical corollary of his moments of realization in the earlier acts. Betrayed by Goneril towards the end of the first act, Lear significantly utters thus:

How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is

To have a thankless child.

(I, iv, 43).

Regan's ingratitude in the second act further heightens his awareness of the ways of the world when he infers to her "sharp-toothed unkindness like a vulture." (II, iv, 44).

A terror-filled nature with its "fretful elements" , that "blow(s) the earth into the sea:, "the curled waters", the "impetuous blasts

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

with eyeless rage," the "conflicting wind and rain" tear not merely Lear's "white hair", but also his psyche. Rightly does he utter in the second act that

. . . we are not ourselves

*When nature, being oppressed commands
the mind*

(II, iv, 60)

In the gamut of Shakespeare's dramatic creations, two storms clearly remain artistically etched out: the storm in *The Tempest* and the storm in *King Lear*. In *The Tempest*, the storm unites the members of a family, a technical necessity that sets the entire play to action and aids in the dramatist's adherence to the classical unities. But the storm in *King Lear* is far from being designed as an ecological phenomenon or a technical embellishment, but it is a primordial natural element and a philosophical force that purges the conscience of a juvenile old king while powerfully catapulting him to a higher plane of consciousness. The storm's "thought-executing fires," "oak-cleaving thunderbolts," the "all shaking thunder" together ravage Lear's mind with a powerful simultaneity. Lear's frail, human, mortal frame is no match for Mother Nature. As Kent comments:

Man's nature cannot carry

Th' affliction nor the fear.

(III, ii, 49-50)

Much later does Cordelia blurt out in anguish thus:

. was this a face

To be opposed against the jarring winds?

(IV, vii, 37-38)

She further agonises thus:

My enemy's dog

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

*Though he had bit me, should have stood
that night*

Against my fire

(IV, vii, 42-43)

Lear's existence on the bare heath in a naked unaccommodated state, ravaged by the "foul weather" outside and psychological turmoil inside transforms the play into one of the greatest tragedies of human suffering and the soul's elevation. Lear's internal tempest is matched with his turbulent vocabulary that continues in the second scene also wherein he beckons the furious Nature to assault him, all such devastating facets of Nature are no equal to the ingratitude of his daughters:

*Blow winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage,
blow!*

You cataracts and hurricanes

(III, i, 1-2)

The storm's "raging thunderbolts", "sulphurous fire", and the "germens spill(ed) at once", the "fire", "rain" and other such primal elements of Nature in a state of raw destructiveness, fail to inflict any pain on the poor old man traumatized by filial impiety:

Here I stand your slave

A poor, infirm, weak, despised old man.

Lear's utterance summarises not merely his individual infirmity, but a powerful picture of the larger human incapacitatedness against the primordial Life Forces and against Nature.

L.C. Knights comments on the "two-fold process of discovery that the scene presents: nature "without" and "within". These two natures incessantly churn Lear's troubled consciousness with a powerful simultaneity, which creates an emotional blitzkrieg that in turn paradoxically elevates his mind to a higher plane of

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

realization. The deepest workings of a Shakespearean tragic hero's mind is best revealed in his soliloquies. As with Hamlet and Othello, Lear's soliloquies aptly describe the aged king's heart-rending wisdom. The once crowned head of Lear is now bare and shelterless, vulnerable to the raging forces of Nature. Abandoned, shunned and untenanted, the desolate Lear now perfectly empathises with the poor, humble and destitute. Agony strangely enhances his discriminatory powers so much so that he now clearly sieves truth from falsehood. Like Lear being thrown open to the winds, the blind Gloucester is deceived to a cliff. The act of Gloucester being blinded by Regan and Cornwall catapults the play to greater tragic heights. The supreme realization of Lear's comment that "man is a worm" is matched by the blind Gloucester's famous remark:

*As flies to wanton boys, are we to the
Gods,*

They kill us for their sport.

(IV, i, 41-42)

It is of no mean significance that the blind Gloucester now clearly perceives eternal truths, as the abandoned Lear's consciousness also attains a higher plane of realization as revealed in their timeless words of wisdom.

It is Cordelia who significantly perceives the inner mellowness of Lear, despite his bare exterior. Shakespeare's artistic use of costumes and embellishments as corresponding signifiers of human nature stand out uniquely in this play. While the crowned head of Lear is divested of all maturity, his seemingly bare head, adorned with "furrow weeds", "hardocks", "hemlock", "nettles" and "cuckoo flowers" is ripe with knowledge and the perception of human life as an ocean of incessant sorrows. It is closer to the Buddhist conception of life as *dukkha* (or sorrow). The new avatar of Lear is far from insanity, as his words reveal a clear understanding of human life. Utterances like

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

We came crying hither

(IV, i, 196)

Or

*When we are born, we cry that w come**To this great stage of fools*

(IV, vi, 200-201)

reverberate with significant echoes from the Buddhist perception of life which apprehends human existence as a series of sorrows.

Sorrow bestows on Lear and Gloucester an intuitive wisdom to perceive the grain of the eternal truths of human nature. The Chandogya Upanishad for instance throws a unique light on the vision of human life:

*When a man rightly sees (his soul), he sees no death,**no sickness or distress. When a man rightly sees, he**sees all, he wins all, completely.*

(7.26.2)

Hence, when Albany brings news of Cordelia's death, Lear agonizingly questions the forces above thus:

*Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life**And thou no breath at all?*

(V, iii, 370-71)

The inexorable question remains rhetorically unanswered, and Lear's death is almost instantaneous. Edgar's description of the moment as "The oldest hath borne the most" (V, iii, 394)

Shakespeare does not transform life "... into the romantic pyrotechnics, for life itself has taken hold of him in order to

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

recreate itself in his image." (Aurobindo, *Future Poetry* 78). The deeper cause for human suffering in *Lear* does not originate in external factors as in Greek tragedies, where Fate or a Delphian oracle determine the course of human life as against individual free will and choice. But a Shakespearean tragedy like *Lear* has human choice as the rationale behind the human drama that the play unfolds. As mentioned above, it is a world of contrasts. While Lear's choice of extreme evil triggers the Tamas and Rajas energies, the bliss of Sattva dawns on his battered soul only on his choice of the benevolent Cordelia. As Lear's tempestuous consciousness is relentlessly churned with guilt, his mind moves towards a Cordelia consciousness (Sattva). With a mind untutored to the lofty lesson of human detachment, he needs the sane advice of the "wise" Fool:

*Let go thy hold when a great wheel,
Down a hill, lest it break thy neck . . .
But the great one that goes up the hill, let
him
Draw thee after*

(II, iv, 66-69)

In fact Lear's quest for a loftier consciousness and his readiness for a spiritual self-exploration that may reveal his true nature to himself is clearly evident in the following lines:

*Doth any here know me? Why, this is not
Lear:
Doth Lear walk this? Where are his eyes?
Either his notion weakens or his
discernings
Are lethargied
Who is it that can tell me who I am?*

(I, iv, 13-16)

The play's soul remains embedded in the tragic hero's quest for the core of his "self" and the realization of the loftier aims of human life. Both Lear's and Gloucester's regeneration lies in their recognition of the quintessential purpose of human life. Lear attains ripeness or "Sattva" on witnessing Cordelia's death and himself embraces an enlightened, Sattvik death that transcends all. As a contrast to the passionate, emotional, impulsive and "dark" Lear whom we witness in the beginning of the play is the serene Lear, who breathes his last with serenity, dignity, poise and realization. Purged of his rawness, Lear's ripe mind attains a state of Sattva, which alone transports him to a blissful state of liberation. The Mundakopanishad mentions thus:

*In the innermost golden sheath, there is
the Brahman without*

*stains and without parts. That is pure, that
is Light of lights.*

*that is what the knowers of the Atman
realise.*

(II, ii, ix, Sivananda 258)

The highest sheath is "golden" since the Atman is located there. It is the innermost core of human life. It is free from stains and all the Gunas of Prakriti. Free from ignorance, it is *Nishkalam*, and pure. (see Sivananda 258)

Is a fitting spiritual mellowness that the old king has attained through the thickets and thorns of earthly agony. As in other Shakespearean tragedies, death aids in transcendence for Lear. As his passing away occurs in the moment of his intense spiritual consciousness, (Sattva), it erodes his earlier judgemental erroneousness. Breathing his last in a state of mind when all passion is spent, the process is imbued with a mystic grandeur, which aids his eternal consciousness to transcend beyond even

the state of Sattva, elevating him beyond the plane of life consciousness to move into a state of Ultimate consciousness. Verse 72 of the second chapter of the Gita entitled *Sankya Yoga: The Eternal Reality of the Soul's Immortality* significantly infers to the sublime philosophy implied in the process of dying thus:

*O Arjuna, having gained the realization of
the Ultimate Truth,*

*one is never again deluded and even at
the moment of death,*

*being situated in this state, liberation from
the material existence*

*and attainment of the Ultimate
Consciousness is assured.*

Lear's transcendence of the *gunas* aids in his transcendence through death. The Gita assures that a mind which surpasses *gunas*, attains a stoicism that is unmoved by pains or pleasures alike. Neither does he detest them nor does he desire them (14.22). The sublime transcendence imbues a Shakespearean tragedy its ultimate *ananda*. Thus, "Ripeness is all" for Lear.

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

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Dr. Sarada Thallam is a Professor at the Dept. of English with S.V.University, Tirupati 517502.

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

[Contemporary Literary Review India](#)

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