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An Ecocritical Reading of Bard of the Barracks' Production of King Lear

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Received-13.07.2024

Revised-30.07.2024

Accepted-26.07.2024

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Abstract: *One of the major problems a researcher frequently encounters while working on Shakespeare's plays is that of the tremendous amount of research that has already been conducted on Shakespeare. Under this circumstance, the film adaptations and the theatrical productions of Shakespeare plays available on the Internet and YouTube open up a new way for him. Every reading of a literary work is a kind of rewriting of it, as also is its screen adaptation and theatrical production, where the filmmaker and the director introduce a lot of things not available in the actual work, with results not always wholly beneficial for it. They view (in this sense, studies) the work from their own perspectives, in the light of the social, political and cultural issues of their own time. In this sense, every screen adaptation or theatrical production of a literary work is a kind of new reading of it, and as such a new work, since it is not possible by any means to reproduce the "intents" of the original author.*

Ecocriticism is an emergent field of literary theory that provides a new dimension for the interpretation of literary works. This paper aims to interpret the Bard of the Barracks company's theatrical production of King Lear from an ecocritical perspective, showing how the human world stands in an entropic relation to Nature whose peaceful atmosphere the characters disrupt. Lear's commodification of nature is indicative of the humanist notion of the supremacy of man over Nature and his ultimate reduction to misery---to an animal-like state---questions the verity of such an assumption.

Key words : Ecocritical Reading, King Lear, tremendous, Circumstance, film adaptations

There are two principal differences between the original Shakespeare play and the Bard of the Barracks company's theatrical production of the same: that of the setting and the replacement of a male character with a female one. Nature plays a very important role in the latter, since unlike in the former where some of the scenes take place in the palace and the castles and the others outside, here the entire action is set in different parts of a particular forest. This change in setting lends a completely different dimension to the play. The verdurous background not only gives an ecocritical tweak to it, but reinforces the atmosphere of harmony and disharmony.

At the very outset, the natural environment is in a state of harmony that poses a striking contrast with the disharmony that characterize the human world depicted in the play. Bird songs are heard in the background, but in the midst of it is reported the king's decision to divide his kingdom among his three daughters. There is a sword struck into the ground, with a royal throne placed close to it. The sword and the throne are symbols of power and authority; they also signify human supremacy over nature. The throne is made of planks of wood, which evidently indicates the use of nature as a commodity to serve human purpose. The particular place where this scene is set has been weeded beforehand for the meeting to take place. There are clear signs of human activity affecting nature, though in a very minor way. The very beginning of the play establishes a dichotomy between nature and culture. Culture does not share a symbiotic relationship with nature. Culture is an entropy. Culture and nature are not mutually sustaining, co-existing systems. Human culture exists as an entropic system that has no symbiotic connections at all with the environment.

The harmonious ambience that prevails at the beginning is soon affected by human activity. Lear arrives there with a few others. Sitting on the throne he declares, "Meantime we shall express our darker purpose." But why darker purpose? Maybe it is a darker purpose because it was so far kept a secret. But for an ecocritic, the word "darker" carries a different connotation; it is darker because it involves the division of the kingdom, and, therefore, the division of nature. It is much



like an act of torture on nature. In fact, Lear's kingdom for the most part consists of nature. In the original play we see a few man-made objects: the royal palace, the castles and the dilapidated house where Lear takes shelter. But in the theatrical production of the Bard of the Barracks we see no such man-made objects that stand out against the natural environment. This lack of presence of man-made objects indicates that in the theatrical production, characters are closer to nature than they are in the original play. Be that as it may, there is a strong dichotomy between nature and culture. When the scene takes place inside the palace in the original play, it does not put the environmental issue to the foreground; but when the same scene takes place outside on the lap of nature, it clearly indicates human encroachment on nature. As in the original play, in the Bard of the Barracks company's theatrical production Lear commodifies nature, so do Goneril and Regan. Lear has a sense of superiority. He has reduced nature to a mere map drawn on a piece of cloth. He divides it with a sword, which is again indicative of human domination on nature. Humanism advocates dominion over nature, as we see in the Bible. It places the human at the centre of the universe. Human mind becomes the source of value, with the result that nature ceases to have any value of its own. Human mind attaches value to it. The inevitable consequence of this is that humans also become commodities. Only those having material wealth are prioritised. Human beings are ready to go any length to satisfy their own desires without care for emotional bondage. If attention is focused on the characters of Goneril and Regan, it is seen that they share no emotional bandage with nature, so does Lear. It is only lately that he realises his connection with nature when he is reduced to extreme misery. As for Edmund, nature helps him to carry out his evil purpose. For Edmund, property is all. He is jealous that he is deprived of inheritance.

As is noted in the above discussion, human and nature stand in a mathematical relationship. There is no emotional bond with nature. The deep ecologists argue that there should be an emotional bond with nature and not merely a rational-intellectual relationship. This lack of emotional bondage results in a value dualism. Nature has value so far as it serves human purpose. The result of this is that human relation loses value. King Lear has value as long as has property. His value falls when he loses possession of his property. Goneril and Regan value property more than their relationship with Lear.

This results in a binary between nature as a commodity and human relationship which depends on an emotional bond. In this binary nature as a commodity occupies the upper hand.

For the Duke of Burgundy also human relationship holds no significance ; its value is subservient to material wealth:

BURGUNDY. Royal king

Give but that portion which yourself proposed,
Here I take Cordelia by the hand,

-Duchess of Burgundy. (Shakespeare 1.1.237-40)

For Lord of Burgundy, therefore, human relationship holds no value. He is a competitor of the Duke of France for Cordelia's hand in marriage. Though a rival lover, property is all for him. Now that Cordelia is out of favour with the king, he does not want her anymore. Lear says that her price has fallen. Therefore Cordelia has no value for him as well. Her value is equated with the value of her share in Lear's property. Lear even underestimates her value by calling her a little seeming substance. When Lear refuses her, Burgundy also does the same. Burgundy says, "Election makes not up in such conditions." All he wants, therefore, is Election or choice.

Set in the forest, unlike in the original play in Act I.ii. Edmund is close to nature. He also regards things in terms of value dualism. For him, Nature as a commodity is more important than human relation. For him emotional bondage holds no significance. He says, "Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land." He makes his plan accordingly, proving innocent Edgar to be a treacherous villain and making a false display of his love. But whatever he does, he does it only to gain possession of property. Human relation has no value for him either.



It is worthy of note that dispossessed of his property Lear also falls in price. Even Oswald, Goneril's steward ceases to address him as the king. He calls him, "My lady's father."

From the above discussion it would be reasonable to conclude that all the disorder stems from the lack of an emotional bondage with and the resultant commodification of nature which in its turn commodifies human relationship. This commodification of nature is the very child of humanism which places the human at the centre of the universe and advocates the supremacy of the human over all other things in the world. In fact the human meant only "man" and not "woman." So far as humanism is concerned, woman always stood on the periphery, not in the centre; a woman was less human than a man. This is clearly reflected in Lear's dealings with his daughters, especially Cordelia at the time of the division of the kingdom. But the play also makes it clear that this so-called supremacy of the human is a mere construct and not natural and that this notion of supremacy is the inevitable result of the commodification of nature. We as human beings are entitled to the right to exploit nature at our will. But if we observe closely, we see that In the play Lear represents a journey: a journey from humanism to posthumanism. Owing to ill-treatment at the hands of his daughters whom he claims to have given all his possessions, Lear loses his sanity. But on close inspection, it becomes evident that Lear is mad from the very beginning: mad for authority and power. Even though he divides his kingdom among his daughters, he says that he would retain a hundred followers. He does not want to succumb his authority. Reduced to extreme misery, however, he realises what life of the man actually is:

LEAR. O reason not the need! Our basest beggars

Are in the poorest thing superfluous.

Allow not nature more than nature needs,

Man's life is cheap as beast's.

- (Shakespeare 2.4.256-60)

But I later on he realises: LEAR....Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow'st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the ship no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! Here's three on's are sophisticated; thou art the thing itself. Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. (Shakespeare 3.4.92-95)

The implication here is that human beings are not superior to other species of animals. There is an ecological interconnectedness that sustains all creatures. Humanity is not a self-contained, coherent being that may claim supremacy over the rest of the life forms. Rather, humanity survives through cooperation of other living and non-living forms on earth. But humanity has traditionally disregarded this mutual dependency. Why human being superior to others? Because we position all other species below us; other species are not at par with us because we are doing the classification. If a man wants to understand what he really is, he needs to open up. Human cannot think of a self that is not open to, made of, and supported by the world around.

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