

(3)

PG SEM-I
CC-2

KING LEAR: CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Dr. Vandana Singh
Asst. Prof. Dept of English
MAHARAJA COLLEGE, ARA

King Lear is more sinned against than sinning.

In Act III, scene ii, Lear already driven out of doors by his daughters, and suffering acutely both from the storm that rages without and the one that rages within, tells Kent,

"I am a man
More sinned against than
sinning."

He means to say that he suffers for no fault of his own, and critics generally have agreed with him. Elsewhere Lear refers to himself as "a poor old man", "weak and despised old man" etc. Hence the impression is created that he is not responsible for his suffering. Lear when abandoned is so pathetic a figure that the reader's sympathy goes out to him, and their heart is filled with indignation against those who inflict that suffering upon him. However, a moment's consideration makes us realise that in reality Lear is himself responsible for his undoing, that his own errors are the root cause of his misfortunes.

A long period of despotic rule, during which he has been flattered and obeyed blindly, has made him self-willed and tyrannical. He has an "opposeless will" and cannot bear the least opposition to his desires. His emotions over-rule his reason. Vain, arrogant and ~~tyrannical~~ tyrannical, he stages a theatrical test, in order to gratify his vanity, by hearing public professions of love

①

On the part of his daughters. When his childish, and selfish desire, is thwarted by Cordelia's refusal to indulge in fulsome declaration of love, like her elder sisters he loses all control over his emotions, rants & storms, and finally banishes the child who ~~alone~~ loves him for himself only, and ^{on} whom he had intended to ~~make the~~ ~~success~~ depend in his old age. In fact Lear should be respected as a king, as a father, and as an old man, but he forfeits respect in all these three capacities by his cruelty and injustice to Cordelia. He acts foolishly and rashly and his sins soon recoil on his own head.

As the play opens we find that though the king is old, he is still supremely powerful. In banishing Kent he shows the "hideous rashness" lack of judgement, as he has just shown in disowning Cordelia. Indeed, the king has grown mighty like the Gods and often he seems to claim supernatural powers.

When dividing his kingdom and giving up his responsibilities, Lear pretends that he does so out of weariness and that he wishes to "unburdened crawl toward death". But he continues to be as autocratic as ever. The division of the kingdom is a selfish act. He has given away responsibility, but still clings to power

②

and this is against the natural order. No doubt a subject should obey the king, servant his master, and a child his father, yet one who wants to be so obeyed must also shoulder responsibility for the welfare of those who thus obey him. Lear refuses to do so, and he is defied both as a king & as a father. He is indignant and bewildered, and hurls loud and extravagant curses at his daughters.

In turning out Cordelia, he had himself broken the law which unites parents and child and when his two daughters unite against him, it is merely the recoil of his own sins upon his head. It was he who had initiated discord and enmity within the family, ~~and~~ ^{and} finally faced the consequences of his own injustice and folly. He tried to calculate and measure love; and now the daughters merely follow the example set by the father. As a king, Lear had failed to discharge his duties towards his subjects. He had almost forgotten that he was a ~~trial~~ mortal and liable to suffer like the poorest and commonest of his subjects. When he is reduced to the level of the humblest of his subjects, then he realises their suffering and misery.

(3)

Lear is thus punished for his selfishness, self-absorption, rashness and lack of judgement. His sins are many and in keeping with Shakespeare's concept of tragedy he suffers for his own faults. There is strict connection between ~~an~~ act and consequences. It is another matter that his punishment and suffering is out of all proportion to his sins. Indeed, it is the sympathy aroused for a helpless old man, the victim of filial ingratitude, that makes us forget for the moment that his ~~own~~ violation of the natural order is the cause of that suffering. Lear has suffered so terribly, and our indignation against the authors of that suffering has been so intense that we are inclined to agree that he is a man, "more sinned against than sinning." As a matter of fact ^{he suffers} because of his outrageous violation of Pietas.