

UNDERSTANDING SHAKESPEARE'S ECOSOPHY

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Shakespeare's creative genius is holistic and all-inclusive. In his creative world the human and the non-human, the natural and the supernatural, the animate and the inanimate, and the rural and the urban find equitable space. Nature constitutes an integral part of the human habitat and it decisively controls human enterprise. Most of his plays depict a setting that provides ample space to the components of nature such as forest, hill, sea, heath, thunder, lightning, rain, birds and animals. All these components are not aloof bystanders of man but active participants in shaping the scope of human destiny.

Though Shakespeare does not seem to have any professed theory of nature a cursory look at his various plays reveals an overall approach that is much akin to Romanticism and Transcendentalism on the one hand and modern approach of 'deep ecology' proposed by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess on the other. The term 'deep ecology' was coined by Naess in the early 1970's. Naess and his colleagues were impressed by some aspects of Sherpa culture in their visit to the Himalayas. They found that their Sherpa guide regarded certain mountain as sacred. Naess formulated a position which extended the reverence felt for the mountains to other things in general.

The concept of deep ecology endorses biospheric egalitarianism. It holds the view that all things in nature are alike in having value in their own right, independent of their usefulness to human purpose. Deep ecologists respect the instinctive value of everything in nature. They see the world not as a collection of isolated objects but as a network of the phenomena that are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent. They recognize that all objects and beings have intrinsic value and man is just one particular strand in the web of life. Naess coined the term 'ecosophy' and defined it as a philosophy of ecological harmony. In the deep ecological approach ecology is not seen as something 'out there' but as something we are part of and have a role to play. It believes that we are a part of the earth and the earth is a part of us.

This approach is different from the materialistic approach to nature. The materialists believe that nature is anthropocentric that regards man as superior to the rest of nature and thus morally justified in manipulating it as much as was required in order to maximize human welfare. It is a utilitarian approach that regards nature as made for man and subject of rash human exploitation.

The deep ecological approach to nature is in line of the Romantic and the transcendental approach to nature. The romantics considered nature as the antithesis of institutionalized and inherited practices of thought and values. They view it as a substitute of traditional religion, a vehicle for self consciousness, a source for searching the true self, and one's real identity. It is a stimulus for imagination and a source of sensations and healthy feelings. It is a therapy for the diseased, over-civilized heart and a source of emotional health. For the Romantics, nature was sacred and divine and a tranquil shelter far from the madding crowd. Romantic poetics presupposes the human organic unity with nature. Nature provides meaningful insight into human condition. Romantic approach to nature is both sensual and transcendental. Nature to the Romantics is a source of beauty, happiness, peace and above all self-realization. The assumption that there is one universal spirit that dwells in all living creatures forms the central element of Transcendentalism. In nature, the individual experiences the divine universal spirit as a force that flows through the human and the non-human. Nature is the font that satisfies soul's desire for the true and pure delight. Alienation from nature can lead to alienation of man from himself. Nature has a joyous and healing influence. Nature has a moral and spiritual character and there is a mystic intercourse and spiritual communion between man and nature.

We can find the above point of view in Shakespeare's approach to nature. The general approach to his approach to nature are that he treats nature as teacher of man; that nature responds to the crisis of man and often sends portents before the coming crisis: nature commiserates man in his crisis: that he treats nature's harshness better than the ingratitude and cruelty of man; that all the components of nature are equally important and merely man is not enough in its fabric; and nature consoles and provides shelter to man bruised by culture. Shakespeare seems to prefer nature over culture as we find the crisis created by the complexities of culture is resolved in the lap of nature in more than one of his plays.

Shakespeare regards nature as a teacher of man just like William Wordsworth. In *As You Like It* Duke Senior is expelled from his dukedom. He finds shelter in the forest of Arden. He says that the elements of nature are like counselors who teach us. He says:

And this our life exempt from public haunt
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks
Sermons in stones and good in everything. (As You Like It, Act 2, Scene
1)

Here we can overhear the tone of William Wordsworth, the great Romantic poet who wrote:

One impulse from the vernal wood
May teach you more of man
Of moral evil and of good
Than all the sages can. (Tables Turned)

Shakespeare's characters feel that even though nature is often harsh, it is not as painful as the cruelty and ingratitude of man. In As You Like It Duke Senoir says that the 'icy fang' and 'churlish chiding' of winter's wind are not as painful as the false flattery of the people of the court. He asks:

Are not these woods
More free from peril than the envious court?
Here we feel not the penalty of Adam,
The season's difference; as the icy fang
And churlish chiding of the winter's wind
Which when bites and blows upon my body
Even till I shrink with cold, I smile and say this is not flattery;

These are counselors that feelingly persuade me what I am. (AS You Like It, Act2, Scene 1)

The Duke Senior further says that adversities of nature are meaningful to us and even if they are outwardly painful, they are inwardly sweet. He says that the adversities of nature are like a toad that looks ugly and venomous but precious jewel in its head:

Sweet are the uses of adversity;
Which like the toad, ugly and venomous;
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head. (As You Like It, Act2, Scene1)

The idea of goodness of nature against the ingratitude of courtly life is further exaggerated in the song:

Blow, blow thou winter wind
Thou art not so unkind
As man's ingratitude. (As You Like It, Act 2, Scene VII)

An important aspect of Shakespeare's approach to nature is his preference for nature to culture. Though he is known for his equipoise in treatment of his subject, in more than one of his plays we can find that he is better disposed to nature than culture. We can see that the crisis created by the complication of culture is resolved in the lap of nature. The humanity bruised by culture is embalmed by nature, enmity is forgotten, estrangement is reconciled, and sorrows turned into happiness. In nature there is no enemy as Amiens sings:

Here shall he see
No enemy
But winter and rough weather (As You Like It, Act 2, Scene V)

In many plays of Shakespeare courtly life is riddled with conspiracy, envy, distrust and enmity. The comfort of courtly life is not without the discomfort of hurting human conduct. In *As You Like It*, for example, Frederick usurps the dominion of Duke Senior and he is exiled. Similarly, Oliver wants to get rid of Orlando by hatching a conspiracy against his life. So, all the characters of the play gradually assemble in the Forest of Arden. They face hardships of rough weather there. However, this hardship is not so pinching as the envy and ingratitude of court life. Nature resolves the crisis created in the court.

The same kind of resolution takes place in *The Midsummer Night's dream*. Because of the cruel law of Athens lovers are made to suffer. If a daughter does not marry according to the wish of her father she was subject to death penalty according to that law. Egeus

wants to marry his daughter Hermia to Demetrius against her will. The same problem arises before Helena. So, all the characters assemble in a wood nearby and their problem is most amicably solved in a very sweet and interesting way by the use of the flower Love in Idleness.

In *The Tempest* also the estrangement of court life is reconciled in the lap of nature. Antonio, the brother of Prospero usurps his rightful place of the Dukedom of Milan and conspires to throw him out on a boat along with his daughter Miranda in the sea. Prospero lives on a lonely island with a spirit Ariel and a savage and deformed slave Caliban. By the knowledge of magic Prospero brings all his enemies on the island and in the end all enmity is forgotten and problems are solved.

In the plays of Shakespeare nature is not an aloof bystander but it responds to the human crisis and also commiserates with man. In *King Lear*, for example, when Lear is thrown out of the house of his daughters, nature responds to the turmoil in his mind. This upheaval of his mind is reflected by the storm outside. It seems that the elements of nature commiserate with Lear in his crisis. Lear welcomes the elements for their 'horrible pleasure':

Rumble thy bellyful, spit fire, spout rain

Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire are my daughters

I tax not you, you elements with unkindness. (*King Lear*, Act 3, Scene I)

In some of the tragedies of Shakespeare nature seems to send portents to man before the coming crisis. In *Julius Caesar*, Calpurnia dreams of horrible incidents that foretell of something unpleasant. There is thunder and lightning in the night just before the assassination of Caesar. Caesar himself says:

Nor heaven, nor earth has been at peace tonight. (*Julius Caesar*, Act 2, Scene II)

Similarly Calpurnia narrates her dream in the following words:

Horses did neigh, and dying men did groan

And ghosts did shriek and squeal about the streets.

A similar premonition has been described before the murder of King Duncan in the tragedy *Macbeth*. Lennox says:

The night has been unruly, where we lay

Our chimneys were blown down

...the obscure bird clamoured the livelong night

Some say the earth was feverous and did shake. (Macbeth, Act 2, SceneIII)

The most striking feature Shakespeare's approach to nature is that he does not portray an anthropocentric setting. To him every strand of nature is equally valuable. This point of view is different from the utilitarian, materialistic approach that sees all the elements of nature as man -centric. The pity shown by Jacques to the killed deer in *As You Like It* gives a hint that Shakespeare does not approve the killing of the innocent deer. Jacques feels that Duke Senior usurped the territory of the deed in the same way as Frederick usurped the territory of Duke Senoir. Jacques weeps at the death of the deer and calls the men in the forest of Arden 'usurpers' and 'tyrants' who kill the deer in their 'assigned and native dwelling place'. This is how human progress trespasses the territory of nature.

Besides these Shakespeare also incorporates the supernatural in his ecosophy. He shows ghosts, witches, fairies and spirits in some of his plays. We can find ghost in *Hamlet*, witches in *Macbeth*, fairy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and spirit in *The Tempest*. All these supernatural creatures play a significant role in human affairs. Ariel and Puck are spirits that amuse us by their interesting activities and in the end unite estranged people.

Thus, Shakespeare, who normally never bothered to go beyond his professed end of pleasing his audience, quite unconsciously presented an 'ecosophy' that is relevant today. He seems to regard nature as pleasant and auspicious even though at times it is 'horrible' and 'unkind'. He does not seem to approve the trespassing and usurpation of nature by man. His treatment of nature appears to assimilate Romanticism, Transcendentalism and the ideals of 'deep ecology' movement.

References:

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