

## Supernatural in Shakespearean Plays With Reference To Hamlet and Macbeth

**Jushmi Gogoi**

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English  
PNGB Govt. Model College  
Kakopathar, Tinsukia, Assam, India

### Abstract

Shakespeare's most of the plays are replete with supernaturalism. This supernatural element gives an extra value to the plays. So this paper basically wants to focus on the supernatural in the plays Hamlet and Macbeth. As in the play Hamlet, the ghost can be seen as a motive force that puts into motion the action of the tragedy. Without the ghost's initial revelation of the truth to Hamlet, there would be no occasion for revenge; in other words, no tragedy of Hamlet. And in the play Macbeth, the hero commits repeated crimes to attain his ambition, but ultimately falls into a guilt trip, and he is haunted by the ghosts of those whom he murdered. Then Lady Macbeth, who can be considered as the fourth witch, and Macbeth is disturbed by those ghosts, and their mental peace is disrupted. But unlike Hamlet, here the ghost drives him to take the revenge on its behalf and Hamlet, after meeting the ghost becomes an embassy of death dispersing darkness and evil all around. This supernatural plays an important role in the plays of Shakespeare. So this paper would like to analyse the different representation of supernatural in both these famous plays of Shakespeare. To describe these issues the researcher will take up the plays in chronological order, first Hamlet, first published in 1603, then Macbeth, first published in 1623. For each of the plays, researcher will begin by setting out the general beliefs about the supernatural held by Shakespeare's original audiences for Hamlet, what they believed about ghosts, for Macbeth, what they believed about witches.

**Keywords:** Revenge, tragedy, supernatural, death, ambition, madness.

## I. Introduction:

William Shakespeare, one of the greatest playwrights of all times, wrote many plays, but his tragedies like Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, King Lear are regarded as his greatest works. Because each of these plays explore the intricate human relationships, the psychic integration on a higher plane of consciousness and awareness, supernatural elements and each of them is varied from the other. Each of these tragedies is the anxious manifestations produced by the mental turmoil, but each of them is different in both intensity and kind. In Macbeth, the hero is all the more nervous and tensed because he wants to be successful by committing crimes, yet moral consciousness prick him, because he is not a born villain. In Hamlet it is just the opposite, Hamlet is broken because all the things like family bonds and his relationship with his beloved, seems to be shattered because he is suspicious that injustice had been done to his dead father, or to him. He seems to have lost all hope, and wants to seek revenge, although he is not sure whether he has been wronged or not. He procrastinates because he is confused and thinks over and over again whether it is morally right to avenge or not. In these plays, the characters suffer from mental conflicts because two opposing views arise in them. And in most of the time it is seen that they are instigated by the supernatural forces to do the evil deeds. They don't know what to rely on, and what to give up. The environment including supernatural elements around them and the other characters aggravate their tension. This paper would like to focus only on the plays-Hamlet and Macbeth in this paper. These paper would study individually how in each play, the tragic heroes suffer mental tension and how supernatural element disturbs him and the world around. These mental agonies reach such a height that Hamlet feigns madness and Macbeth becomes like a mad person. This paper would also like to show what situations arouse that turmoil and how the supernaturalism has urged the characters to seek revenge and ultimately how their downfall happens. In Hamlet, Hamlet tries to suppress his hatred and gloom, but is unable, Hamlet tries suppresses his love for Ophelia, for his mother, and his revenge-motive too long but he keeps on doing the opposite, i.e. despite having love, he keeps on hurting people as the ghost of his father always guides him to seek revenge.

## II. Objectives of the Paper:

The basic objectives of this paper are-

- To analyse Shakespeare's portrayal of supernatural in these two revenge tragedies.
- To analyse the representation of the supernatural elements as the embassy of death.
- To see how supernatural elements disrupts the peace within and around the characters.

The supernatural according to The Oxford Dictionary "includes all those phenomena, which cannot be explained by the accepted laws of natural science or by physical laws." The word 'supernatural' can be associated with the words which can be described as beyond nature and which cannot be manifested by the laws of the natural world. Shakespeare's England was much more superstitious than it is today. Folklore and astrology were discussed commonly and earnestly. It was an age of ignorance and superstition. Despite the advance of science and learning, the majority of the people still believed in witchcraft and charms and omens of all sorts. It was for that reason that Shakespeare too, introduced the marvellous in a number of his plays. Shakespeare used such elements such as witches in Macbeth, ghost in Hamlet and Julius Caesar, Fairies in The Midsummer Night's Dream. Shakespeare's proficient skill is seen in the fact that while he freely utilizes the favoured superstitions connected with the supernatural, it is neither gross nor crude as that of his peers, nor is it extrinsic to the action, a mere object of horror brought in to create sensation.

### **III. Supernatural in Hamlet :**

Shakespeare creates an atmosphere of suspense and wonder during the appearance of the supernatural as it creates thrill and make people eager about the action of the drama. Audience of the Elizabethan drama are aware of the fact that they are going to witness some important mission lead by the ghost thus eagerly waits for the action.

When the supernatural figure first appeared to Horatio; he became afraid of this appearance of the figure which is already dead. It has given a hint that it has something significant to impart. Prince Hamlet's meeting of the ghost make the audience worked up to a climax with their expectation. When prince Hamlet witnesses the ghost with his own eyes he behaves in such a way that the audience feels the shock with almost the same freshness. The ghost of Hamlet makes communication with the prince only and tells him the cause of his death. This leads to the action of the tragedy.

#### **III.1. Setting in Hamlet**

In the play it is seen that there appears a ghost who is in the form of Hamlet's father. The emerging time of the ghost is notable because it emerges at the mid of the night when the whole atmosphere is dark and cold. It appears in a time which is generally associated with the evil power or the spirit of the other world. It appears wearing armour like the dead king of Denmark used to do.

...fair and warlike form

In which the majesty of buried Denmark

Did sometimes march? (Act I, Scene I)

The ghost departs as soon as Horatio tried to speak to him. The ghost does not speak to other people who are not directly connected with its task as in the later part it is seen that the ghost only talks with the prince Hamlet. Again the ghost is seen to disappear as the cock crows which provide a sign of great importance. As Horatio wonders that the appearance of the ghost foretells some serious disaster to their state or it desires something done for his own sake. The ghost has considerable dramatic and symbolic weight as the ghost is put into a closest relation to the main character of the play and its influence is seen in the actions of those characters.

The ghost can be considered as the driving force which controls the actions of the character of the play. It is the ghost which made the prince Hamlet known that his father was murdered by his uncle and told him that the poison was poured into his ears while he was sleeping in the garden. The ghost also disclose that the cunning nature of his mother as she married to his uncle soon after his father's death.

So in the play the entire action is centred on this declaration. It is clear that without the declaration of the ghost there would have no any murder or no point of seeking revenge.

### **III.2. The ghost of Hamlet's father**

The ghost of Hamlet's father wanders in the night searching for chance to talk with his son. Having been murdered by his brother the ghost roams around the castle of Elsinore. He charges his son to revenge for his death; it often controls the action of Hamlet telling him what to do to revenge against his murderer. And when the prince takes too long about it reappears to spur him on. The Ghost appears three times in the play: in Act I, Scene I; in the continuum of Act I, Scenes IV and V; and Act III, Scene IV. The ghost arrives at 1.00 a.m. in

at least two of the scenes, and in the other scene all that is known is that it is night. Bernardo and Marcellus first saw the ghost. Horatio asks him to reveal his motive behind his appearance. It is about to do so when the cock crows, signalling morning, and the ghost instead disappears.

"...but know, thou noble youth,

The serpent that did sting thy Fathers life,

Now wears his crown."

He reveals to Hamlet that he was murdered by his own brother and told Hamlet that he was poisoned and murdered by his brother, Claudius, the new King of Denmark, and asks the prince to avenge his death. In the third appearance, Hamlet is confronted by the ghost in his mother's closet, and is rebuked for not carrying out his revenge and for disobeying in talking with Gertrude. Hamlet fearfully apologises. Gertrude, however, cannot see the ghost, and thinks Hamlet is mad.

### **III.3. Hamlet as a tragedy of Diseased thought**

Tragedy can be seen as a mirror of the truth of our sufferings. Tragedy assures us that good can be found in the evil and beyond this physical life. Shakespeare's tragedies represent the truth of mortality along with the responsibility of human beings. Evil in Shakespearean tragedy is a principle of death. Mind of the hero is often interlocked with various mysteries of life. And his play often provides us some unnatural experience of the hero who always fall and die.

In the play Hamlet death rules the story. The play deals with the unexplainable death. It is seen that hamlet's fear of death is deceased before his own death. It is usual in Shakespeare's plays for the main theme to be reflected in subsidiary incidents, persons and detailed suggestion throughout. The theme of Hamlet is death. Death is over the whole play. The loss of Hamlet and his successive mental trauma bordering on mental illness is reflected in the loss of Ophelia and her insanity. Ophelia and Polonius die in the course of action and Ophelia is buried. The death of Guildenstern and Rosencrantz is also arranged by Hamlet. The plot is put in a position by the killing of the father of Hamlet and the play starts with the presence of ghost.

What may this mean,

That thou, dead corse, again in complete steel

Revisits thus the glimpses of the moon,

Making night hideous and we fools of nature,

So horridly to shake our disposition

With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls?

In the very first scene itself the terror is heard beyond the grave. Hamlet's mind is filled with deadly thoughts of the body's decay. The pain of Hamlet's mind is seen throughout the whole play. It is designed in such a way that it hardly gives us the sense of evil and the abysses of spiritual sin which is prevalent in the play Macbeth. Where in Macbeth, the protagonist and heroic victim of evil rises gigantic from the darkness of an evil universe. According to G. Wilson Knight "Hamlet is the ambassador of death walking amid life...but it is to be noted that the consciousness of death, and consequent bitterness, cruelty, and inaction in Hamlet not only grows in his own mind disintegrating it as we watch, but also spreads its effects outward among the other persons like a brighting disease, and, as the play progresses, by its very passivity and negation of purpose, insidiously undermines the health of the state, and adds victim to victim until at the end the stage is filled with corpses."

The spirit that I have seen

May be the Devil...

It was the monster of the knowledge of death which controls Hamlet and instigate him from distress and agony to increasing harshness, scepticism, murder and madness. Hamlet can be seen as an image of death which is living. The ghost was framed in the whole play as a sign which is not kind but threatening.

#### **IV. Idea of supernatural in Macbeth**

Shakespeare uses lots of supernatural elements in his plays. Supernatural is an important part of the folklore of England, Europe like magic in Dr. Faustus. The supernatural in Macbeth is portrayed by Shakespeare. In first or foremost it is created by the use of language. The languages of the witches are mostly in the equivocation and most importantly here the supernatural is an evil element. That is why the language of the witches are all in the forms of equivocation except Banquo's ghost. Through language Shakespeare portrays the powerful

evil that is present in the three witches. So through the power of language Shakespeare creates an illusion on the materialization of the evil in the witches.

#### **IV.1. Setting in Macbeth**

Supernatural is seen in the setting of the play. For all the manifestation of the supernatural we find in Macbeth is through language. The elements of supernatural can be seen in the setting itself. It starts with three weird sisters. Thunder and lightning and it starts with equivocation which is followed by a scene in the battlefield or by the scene of death. That is whole first act or the beginning of the play begins with the idea of supernatural. For the Elizabethan audience they get a feeling of fear when the three witches appear and they also get a sense of hope what is going to happen in the next.

Lady Macbeth says,

“Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be

What thou art promised. Yet do I fear thy nature;

It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness

To catch the nearest way: thou wouldst be great,

Art not without ambition, but without

The illness should attend it.”

Lady Macbeth can be considered as the fourth witch as she has heard from Macbeth that he had won the battle for them. She seems to be the fourth witch; will catch the nearest way to get her husband to greatness, and she also said ‘forces of nature unsex me here’, take my womanhood away from me; fill my breasts with poison instead of milk; and just before that Macbeth asked Banquo that are they man or they women they have beards; but they talk like woman. Lady Macbeth is seemed to be following the same path as she said the forces of nature to unsex her.

The setting further depends on the porter scene. Duncan come and says ‘what heaven is this?’ that is in the Macbeth’s castle but with the coming of the porter scene and the supposedly opening up castle from heaven to hell completes the idea of the supernatural entering into the

Image of the setting and it is transformed from heaven into hell by Macbeth killing Duncan where is also transformed in the image of the porter scene where we have porter being the hell's porter opens the hell's gate for soul for punishment. The tailor, equivocator, the farmer enters to the Hell Gate, ultimately the ghost of Banquo in the banquet hall, the castle has become unholy. And Macbeth is going toward madness.

Woods don't walk; but the use of Shakespeare's language and the way he constructs the play make it seem the setting transformed and trees are walking towards Macbeth, just as the witches came to Macbeth.

#### **IV.2.Supernatural in the three witches:**

Witches are like spiders; they have the web; it sits in the middle, it waits for its preys to come and stuck and then they slowly goes and catch it. They like the spiders' waits for the battle that is lost and won at the same time. Macbeth has won the battle but he loses it but the witches have lost the battle but still they got the victory. Macbeth wins the battle but he loses his mind but the witches loose and then win and Macbeth like poor prey steps into their web and got caught. Banquo didnot get caught even Banquo was ambitious.

The witches through their speeches show their power. Evil has such a great power but only to those who cannot resist. Banquo resisted, he warned Macbeth again and again. They will do more harm than they do well. They can do anything; it warns the audience that the Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are going to fall. They conjure apparitions like the bloody child and they supposedly foretell Macbeth's future but in that foretelling he missed out equivocation that is present. The witches have the power to see the future. That is why he went on to kill the Duncan not realizing that what they are saying is just playing with his mind.

Appearance of Hecket: with the apparition of Hecket the circle of evil is complete because Hecket is supposedly the queen of the witches and the way she takes immense pleasure in partaking of Macbeth's misery heightens the sense of the evil presents in the supernatural in the play.

Supernatural also occurs in the form of Banquo's ghost. He is a relaxed character in the play. They were more than friends. They are more like brother than friends as whenever we see Macbeth we see Banquo. Culmination of evil in Macbeth is not complete even in the killing of Duncan; it culminates the killing of Banquo just to keep his secret.

The apparitions that Macbeth sees in the form of Banquo are the manifestation of his guilt or having killed one of his friends. Fear is evident in the character lady Macbeth. Macbeth saw apparitions but in a way Lady Macbeth became an apparition. Coming together of supernatural in the form of natural comes in the form of Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth became a mere shadow of herself. The same women who said the forces of nature to unsex her become a ghost. The same thing about shadow is told by Macbeth.

“Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage

And then is heard no more. It is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Signifying nothing.”

Supernatural being culminated in the image of shadow; it is a shadow that walks with everyone. It is a shadow that walks with us, that is always with us, but it is up to us whether we decide to listen to the shadow or to listen to our own self. Supernatural in this play is equated with evil, guilt and fear. All three are built in Macbeth by Shakespeare’s language.

### **IV.3. Lady Macbeth as the fourth witch:**

Lady Macbeth can be considered as the fourth witch. As her attitude towards three witches is notable, she did not even question them. She is actually more ambitious than her husband. She sees a reflexion of her ambition to be realized through her husband. She is a woman who can go beyond the bad thoughts as she asks the forces of nature to unsex her so that she can do what is planned by her. Lady Macbeth has genius face; she has two faces and she plays both of them equally. For example her behaviour towards Duncan and what she had done to Duncan can be seen as a good example of this. Later the fall of Lady Macbeth is seen as the evil within her. Witches are supernatural but she behaves like a supernatural but ultimately she is material, living; a guilt finally takes the better of her.

Come, you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,

And fill me from the crown to the toe, top-full

Of direst cruelty. [...]

Come to my woman's breasts

And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers,

Wherever, in your sightless substances,

You wait on nature's mischief. (1.5.39-49)

#### V. Conclusion:

Hamlet and Macbeth are two of Shakespeare's serious tragedies. In terms of dramatic power, theme and in poetry it can be considered as magnificent. These play also very much in common if we see it in an abstract point of view. In both the plays it is portrayed as the action takes place in an open, an elective monarchy which is threatened by foreign invasion and the threat comes from Norway. The murder of a king is at the center of the plot of both plays.

Many scholars have written about Hamlet and Macbeth because everybody found it very captivating; be it as a drama or as psychology and for what it indicate about Shakespeare's England or as well as for what it seem to indicate about the mind of Shakespeare. The aim of this paper was to see how Shakespeare had portrayed supernaturalism and how a supernatural element disrupts the peace within and around the characters. At that time the Elizabethan audience thought of ghost and witches as a part of supernatural order. Those "modernist" critics who argue that King Hamlet's ghost and the Weird Sisters are not real but only "symbols" and "objectifications" of the respective heroes' troubled minds (Curry, 56). It is impossible to compose anything about Hamlet and Macbeth without mentioning about the ghost and the weird sisters as they play a very important role regarding the influence on the main characters. In both the plays the kinsman of the king occupies the throne but in a way they become very criminal and at the end they are punished. Both plays are psychological dramas. As the major conflict takes place in the mind of the protagonist. In both the plays the violence which is bloody is the main substance. But apart from these the both plays are centered on the supernatural which plays a very significant role. And it is seen that in both plays the supernatural tempts the main characters to seek revenge. Modern audience cannot experience and the thrill of these plays as well as Supernatural as Shakespeare intended it to be when they watch the play or read the drama as Shakespeare's contemporary audience had believed it to be.

**VI. REFERENCES**

- Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. Penguin, 1991.
- Clark, Cumberland. *Shakespeare and the Supernatural*. Williams and Norgate, 1931.
- Curry, Walter Clyde. *Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns*. Louisiana State UP, 1976.
- Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Translated by Richard Howard, Tavistock, 1967.
- Gibson, J. P. S. R. *Shakespeare's Use of the Supernatural*. Deighton Bell, 1908.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2004.
- Kittredge, George Lyman. *Witchcraft in Old and New England*. Harvard UP, 1929.
- Knight, G. Wilson. *The Wheel of Fire*. Methuen, 1960.
- Knights, L. C. *Discerning the Ghost in Hamlet*. 1959.
- Lederer, David. *Madness, Religion and the State in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge UP, 2006.
- MacDonald, George. *The Tragedie of Hamlet: A Study with the Text of the Folio of 1623*. 1885.
- Salkeld, Duncan. *Madness and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*. Manchester UP, 1995.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. 1794.
- . *Macbeth*. Edited by Stephen Orgel, Penguin Books, 2000.
- . *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Edited by W. J. Craig, Oxford UP, 1959. First published 1906.
- Stewart, H. H. *The Supernatural in Shakespeare*. John Ousley, 1908.
- West, Robert H. "Elizabethan Belief in Spirits and Witchcraft." *Studies in Shakespeare*, edited by Arthur D. Matthews and Clark M. Emery, University of Miami, 1953, pp. 65–73.