

Overcoming Negative Patterns of Family in King Lear

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Abstract-We are better equipped and trained to handle so many things of the outer world. We are taught how to get a degree, a good job and run after all materialistic pursuits in life. We learn how to drive a car, how to play a guitar and take care of our mental and physical health but unfortunately, we are not trained to raise kids. There are so many similar issues for which we can get answers in literature. A sensitive reader can always and will always find some suggestions for the lives around him. This paper focuses on the Shakespearean tragedy 'King Lear', where his tragic flaw gives way to so many problems in the play. Intolerance, defection, betrayal, and rejection, all are seen actively displayed by the family members. The story revolves around Lear and his three daughters and Gloucester and his son. The play artistically presents an example of disfunctioning of the families where love and faith crumbles down. The elder two daughters of King Lear, Goneril and Regan call them victims of partiality and aggression of their father, in the same way Edmund is seen humiliated in public. One thing that is common among these children is some sort of early family disturbances. This may act as key to their character. No sense of duty and affection are nurtured. The roots of evil may be the want of that love for which family is the natural home and place of training in how to behave in future with society and with the parents too. Shakespearean plays can be seen offering variety of subjects to study and grow. King Lear can teach us the effect of negative family patterns and suggests for a home filled with positive patterns. It might help in developing your own family plan too. The first half of the paper deals with the behavioural disorder of the two affected families and the second half tries to figure out the reasons.

Keywords-Family, disfunctioning, disorder, rejection, emotional deprivation.

So many times, we are concerned about the temperature outside but not much concerned with the climate inside our homes. The little angels in our homes are very soon affected by the cold or the hot atmosphere created by us parents. The words, tone and even the mood make the total personality of our kids. That's why a healthy home environment should be

chosen. For that parents should set an 'emotional thermostat' for the family members. Sometimes kids push their limits to argue and misbehave with their parents, sometimes they test their authority, sometimes they go through the stages where they take their own decisions and question their parents. There is just one reply to all these questions of family patterns and that is, how you are raising your kids and finally the environment you are creating for them. How you are overcoming negative family patterns and creating a grace filled home for kids. Communicating with warmth, love and encouragement makes a child's journey towards adulthood more satisfying. Our aim is not just producing a puppet type obedient children today but a responsible adult for tomorrow.

On the onset King Lear is a story of a king and his three daughters. An elderly king who wants to divide his kingdom among his daughters on their expression of love for their father. The elder two flattered him but the third and the truest stays calm and plain. King's tragic flaw is that he could not understand the true nature of his daughters. As a result, he divides his kingdom between the elder two daughters and reject the third one. The elder two banishes their father and leaves him out in cold on the heath. King suffers due to his immature decision. Finally, the rejected and misunderstood youngest daughter is seen holding his father close to her heart. Drama explores family interaction turning into mental disorder.

In King Lear two distinct modes of evil emerge. According to *J. Stampfer*, evil is present as animalism in Goneril and Regan and as doctrinaire in Edmund¹. Their modes are not to be confused, Goneril and Regan have the immediacy of animals to whom consideration never interposes between appetite and deed. It is in this spirit Lear compares his daughter, Goneril, in a single scene (I, iv) *to a sea-monster, a detested kite, a serpent and a wolf*. Through them animalism was bursting into civil society.

Edmund on the other hand is a doctrinaire atheist. The play of Shakespeare has much to say against the evils

of society, but our misfortune is that we take them as mere entertainment for a couple of idle hours. They are not considered sober testimonies of their author's convictions.

Let us first take the two sisters, who are embodiments of evil, but Shakespeare has managed to distinguish their characters. Goneril the eldest is the leader and Regan the follower. The destined ruin of the unnatural daughters carries with it the destruction of those who assist them and who in thought and action resemble them. In this reference the character of Edmund will be studied later after the two unnatural sisters.

Both sisters think alike. In their view the sole end of power is to gain more power and to satisfy their own desire. Referring to Goneril and Regan, Shakespeare says that they can perform any base deed to achieve 'sovereign sway' and supremacy without being unnerved. The two sisters are at the outset hypocrites and liars. Their story makes it clear that to place power in the hands of the bad is an injury not only to others but also to the bad itself. So, in the tragedy of Goneril and Regan we see that misplaced authority works out its own destruction.

They are capable of putting up a good front to impress and exploit others. In the very first scene of Act I they exploit their own father. Their excessive and passionate speeches make Lear happy. His ego is satisfied because he had already decided to divide his kingdom among his three daughters based on their avowal of love. Goneril starts with extravagant protestations of love: "Sir, I love you more than words / can wield the matter... / No less than life, with grace,

² health / beauty, honour..." no doubt a daughter can love her father so much but her subsequent attitude towards the old father forces to say that her speech was all false. Regan surpasses her sister and says: "I am made of that self same metal that my sister is / ... only she come too short that I / profess myself an enemy to ³ all other joys..." Their speeches are just words, words and words without any matter in them.

They are also unable to maintain personal relations with each other. Irresponsible and egocentric, they are usually unsympathetic, ungrateful, and remorseless in their dealings. We can say that Lear imposes a great burden on the family and creates a great deal of unhappiness for his daughters. But in fact, they too are unfaithful as wives. Goneril has never loved her husband. She is determined to get rid of him and wants

Edmund as a substitute. She runs into the bitter rivalry of her sister. When Regan becomes a widow, Goneril poisons her to get rid of her. They have a verbal quarrel:

Regan :In my rights

By me invested, he compeers the best

Goneril :That were the most, if he should husband you.

Regan :Jesters do oft prove prophets.

Goneril :Holla, Holla!

That eye. That told you so look'd but a squint

Regan :Lady, I am not well: else I should answer

⁴ from a full flowing stomach...

It is very clear that both are manipulative and exploiting in their sexual relationships. In addition to this Goneril is unfaithful as a mate.

Even when the two sisters have been allotted their part in kingdom, they are not fully satisfied and are afraid somewhere in their heart of their father whose nature is rash and who cannot easily give up his authoritative attitude. Goneril is anxious and says: "Pray you, let us hit together: / If our father carry authority with such dispositions / as he bears, this last surrender of his will but offend us...we must do something, and i' the

⁵ heat." Not only this, but also, they refuse to honor the terms and conditions of their father for surrendering power in their favour. Goneril said: "Idle old man / that still would manage those authorities / that he hath given away"⁶. This is the keynote of Lear's tragedy. Father suffers because daughters have lost all faith in their father.

They did all wrong but not even once they felt guilty of their act. Inadequate conscience development and lack of guilt is another characteristic of the personalities residing in a broken home. Regan is so cruel that she orders to pluck out Gloucester's eyes. This can hardly be expected of a woman, but she never feels guilty. We can clearly feel her moral decline when after plucking out Gloucester's one eye, she shouts with cruelty: "One side mock another / th'

⁷ other too" Goneril goes to the extent of poisoning her own real sister only to remove Regan from her way to woo Edmund. She poisons Regan and says when Regan complains of sickness (Aside): "If not, I'll ne'er

⁸ trust medicine". Goneril is very shrewd. First, she joins hands with her sister to cut Lear to size. They reduce their father to the position of an old pensioner

dependent on their bounty. And then her next move was to poison her own sister. Only a criminal can have such a mind and such calculative moves. Goneril and Regan break the closest and the fundamental human ties. But not even once in the play do they feel guilty of their act.

Next character in this group is Edmund. He is in fact a greater criminal. Goneril, Regan, Cornwall and Oswald are all his inferiors. Edmund sees nature as a godless mechanism, governed by impersonal laws. The universe is without purpose or guidance, man and beast are alike. Edmund denies the system of correspondence between the mind of man and the phenomenon of nature, which was so integral a part of Elizabethan doctrine of order and decree.

Edmund can deny all benevolent human feelings, he insists that customs can be unreasonable and social laws unnatural. It is significant that in the figure of Edmund, the sense of individual separation from the community and feeling of superiority to his fellows can easily be traced out. The important thing is the marginal advantage gained by having a sharper wit than the other. He is not a co-operative member of a grand community.

Basically, he is incapable of having any sense of loyalty to other persons, groups or social values. He is against his father and brother, though he has sufficient reasons for being so. He promises to marry both Goneril and Regan separately, giving an impression that he only loves one of them. He could not afford to annoy either of them, or he himself could not know his heart as to whom he loved sincerely. In the end when he is about to die (Goneril and Regan are already dead), he realizes “*I was contracted to them both / all three now, marry in an instant.*”⁹

Like a criminal he is without remorse. We see him as someone not guilty for what he has done, acknowledging it freely and even boasting. His affection towards his father and brother is also the result of his inadequate conscience development. Edmund in his opening soliloquy is the compact image of everything that denies the orthodox view simply and Shakespeare thought of him exclusively as the bastard which is the Elizabethan equivalent of outsider. Edmund is a complete outsider. He is outside society, nature and reason.

Typically intelligent and manipulative is next characteristic of an anti-social personality. When we

meet Edmund for the second time we are acquainted with his nature and character. We find him pondering over the matter of legitimate and illegitimate breeding of man and with the entry of his father Gloucester he very cleverly plans and pretends as if he is reading something which is not worth his father’s notice. After igniting his father’s curiosity, he answers: “*I beseech you, Sir, Pardon me : it is a letter from / my brother, that I have not all o’er read; and / for so much as I have persued, I find it not / fit for your o’er-*

looking.”¹⁰ This was his first trick to tarnish his brother’s image in his father’s eye. Because when Gloucester reads the letter by falsely alleged to have been written by Edgar (Though it was only Edmund’s progeny) the total image of a faithful son was shattered.

We can easily trace those characteristics in the characters of Goneril, Regan and Edmund, which characterize anti-social elements. However, one thing which is similar in Goneril, Regan and Edmund is some form of early disturbances in family relationships. If we take Edmund’s case we find that although Gloucester shows a great liking for Edmund at first he treats him humiliatingly in public. It is possible that this humiliation has a lot to do with making him what he is. It may be reasonably argued that Gloucester’s treatment of Edmund under the impulse of shame may be the whole key to Edmund’s character.

Gloucester says “*His breeding, Sir hath been at my charge / I have so often blush’d to acknowledge / him*

that now I am braz’d to’t.”¹¹ These are the lines spoken by a father to the third person in the presence of his son. We can well imagine, how the son must be feeling at that time. Not only this but Gloucester also kept him in a foreign country for nine years. This must have convinced Edmund of the fact that he is out of the ordinary law and has no right to inherit the estate of his father. This sort of treatment has gone a very long way towards making Edmund grow into a socially immoral character. In Edmund the root of Evil is the want of that love for which the family is the natural home and place of training. When a family life is sound even ordinary man learns to have regard for the feelings and welfare of others. In Edmund’s case the room was left vacant in his nature because no sentiments of duty and affection are nurtured in him as they are in early years of most men. He lacked

emotional fulfillment. This could be the reason why he acted with Goneril and Regan in such a way. This must have given him a sort of satisfaction. He could not afford to maintain any close relationship with any one around him. When he is informed of Goneril and Regan's death and he too is dying at that very moment he feels as if there were some who loved him. "*I was contracted to both / all three now; marry in an instance*". These lines by Edmund convey his sense of satisfaction, which he lacked while alive. Further we find that as he lies dying, he says : "*Some good I mean*"¹²
to do / Despite of mine own nature."

He tells them of his order for the murder of Cordelia and Lear. His intention for the first time is good, but it is too late. Several studies have related parental rejection and inconsistent discipline result into inadequate socialization and anti-social personality. Edmund's worldliness is an amplification of Gloucester's behaviour. He wants to do as the world does and be comfortable. Edmund wants to have what the worlds "*have land by wit*" as he puts it and be prosperous. The shallow foxiness, which Gloucester exhibits in his rejection of Edmund, ripens into an effective wildness in Edmund. The father forgets morality and the son follows him. Edmund is half of Gloucester and matured from its own terms. That is why he says "*The younger rises when the old doth fall*". In the case of Goneril and Regan we can say that they must have experienced the trauma of loosing a parent at an early age with emotional deprivation from the behaviour of their father, though he always loved Cordelia the youngest one. Goneril herself said, "*He always lov'd our sister most...*" and Lear had always been of rash nature. Both sisters are anxious and in Goneril's words: "*The best and soundest of his time hath/been but rash; then must we look to receive from /his age not alone the /imperfections of long engrafted condition/but therewithal the unruly waywardness / that infirm and choleric years bring/with*"¹³
them." Distinction among children and no close rapport with the father could be the reason of Goneril and Regan acting in such a way.

In a nutshell if we talk about the background, atmosphere or the world of *King Lear* then we can say that it is full of such characters that act and behave against the social norms and the socially accepted values. For example, Gloucester talks shamelessly before his illegitimate child of his lust with his mother,

King Lear curses his daughter Goneril most objectionably and Goneril plots against the life of her noble husband most callously. Then the crushing of the eyes of the Gloucester, turning out Lear in the most indecent weather and hanging of Cordelia etc. are examples of abnormal behaviour. There is a gap between appearance and reality and this theme is worked out in the main plot as well as in the sub plot. This is a moving prelude to the tragedy of King Lear. It is supposed that Elizabethans would have left the theatre a bit shaken and disturbed but an inquisitive reader would ponder upon the causes of the shaky foundations of family ties. In a nutshell the drama leaves some pointers for the reader-

- Your words have the power to destroy or heal.
- Creating the grace filled home.
- No shame words for the kids.
- The healthiest kids are those who have their parent's belief in them.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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