

The Face behind the Mask: The End of Time in Shakespearean Drama

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But since correction lieth in those hands
Which made the fault that we cannot correct,
Put we our quarrel to the will of heaven;
Who, when they see the hours ripe on earth,
Will rain hot vengeance on offenders' heads. (Shakespeare
William, *Richard II*, Act I, Sc. ii, L. 4-8).

‘What’s past is prologue’.¹ Present is the mirror wherein we see the looming images of this prologue, we enacted once. It is this very prologue that leads us to compose in connecting sequence, the epilogue, our future. Whenever a great writer records these sequences, the impressions of distress, sorrows, apprehensions, hopes and desires, the ground realities of our own susceptible world, start resembling strikingly those of the writer’s lost world. A great writer thus becomes our mouthpiece as we in turn become vocal cords of voices buried deep within the bowels of the books. This correspondence between past and present helps in reading between the lines the ‘things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme’,² the future, the living obscurity of our living selves.

The living obscurity of our age urges us to relate, in every walk of life, to the age in which Shakespeare lived and worked; an age as well-documented, as vulnerable and as eerie as ours. On the horizon of English language though, a couple of centuries before Shakespeare, Geoffrey Chaucer had also seen circumstances as grim as we did recently in our times. Surviving the worst black death of human history in 14th century, Chaucer was led by a corrupt and crumbling social order to suffer a ‘mysterious’, untimely death. Shakespeare’s untimely death was

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‘mysterious’ too and for sure there were writers before Chaucer or Shakespeare who bewailed in England and there had been souls that carried the heavy burden of the plight of humanity beyond England as well. With the knell of uncertainties resounding loud in ears, the entire history of mankind is a sorrowful affair.

Lives and perceptions of life transform once we find ourselves living in circumstances altered, compromised or unfortunately out of hand. When I wrote the following passage in May 2020, at the peak of the pandemic, I did not know what fate had stored in stock but it looked grim; there was a frightful sensation that it could very well be the beginning of an end:

‘Covid19 has changed our world view to a very large extent, as if it was all a dream what we considered ‘normal’ in life only a few months back. The superpowers of the world lay exposed at ‘the hand’ of a lowly creature about which it is difficult to say that it’s even fully alive, until it feeds upon the flesh and blood of the ‘paragon of creation’. The entire civilization which took a century to evolve its present features lay vanquished within less than a month of the onslaught of the ‘unseen, invisible enemy’. There can be various ways of understanding nature of this disaster which shook the confidence of the space-age mankind to a limit that the restoration of this lost self-belief would require another century of equally long list of ‘isms’ and deep layers of fake images of glory which had lately defined our world from 1920 to 2020 (the world in between Spanish flue and Covid19).’³

This world shall go through many more alterations before the publication of this article, it seems evident. Forces of change of drastic political and social kind, we thought we could avoid seeing in our life time, would soon be redefining, while redesigning the bounds of our political estates, the moral rules of social playgrounds of our psychological states. It seems that all we hoped not to happen (again) in this world, this world is heading exactly towards all that in rush. Nature, as if, has spoken with a tongue twister, ‘If it were done when ‘tis done, then ‘twere well/If it were done quickly.’⁴ Deep down, we all know that, ‘this blow/Might be the be-all and the end-all here.’ (Shakespeare William, Macbeth, Act I, Sc. vii, L. 5)

‘Be-all’ is wishful thinking; ‘end-all’ sounds more realistic in historical retrospective. The mankind’s specific mischievous arrogance to under

value the grim realities of the universe in the past few centuries and the gross self-deception that it actually comprehends its own self, has led us to this catastrophic point of no return.

The wise among us always lamented upon the fast approaching fate of the mankind. They have, in distant phases of time and far apart geographical lengths of lands, spoken to us with voice of caution, warning us that we with our inherent sin of self-glorification stand no chance of 'forgiveness' when *Heaven's revenge* comes. It is *Heaven's revenge* that makes the empires fall and dispatches individuals of status and power to dust. It is *Heaven's revenge* that makes histories to evolve out of the 'dissolved, melted solid flesh' of those who pretend controlling lives and deaths of other people before they themselves enter oblivion. *Heaven's revenge*, if taken 'Biblically', is God's wrath that descends as His curse upon the ungrateful humans. Whenever mankind's corruption of soul, its instinctive savagery, cruelty, lewdness and desire to violate justice reach a point where from no 'good' is derived by His Will any more but only disasters emerge, God sends death to human communities. *Heaven's revenge*, if taken philosophically or astrologically, is the imbalance in the relation between the cosmic forces of incalculable grandeur and the lowly humans on earth. Either ways, this very concept of *Heaven's revenge* urges us to reflect upon our past(s) to survive 'the slings and arrows' of future. The mindfulness of it helps us to avoid committing those errors that we proudly think make us humans.

'Man often times ought to behold himself in a glass', Plato's echo can be traced in Shakespeare, in the following passage from *Hamlet*. This is what Hamlet thinks about the sole purpose of playwriting, to hold mirror up to age. Shakespeare advises, inversely, his fellow Londoners to observe their own selves as reflections of their time and the time bygone. Through our own crooked face, we understand the crookedness of the face of our age and only then the desire to help it improve appears.

'...you o'erstep not the modesty of nature: for anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.' (Shakespeare William, *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene ii, 17–24).

A very similar tone we can observe in an earlier collection of Tudor poems, *The Mirror for Magistrates* (edited by William Baldwin and George Ferrers in 1559). This work was conceived as a continuation, of *Fall of Princes* by John Lydgate (1370 –1451) and *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium* (On the Falls of Illustrious Men) by Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375). However, it was Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Monk's Tale* which served as the greatest source of inspiration for *The Mirror for Magistrates*. Chaucer's greatness in 'holding the mirror up to his age' can hardly be denied though it seems that it did cost him his life.⁵ It seems that even today the establishments, the forces of status quo of our societies, desirous of keeping the masks of progress and growth intact over their worn out and deformed faces, have little room for 'Chaucers' and 'Shakespeares'. Baldwin wrote:

‘...here as in a looking glass, you shall see (if any vice be in you) how the like hath been punished in other heretofore, whereby admonished, I trust it will be a good occasion to move you to the sooner amendment. This is the chiefest end, why it is set forth, which God grant it may attain.’ (*The Mirror for Magistrates*, p.64).

Lily B. Campbell, after reading the passage mentioned above, remarked that *The Mirror for Magistrates* was ‘a work dedicated to the task expounding the present by reference to the past, using history to teach the political lessons which its authors reckoned most pertinent to the understanding of political events in their own day. It was highly selective, making no attempts to cover all the events of any reign but choosing only those which might be used to mirror contemporary affairs.’ (Campbell Lilly B., *Shakespeare's Histories*, Methuen and co ltd, 1964, p.109).

Shakespeare wrote in similar vein. His drama, in the widest possible sense of the term, remains ‘political drama’. Shakespearean drama, as its fundamental principle, involves the psychological, financial, social and political selves of his age to design the nexus of the plays’ thematic patterns. It is always the ordinary Londoner, even when it is ‘disguised’ on stage as a king, the ‘linchpin’ of his plot. The nature of the crises of his age carves the thoughtfully crafted list of dramatis personae in Shakespeare’s works. It may be the Catholic quibble about the term ‘supreme head’ used by Queen Elizabeth I to describe herself as supreme head of the church of England or the Tudor principle that the crown once possessed, *cleareth and purifies all manners of default*, or the silky exotic Persian attire available in London for viewing of the ordinary (and buying of the rich) or revolutionary young

women dressed in men's stockings in the streets of London, nothing skips Shakespeare's watchful vigilant eye and drifty quill misses no detail as it kept on creating new words and expressions day and night to understand the world which was, every moment, redesigning itself.

It was misleading and unfair of some early 20th century critics to assume, 'no period of English literature has less to do with politics than that during which English letters reached their zenith, and no English writer's attitude towards the questions, with which alone political history is concerned, is more obscure or less important than Shakespeare's... (as he) shuns the problems of contemporary politics.' (Pollard A. F., *The Political History of England, Volume IV, 1547-1603*, London 1919, p.440)

J. Dover Wilson, G. B. Harrison, Granville Barker, Eleanor Prosser, Harold Bloom and Victor Kiernan, among many in the mid and the latter half of the previous century, confirm overtures of the political overtone of Shakespearean art. A writer whose fundamental conception of universal law remains deeper than that of any other in human history and the one whose desire to depict the mysteries of human mind led him to create the largest number of characters as individual psychological states ever by a single writer, was definitely destined to reveal the 'certainties' of political and social nature of mankind in his plots.

'I do not believe that a poet exists in a vacuum, or even that he exists solely in the minds and hearts of his interpreters. I do not believe that he can write great poetry without conviction and without passion. I do not believe that his reflection of his period is casual and fragmentary and accidental. Rather it seems to me that a poet must be reckoned a man among men, a man who can understand only against the background of his own time. His ideas and his experiences are conditioned by the time and the place in which he lives. He is inevitably a man of feeling. If, however, he is not merely a poet but a great poet, the particulars of his experience are linked in meaning to the universal of which they are a representative part. If he is a great poet, his feeling becomes an intense passion. It is not that he does not write out of his experience that sets him as a man apart; it is rather that he penetrates through experience to the meaning of experience. For this reason he has generally reckoned a seer and a prophet.' (Campbell Lily B., *Shakespeare's Histories*, Methuen and Co Ltd, 1964, p. 7).

Shakespeare, a seer and a 'prophet', warns us all, 'beware the ides of March'.⁶ 'Ides of March', today, is a reference to 'settle the debts' in a much deeper sense than any Roman could imagine at the time of assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC. Under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (*Julius Caesar* was first staged in 1599) or during the age of her successor, King James I (the play was printed in 1623) regicide was not a theme which was favoured much by the establishment. Yet political murder remained Shakespeare's celebrated theme throughout the so-called, 'history plays' (from the beginning of his career in 1589 to late 1590's).⁷ Despite pressures on him, Shakespeare continued with the theme throughout his 'tragic phase' as well.⁸ It seems that what Hamlet says by the close of Act II, Sc. ii, in a soliloquy, 'the play is the thing, wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king', was the agenda hidden behind all these works. Politically charged plays of Shakespeare were shaking the foundations of long established social norms and political ideals. Political and religious management was not comfortable with themes of his plays spreading far and wide the message of free-thinking, urging people to consider that monarchy did not have to be hereditary or confirming that the female mind was more independent and more creative than its male counterpart. These, the forces of status quo, as in our age, wished to continue with the millenniums old plan to rule over the masses to exploit their resources at will by keeping them trapped in the rat-race. The fiercely competitive world designed by these forces encouraged then, as it does now, to struggle violently day and night for possession of wealth and power. These forces designed education systems, civic structures, bureaucratic institutions, even the domains of emotional spheres of lives to teach mankind to be brutally competitive while putting the mask of religious spirituality, social disciplines, forbearance and moral decorum on the cruel face of civilization. Shakespeare's success as a popular playwright was tearing this mask apart, exposing the horrific truth hidden beneath. Perhaps it was important to hush his voice like the voice of Chaucer. Scandalously leaving London at the prime of his career, Shakespeare had already announced in his last solo play, *The Tempest*:

But this rough magic
I here abjure, and when I have required
Some heavenly music, which even now I do,
To work mine end upon their senses that
This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,

And deeper than did ever plummet sound
I'll drown my book.(Shakespeare William, *The Tempest*, Act V,
Sc. I, L.51-58).

If we did not have the posthumously published first Folio of 1623, the most important and the most popular secular book that was ever published, Shakespeare would have been lost to us. Only a handful of the plays that appeared in his life time for the sake of copy rights, would have left us with a writer of modest calibre with erratic plots, incorrect sense of history and geography and only occasionally with whims of lofty poetry. Shakespeare was determined to 'drown his books' in the sea of oblivion, broke his 'staff', his quill which had for almost two decades done all the magic for him.

Miraculously, Shakespeare's works survived. Miraculously, within a couple of centuries of his death, he was the most translated author in the known history of mankind. Miraculously, Shakespeare remains that voice of courage whose speeches, whenever I have the good luck to perform on stage, give my otherwise timid self the fire to express my deepest rebellious nature 'full throated'. I can never forget the blissful feeling I had while performing the character of King Lear in 2016, 400th Anniversary Tribute to Shakespeare, University of Sarajevo, when I lost myself in the flow of the speech of the mad King in Act IV, Sc. vi and kept on repeating with tearful eyes, 'dog's obeyed in office'. How often do we hear in our secular, democratic and liberal age a word like 'dog' describing the true worth of the people of authority in high offices in a literary work especially designed for their own viewing? Shakespeare used it pointedly to describe the entire state-run machinery in front of King James, the absolute monarch.

The king, the royal highnesses, the two young princes and the rest of the nobles, the pearls of the realm could not possibly understand otherwise the design of the play if the speeches were not 'pointed'. From the very first scene to the last, the play was a direct address to the king and his establishment. The following passage is a remarkable example of pungent sarcastic attack on the blindness of the high office holders, towards the suffering of the ordinary people. When the blinded Earl of Gloucester tries to recognize the pattern of voice of the mad King Lear upon the heath, he bursts in to tears at the plight of this 'ruined piece of Nature'. Gloucester could not see. He thus informed the king:

Gloucester: I see it feelingly.

Lear: What, art mad? A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears. See how yon justice rails upon yon simple thief. Hark in thine ear: change places and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief? Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?

Gloucester: Ay, sir.

Lear: And the creature runs from the cur? There thou mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office. (Shakespeare William, *King Lear*, Act IV, Sc. vi).

Shakespeare shatters the entire aura of glory, faked by the fatigued out, worn out, exhausted, vulnerable humans in silk robes, pretending to be the agents of the Divine Will. The mask of authority and supremacy over vulnerability and mediocrity was feared to be scratched and thus the staging of this great play, the greatest poetry of English language, was banned from public viewing.

Richard II, the play upon witnessing of which Queen Elizabeth I, reported William Lambarde, her archivist, lamented, "I am Richard II, know ye not that", had much deeper social implications than the tragedy of Lear. The play was performed around forty times in streets and play-houses before the rebellion of Earl of Essex broke out. Against an 'anointed' queen urging anti-state violence, against his own 'gracious' patron voicing anti-authoritarian thoughts, Shakespeare's radical liberalism, in this play, is at its best.

Elizabeth was a queen of great potential, there can hardly be any doubt about it, but she was, in her last years at least, not able to deliver as the head of the state whatever was expected of her. In her last years on the throne, England had become the economic graveyard of the working classes. Street crime, prostitution, corruption in high offices and other poverty related vices had ruined the dream of an England that Spencer spoke of in his *Faerie Queen* and Shakespeare celebrated in early days of his poetic career. Elizabeth's incompetence led her away from her people; she had grown, with age and depression, immune to their suffering. No wonder that it is Richard's incompetence in the play that became the cause of his own demise. It is the inability to govern that makes a ruler the worst of the criminals in a society and thus makes it rightful for the masses to stand in protest to punish the crime. This message in the play was well interpreted

and it seems that the people loved it. The divine queen had painted a thick pale mask over her decaying face to continue with the deception of glory but Shakespeare was determined to expose a bald head, hollow cheeks, empty-dead eyes and rotten skin under it to the subjects of 'Regina Vagina'.

Elizabeth survived the rebellion, beheaded the Earl of Essex but did not ban the play nor did she execute any artist involved in the staging of *Richard II*. Shakespeare remained the preferred court-writer, the Lord Chamberlain's man. But she revenged in her own particular idiom by commanding the performance of *Richard II* in 1601 for her gracious viewing, right after crushing the rebellion. This was her way of sending warning to all involved in the plot against her divine office. Shakespeare, though, already had sent his message in *Julius Caesar*, warning the old queen that the mask of divinity of a mere human and the truth of its mortality is only a fatal stroke away. 'The Ides of March' was Shakespeare's warning, an alarm call for a monarch who enjoyed the misleading faith that being divinely anointed, the chosen one of God, the breach of her security was beyond measures of possibility.

'Ides', an ordinary day of mid-March, was about to change its entire contextual reference in history with the happening of the unthinkable. Security of Caesar was not breached before that fateful day either. When the 'stars that rule the natal chart' fade, no 'aid' can help to escape. After the death of Julius Caesar, this became the day to remember the parricide. It was declared forbidden for the senate to meet on the ides of March. Numerology and astrology were set at work around the ides of March which used to be once among the holiest days in Roman calendar to celebrate feast and sacrifice for god, Jupiter. With the death of Caesar on this date, entire mythology of signs and omens grew around it:

When beggars die there are no comets seen
The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes.
(Shakespeare William, *Julius Caesar*, Act II, Sc. ii, 30-31)

Shakespeare exploited Elizabeth's cometophobia in these lines spoken by Julius Caesar's wife, Calpurnia. The Queen believed that the non-periodic 'great comet' seen in 1577 and the comets seen before the execution of Marry, Queen of Scots in 1584 were the harbingers of an end. In the line above, Shakespeare ironically implies it inversely to bring to ashes the whole facade of the 'chain of Being'. Births of the monarchs, as well as

their deaths were cosmic events; this mask of divine glory was snatched away from the face of the ailing queen. Once and for all, her joy to put one-inch-thick makeup⁹ to maintain her image of the Virgin Queen was gone when Shakespeare in *Hamlet* challenged:

‘Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times, and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. —Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? Your songs? Your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chap fallen? Now get you to my lady’s chamber and **tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come.**’ (Shakespeare William, *Hamlet*, Act V, Sc. i).

‘Beware the Ides of March’ is warning for all those who think of themselves in command of the ‘affairs’ of the world; sure, they may paint an inch thick but they all have to come to this ‘favour’, the realization of their own truth, ‘dogs in office’.

Julius Caesar’s political murder was transformed by Shakespeare into an event of cosmic warning. It is a warning not only for the monarchs and the heads of the states but for all those who, in their horrid offices and dreadful cabinets, assume images of power. Bureaucrats and their watchdogs, clerical staff of town halls and municipalities, teachers and professors in countries like ours where red-tapism enjoys crushing human ego day and night, constables of law enforcing agencies on the roads and many others whose delight of life rests upon opportunity of inflicting humiliation on those they can momentarily dominate, are the subject of Shakespeare’s address. ‘Ides’, the middle of the month to settle debts at the beginning of the new Roman year in March, became a sign of cosmic tragedy. These cosmic scales cannot be completely ignored as mere superstition. Julius Caesar's brutal assassination became pivotal point in Roman history; Rome could never be the same again.

Thousands of years later, coincidentally, on March 15, 1939, Adolf Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia, spurning the Munich agreement. This world, too, could never be the same again.

The mask of civilization branded with mantras of cultural sophistication, slogans of human rights, plans of economic advancement, claims of philosophical progression, growth of literacy rates, lay bare every time cultured and refined policy makers of the world brought 'death into the world, and all our woe'.¹⁰ Shakespeare's attempt to expose the face behind this mask of civilization aimed at liberating us from our inconsistent, erratic and illogical believe systems whether intellectual, spiritual or political. His drama is an attempt to help us to observe the decorum of life where vitality, versatility, flexibility reign supreme. Shakespearean art rejects all those models of life and modes of thinking that urged people, then and now, to follow the tracks of dogmatism and conservatism masked by pseudo images of 'progress'. The famous 'seven ages of man' speech in, *As You Like It*, is a brilliant example where melancholic philosopher Jacques sets us all free from the idealized projection of our otherwise worn out social structure:

JAQUES: All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,

That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.
(Shakespeare William, *As You Like It*, Act II, Sc. vii, 139-166).

What happens to be the ultimate truth of human existence, the most forgotten one as well, is captured in the sixth line (L. 144 in the scene) of the quoted speech through powerful graphic image of helplessness, ‘mewling and puking’. It is our existentialist powerlessness and infirmity that designates us as humans. This line is directly connected to the last four lines of the speech. The wheel thus comes to full circle; our beginning and ending are undistinguishable states, the states of sorrowful vulnerability.

In between these two states we learn to pretend, within our particular social contexts, mock-authority and fake-power. We could, instead, develop philosophical bend of mind to relocate the significance of ourselves within the cosmic plan but that was a possibility only if we had evolved minds differently by receiving differently designed form of education. In the name of school, the formal brain-washing institutions of ‘shiny faces’, faces that reflect the prospects of exploring the truth of existence, we have produced spineless ‘snails’(L. 7-8).

Shakespeare’s concept of education involves a free and dynamic mind, grooming the youth. A mind is an inspired mind not a designed mind when it sets humanity free from the dominating bodies of the organizations of state, causing fear and the ‘soul-saver’ religious institutions, causing mental inertia.

Shakespeare offers a specimen, the image of ideal ‘teacher’ through Falstaff, perhaps the most celebrated character of Shakespeare beside Hamlet and Rosalind:

‘**Falstaff**, as the comic Socrates, represents freedom only as an educational dialectic of conversion. The immortal Falstaff, never a hypocrite and rarely ambivalent, decidedly not a counterfeit, essentially a satirist turned against all power, which means turned against all historicism- explanation of history – rather than against history. A veteran warrior, now set against chivalric code of honour, Falstaff knows that history is an ironic flux of reversals.....

Falstaff's energies are personal: his relative freedom is dynamic one, which can be transferred to a pupil but at the coast of dangerous distortion... Falstaff declines to harvest his affections, but he certainly teaches Hal to harvest everyone. ... Hal is Falstaff's masterpiece: a student of genius who adopts his teacher's stance of freedom in order to exploit a universal ambivalence and turn it in to selective wit...

The Wife of Bath, Falstaff's literary mother, divides critics pretty much the way that Falstaff does. One wouldn't like to marry the Wife of Bath, or carouse with Falstaff, but if you crave vitalism and vitality, then you turn to the Wife of Bath, Panurge, Sancho Panza, but most of all to Sir John Falstaff, the true and perfect image of life itself.' (Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare the Invention of the Human*, pp. 276-284).

Without this vitalism, education with its 'neatly' designed and often 'cunningly' revised syllabuses, 'crafty' methods of examining the innocent minds to pollute them in turn with corruption of competition, remains a serious barrier hampering the evolution of human potential.

Once denied the possibilities of growth, an under developed mind, the kind of mind we see all around us, engenders mediocrity and fake images of glory to satisfy brutal and unleashed ego. This leads to the destruction of capacity to think independently; it also annihilates the ability to nurture empathy and facility to foster love.

The model of love and empathy, suggested in Shakespearean drama (the subtlest examples are, *As You Like It* and *King Lear*), is a compact system of inner growth leading to broadening of one's horizon of understanding of life as part of primordial existence. Subjected to social norms, the products of decadent educational systems, the barren soul and stereotypical mind start considering everything that happens to be abnormal in life, if repeated consistently over a period of time, as 'normal' in life. Bliss of love becomes confined to this monotony of life as well. Shakespeare mocks both at the cheap, conventional love phraseology and common folk mannerism through which lovers fake suffering to prove their 'true love' (L. 9). Once deprived of this bliss, the essentials of the selfish, cruel and corrupt patriarchal system start dictating terms and conditions of life to the monotonous mind. At this stage, stereotypes of various ideologues become supreme agents in inciting

the mind to commit crimes against all rationale which otherwise reflects its radiance in 'internal' and 'external' cosmos of mankind. What a beautiful phrase is, 'bubble reputation'; it tells us that all the 'golden' lands, 'sacred' ideologues and 'glorious' leaders that we die for, are reflections merely in bubbles. Any thought of honour and glory associated with these will burst like bubbles as well. Once these bubbles burst, we see ourselves as the abused, the victims of these social systems which have inbuilt mechanisms to protect particular groups of already existing and the fast emerging new breed of 'beneficiaries'. These beneficiaries of the systems are described as those men of 'wisdom' whose delight is to inflict the rest with 'their great knowledge and insights' while having luxurious meals, sitting at their embellished dinner tables filled with exotic food (L. 15-18 of the quoted passage). This mask of the 'great ones' comes off as well. Time decides their ultimate fate. Crooked, deformed, frail humanity finally loses all; 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust.' The horrid ugliness meets its fitting end but the mask survives.

As long as this ugliness of arrogance, viciousness of greed, savagery of selfishness rules the world, the mask will be needed over the corrupt face covering the truth behind it. As long as there is this mask, those who refuse to accept it as truth will be needed more than anybody else on earth to keep the distinctions of falsehood and Godhood alive.

Today, Shakespeare is needed more than ever to help us to distinguish the fake from the real. If *King Lear* becomes part of all primary school syllabuses, our children will learn at least, if nothing else, to say loud with passionate voice, 'dog's obeyed in office.' And what else one needs to learn but this to live a fearless life of grace and dignity.

Shakespearean drama is 'soothsayer'. It warns civilisation of the approaching fatal stab. It tells us tales of the past to forecast the future. Just a decade after Shakespeare's death, England was well prepared for the deadliest civil war of its history; that, actually, happened within two decades of the warning send to the Stuarts in *King Lear*. *King Lear* is the forecast about the fast approaching death of our existing patriarchal system. Reading Shakespearean drama as recurring thematic pattern, we see the images of male aggression molesting physically and psychologically the elements of femininity in the social order are gradually neutralized to welcome a new image of the female by the last two solo plays, *The Winter's Tale* and *The*

Tempest. The plays composed in the last phase from 1603 to 1611 (with two earlier exceptions of, *As You Like It* (Rosalind, 1599) and *The Twelfth Night* (Viola, 1600)) show the gradual withdrawal of patriarchal system, paving way for newly carved image of womanhood. Throughout the Shakespearean drama, a long list of female characters appears, portraying women capable of replacing the existing patriarchal system. The full grandeur of Shakespearean concept of 'womanhood' reflects upon the powers of superior wit, lofty imagination, enriched speech, spirit of innovation and adaptability, political vision of state as 'motherhood' and spirituality marked by the virtue of sacrifice. All these virtues are personified in Rosalind, Cordelia, Beatrice, Portia, Hermione, Paulina, Perdita, Viola and Miranda. These witty and meditative women, the most harmonious balance ever achieved by beauty, intellect and spirituality, in command of themselves and their surroundings, are the ultimate role model for the future women on earth. Shakespeare always draws contrasts to make us understand the nature of female mind in his drama. The yet unseen 'women of future' are contrasted with many recognizable faces of the day, the more familiar breed of 'males in female skin' around us: Goneril, Regan, vindictive and without any moral scruples; Gertrude, Ophelia, psychologically passive and submissive; ruthless and stubborn Lady Macbeth, Cleopatra; weak and vulnerable Lady Anne, Lavinia.

The bard holds the mirror up to all ages through his drama. Whenever we see our crooked face in his mirror, we must try to improve upon it. Shift from the patriarchal system, the long awaited improvement upon our crooked social face, is the only hope for the world to escape the certain death of cataclysmic nature. It seems that the world will enter a new kind of matriarchal system soon after the existing orders of politics, economics and armed defence collapse. In preparation to replace these decadent systems, individually and collectively, we must make the model of womanhood, as suggested by Shakespeare, available to our youth instantly. It is the right of our youth to choose for its own self the best model of life for better future. If the youth wishes to be suicidal, it can continue living the way we did. But if ever it intends to have life of purposefulness, decency, elegance and creative joy, it is our responsibility to define to the youth, young females in particular, the outline of the concept of womanhood as Shakespeare portrays it. It is only then that a natural shift from this fatigued out patriarchal system to a more balanced system of matriarchy will take place. We have lost all the moral ground and claims of credibility to guide the youth after the kind

of world we are leaving in inheritance. They deserve better and as our penance, we can let them choose the alternative life style without hindrances of educational stereotypes, cultural nuances and barriers created by institutions of religions and traditions.

The world, soon, shall see a shift in political model of governance. *Richard III, Henriad*¹¹, *Julius Caesar, Hamlet, King Lear* mark the end of a political system where the undeserving, ‘the madmen lead the blind’.¹² In every tragedy and comedy, Shakespeare mocks at the social and political elite, sometimes describing its worth by giving names like Lord Shallow, Dogberry, Doctor Butts, Dull and Malvolio. These, the representatives of diseased and malfunctioning state machinery, are those ‘gilded butterflies’¹³ that Lear wants to laugh at. These butterflies are seen all around us. There is no need to have awe of their gilded masks, just laugh at their pathetic concerns in life. This laughter shall set us free from the ‘thrill’ they have in winning or losing ‘office of high position’, the ‘joy’ they have in gossiping about the favourites of the people of authority and the ‘wisdom’ they have in knowing all the latest trends in fashions. Only then, we become ‘God’s spies’, the knower of the truth of existence. Take them as clowns of nature and just by not taking these Shallows, Dulls and Butts seriously, take our own selves seriously. Their time is already over as the system that protects them is neither able to sustain itself nor them anymore.

The same systems of education and politics that produce Shallows and Dulls on one hand, provide platforms for the pseudo intellectual elite like, Polonius, Iago, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Duke of Buckingham, Sir William Catesby, just to mention a few among hundreds. Shakespearean drama forecasts four centuries ago that ‘these tedious old fools’¹⁴, the ‘great babies’¹⁵, the game players of our societies can never be the source of enlightenment; these are the forces that bring more chaos for an already suffering humanity. Shakespeare was right about them, history is the witness and we, the victims of both, wonder would there ever be ‘the fire/That severs day from night.’ (Shakespeare William, *The Twelfth Night*, Act V, Sc. i, L. 265).

The masks of the civilizations are torn by the masks we have on our faces today; this pandemic is our ide of March. But the forces of status quo are trying to resist hard. If the ‘moulds’ of these cruel and corrupt systems are not ‘cracked’ now, the moulds that create these ‘ungrateful men’,¹⁶ the

Heaven's revenge is not far. Grief stricken Lear's words of curses are every letter a warning:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!
You sulfurous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe.....! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
Smite flat the thick rotundity o' th' world.
(Shakespeare William, *King Lear*, Act III, Sc. ii, L. 8-9L. 1-8)

This mask on our face is a reminder of the fact that whatever we thought we were, before December 26th, 2019 (the day Covid19 was reported in China), it was a farce. This mask urges us to reconstruct our entire self, whether social or individual, and reevaluate where and how did we go wrong as a civilization. When I go through Shakespearean drama, I see that the answers are available readymade. We went wrong in our strategy to see life as competition. We went wrong in our plan to abandon the Socratic and Prophetic model of education for the soulless and, after the shrinking of the job markets, pointless academic activity. We went wrong in our understanding of Nature and our handling of human nature. We went wrong in our concepts of governance, economics, warfare and social measures of success. We went wrong and we tried to hide behind the mask of fake glory and pseudo concepts of achievement. Ironically, this mask, to avoid covid19, instead of hiding has exposed our true face; crooked, deformed and terrified face of an exhausted civilization.

Let's get rid of the mask, let's get rid of the models of life that we inherited from our ancestors. Let's help our new generations to get rid of it too by abandoning the approach towards life that we stubbornly maintained. Let's build our societies on the principles of cooperation by rejecting the outdated concept of the cave-era, competition. This is the message of Shakespearean drama that we can still survive. But time is running short and the way we have evolved a brain that thinks only in vain (While cheap middle classes are contended with matching colours and name of brand only, pompous and sick humanity has created mask to protect against virus that cost a million Japanese Yen, there are others that cost several thousands of US dollars),¹⁷ chances are bleak.

We are a failure as civilization and we should hope genuinely that our children never learn to be what our ‘successful’ social, academic, political and religious elite had been over the centuries. I pray that our next generation could tell us with conviction and pride some day:

‘Presume not that I am the thing I was;
For God doth know, so shall the world perceive,
That I have turn'd away my former self.’

(Shakespeare William, *Henry IV (Part 2)*, Act V, Sc. v, L.61).

ENDNOTES

- 1- This famous line, to begin the text, is taken from Shakespeare’s last solo play, *The Tempest*, (Act II, sc. I, L. 219)
- 2- Milton’s way of saying, ‘the unprecedented’; (Milton John, *The Paradise Lost*, BK I, L. 16)
- 3- Yar Khan Shahab, *Tehseel*, Karachi, Pakistan; (it was also recited in a virtual conference held in India on 13th November, 2020.) The Bosnian version of it appeared in *Novi Izraz* (January-June), 2020, P.E.N., BiH (ISSN 1512-5335) pp.3-12.
- 4- Shakespeare William, *Macbeth*, (Act I, Sc. vii, L. 1-2)
- 5- Terry Jones discusses in details in his remarkable work, *Who Murdered Chaucer? A Medieval Mystery*, the causes of Chaucer’s death. He provides historical evidence while relating the mystery of the death of the greatest poet of the age to his heroic efforts in introducing the vernacular as serious and important literature of the day. The infuriated old school of conservative academia and nobility stood against him and finally after isolating socially, murdered him.
- 6- This amazing expression invented by Shakespeare is among the most popular quotable quotes of the Bard, *Julius Caesar*, (Act I, Sc. II)
- 7- Shakespeare’s history plays are romantic versions of biographies of English kings. These include, King John, Edward III, Henry VIII along with a continuous sequence of eight plays. The sequence composed in two cycles comprises of the first tetralogy, written in the early 1590s. It covers the entire saga of the Wars of the Roses and includes Henry VI, Parts I, II & III and Richard III. The second tetralogy including, Richard II, Henry IV, Parts I and II and Henry V, (the Henriad), was completed in 1598-99.
- 8- Though the most intense phase of tragedy began in 1599 and continued until 1608, Shakespeare had already displayed all the expertise of a master tragic playwright as early as 1592 when he staged, *Titus Andronicus*. But the dates of staging of most of the major tragedies are during the reign of King James and are popularly categorized as Jacobean plays not as the Elizabethan plays. *Julius Caesar* (1599), *Hamlet* (1600-1601), *Troilus and Cressida* (1602), *Othello* (1604), *King Lear* (1605), *Macbeth* (1606), *Timon of Athens* (1607), *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607), *Coriolanus* (1608). *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, due to the historically identifiable characters are sometimes ranked by the critics as histories as well.

- 9- At the time of her death Queen Elizabeth was reported to have one inch of lead-based makeup known as “Venetian Ceruse” on her face. Many argue that this poisonous substance caused her melancholia, frail health, rotten skin, the loss of most of her teeth and hair loss.
- 10- Milton John, *The Paradise Lost*, (BK I, L 3.)
(Almost 40,000,000 people died in the WWI, 5,000,000–9,000,000 in the Russian Civil War, 85,000,000 in WWII, 80,000–110,000 in Kashmir wars, well over 116,000 in Arab-Israel conflict, 1,500,000–4,500,000 in Korean war, 500,000–1,500,000 in Ethiopian civil war, 1,240,000–2,000,000 in Afghan war, 272,000–1,260,000 in war on terror, 384,000–577,000 in Syrian civil war are only a few wars to mention in the last hundred years or so.)
- 11- *Henriad* is a reference to *Richard II*, *Henry IV Part 1*, *Henry IV Part 2*, and *Henry V* when taken as a group of plays or, collectively, as an epic about prince Harry, the future King Henry V.
- 12- Shakespeare William, *King Lear*, 'Tis the time's plague when madmen lead the blind. (Act IV, Sc.i, L. 53)
- 13- ...So we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too-
Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out-
And take upon 's the mystery of things,
As if we were God's spies (King Lear act V Sc. i, L. 13-19)
- 14- Shakespeare William, Hamlet Act II, Sc. ii, L. 237
- 15- Ibid, L.406 (That great baby you see there is/Not yet out of his swaddling clouts.)
- 16- Shakespeare William, *King Lear*, (Act III, Sc. ii, L. 8-9). ‘Crack nature’s molds, all germens spill at once
That make ingrateful man!’
- 17- <https://japantoday.com/category/national/japan-fights-coronavirus-in-luxurious-style-with-million-yen-masks>

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Abstract

Obscurity of our age (since the beginning of Covid19) urges us to relate, because of striking resemblances in every walk of life, to the age in which Shakespeare lived and worked. Shakespearean drama is warning but forces of status quo, desirous of keeping masks of progress intact over worn out deformed faces, have little room for 'Shakespeares'. Psychological, financial, social and political selves design the thematic nexus of Shakespearean plays; 'the play is the thing, wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king' seems to be agenda hidden behind his works. Forces of status quo, while putting mask of spirituality and morals over cruel face of civilization, design education systems, civic structures, bureaucratic institutions, domains of emotional spheres to teach mankind brutal competitiveness. Shakespeare tore it to expose face behind mask. His plays liberate us from our inconsistent political, religious and cultural believe systems.

Keyword: past is prologue, obscurity of our age, Covid19, Heaven's revenge, *The Mirror for Magistrates*, political drama, cometophobia.