

‘New Beginning’: As a Pseudo-Concept in Shakespearean Art

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‘Well, if I be served such another trick, I’ll have my brains
ta’en out and buttered, and give them to a dog for a new-
year’s gift.’ (*Merry Wives of Windsor*, Act III Sc. v)

At the hour of the midnight, 31st December 2020, it seemed, the mankind was at war with Nature all around the globe. People who were living in Sarajevo during the siege, some three decades ago, confirm that it did sound like war, as if the city was bombarded from all corners by aggressors. Once again, vain and pompous reptilian mind within the creature that has nothing in hands to control, neither life nor death, was pretending controlling all, knowing all. Last year, just a day before the display of these 'fascinating booming sounds and shiny colours', Nature's warning had appeared.¹ We all turned blind eye and went on with the normal-routine cheapness called celebrations of ‘the new beginning’, wasting millions of dollars to enjoy booming sounds and shiny colours while 11 percent population of this world, according to official count, went on with its normal-routine starvation. Who would believe in another phase of time, if ever this reptilian mind allows this world to reach another phase, that there lived once a creature with claims of religious spirituality and secular rationality, celebrating something as vague scientifically² and as unrealistic astronomically as new year over the virus ridden dead bodies of two million people to mark yet another beginning. Will this creature ever learn the meaning of the most used words in its daily vocabulary; words like modesty, empathy, solidarity, love, sacrifice and conscience. It seems that we need perhaps another five thousand years’ evolution to get rid of the opposites of these words which define us today as a creature; words like pompousness, selfishness, egocentricity, cruelty, greed and ignorance. Ill-gotten gains lead to joy only for a short while even in a tragedy of Shakespearean proportion. The concept of festive ‘beginning’ without much to claim as success before the previous ‘ending’, sounds like

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a ludicrously naïve concept anyway. Seeing the enthusiasts emotionally charged commitment to this strange 'beginning' (which starts with the counting backward from 10 to zero in dramatic and frenzied yelling around 12.00 midnight; ironically, the 'bewitching' hour in traditional sense), we are forced to rephrase the old idiom into, 'failure has many fathers'.³ In the words of John Henry Jowett (1864–1923)⁴, 'Every other beginning is a perverse beginning, and it will end in sure disaster.'⁵

Shakespearean concept of 'new beginning' is also rooted in the deep sense of remorse. All, that 'happens', appears in his works as continuum of existing set of sequences without much to mark the change that could describe an 'ending' or a 'beginning'. Changes of regime, regicides, battles and court conspiracies cause the fake change in political structure of Shakespearean drama. Those fake changes are exactly the same kind of shuffling that we experience in our social, educational and political systems around the world. Rise and fall of particular individuals and political parties play no role in redefining the fundamentals of human nature. Pompousness, selfishness, egocentricity, cruelty, greed and ignorance, change names and faces; the bearers of the 'virtues' change, 'virtues' remain the same. With clear intent to expose the meaninglessness of the concept of 'change' and thus the concept of 'new beginning' without change in the essence of one's being, Shakespeare draws line of distinction between the agents of status quo and the forces that fight for renewal of true human values.

The following passage is a remarkable lead in to the concept of change the way Shakespeare sees it. King Claudius in *Hamlet* portrays himself as harbinger of the new age. He is a man of natural gifts, charisma and unmatched wit. He killed his paralysed⁶ brother, King Hamlet senior, to save the kingdom from the approaching threats from outside the frontiers⁷ and unrest within⁸. But did he, with all his efficient diplomatic efforts and psychological insights in to intricate nature of human brain, celebrate the self-proclaimed new age? He wishes to repent for the sin he had committed, the sin that ushered the new age of 'peace and harmony', but he found his heart 'hardened'. Hardened heart serves as barrier towards the change. Whenever they appear and wherever they appear, the heart opened towards the pain and suffering of others is the primary requirement for all the social reformers. With the words of repentance from his mouth he could "bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (*Matthew 3:8*). But it did not

happen and instead of a new beginning we observed total decay and death of the social system in Denmark. What could, then, become a real beginning remained fake slogan:

O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon't —
A brother's murder. Pray can I not:
Though inclination be as sharp as will,
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
And, like a man to double business bound
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
And both neglect. What if this cursed hand
Were thicker than itself with brother's blood —
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy
But to confront the visage of offense?
And what's in prayer but this twofold force,
To be forestalled ere we come to fall,
Or pardoned being down? Then I'll look up.
My fault is past; but O, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder'?
That cannot be, since I am still possessed
Of those effects for which I did the murder:
My crown, mine own ambition, and my Queen.
May one be pardoned and retain th' offense?
In the corrupted currents of this world
Offense's gilded hand may shove by justice,
And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
Buys out the law. But 'tis not so above:
There is no shuffling, ... (Act III, Sc. III, L. 36-60)

May one be pardoned and retain th' offense? To undo the wrong, one needs to end the era of wrong doing. Beginning of any kind is philosophically and politically not possible until accountability process is held supreme to bring justice and balance in a society.

This mockery of annual beginning of a new era is a slap on the face the suffering humanity around the world. But definitely it is much easier to shout counting backward than commitment that until the wrongs of the past year are mended, there will be no celebration. Every new year could start with the birth of our new personality but like Claudius we are lost in 'the corrupted currents of this world'. When the clock of personality

strikes change, only then the change shall be celebrated. When the clock of personality strikes change, only then the change shall be celebrated. This is, what has been described by Stephen Greenblatt, 'self-fashioning'.

'Self-fashioning' is a process which needs to be initiated in order to create a 'new beginning'. For a new beginning, one needs to formulate one's outward appearance as well; it is the entire decorum of one's being which transforms in to (what mad Lear calls in Act III) 'the thing itself'. However, as we can witness around us, this process of 'self-fashioning' is not a very common happening. It is a challenging task that most of us fail to accomplish. One major reason for this failure is the fact that change or self-fashioning is not a completely individual process. There are uncountable other elements and social forces that play important role in its shaping. Greenblatt elaborates on this idea by explaining that: "Family, state, and religious institutions impose a more rigid and far-reaching discipline upon their middle-class and aristocratic subjects."⁹ All of these elements influence one's fashioning of oneself, however cultural institutions and social organizations hinder the very pure process of self-fashioning.

Life, thus, results in to a monotonous affair of sequences where only faces change but never the essence of being. It seems that we are remarkably unfree to do so; no matter how many times we try to re-fashion ourselves, we are powerless to stand opposed to the forces of status quo.

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(there were) No moments of pure, unfettered subjectivity; indeed, the human subject itself began to seem remarkably unfree, the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society¹⁰.

Claudius' mind is product of relation of power. The power play of his society that designed him, despite his desire to re-fashion, keeps his entire being remained trapped within the matrix of his age. We all experience, on small scales, similar barriers. Claudius, just like us, is not the Hamlet of

the last Act of the play who manages to break through the shackles of his previous self to re-fashion it as reflection of the Self.

This alignment of self and the Self require demolishing of one's ego, one's sense of self-glorification. It is a choice that one may make for new beginning, but it seems that this choice is also produced by the social constructs which hold the greatest amount of domination over individuals. Stephen Greenblatt adds: "If there remained traces of free choice, the choice was among possibilities whose range was strictly delineated by the social and ideological system in force"¹¹. This causes ambiguity leading our perception of existence into more complexity. Once weakened by the pressures, exercised by the forces of socio-historical tension, we become the unconscious victims of the system and start behaving as an entity which applies to 'nothing' exactly. Our duties, rights, submissions and rebellions all correspond to systems that design us. Very few break through the spell of the 'design' and see the true potential of goodness within the human profile. The rest, keep on suffering from incurable 'logical disorder' all their lives.

..... Our natures do pursue,
Like rats that ravin down their proper bane,
A thirsty evil; and when we drink we die. (*Measure for Measure*, I. ii,
120-22)

We, the lowly human, are not the only forgers of our own 'selves'. From Greenblatt's point of view, different ideological constraints prevail even over this idea that we are able to grasp and formulate our own 'self' in whatever way we see it fit. Psychologically speaking, the idea of a 'new beginning', remains a problematic issue. If various elements play important role in formulating their authority in order to undermine one's authenticity, how much of the 'pure' self-fashioning can be achieved? The Elizabethan world does not appear so vividly different from the contemporary era, because the pseudo-concept of creating 'a new', remains nothing more than a mid-summer night's dream, or rather a fallacy in its own right. Our social orders steal from us, our own selves.

Re-examining ourselves involves re-examining history and literature that emerged within the systems we breathe in. It is important, in order to better define the changes traced in the dismantling and the establishment of the social order. A definite act of mind is required to comprehend the

totality of the world around us and if we happen to be fortunate, someone with the capacity to see more than ourselves enriches us about the knowledge of our own selves. It is not without reason that Greenblatt places Shakespeare under the label of a 'total artist', standing in contrast to the term of the totalised community.

Shakespearean plays seem to fall out of the sublime confrontation which emerges between the total artist and the totalising society. For Greenblatt, the figure of a total artist is the persona of someone who at the moment of creation is complete unto himself, whereas the totalising society is a community forming an occult network between human, natural and cosmic powers and the totalising society claims a privilege in this network on behalf of its ruling elite¹². Greenblatt also continues by adding that such a community generates exuberant dreams of access to the aforementioned powers, vesting control of this access into the religious and state bureaucracy at whose pinnacle stands the symbolic figure of a ruler. The result of the confrontation, between these two sides, is sets of unique and supremely powerful artistic works¹³. These works define us both as their subject and their audience. We learn through these great works of art that life is bigger than the designs our societies adopt to manoeuvre and manipulate. In *As You Like It*, the Duke Senior's first speech in Arden is a great source for liberation from fake social decorum:

"And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything." (Act II, Sc. I)

William Shakespeare's dramatic opus and his lyrical cycle rose from the society which grasped a particularly high degree of dominance over culture and the people immersed within the same culture. For this reason, Elaref's analysis of Greenblatt's works should be taken into consideration: "It pays attention to Greenblatt's belief that the culture of any society plays a significant role in shaping the identity of its people. In this respect, literature, which is one of the essential constituents of the cultural products, may determine the identity of its readers."¹⁴ Besides other factors previously mentioned, literature, art and culture also help mould the person's identity, however even in this identity-formation it becomes evident that the process of 'self-fashioning' as a model for a 'new beginning' remains still impure.

A literary text portrays the identity of the society, as well as the manner in which culture is constituted. Elaref therefore adds that: "He (Stephen Greenblatt) is much more concerned with explaining that the literary text represents both the cultural identity of a society and the way through which this culture is constituted."¹⁵ Moreover, it should be noted that: "Greenblatt believes that the individual's identity is part and parcel of the surrounding culture."¹⁶ If literary pieces, for example the Bard's writings, reflect the notions of the Renaissance day and age, then it is safe to conclude that such text depict the cultural identification of the Elizabethan people. Furthermore, if individuals shape their nature through the nurture of literature, art and culture, these elements reflect the social practices of the sixteenth century as well. 'The Self' of an individual, in this regard, is a cultural constituent, and as such it is an entity formed by structural authorities. Elaref confirms this idea by explaining: "That the Renaissance literature is inextricably related to the social practices in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, which picture the self as a culturally constituted entity shaped by structural authorities."¹⁷

We can also connect Hans Bertens's work to *Self-Fashioning* by quoting the author's word and ideas concerning the process of identity-forming in the following lines: "*Self-Fashioning* ultimately subscribes to the poststructuralist notion that the self is always a construction, that our identity is never given, but always the product of an interaction between the way we want to represent ourselves – through the stories we tell (or the incidents we suppress) and our actual presentations – and the power relations we are part of."¹⁸

The idea that a 'new beginning' can be created is a pseudo-concept. The 'Self' remains always a 'make-up construction', whereby our identity is the product of various interactions, especially in terms of the power-struggles and different social relations which surround and bind us. The genuine, pure and untouched self-fashioning is substantially unattainable since human beings remain influenced by various kinds of artistic models, which are more often reflections of the society's impositions placed on the subjects underneath the ruling sceptre of the monarch, state, or the group of the cultural elite. Since the concept of a 'new beginning' is a pseudo-concept, and since Greenblatt confirms that the identity-formation is never a pure and singular process, it is important to mention elements of the society and the people which influence one's identity and self-fashioning.

In Shakespeare's dramas, there are several examples which portray the phenomenon in which various characters influence the identity of a fictional individual, albeit negatively most of the time. Taking into account the post-colonial literary theory, Shakespeare's depiction of Caliban from *The Tempest* remains an intriguing venture for all ages. Caliban had inhabited the mysterious island long before Prospero and his daughter Miranda arrived. In this regard, Caliban was a character who existed long before he was enslaved by the Wizard. However, Prospero's imposition of dominance and authority over the native caused serious alteration to Caliban's own self-fashioning. Harold Bloom explains the obvious difference between the native creatures and the European newcomers by explaining that: "Caliban and Ariel are personalities, but then Caliban is only half-human, and Ariel is a sprite."¹⁹ Miranda even tried to teach Caliban their own native language, therefore further imposing their own national identity, language and culture onto the already subjugated native. Prospero's dominance hindered Caliban's genuine originality, his own origins and traditions, because Prospero had in his colonising mission: "Assumed that the natives lacked any culture or formal language until the Europeans brought them the 'gifts' of Western language and culture. If the natives resisted European paternal rule, then they were labelled as 'savages,' beyond redemption."²⁰

Caliban's self-fashioning was no longer his own, but rather, it was the European invention; the manner in which Prospero and his daughter perceived Caliban, influenced the way in which he later evolved. His identity will forever remain tarnished by the oppressive struggles which he had to endure.

Similarly, the Bard portrayed the influence of the society upon another fictional individual in his famous tragicomedy *The Merchant of Venice*. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock's basic human capacity is questioned due to the overwhelming prejudice and intolerance of the Venetian society. Shylock the Jew is not able to fully develop as a model of decent life. Other dramatis personae simply reduce Shylock's identity to a level of a mere category. Nahvi elaborates on this idea by explaining:

Throughout the play, the other characters consistently refer to him as simply, the Jew. This characterization dehumanizes and de-personalizes Shylock.²¹

The question then arises: how can Shylock redefine his identity, how can 'the new beginning' commence since so many outward factors influence Shylock's perception of himself and others. His self-fashioning is greatly impaired by the process of stereotyping which surrounds him. Various attributes given to Shylock and his community by the society are predominantly negative, and Mushtaq names these negative epithets: "shirkers, liars, corrupt, weak, inferior, uncivilized, impotent, cruel, lazy, irrational, violent and disorganized."²²

If negative qualifications are the only marks of understanding Shylock's mind by the society he lives in, what hope remains for him to realize his self-development? This feature further substantiates Greenblatt's idea that self-fashioning is not a separate construct, and this further confirms the notion that social ideologies and worldviews of the people from the environment also affect one's identity-formation.

Furthermore, even if we ignore the recurring thematic patterns of prejudice, racism and intolerance represented in Shakespeare's plays, we can still observe the negative connotations which a certain community may impose on another's identity and their cognitive behavioural patterns. In Shakespeare's well-known comedy *Much Ado About Nothing*, the character of Don John is a character whose 'self' is fully moulded by the Messina community and characters such as Leonato, Pedro, Beatrice and the rest. Caliban's identity is affected by racism and colonisation, Shylock's by oppression and prejudice towards the Jews. John, however, is an interesting character, because besides his 'bastardy', he does not differ vividly from other dramatis personae. Nevertheless, he is a villain who tries to destroy Hero's wedding, and he nearly succeeds, yet in the end he escapes punishment. Other fictional individuals still perceive John as the villain, and since they deny to allow him any space for a 'new beginning', he is somewhat 'baptised in villainy'.

Regardless of Don John's past, all the hardships he might have endured, his role in life remains influenced by the society. His identity is born out of prejudice. Although he is not a native of an unknown land, although he is not a Jew in a predominantly Christian community, he is still ostracised from the rest of the group. Since he cannot be accepted with his own original and unique character, his chances of a 'new beginning' are shattered, while his personal 'self' is determined by the myopic perception of others.

New beginnings do not occur when old sorrows haunt the heart. Every new beginning must be marked by the ending of the past grief. Societies cannot emerge victorious in totality if they do not see the wisdom in mending their wrongs. Individuals cannot thrive in totality if they do not learn to improve upon their misdeeds. The world cannot prosper in totality if it fails to embrace accountability as its basic life-principle. When things start anew, only then we will celebrate a new year, on whatever day and whatever hour, we all shall celebrate the day as it would mark our success over the ills of our world. We must try to understand as human race, sooner the better, that there is no such thing in Nature as 'autonomous human reason'. We all live in relation to one another and without any one of us playing allotted role, the downfall, of all, is the inevitable fate. If societies are relativistic, they become nihilistic as well. Humanity has a collective heritage, our spirituality. If we fail to restore it as supreme value in our societies, we will never see the functioning the virtues of modesty, empathy, solidarity, love, sacrifice and conscience. We will be left pitifully with only what we have today, pompousness, selfishness, egocentricity, cruelty, greed and ignorance. And there will be another new-year night celebration next year over the ruins of humanity.

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ENDNOTES

1. 30th December, 2019, Dr Li Wenliang (the first person to detect the new virus, Covid19) sent a message to fellow doctors warning them about the outbreak and advising they wear protective clothing to avoid infection. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51364382>)
2. Chinese and Korean (the Lunar New Year), Iranian (Nowruz, the commencement of Spring), Telugu and Kannada (Ugaadhi, lunar-based New Year), Tamil (Puthandu, Solar calendar beginning on 14th April), Jewish (Rosh Hashanah), Islamic (al-Hijriyah) are only a few to mention among many such calendars where first January as New year's day does not fit in even today.
3. The original idiom: 'success has many fathers, failure is an orphan'.
4. John Henry Jowett was a prolific writer and preacher. During his life time he was considered 'the greatest speaker in the English-speaking world'
5. Jowett, J. H., *My Daily Meditation for the Circling Year*. Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press.
6. 'Faith, I must leave thee, love, and shortly too;
My operant powers their functions leave to do:
And thou shalt live in this fair world behind, 170
Honour'd, beloved; and haply one as kind
For husband shalt thou—(Hamlet Act III, Sc. II, L. 169-172)
7. ...we have here writ
To Norway, uncle of young Fortinbras—
Who, impotent and bed-rid, scarcely hears
Of this his nephew's purpose—to suppress
His further gait herein; (Hamlet, Act I, Sc. II, L. 27-31)
8. Ibid: '....this warlike state' (L. 9)
9. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 1
10. Ibid, 256.
11. Ibid.
12. Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 2.
13. bid.

14. Abdelnaeim Ibrahim Awad Elaref, "The Effect of Social Context on the Formation of Cultural Identity and its Fashioning According to Stephen Greenblatt," *International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)*, Vol. 9. No. 9 (2020): 722.
15. Abdelnaeim Ibrahim Awad Elaref, "The Effect of Social Context on the Formation of Cultural Identity and its Fashioning According to Stephen Greenblatt," *International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)*, Vol. 9. No. 9 (2020): 722.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid, 728.
18. Hans Bertens, *Literary Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 179.
19. Harold Bloom, *The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 582.
20. Jyotsna Singh, "Post-colonial reading of *The Tempest*," *Discovering Literature: Shakespeare & Renaissance*, British Library, 15 March, 2016, Accessed 2 January 2021, <https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/post-colonial-reading-of-the-tempest>.
21. Alaeddin Nahvi, "Shakespeare's Shylock, the Everlasting Character of all Times," *Chumhuriyet University Faculty of Science: Science Journal (CSJ)*, Vol. 36, No. 3 Special Issue (2015): 1294.
22. Hammad Mushtaq, "Othering, Stereotyping and Hybridity in Fiction: A Postcolonial Analysis of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Coetzee's *Waiting For The Barbarians* (1980)," *Journal of Language and Literature*, No. 3 (2010): 25.

Abstract

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Keyword: New beginning in Shakespearean concept, fake changes in our social, educational and political systems.