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The Nature of Trust in Three Shakespearean Tragedies

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Abstract:

Shakespeare was one of the greatest dramatists that ever lived in the tide of time. Shakespeare, though dead, still lives on through his works. His literary works have received massive scholarly attention than those of any dead or living poet. The nature of trust is an essential element in every relationship. Research has shown that when trust no longer exists, teamwork, leadership positions and relationships are bound to fail. Shakespeare's tragedies are woven around the nature of trust to establish the conflict in the plays. The trust could be betrayed in the case of young Hamlet or could be manipulated to trust a wrong person or a wrong council in the case of Othello and Macbeth. This study seeks to highlight the various constructions of the betrayal of trust in Shakespeare's Hamlet, Othello and Macbeth and the various manipulations employed to break the trust in the existing relationship between the tragic heroes and their loved ones. And also to critique the social institutions which make these constructions possible and showcase the often negative consequences of the betrayal of trust in the lives of characters. This study is a qualitative one; the study's significance is in the quest that Shakespeare's tragedies are woven around the nature of trust and trust is key in every sphere of human life and this work will also open a new window of scholarship in Shakespeare's tragedies.

Keywords: Trust, Shakespeare, Hamlet, Othello and Macbeth

1. Introduction

Shakespeare was one of the greatest dramatists that ever lived on the face of the earth. Though dead, his works continue to inspire several generations. His name has become a household name among scholars. What then made him different from the other writers during his time? His tragic heroes are full of action and life. According to Johnson, Shakespeare had a special way of choosing individual characters to act in his plays to portray his vision of wide circumference, without diminishing the separate intended to attach to the being he portrayed. Othello is a personage of this description as well as Hamlet to a greater or less degree. It is true to say that all his chief characters possess this claim to our admiration (Clement, 1943). Unlike other writers, who crafted their characters to represent particular persons, Shakespeare's characters were made to represent a universal concept, which applies to all men such that the reader or the audience identifies themselves with Shakespeare's characters, which probably made his writings upstanding throughout several generations. But this is not to say that Shakespeare was not without fault as Pope and Johnson had 'ventured to point out, in the honesty of their criticism, that Shakespeare was not free from fault; and it was this which the nineteenth Century chose to remark to Johnson's preface, in particular, was remembered only to be despised' (Nichol, 2009, p.4). But on the whole, Shakespeare was a great writer and he still lives through his works. Most of Shakespeare's tragedies are woven around the nature of trust.

Trust is an essential element in every relationship whether marriage, teamwork or business partnership. Every human relationship thrives on trust. Most of Shakespeare's tragedies portray the issue of trust as the cause of the central conflict in the plays. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*, the central conflicts in these tragedies are either a betrayal of trust or trusting a wrong person or a wrong counsel. Therefore, the issue of trust in Shakespeare's tragedies is very relevant in modern scholarly work. There have been systematic efforts by scholars to investigate issues in Shakespeare's tragedies, for example, the literature reviewed by Kurt (1994), Al-ibia (2017), Nafi (2018) and Cutturu (2012) shows that the nature of trust is missing in Shakespeare's tragedies, therefore this study seeks to highlight and critique the various constructions of the nature of trust and its implication on the characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*. What then is trust? Chervany & Mcknight (1996) view trust as a key to a positive interpersonal relationship in every kind of setting because it is central to how we relate and interact with one another. Without trust, there cannot be any partnering. Trust is a very broad topic; its concepts are applicable in several disciplines. In this study, the researcher will limit the nature of trust to the relationships between the tragic heroes and the other characters.

Critical reception of Shakespeare's writings has shown that he was a great writer. Shakespeare was one of the greatest dramatists that ever lived in the tide of time. According to Smith (2009), the first to recognize the greatness of Shakespeare were Coleridge and Hazlitt in the early nineteenth century. This century saw Shakespeare as the glory of the English letters. So, Pope and Johnson stated in unequivocal language, which should not have been forgotten. 'He is not so much an imitator as an instrument of Nature' said Pope and it is not just to say that he speaks from her as that she speaks

through him, and Johnson declared, 'the stream of time, which is continually washing the dissoluble fabrics of other poets, passes without injury to the adamant of Shakespeare.' (4). Thus, the passage of time has not been able to diminish or reduce Shakespeare's poetic creativity. His works have stood for several generations and yet the beauty in his imaginative work has been praised by both young and old. In Samuel Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare, he described him as above all writers, he was the poet of nature, the poet who is able to faithfully hold up to the reader the mirror of manners and life (Smith, 2009). That 'Coleridge sees in Shakespeare the true dramatic poet... in as much as for a time he has made you one-an active creative being' (Clement, 1943, p.50). Time has wiped away the works of many ancient poets that ever lived before Shakespeare. Though Shakespeare is dead, he still lives on through his works. His works have received massive scholarly attention, and are studied in many educational institutions both second cycle and tertiary institutions than any other author on earth. Shakespeare will continue to live on as many generations yet unborn will continue to study his works. Shakespeare's plays are a true representation of human life. Coleridge notes that everyman sees himself in Shakespeare's plays, 'the brilliant beams and you see before you a being of gigantic proportions and such elevated dignity, that you only know it to be yourself by the similarity of action. So, in Shakespeare, every form is true, everything has reality for its foundation; we can all recognize the truth, but we see it decorated with such proportions of grandeur, that while we know the figure, we know also how much it has been refined and exalted by the poet' (Clement, 1943, p.44). One thing that remains unique in Shakespeare's plays is how the actions of the characters invoke similar feelings and reactions from the reader. The reader and the characters are not apart; the reader sees himself through the actions of the characters. Coleridge further notes, 'Shakespeare was almost the only dramatic poet, who, by his characters, represented a class and not an individual that other writers did for the stage, and in other respect, good ones, too, had aimed their satire and ridicule at particular foibles and particular persons, while Shakespeare, at one strike, lashed thousands. Shakespeare struck at a crowd.' (53). To expand, many writers focused their characters on an individual but Shakespeare crafted his characters to represent a nation. That is why, his characters could stand the tide of time and they also modified every individual in the society.

There is a lot of scholarly attention to Shakespeare's tragedies. For instance, Nafi (2018) illustrates Shakespeare's concept of tragedy from three perspectives, which sets his works as a dramatist apart from others. 'The tragic action and the tragic appeal was analysed to highlight how Shakespearean tragedy is different from the classical tragedy of ancient Greece. The study reflects the contradictions of social life during the Renaissance culture; it anticipates the development of realism and romanticism in the nineteenth century, and it reveals the hidden depths of human mind unknown to literature before.' (46). Shakespeare's tragedies portray different angles on life issues resulting in the diversity in Shakespeare's tragedies. Further, Nafi noted, 'a Shakespearean tragedy is a tale of woe and suffering of man in high estate, culminating in his death. The hero must be a person of high dignity ... a King Lear, or a prince Hamlet, a general of the Republic like Othello, a leader in the state like Brutus, Anthony or Coriolanus.' (47). Shakespeare crafted his tragic heroes as very prominent and great people to the extent that they merit the admiration of the reader and the audience so that their downfall invokes pity and sympathy from the reader and audience.

Other scholars have examined several issues in Shakespeare's tragedies. Kurt (1994) examines the contribution of female characters to Shakespeare's major tragedies, such as *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. He argues that the women's conflict with the patriarchal order enables the males to recognize and combat corrupt elements in society. The awareness of the female character allows them to perceive the tainted patriarchal atmosphere that dwells in and operates within it as the best they can (i). But Salim (2017) differs in his study when he presents a unique approach to unfolding the pattern of what Shakespeare follows to design his characters. This pattern mostly applies to Shakespeare's tragic heroes. He argues that Shakespeare can reveal a great portion of this pattern in the words of King Lear as he disowns Goneril and Regan by promising an act of revenge on them both. Lear's threats show four unique characteristics that apply to him and Shakespeare's tragic heroes; his speech shows that he is determined to revenge on his daughters. The speech shows that he is unaware as to how to carry the ravage, no remorse about his vengeful plans and this reveals his madness. The study shows that Lear's speech could be adopted to unfold the unique patterns that Shakespeare followed as he portrayed his major tragic heroes. However, Cutitaru (2012) accesses four Shakespearean tragedies *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* by exploring cultural ambiguity which Shakespeare adapted from these sources into his major plays and turning them essentially into an instrument of his tragedies. He states that in these modern times, Shakespeare would have been accused of plagiarism. Cultural ambiguity was adopted in various forms in Shakespeare's tragedies starting from *Hamlet* and *Othello* to the crisis of identity in *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. The strength lies in how Shakespeare explored sources for his masterpieces; he took the plot, characters, and content from his predecessors and turned them into his literary works. However, Shakespeare is not the only writer who is guilty of this; many contemporary writers have remodified existing stories as their literary pieces.

2. Methodology

This part of the study outlines the methods applied in carrying out this research. This study primarily employs the qualitative approach in analysing the nature of trust in *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*. This method will use characters and the process of characterization to give a better interpretation of the texts. The data for the study comes from the primary source, which are Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth* and the secondary sources come from textbooks, journal published articles online to help the researcher to critically analyse the texts. This study is motivated by the fact that trust is an essential element in the life of every human being and every relationship; its absence can cause a rift in human relationships and most of the tragic conflicts in Shakespeare's tragedies are a result of the nature of trust; the trust is

either betrayed or manipulated for a gain which results into tragic consequences to the tragic heroes. The nature of trust in Shakespeare's tragedies will give this work a new scholarly phase.

3. Textual Analysis and Discussions

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the tragedy of the tragic hero revolves around the betrayal of trust. In the case of Hamlet, his uncle Claudius and his mother betray his trust. Young Hamlet comes face to face with an uncle who betrays his trust by killing his father and snatching his birthright as the heir to the throne with the excuse that young Hamlet is not of age. Claudius demeans his nephew so he can be elevated by referring to him as 'of impious stubbornness', is unmanly grief; it shows a will most incorrect to heaven, a heart unfortified, a mind impatient (Act 1 sc 11, 9). This accusation of Claudius justifies and paves the way for him to ascend to his brother's throne as from his speech young Hamlet exhibits immaturity. King Claudius then is personified as evil as he is eager to commit crime after crime to keep his ambition. The throne and the queen go together, so he forcefully takes over as the husband to the queen. 'Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen, the imperial join tress to this warlike state, have we, as 't were with a defeated joy, with an auspicious and dropping eye, with mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage, in equal scale weighing delight and dole, Taken to wife' (Act 1, sc 11, 7). This haste marriage of Claudius is to exonerate him from the guilt of his murder but he rather worsens the case as young Hamlet attributes his actions to that of a beast, who cannot control his sexual desires. Therefore, the actions of Claudius seem unforgivable in the sense that he denies young Hamlet three things, he kills his father, takes away his throne and denies him a mother to shed in his grieves. Thus, young Hamlet becomes lonely and angry about the incestuous relationship between his uncle and mother. 'O God! A beast that wants discourse of reason would have mourn'd longer-married with an uncle, my father's brother, but no more like my father than I to Hercules. Within a month, ere yet salt of most unrighteous tears had left the flushing in the galled eyes, she married. O, most wicked speed, to post with such dexterity to incestuous sheets!' (11). Hamlet sees Claudius and Gertrude's marriage as a foolish one because a beast that cannot reason would have reason to show respect to the dead mate than rushing to marry in less than a month. Therefore, young Hamlet is genuinely grieved and honestly critical of Gertrude's and Claudius' callousness towards the loss of old king Hamlet. And as if that is not enough, Ophelia betrays their relationship by taking side with his brother and father. Ophelia's betrayal enforces Hamlet to see all women as fickle-minded, who can easily be deceived. *Hamlet* is one of Shakespeare's tragedies that shows right from the beginning of the play that the tragic hero has lost trust in all the people around him. Therefore, the reader sees young Hamlet's madness not as a pretence but as a real psychological trauma as a result of the betrayal of trust. The appearance of his father's ghost heightens this trauma and all that Hamlet seeks to do is to fulfil his duty by avenging his father's death. But the saying 'justice delay is justice denied' applies to this play as young Hamlet gets the right opportunity to let his uncle pay for his evil deeds, but he postpones it with the excuse that killing a person praying will help him to go to heaven instead of hell. Claudius' sins are so great that young Hamlet thinks that he ought to suffer after death by going to hell instead of heaven. But this one mistake of Hamlet sparing his uncle's life will be very disastrous because a lot of innocent people like Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Ophelia, Laertes, Gertrude and young Hamlet will shed blood for this one mistake of Hamlet.

Shakespeare's *Othello* raises issues of manipulated trust for selfish ambition. In *Othello*, Othello promotes Cassio to a lieutenant, a position of more intimate trust that displeases Iago, and he becomes so sad and evil driven by this elevation of Cassio that he promises to take an act of revenge. Iago is a crafty fellow with deep knowledge of human nature; he uses this gift to get back at all those he sees as a threat around him. At the beginning of the play, he tries to incite Brabantio about her daughter's choice of man she loves but Desdemona wins the fight by reiterating her love for Othello and gains her father's blessings. Iago then becomes jealous seeing Othello and Desdemona happily married. Cassio falls into Iago's trap and loses his reputation and trust in Othello. Iago then gains Othello's trust in trying to resolute the problem between Cassio and Othello, he schemes his way to the hearts of these two by false proclamation as being an honest man, 'as I am an honest man, I thought you received some... you advise me well... I think thou dost', and 'for I know thou'rt full of love and honesty' (Act 2, sc 11, 56, Act 3 sc 1, 74). The irony in the above statement works for Iago, he then becomes the center of attraction where Cassio and Othello seek in his honesty and judgment without knowing the true nature of Iago. Iago works his ways to cause jealousy in Othello's heart, "in sleep I heard him say, sweet Desdemona, let us be wary, let us hide our love, and then sir, would he gripe and wring my hand crying, 'O sweet creature!' And then kiss me hard, as if he plucked up kisses by the roots that grew upon my lips: Then laid his leg over my thigh, and sig'd and kissed and then cried, 'cursed fate that gave thee to the Moor!'" (Act 2, sc 11 79). Iago fills Othello's heart with jealousy; jealousy is what breaks trust in every human relationship. Othello falls into Iago's deception and feels rag to revenge Desdemona unfaithfulness. Al-Ibia (2017) asserts, 'Shakespearean tragic heroes are usually uncertain of the method through which they can carry out their vengeance plan and thus they need a long time to figure it out. Othello becomes a remote control in Iago's hands and he cannot think for himself. This makes the reader sympathize with him and wishes he will discover his folly and know that he is being manipulated by Iago. But Othello's love for Desdemona will not permit him to forgive her for her infidelity. Othello decides he will not allow Desdemona to live to commit another adultery. Therefore, Desdemona's plead of innocence is not taken by Othello. Othello strangles Desdemona to death to only realise he is manipulated by Iago. At this point, Othello is pitied but he cannot be helped by anyone because he has trusted the wrong person. Iago succeeded in using his vindictiveness to break the trust that existed between Othello and Desdemona. I, therefore, argue that Iago's desire to destroy Othello and Desdemona is not only a result of Cassio's promotion but is also rooted in Desdemona's virtuous behaviour which Iago's wife Emilia lacks. The wisdom that Desdemona possesses, therefore, is the remote reason why Iago betrays Othello's and Desdemona's relationship.'

In *Macbeth*, the play revolves around the dangers of the lust for power and the betrayal of trust between friends. But right from the beginning of this play when Macbeth and Banquo return victoriously, the first prophecy of the witches comes true. Duncan gives the title Cawdor to Macbeth and he indicates the title demonstrates his absolute trust in Macbeth. This is the first error Duncan makes, trusting a man who will later betray his trust and murder him in cold blood and snatch his throne away from him. Initially in the play though Macbeth is ambitious, he knows as a cousin to the king he has the chance one day to raise to the throne but the prophecy of the witches leaves him so confused and uncertain as to how these prophecies will be manifested. Lady Macbeth appears and incites her husband to hasten his way to the throne. This shows that Iago in *Othello* is not different from Lady Macbeth, as both of them become the driving force in these plays. Lady Macbeth is an embodiment of evil in this play. She is over-ambitious than her husband and also different from Gertrude and Desdemona. In *Hamlet* and *Othello*, the female characters are dominated by the men. Claudius and Othello set the pace for these women but Lady Macbeth is different; she seems to hold the remote in this play, she is the driving force in this play. 'That I may pour my spirits in thine ear, and chastise with the valor of tongue. All that impedes thee from the golden round, which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem to have thee crow'd withal' (Act1, sc5, 15). This speech implies Lady Macbeth is eager to poison her husband's ears so that he can overcome every form of good nature and take the throne away from Duncan. Duncan's trust in Macbeth and his wife is his second mistake. Macbeth is caught between his ambition and his good nature and initially he discards his wife's advice to proceed further to murder Duncan when he visits them. 'We will proceed no further in this business. He hath honour'd me of late; and I have brought Golden opinions from all sorts of people, which would be worn now in their newest gloss not cast aside so soon.' (Act 1, SC 111, 54). But Lady Macbeth refers to her husband as a coward and a cat that loves fish but does not want to wet his feet. Lady Macbeth supports her husband to be a man and work his way to the top. But it seems the God granted Lady Macbeth's request when she asks the God to 'unsex me', which means to remove every feminine trait that will prevent her from achieving her plans. She then truly assumes a masculine position in this play and drives her husband to do as she says. Macbeth murders Duncan and ascends his throne but as the saying goes, violence begets violence, Macbeth must continue to kill any person who stands in opposition to his new status as the king. This lust for power leads Macbeth to commit many crimes. After Duncan's murder, Banquo becomes suspicious of Macbeth, he knows Macbeth will soon come for his head; the trust between these two is broken as a result of Macbeth being afraid that the witches' prophecy will come to pass. Macbeth, as a villain, decides to wipe Banquo and his family but only succeeds to kill Banquo; his children, just like Duncan's children, flee. But though Macbeth is the king, he is unhappy because he has shed a lot of innocent blood. He and his wife are being tormented but they have gone too far with the killing that they cannot stop; they must continue to kill all their opponents to survive. Therefore, Macbeth loses all his trusted friends, and becomes lonely and unsatisfied. He realises this and laments that he has defiled his mind for the descent of Banquo.

All the three tragedies I deal with in this paper show that the tragic heroes and other characters are manipulated to trust in the wrong council resulting in traumatic implications for the tragic heroes and their loved ones. In *Hamlet*, King Claudius manipulates the trust that exists between a mother and a son. Claudius is subtle and cunning like Macbeth; his lust for power makes him kill his brother so he can ascend the throne to marry the queen. He breaks the friendship and trust that existed between young Hamlet and Laertes. He is a power drunk just like Macbeth. The only difference between them is that in *Hamlet*, Claudius is the moving force but in *Macbeth*, it is Lady Macbeth that is in charge of the affairs. Gertrude takes instructions from him but it is vice versa in *Macbeth*. Claudius, Macbeth and Iago are the villains in these plays. They all have betrayed the trust of their loved ones to satisfy their lust for power. Young Hamlet and Othello become victims of manipulations; their death, therefore, invokes pity and sadness. Among the three women Gertrude, Desdemona and Lady Macbeth, Desdemona stands tall as she exhibits characteristics of a virtuous woman; it is rather unfortunate her husband betrays their love and loses trust in the marriage and kills her. The nature of trust, therefore, becomes a key issue in these plays.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth* are woven around the nature of trust because trust is an element that binds people together and reduces conflict. The trust element sets the pace for the tragic conflict in Shakespeare's tragedies. In the case of *Hamlet*, young Hamlet is betrayed by his uncle Claudius, his mother Gertrude and his girlfriend Ophelia. The betrayal of young Hamlet's trust leads him to embark on a journey of revenge, which leads to his downfall and many other characters. However, the nature of trust differs from *Othello* and *Macbeth*. The trust of these tragic heroes is manipulated to trust in deceptions and wrong council. In *Othello*, Iago uses his knowledge of human nature to deceive Othello, Cassio, Roderigo and Emilia for his selfish gains. Othello's trust in Iago leads him to straggle his innocent wife to death. In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth is the driving force of the play; her over-ambition causes her to incite her husband to commit several crimes against his uncle King Duncan, Banquo and many other characters due to his lust for power. Therefore, trust is an essential element in Shakespeare's tragedies.

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