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Plague and death in the play Romeo and Juliet

K. Athira

kurpathathira@gmail.com

Sathyabama Insititute of Science and Technology,
Chennai, Tamil Nadu

Dr. Sowmiya L. M.

sowmisanjumani@gmail.com

Sathyabama Insititute of Science and Technology,
Chennai, Tamil Nadu

ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare the excellent writer that changed the front face of English language. Romeo and Juliet have been one of the best-known literary works. Through this paper it can be understood how the external circumstances that had affected England and how Shakespeare has blinded this aspect to the theme of death in his tragedy Romeo and Juliet. The black death had directly and indirectly affected the life of the people as they could see mass destruction all around them and this could be partially evident through the play Romeo and Juliet.

Keywords— *Plague, Quarantine, Death*

1. INTRODUCTION

The golden age of history – The Elizabethan era, a fantastic period with beautiful history of various things. This era is usually associated with Queen Elizabeth- I. It was the rise of English Renaissance and also saw growth of poetry and other aspects of art like music and literature. This age was considered as a golden age for literature and also for drama. The rise of literature and culture was due to the interests of queen Elizabeth and her fascination towards various aspects. The Elizabethan period was an era of great enlightenment in life of humanity. The Renaissance had made a massive contribution towards art culture and literature. The effect of the Renaissance on English literature increased emphasis on humanism and individuality. Poets wrote about their experiences of love in a way that was individualised and secular. These were the hallmarks of the Renaissances. Writers belonging to this period were able to criticise the church and state in search of greater happiness for individuals with the society. The Elizabethan literature becomes very prominent for the impact of Renaissance. It is during this era that the Elizabethan theatre flourished with the efforts of eminent writer such as William Shakespeare and others who helped to break free the conventional methods and added new essential features to the plays and the stage. Queen Elizabeth was completely against the shutting down of the theatre. It is during this period that literature had flourished to its epitome and also it is during this era numerous literary works have been produced. The Elizabethan drama was the dominant art, for that rose its fame during the Elizabethan period. This period gave birth to more complex dramas unlike the existing simple stories. The era also observed many translations of foreign works into English. The authors of this age had a sense of spirit and freedom which was evident in the works that were being produced. Romance had dominated all types of literature that includes drama poetry prose. This period was a true combination of experiments that resulted in wonderful new discoveries. William Shakespeare began to earn a living as an actor and later as a playwright. The works of Shakespeare can be divided into various parts.

2. ROMEO AND JULIET AND THEIR EFFECT THROUGH PLAGUE

England had been affected by the plague in 1300's. There were constant outbreaks of the plague during 1593, 1603 and 1625 and 1665. In 1563 London had witnessed a devastating outbreak that washed out most of its population. The cause of the outbreak was unknown to the people and the unhygienic circumstances added to the situation for the worse. "The great Plague of London" of 1665 had witnessed the death of numerous people and the entire city of London was closed due to the pandemic. Various people were highly affected by the plague and one among them was the well know English writer William Shakespeare. Due to the outbreak the theatres were also closed making it very difficult for the people to survive in such extreme conditions. The plague had tremendous impact on art and literature. The common frame of mind was one of pessimism and a very dark representation of death as the theme to various works. The works that were produced during this time was a gentle reminder to the people how fragile was the life of human being in the contemporary world. The world that Shakespeare had lived was filled with extreme fear, anxiety and death. Shakespeare's everyday life was an inspiration to understand and analyse his works. Few of his writings were based on the themes like tragedy and death and also referred to the black plague. The pace of the play is comparatively faster when compared to the other plays: "Goodnight, goodnight! Parting is such sorrow that I shall say good night till it be tomorrow."

3. THE ELEMENTS OF DISCUSSION

"We were born to die." Says old Capulet when Tybalt dies unaware that the same fate awaits his daughter Juliet. The theme death in this play is irresolute. How death can affect society is an important subject of concern in this subject of concern in the play Romeo and Juliet. Romeo and Juliet are start crossed lovers who truly love each other but due to the family conflicts between the two households they tend to budge into a true tragedy. Mastering the art of characterisation Shakespeare tries to depict the theme through the characters and setting that also includes the writers state of mind. Throughout the play there are several questions raised on very broad topic such as the life, death and most importantly the question of death hurting the society is questioned. Though Juliet is not Romeo's first love, he instantly falls in love with her. It is only after they met, they feel in intense love and immediately Romeo goes to the balcony to confess his true feeling to lady love and promises to stay forever. Little did they know how fate would completely change their life. There is a sudden move towards tragedy which is not expected by the audience. Throughout the play the theme of death is predominant as for the right flow of the play the theme of death is always present. There are a total of six deaths in the play. Shakespeare a very prolific write uses this theme to create a problem between the two lovers to ultimately show the two families the love they possessed for each other.

In Shakespeare's play the epidemic disease love key under toned character's speech like in this play Mercutio call on "a plagues in both the houses". Plague had become an ordinary aspect in most the plays by Shakespeare. This high impact of this dangerous disease was evident through the plays of Shakespeare as he was personally affected by the black death or the plague. This plague is an actual even in the play Romeo and Juliet. The plague is the twist in the plot that turns a lovely love story in a tragedy.

Friar Laurence is the victim of the plot. First when under the pressure of Juliet's impending marriage to Paris, he fails to revel prior marriage of Romeo and Juliet and tries to cover up the situation by the idea of Juliet's consuming the sleeping portion. This holy character is introduced in the early parts of the play and Shakespeare explains the potentiality of good or evil and according to R.M Frye he expresses an orthodox Christian view equally shared by the Catholics and the protestants. His intentions are good and actions are impulsive. He an example of what he himself has said about human beings.

"virtue itself turns wise being misapplied" (act-2 scene-3).

Friar tries to illustrate through his own actions the moral dangers inherit man's duel nature that he warned against in his opening scene. Shakespeare's Friar functions as a connector who sees to be at house with the character and actions. His humanising actions is meant to minimise the effect the cold faith on the lovers but ironically it increases their own fate.

During a duel with Romeo and Tybalt, Tybalt gets killed in the hands of Romeo and this creates a lot of anxiety among the people of Verona. It is after this act that Romeo is banished from Verona and this news had created fear in Juliet. Friar Lawrence a holy man who helps Romeo and Juliet to secretly get married. Juliet seeks help from Friar Lawrence to help her bring back Romeo and Friar Lawrence found this to be a very appropriate way to end the feud among the Montagues and the Capulets. Friar Lawrence conveys a message to Romeo about the deadly chemical that he would use on Juliet that would make her appear dead. John Friar would send the message to Romeo to Mantua. So that he can sneak back and take away Juliet from Verona and live happily ever after. Everything went according to the plan Juliet had consumed the drug and appeared dead to her family and Romeo sneaks. But for a complete misfortune occurs that John Friar had never reached Romeo in Mantua. He conveys his message in the flowing line:

*Going to find a barefoot brother out,
One of us order, to associate me,
Here in the city visiting the sick,
And finding him, the searches of the town,
Suspecting that we both were in a house
Where the infectious pestilence did reign
Sealed up the door and would not let us froth
So that my speed to Mantua was stayed.*

Understand the fact that the being in the quarantine it was not possible for Friar John to inform Friar Lawrence about the problem and this led to the complete tragedy of the play. As the plague was infectious and contagious people were kept in quarantines and were asked to stay away from people this is what had happened to Friar John who had to quarantine himself and could not deliver the letter to Romeo. This conversation shows how their entire plan fell apart.

*Friar Laurence: Welcome from Mantua. What says Romeo?
Or, if his mind be writ, give me his letter.
Friar John: "I could not send it- here it is again,
Nor get a messenger to bring it thee,
So fearful were they of infection."
Friar Laurence: unhappy fortune.*

Friar John could not deliver the letter because he was stuck at the quarantine. Romeo and Juliet that star crossed lovers but it could also be said that they are already plague stricken. The plague is not a very particular theme in the play but it throws light on the situation that the people of London went through. It is the plan of Friar Lawrence to fake the death of Juliet and make sure Romeo returns to the grave so that they are leave Verona and live happily after. The plague had no consideration on gender age and caste it was equal and similar to everyone. The severity of the disease had completely killed a lot of people making the situations worst.

People are locked inside the houses such that the spread of the disease could be handled. This is one important reason that Friar John had to quarantine himself making the beautiful love story into mere tragedy that still pokes pain in heart of many. Everyone in the country understand the importance isolating themselves. Most of the social gatherings were put off, theatres were the entertainment zone for the common people and due to the pandemic

The image of death of the lovers appears to be very strong towards the end of the play:

*Shall I believe
That unsustainable death is amorous,
And that the lean abhorred monster keeps
Thee here in dark to be his paramour.*

Characterisation and different setting are another way that Shakespeare uses to convey the theme of death. Each character in the play portrays and very significant aspect of life. Romeo is considered immature and is totally unaware of the reason behind the duel with the Capulets. Juliet a thirteen-year-old girl who is young and is not affected by the rivalry between the two families. The play begins by a dual on the streets of Verona during 1300. The lives of both the protagonists are different Romeo is always out with his friends and never at home where as Juliet is always at home and has not seen much of the world.

4. A TRAGIC CONCLUSION

The tragedy Romeo and Juliet is not just a play but has a sense of deeper meaning to it. Death is not always a good end to the circumstances that we face through every day. Through the play it could also be understood that love is blind in spite of the rivalry among the families they remain together until fate or destiny tries to tear them apart. Life without love is worth not living and this aspect is evident through the constant love both the star-crossed lovers possess for themselves. After understanding that fact that Juliet is dead Romeo without a second thought kills himself and when Juliet wakes up to see this sight, she also kills herself. The plague could be referred as the flaw of the social structure of Verona that is the prince does nothing to do with the violence that both the families are creating and also the fact where Romeo and Juliet take extreme steps to unite because of the existing family duel. Another aspect of the plague could be the prolonged rivalry between both the families the Montagues and the Capulets. Similar to the sudden outbreak of disease which has no cure is the duel between the two families too has no cure. The hatred is just being passed on from generations yet no one is ready to accept and compromise. Though the churches were being questioned the fear of God was omnipresent among the people and the fear of committing a sin was considered tedious. It could also be considered that the two lovers feared no god and instead worshipped each other and as a result to their punishment they are wrapped around the arms of death. Shakespeare is also very efficient at historical plays also that is to make the play Romeo and Juliet realistic the war that had happened between England and Spain could be depicted as the duel between the though families. The plague is a situation that William Shakespeare had personally experienced that cause him to a trauma which could have been a reason him to write tragedy. Expect for the play Romeo and Juliet the plague is not a matter of concern in any other plays of Shakespeare. The entire love story of Romeo and Juliet would turn the tables around if Friar John was able to convey the message to Romeo who was at Mantua. The tragedy would then been a happy love story that would bring joy to the reads and not pain.

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