

Analysis of Political Morality in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar

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Abstract— This paper outlines the ever-lasting and never-ending issue of political morality that is substantially demonstrated in the play *Julius Caesar* by one of the greatest, if not the greatest, 16th century dramatist William Shakespeare. The paper's main focus is on the interpretation of political insinuations and its efficacy on the general republic and democracy. The paper draws its strength in delineating the political motives behind all kinds of evils such as mass manipulations, verbal fallacies, and brutal murders. It tries to throw light on the author's usage of his protagonist in manifesting to the audience, the inevitability of a person's character influencing their political beliefs and actions. The plot could not have been better plotted by the great dramatist, which conquers the then ongoing political turbulence in the gluttony of power and also seeking its relevance in the contemporary political era.

Keywords— Manipulation, Morality, Politics, Tragedy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Julius Caesar is a political tragedy in five acts penned by none other than the greatest dramatist of all time, William Shakespeare which is believed to have been written in 1599. It is one of the several plays written by Shakespeare based on real events from Roman history. Julius Caesar was a Roman politician and general who played a crucial role in the events that led to the downfall of Roman Republic and insurgence of Roman Empire. Shakespeare graphs this downfall into a tragedy which becomes one of his most popular tragedies with all the political elements inculcated in it. The play illustrates the internal and external conflict between personal values and social or political constructs. Throughout the play, individuals' character is revealed in the decisions made between morality and personal benefit. The audience sees that politics are not divided between what is right and wrong, but by leaders who struggle to determine what is best for themselves rather than the general public or the country. Shakespeare, through one of his most famous tragedies' has desired to manifest the effect of political manipulations on the general lives of the democratic public which is not just confined to the sixteenth century

but also utterly relevant and prevalent in the modern era as well.

II. MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Julius Caesar: A Roman General and Senator
- Brutus: A supporter of Republic and a friend of Caesar
- Mark Antony: A friend of Caesar
- Octavius: Caesar's Nephew and appointed Successor
- Cassius: A General and a conspirator against Caesar
- Casca: A public figure opposed to Caesar's rise to power

William Shakespeare was deeply concerned with the politics of his age and it is straightforwardly manifested in many of his plays, Julius Caesar being one of the kinds. When Shakespeare began to compose 'Julius Caesar', he shifted his attention from politics of England to Political turbulence of Rome. It is thus strange that most Shakespearean critics have denied political implications in his plays. Writers like Edmund Spenser have declared him apathetic to politics and as one who is only interested in the development of his characters which beyond doubt he was a master of the art. But to say that Shakespeare was not concerned about politics of his time would be a sleek attempt to digress from the chief element in his most famous work as one can easily understand the political edge in many of his plays.

In the play, there is a battle between groups of two political ideologies. The Monarch group and the Republican group. Mark Antony and Octavius being the stalwarts of the Monarch group and Brutus, Cassius and Casca being the stalwarts of the Republican group. Caesar has just returned to Rome after defeating his rival Pompey and his sons in the battle of Munda and the Romans are celebrating his victory and urging to make Caesar their king by offering him the crown. Mark Antony thrice offers the crown to Caesar. Cassius somehow doesn't like this and is filled with jealousy against Caesar. He wishes the downfall of Caesar in the eyes of all the Romans and that leads him to engage in the vicious art of manipulation that serves politics at its best. He tries to influence most of the Senate members including Brutus into believing

that Monarchy will be the ultimate outcome if Caesar were to be crowned the king and democracy would be just a dream for them. Monarchy leads to nothing but tyranny and subjugation of the basic rights of its citizens so as highly believed by Brutus and which is proved well enough by Cassius in leading Brutus into an abysmal cave of hatred towards a very close personal friend who soon turned into an ignorant enemy.

Cassius's conniving speech made a deep impact on the minds of the senators and Brutus too. They were compelled to believe that Caesar was a tyrant and if he became the King of Rome, it would bring nothing but the destruction of the Roman Empire and the democracy.

"Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world like a colossus, and we petty men walk under his huge legs and peep about to find ourselves dishonorable graves."

As Cassius tries to convince Brutus that Caesar needs to be taken down, he conjures up a vivid image of the Roman leader as a 'Colossus- a giant statue'. The politics that Cassius plays on Brutus by tricking him into subverting the minds of the senate members is proof of Shakespeare's awareness of the political problems of his time. As Cassius complains about Caesar's power, he claims that it's Rome's own fault for being servile to one man. Men, according to Cassius, are masters of their own fate which means it's up to them to take Caesar down.

"Men at some times are masters of their fates. The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, But in ourselves, that we are underlings."

Brutus, though being a close follower and friend of Caesar, was also led into believing that Caesar had grown too ambitious and that he must be assassinated to secure the democracy and peace of the Roman Empire.

Like many political plays, Julius Caesar has a mischievous plot too. Two major political speeches made by Marcus Brutus and Mark Antony set the background to this political intrigue. After Cassius plays political tricks on the senators, it is decided that Caesar must be assassinated to prevent any kind of tyranny on his part if he becomes the King of Rome. The plot against Caesar thickens and at the Capitol, the execution of Caesar is initiated by Casca followed by other conspirators by stabbing Caesar, Brutus being one of the conspirators too. Caesar has been sent to heaven and the mob, the crowd, the Roman citizens demand an explanation for such a cruel act against someone whom they loved the most due to his generosity.

Brutus comes forward to deliver his speech at Caesar's funeral. The crowd in front of him is infuriated, agitated, overwhelmed by Caesar's assassination and they clearly demand a legitimate explanation of this cruel and atrocious act committed by the conspirators. Brutus stays calm and addresses the crowd. He begins like,

"Romans, countrymen, and lovers! Hear me for my cause, and be silent, that you may hear: believe me for mine honour, and have respect to my honour that you may believe: censure me in my wisdom, and awake your senses, that you may the better judge. If there be any in this assembly, any dear friend of Caesar's, to him I say, that Brutus's love to Caesar was no less than his. If then that friend demand why Brutus rose against Caesar, this is my answer: Not that I loved Caesar less but I loved Rome more".

Brutus delivers such a remarkable and mesmerizing speech that each and every person in the crowd forgets their fury and listens to him with absolute attention and understanding his explanation for the evil deed of murdering Caesar. He further states that if there was any friend of Caesar in the crowd, he ought to know that Brutus's love to Caesar was no less than his. If then that friend wished to rise against him, his answer was: Not that he loved Caesar less, but that he loved Rome more. He further clarifies that Caesar was a valiant person and for that he loved him. But Caesar being too ambitious, Brutus had to kill him in order to protect all countrymen's freedom. Caesar had to be assassinated in order to protect Rome from Monarchy and Tyranny. No one in the crowd could deny this statement as every citizen wishes good for his country and himself and Brutus's political speech proved to be too convincing for them all. He was a skilled orator and his art of convincing through words without raising any weapon or any materialistic thing clearly embraces his political genius in seeking the crowd attention and approval.

Shakespeare, being born in an age where politics dominated, being aware of the political unrest and upheaval, was bound to inculcate political art and scenario in his plays. He was the author of his age and it would be a surprise if his plays did not possess any political edge. He seeks out the psychology of the human mind and the fickle nature of it and uses it to his advantage of dramatizing, Julius Caesar being one of them. The description of the characters, the speeches, and the consequences of their speeches make the play worthwhile. Brutus uses his oratory skills well which is so required in all the political scenarios. He puts his country, the citizens of the country, and the democracy of Rome itself first, thus justifying the assassination of Caesar.

Shakespeare uses his characters to show the audience that character can be determined by the decisions people make. Many of the key struggles in the play involve characters choosing between what is best for others and what is best for them. If one has difficulty in digesting how the crowd could so easily be manipulated in believing the justification of a murder, then they are in for a big surprise. The next scene, in which Mark Antony delivers his speech, the crowd once again going through

the emotional turmoil, turn against Brutus and his senators with a vengeance. Such was the speech of Mark Antony. Here is a small extract of his speech:

"Friends, Romans, and the countrymen, lend me your ears; the noble Brutus hath told you Caesar was ambitious: If it were so, it was grievous fault, You all did see that on the Lupercal I thrice presented him a kingly crown, Which he did thrice refuse: was this ambition? Yet Brutus says he was ambitious; and, sure, he is an honourable man".

Mark Antony delivered the speech that proved to be the final nail in Brutus and Cassius's coffin. Political speeches are very closely and attentively heard as they are made by big names and the orators need to be very careful about what they speak considering the audience, the crowd, and the viewers in mind. Any criticism or negativity about any particular targeted person or a group, and arrogance in the speech could eventually ricochet and lead to a negative outcome. Antony being very much aware of it never utters a demeaning word that would ignite fury in the crowd about Caesar's conspirators. He addresses them all as "honourable men" including Brutus and confining himself to his own purpose of the speech. He counter-questions the allegations laid by Brutus against Caesar and manages to justify them with proof which again infuriates the crowd against Brutus and his comrades and with such vengeance that they had to scuttle in order to escape the wrath and frenzy of the mob.

Politics is at the core of this tragedy. Caesar, being the favourite of the Romans because of his generous nature in distributing his gains to the Romans, was the subject of jealousy for many Roman senators, especially Cassius. Cassius just couldn't absorb the fact that after the victory, Caesar had become one of the most powerful people in Rome. His jealousy and greed for power led him to believe that Caesar would become a tyrant and use his powers destructively which ultimately increased his motivation for killing Caesar, which he justifies as an act of freedom from tyranny. Shakespeare's political viewpoint is so accurate that it is even relevant in modern times. Politics, as described by Shakespeare, is used to curb the opposition and even freedom of individuals through its misuse of power.

Cassius's motivation to kill Caesar was driven by his Jealousy for Caesar. Caesar has gained more power than any other men in Rome and Cassius thinks he does not deserve it, that he is unworthy of it. Cassius quotes: *"What trash is Rome, what rubbish, and what offal when it serves for the base matter to illuminate so vile thing as Caesar!"*

In this quote, he is trying to convince Brutus to join the conspiracy against Caesar. The greed for power, greed for position and the desire to rise above everyone impels a person, drives a person to carry out such evil

deeds that ultimately lead to doom and destruction, not only of oneself but the whole civilization as well that usually one notices in political scenarios. The wicked and vicious political art of manipulation, the art of brainwashing through words results in such a great political tragedy as Julius Caesar.

III. CONCLUSION

In the play Julius Caesar, the tragedy was mainly directed at Marcus Brutus. The politics played by the stalwarts of the Republican Group in the play served as catalyst resulting in this tragedy. Shakespeare uses the story of Caesar's assassination to illustrate the convoluted relationship between the character of political leaders and the political decisions made by them. Brutus was the tragic hero of the play because of his idealistic qualities. His idealist nature was a threshold for the compromising political morality instilled by the antagonists of the play. The mindset that Brutus possessed only allowed him to see the world from a single point of view. He could only see what was best for his country regardless of who died and who lived and his judgments and decisions were based on this single perception. This tragic flaw of Brutus resulted in this great tragedy of Caesar and Brutus as well. Brutus always believed that everyone in his country should be as honourable as he is and thus he was too idealistic. The Tragedy was also the cause of Brutus's gullibility. Brutus couldn't understand the politics played by Cassius and thus he was easily manipulated by Cassius into believing that Caesar would destroy Rome if he was conferred the crown though he knew Caesar well enough. This weakness of Brutus, weakness of a single main character, leads to the great tragedy of Julius Caesar which manifests Shakespeare's style of dramatizing his tragic plays which results from the character's own weakness termed as 'Hamartia'.

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