

PARENTAL VICTIMIZATION: PRESENT DAY RELEVANCE OF *KING LEAR*

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There is always a debate on what is the central theme of Shakespeare's *King Lear*; is it error of judgment, power politics or filial ingratitude? The drama is one of the master pieces from the great dramatist and it gives the exposure to all the eternal themes mentioned above. The drama, which has been considered to be the everlasting treasure of moral truth of human life, has been relevant even to the present-day situations; and herein lies the greatness of the dramatist and that of the literature too.

The peculiarity of Shakespearean drama and its characters is their being lifelike in nature. This peculiarity always compels its readers to correlate everyday incidents and people to the eternal themes and characters of the dramas. The drama was remembered recently due to a resembling and dramatic expelling of 80-year-old Vijaypat Singhania from his position as a Chairman Emeritus of India's one of the renowned business houses, Raymond. The event had attracted a lot of attention from media or rather Mr. Vijaypat Singhania himself used the media platform to give outlet to his grievances against his son, Gautam Signaniya. How Vijaypat Singhania alleged his son for such an expulsion from his Raymond empire, reminded many of the drama that Shakespeare wrote more than 400 years ago. Vijaypat Singhania has recently published his life story through an autobiography entitled *An Incomplete Life*, which may be used to compare and evaluate relevance of Shakespearean drama in the present time.

Throughout the play *King Lear*, it can be observed that along with filial ingratitude, the theme of 'power that corrupts', plays an extensive role. Irish philosopher Edmund Burke once said, "The greater the power, the more dangerous the abuse". But this quote needs to be further amended, because it is not just power but the nature of the person that decides the extent of abuse of that power. The quote of Abraham Lincoln that, "If you want to test a man's character, give him power" proves that it's mostly up to the basic nature of a person that whether power corrupts the character or not. This quote of Lincoln has been repeated by Vijaypat Singhania in many of his recent interviews.

“Actually, I didn't retire as such. I was forced out of my company, because I gifted my company, my wealth away to my son. People would ask American president Abraham Lincoln how do you judge a person's character? His answer was simple. Hand them power and watch how they behave. Otherwise, I spend a lot of my time in legal cases and arbitration and hopefully in the near future it will all be over. I'm always talking to lawyers nowadays.”¹

The statement reminds us of Shakespearean play, *King Lear*. It points out to both the themes in the play; filial ingratitude and power that corrupts. In order to understand the relevance with the situation of Mr. Singhania, it would be better to highlight how Shakespeare brings home the powerful message that parents sometimes commit mistakes in understanding the true nature of their own children. This error of judgement leads them to disillusion. But till the awaking of senses to the reality and facts, time has elapsed only to permit them to repent their mistake without allowing them to rectify it.

Parental Victimization in *King Lear*

The term parental victimization is derived from a statement of The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act 2007 of Government of India that seeks to protect senior citizens and parents from being victimized by their children. This victimization underlines the term filial ingratitude. Filial ingratitude is a dominant theme in *King Lear*. It is a universal theme in the sense that it is common to

find many sons and daughters who show much ingratitude and cruelty towards their parents in any age or place. In the play, there are two fathers (Lear and Gloucester) who suffer because of favouring certain kids to others. Their tragedy is caused by those whom they have already favoured and preferred. The play gives us incidents which connect one father (King Lear) with his two ungrateful daughters (Goneril and Regan) on one hand, and another father (the Earl of Gloucester) with his son (Edmund)

Those two lines of relationships display the issue of ingratitude on a very deep and comprehensive level. What made this play a tragedy was the evil children's filial ingratitude for the blindness of Lear and the Earl was so great that only through suffering from the monster ingratitude of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund did they learn to distinguish the good children from the evil ones.

It was filial ingratitude which opened Lear's eyes to the painful truth that he had disinherited his good daughter and had given power to his evil daughters. Lear expresses his great shock addressing ingratitude as an enemy that has occupied the heart of his daughter. He says:

"Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend,
More hideous when thou showe'st thee in a child
Than the sea-monster!"²

The traditional ideal values that have been cherished to make the parent-child relationship natural and wholesome are distorted and destroyed in this play. Lear and Gloucester are both trusting fathers. They foolishly believe the superficial words of their evil children and banish those children that truly love them. This banishment of truthful children is only because of their outspoken language that does not please their whimsical nature. As a result of their wrong judgement, both fathers are expelled by their unthankful children and are bereft of their rightful home. The filial greed and ingratitude shown by Edmund, Regan, and Goneril bring immense suffering to all. The play begins by an incident wherein King Lear wants to divide his kingdom among his three daughters because he has become too old to rule. Therefore, he asks each one to express her love for him. The first two daughters, Goneril and Regan, choose very passionate and poetic terms to flatter their father which reflect how hypocritical they are.

Once Goneril and Regan receive the kingdom of Lear, they began to show their real ungrateful nature. They have a private conversation in which they reveal their real identities. They conspire against their father whom they regard as very rash and emotional. They plan to treat him in the way that they think he deserves.

Goneril reveals her true nature to Lear when he visits her. She does not treat him as a king anymore because she thinks that if he still has his title, as a king and the royal accompaniment, he will remain the real king in the eyes of the public. She dismisses 50 knights and gives orders to her steward to ignore her father and treat him badly. She insults her father calling him an idle old man who still wants to enjoy his lost glory. Goneril assures that when her father goes to Regan, she will also treat him badly. Lear is hurt by his evil daughters' ingratitude, which is made obvious by their great disrespect and intolerance toward him. Goneril's meanness towards him makes him utter the frustration and he curses her to beget a ungrateful child to realize his pain. It prompts him to say.

“..from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honour her! If she must teem,
Create her child of spleen; that it may live,
And be a thwart disnatured torment to her!
Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth;
With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks;
Turn all her mother's pains and benefits
To laughter and contempt; that she may feel
How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is

To have a thankless child! Away, away!”³ (Act I, Scene IV)

Therefore, he heads to Regan expecting her to be a grateful child to take his side and criticize her sister. Unfortunately, the sign of ingratitude shown by the second daughter is worse than that shown by the first one. He cannot believe what happens to him, and therefore, he asks the elements of nature to avenge his humiliation. Lear speaks to Kent expressing the internal storm which goes inside him.

“...Filial ingratitude!

Is it not as this mouth should tear this hand
For lifting food to't? But I will punish home:
No, I will weep no more. In such a night
To shut me out! Pour on; I will endure.
In such a night as this! O Regan, Goneril!

Your old kind father, whose frank heart gave all,”⁴ (Act III, Scene IV)

He states that Goneril and Regan's actions lead him to madness. This realization awakens on him after losing his kingdom and senses. He expresses that he is a victim of love shown towards ungrateful children. He is a fit case of parental victimization at the hands of ungrateful children.

The similar feeling is expressed by Mr. Vijaypat Singhania in *An Incomplete Life*.

“Every few days my mind goes back to 13 February 2015. It was just another Thursday. If only I knew then what I know now, my life would be completely different. Of all the bad decisions I've made over the years, giving away all my wealth to my youngest son definitely takes the cake.”⁵

Vijaypat Singhania was the Chairman of one of India's big business empire, *Raymond*. He is a person who is famous because of his flying adventures around the world. He is renowned in India for successfully maintaining adventurous spirit up to an old age besides handling his business empire. Even after being a man with worldly knowledge, he falls prey to blind affection to children when he gifts away his entire share in the company to his son, Gautam Singhania, leaving himself complaining of unjust and cruel behaviour of the son to disinherit him of not only the earned wealth but his ancestral house also.

“..and I have now moved into a small accommodation in Malabar Hill, where I still live now....I have limited money left, and no source of income as I am no longer Chairman Emeritus at Raymond....I am forbidden from going to my own office...I have also lost my cars in Mumbai and London...”⁶

This reminds us of plight of King Lear, who was bereft of his royal escort, his title and his kingdom. Singhania was actually warned by his senior advisors about the consequences of his wrong decision. But he was quite assured of his decision which he regrets now.

“A little over six years ago, I was in London with my senior advisors. We were having a heart-to-heart chat when I told them that I was thinking of gifting away all my shares of Raymond and its associate companies to Gautam. There was absolute silence in the room for a few seconds. Looking back, the unease on their faces was pretty comical. There were four men in the room and each one of them, when they regained their ability to speak, told me that this might not be a good idea. But I leapt to my son's defence. 'Gautam will never mistreat me,' I said.

Those were my exact words to them. How fervently I wish I could take them back.”⁷

When we read the book *An Incomplete Life* we come across the quotes from Shakespearean drama which indicates that Singhania was well versed in Shakespearean literature and he might also have read *King Lear*.

What surprises us is how he commits the same blunder as Lear did in distributing his Kingdom between two sisters. But herein lays the dilemma of a parent who is leading into an old age. He tries to

balance the relations by partially relegating the power to ensure that the next generation is trusted with it for its prosperity and withholding some rights with oneself to retain the dignity.

Herein comes the phrase “power that corrupts”, which is basically subjective. A good-natured child recognise it as a gift from the parent for overall prosperity while an ungrateful child use it to take a revenge leading to parental victimisation. Generations after generations, cases of parental victimisation may surface up in different forms, in different ages.

References:

1. Singhania, Vijaypat, *An Incomplete Life*, New Delhi, Pan Macmillan, 2021, p. 222
2. Folger Shakespeare ibrary <https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/king-lear/> Act I Scene IV line 270.
3. *ibid* Act I Scene IV line 294.
4. *ibid* Act III Scene IV line 23.
5. Singhania, Vijaypat, *An Incomplete Life*, New Delhi, Pan Macmillan, 2021, p.191
6. *ibid*, p.202
7. *ibid* p.195