

Illuminationist features of Shakespearean Drama

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Summary

Shakespearean drama is the vast remification of organic interconnections, it deals with the 'wholeness of life'. The soul of this drama is intellection not principles of 'formulations' as Shakespeare aims at manifesting the 'beatific vision' on stage rather than structural designs. The principle of diversity instead of the Aristotelian concept of conflict, as a result, becomes the essence of the kind of drama he was offering to his audiences. To display this diversity, Shakespeare centred his interest in the position and disposition of Nature. Out of necessity, Shakespeare presents us with a form of drama which is of 'no genre' as western tradition of drama offers nothing similar to it. It is, however, not too improbable to place Shakespearean drama in the category of what might be called 'Illuminationist drama'. Discursive reasoning and intellectual intuition along with recurring images of *nakuja abed* (place of nowhere), diverse nature of characters in terms of their degree of illumination, concept of the head of the state resembling that of an *imam*, womanhood as the locus of Divine manifestation and the image of the concealed rescuer, all connect Shakespearean drama to Shahab ud-Din Suhrawardi's Illuminationist ideal. The present article, elaborates the nature of Shakespearean Illumination, the part II of this series shall deal with the themes of womanhood, royalty and concealed hero in more details.

Key Words: intellection and formulation, secular Bible, Beatific vision, spiritual growth, organic continuum, position and disposition of Nature, Discursive reasoning, Intellectual intuition, apprehension and comprehension, Hamlet, King Lear, The Tempest, humanism, individualism, self-fashioning, cognitive act, *Wujud, nakuja abad, al-nafs al-natiqah, al-nur al-isfahbad*, primordial state.

Drama, when it becomes Shakespearean drama, is the ‘interim reading of life’. In Shakespeare’s case it is an expression of experiencing life as a vast ramification of organic interconnections. In other words Shakespearean drama is an expression of human ‘wholeness’. Shakespeare’s art makes contact with us on the level of ‘intellection’ not formulation. His complete works have been called ‘the Secular Bible’, because they give mankind code of conduct, manner of observance, method of growth in such a charismatic way that quest for Truth and ‘Beatific vision’ remains no more the private property of the ‘chosen seeds’. No wonder that in the bard’s own life time theatre had become alternative for church. His audience, mostly illiterate, experienced the delight of spiritual growth in this unconventional entertainment of the revelation of the truth not yet fully comprehended by the men of ‘wisdom’. To know Shakespeare it is important not to identify with psychological states but with the ‘stations of wisdom’ of the protagonists. Shakespearean drama is nothing if it is not the interpretation of these stations. This is the very aspect that is, to use Carlyle’s phrase, the ‘body and substance of his work (which) comes from the unfathomable depths of his oceanic mind.’ The focal point here is Shakespeare’s creative perspicacity. What ever his drama is, it ‘spills over with events’. It is a world of real activity, meaning and also of ceaseless turmoil. It has no ‘organic continuum’, but it does have a purpose which gives it both structure and substance.

Observe, for instance, the following piece of advice from Hamlet to an actor in Act II:

‘...anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end both at the end and at the first, was and is, to hold as ‘twere the mirror upto Nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image,

and the very Age and Body of the time, his form and pressure.’
(Hamlet, II.ii)

The message hidden in this passage has been deciphered by John F. Danby:

‘The Nature of Hamlet’s passage means, in some sense a current actuality, and may be, behind this, the divine forms that account for it. Elizabethan nature is not a force that usurps God’s position, nor it is in any danger of losing precisions and manifoldness of outline. Elizabethan nature is tidy servant, ‘God’s hand maid’. Her house is recognizable for having everything in its place. Each object stands in its especial place on its particular shelf of ‘degree’. Two relations describe it, the relation to the next above, and relation to the next below. One’s nature depends on one’s position. The complete serial order of these positions constitutes Nature. Position also defines disposition. To quit this position and this order is to move into the sphere not of the meaningful and indeterminate energy, but into chaos.’¹

It is in this position and disposition of Nature that Shakespeare centred his interest. But this Elizabethan model is not flawless. Here chaos (‘Confused Mixture’), or as the Romantics would call it, Negative Capability (leaving one’s place and finding oneself in that of something else), is considered disposition. Shakespeare’s genius would disagree. He knew that Nature does not create the ‘monstrosities of virtue’, and that within disposition a nucleus, a reference point of position could be found. ‘Disposition’ then defines ‘position’. We see this theme repeated through out his great tragedies and late romances. And it is this mechanism in his plays’ structure that helps them finding a place of prominence in every culture of man and in all ages of history.

Shakespeare presents us with a form of drama which is ‘of no genre’, says Prof. Harold Bloom. It is of no Western genre for sure. I, however, think, it is not too improbable to place Shakespearean drama in the category of what might be called ‘Illuminationist drama’.

Illuminationist (Ishraqi) philosophy, as opposed to Peripatetic philosophy, is related to a period before ‘philosophy became rationalized’. Al Sheikh al-maqtool Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi (1153-1198), the

¹ John F. Danby, *Shakespeare’s Doctrine of Nature*, p. 13

father of Illumination, altered Aristotelian tenets of philosophy to two fundamental constitutive elements:

1. Discursive reasoning
2. Intellectual intuition.

Hazrat Shahab ud-Din Suhrawardi's discursive reasoning lead him to give a new dimension to the ancient philosophical issue of the celestial origin of soul and its immortality. He focuses on misery of soul's present state and made Illuminationist philosophy a way of seeking elevation by which the soul can rise above the earthly plight. An Illuminist therefore, would find it hard to agree with Aristotelian emphasis on principal value of existence (Suhrawardi shifts emphasis from existence to essence), or with the nine accidents of Aristotelian logic (reduced to four by Suhrawardi i.e. relation, quality, quantity and motion) or with its Hylomorphism (Matter as first cause theory was altered to the degrees of light and darkness as constituent elements of universe).

Intellection thus is an eschatological ideal – the spiritual union. The ontological status of all beings, similarly, is an ideal degree of movement in which they approach the supreme light and are illuminated.

The spiritual union of the illuminated selves was for several complex reasons, a greater socio-philosophical issue than 'autonomy', 'humanism' 'individualism' etc. for Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Elizabethan England in its true sense is a place of what Stepehn Greenblatt calls 'self-fashioning'. It is a vaguely applied term to understand the mechanism of a cultural system which invented the minds of individuals from abstract potential to concrete embodiment. Coincidentally, it is this very attempt to have concrete embodiment of abstract potential that the Illuminationist philosophy deals with. The idea of soul's union with its origin becomes concrete possibility when Suhrawardi outlines the way in which the soul can become disengaged from its material bond.

Sayyed Hossein Nasr while commenting on Suhrawardi's eschatology says: 'this should be the goal of all men, for every soul in no matter of what degree of perfection it may be is seeking the supreme light at every moment of its life even if it is unaware of the true object of its search.' This is the very phenomenon that Prof. Harold Bloom calls

consciousness of one's consciousnesses.² Shakespeare was aware of this philosophy when he composed the following lines:

No, no, no, no! Come lets away to prison;
 We two alone will sing like birds I' the cage;
 When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down;
 And ask of thee forgiveness. (*King Lear*, V.iii. 8-11)

This passage from *King Lear* is perhaps among the most neglected passages of all Shakespearean drama. The passage takes place after the evil daughters (Goneril and Regan) have foiled the rescue attempt of their insane father by their youngest sister Cordelia. Both Lear and Cordelia are arrested as traitor and invader. Edmund (the commander in chief of the English forces and one of Shakespeare's greatest Machiavellian character ever) decides to send them to their death trap before any official trial begins. The fate, the fast approaching death, they both realize but look at the rhythm of calming lucid serenity of thought as if this is the most joyful moment in the old king's life. In the play this is the only poetic thought Shakespeare decides suits the king best when he is in the midst of the greatest crisis of his life.

In this passage prison becomes freedom (Lets away to prison), punishment becomes a bliss (will sing like birds), 'two-ness' becomes 'one-ness' (we two alone) and most importantly when the daughter seeks blessing of the father he would kneel down instead. They, in fact, are experiencing the state of absolute 'mergence', the joy and felicity of absolute accomplishment; in their case 'disposition' has become a reference point of 'position'. Like an Illuminationist, the terrestrial prison is no more an obstacle but an instrument to enjoy the eternal bliss.

Let's consider another passage:

'What piece of work is man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god...' (II.ii. 303...)

Bloom writes in *Poem Unlimited*, 'one knows that Shakespeare was not Pico della Miradola --- hermetist, kabalist, Neo-Platonist --- but Pico

² Shakespeare Invention of the Human

would have been happy to agree that in apprehension we could again be gods. Hamlet uniquely fuses apprehension and comprehension, and could be viewed as the hermetist Anthropos.’

Hamlet fuses ‘apprehension and comprehension’ without having the slightest idea what he was talking about? If this is what Prof. Bloom means to say, I tend to disagree. The subject matter of Hamlet’s speech is deeply rooted in Illuminationist psychology. According to which minerals, plants and animal, three kingdoms came into being as a result of the mixture of elements. Animal soul beside the power of feeding, growth and reproduction has additional faculties of motion, lust, anger and desire. Man who is the most perfect of the animals (what a piece of work) possesses in addition to the above senses and five inner faculties which relay impressions received from the external world to the light residing within him (how infinite in faculties). These five are ‘Sensus Communis’ (how express and admirable), fantasy, apprehension, imagination (how noble in reason) and memory, all crowned by the rational soul (*al-nafs al-natiqah*) which ultimately is the same as lordly light (in apprehension how like a god or *al-nur al-isfahbad*).³

Martin Lings was right when he said that Shakespearean drama in its outlook is not renaissance drama. Shakespeare’s concern is the primordial state of man. Throughout his tragedies and late romances he is essentially interested in demonstrating the celestial origin of the soul and the misery of its present state and consequently seeking a way by which the soul can rise above its occidental exile.

Shakespearean drama like all Illuminationist art is Truth concealed. And Truth, in all its possible dimensions (according to the Sufi understanding) is only *alif* ‘ا’ (first letter of Arabic alphabets). Shakespeare, like any other Illuminationist, doesn’t try to present this Truth in all of its aspects. As the precedence set by Suhrawardi himself, ‘in each treatise a certain phase of the spiritual life, a certain inner experience, is revealed and a certain set of symbols is unveiled, which gives the reader a glimpse of some aspect of the Illuminist universe.’ The general nature of Illuminist recital is divided into two parts. For instance:

‘In the *Chants of the Wings of Gabriel*, in the first part the hero sees a vision of a sage who is the prophet within himself. He asks the sage

³ S. H. Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*.

about original home and receives the answer that he comes from the 'land of nowhere' (*nakuja abad*), meaning literally utopia..... In the second part the disciple asks the sage to be taught the Word of God. The sage agrees to his request and instructs him in the mysteries of 'Jafr', science of the esoteric meaning of letters and words based on their numerical symbolism. He tells the disciple that God has created words such as the angels and a Supreme Word which far transcends the angels. Man is himself a word of God.⁴

(* Note: A brief introduction to the Master of Illuminationist philosophy, Shahab udl-Din, and 'Dodtor Maximus' of Islamic spirituality, Ibn Arabi will be of some value in understanding the nature of their quest, which is not very different from Shakespeare's protagonists.

I. *Shahab ud-Din Suhrawardi, is generally known as Shaikh al Ishraq, the master of illumination, especially by those who have kept his school alive to present day. Suhrawardi was born in 549/1153 near the modern Persian city of Zanzan. He received his education in Ispahan, then a leading centre of learning in Persia. One of his school mates was Fakhr al-Din Razi, the greatest adversary of philosophy. After completing his studies Suhrawardi set out to travel over Persia, meeting many Sufi masters to some of whom he became strongly attached. During this phase of his life he entered upon Sufi path and spent long periods in spiritual retreats, in invocation and meditation. His search for Truth took him to Syria and Aleppo, where he met Malik Zahir, the son of Salah al-Din Ayyubi. Zahir invited him to stay at his court in Aleppo. Suhrawardi accepted the offer, but his outspokenness, intelligence and lack of prudence in exposing esoteric doctrine made him unpopular among the ulema. They asked for his execution on the grounds of propagating doctrines against the tenets of the faith. At a time when Syria had just been recaptured from the crusaders and the support of the ulema was essential to maintain his authority, Saladin had no choice but to yield to their demand. Suhrawardi was imprisoned and in the year 587/1191 he died, the immediate cause of his death is unknown. At the age of 38, the Master of Illumination met with the same fate as his illustrious predecessor, Hallaj.*

Despite his short span of life Suhrawardi wrote nearly fifty works in both Arabic and Persian, most of which has survived. The sources from which

⁴ W. Chittick, *Imaginal World*, p.36

Suhrawardi drew the elements that he synthesized into Ishraqi theosophy include first and foremost Sufism, especially the writings of Hallaj and al-Ghazzali, whose Miskat al-Anwar had a direct bearing upon the relation between light and imam as understood by Suhrawardi. It also include Muslim Peripatetic philosophy, especially that of Avicenna. As for pre-Islamic sources, he relied heavily upon Pythagoreanism and Platonism, as well as upon Hermeticism as it had existed in Alexandria and had been later preserved in the Near East. Above these Greek and Mediterranean sources, Suhrawardi turned to wisdom of the ancient Persian doctrines he sought to revive and whose sages he considered as the direct inheritors of wisdom as it was revealed to the prophet Idris, the Hebrew Enoch, whom the Muslim authors identified with Hermes. He relied upon Zoroastrianism especially in the use of the symbolism of light and darkness and in angelology. He writes himself:

‘There was among the ancient Persians a community of men who were guides towards the Truth and were guided by Him in the Right Path, ancient sages not like those who are called the Magi. It is their high and illuminate wisdom, that to which the spiritual experiences of Plato and his predecessors are also witness, that we have again brought to life in our book called Hikmat al-Ishraq.’

2. *This spiritual realization and attainment of absolute wisdom, the inner or esoteric dimension, is an intrinsic aspect of Islamic Revelation. It received its name, Sufism, at a later period and it drew some of its formulations from neo-Platonism and Hermeticism, but the reality of Sufism, its basic doctrine and methods, reach back to the origin of the Revelation and in this way it makes it primordial. Sufism encounters complete metaphysical, cosmological, psychological and anthropological doctrine of monumental dimension with the arrival of Ibn Arabi. Abu Bakr Muhammad Ibn Arabi was born in Murcia in Southern Spain in 560/1165. He was entitled by posterity al-Shaikh al-Akbar (Doctor Maximus) and surnamed Muhyi al-Din (The Revivifier of Religion). Ibn Arabi received his early education at Saville. Two women saints, Fatima of Cordova and Yasamin of Marshena, had a strong influence on him at this early period of his spiritual growth. At the age of twenty, Ibn Arabi began to travel about various cities of Andalusia. It was during these trips that he met in Cordova Averroes, the Master interpreter of Aristotle. In this encounter two men faced each other, one of whom was a follower of the edicts of reason and who became the most influential of all Muslim thinkers in the Latin*

West, and the other a Gnostic for whom knowledge meant essentially 'vision', who became the dominant figure in Sufism and subsequent intellectual life of Islam. Ibn Arabi's life would enter a new phase with his pilgrimage to Mecca in 598/1201. Throughout these years he continued to have theophanic visions. In Mecca he had the vision of all the spiritual poles of the revelations anteceding Islam, and realized the transcendent unity of all the traditions revealed by God to Man. Here he was 'commanded' to begin the composition of his magnum opus, *al-Futuh al-Makkyah* (*The Meccan Revelations*). Ibn Arabi, at this time, initiated into Divine mysteries by Khidr, the prophet who initiates men directly into the spiritual life without being attached to regular initiatic lines. He became a disciple of Khidr and in 6011/1204 received the mantle of Khidr from Ali ibn Jami, who himself had directly received it from the 'Green Prophet'.

In 621/1223, Ibn Arabi decided to settle in Damascus. During this last phase, he completed the *Futuh*, which contains the spiritual diary of thirty years of quest for the Truth. It was here that the great Master died in 638/1240, leaving an indelible mark upon the ways of esoteric understanding of life. A large number of several hundred works attributed to Ibn Arabi have survived the trial of time.)

All the references above are taken from S.H. Nasr, *Three Muslim sages*.

Shakespeare, as a principle in his great tragedies, places his protagonist in '*nakuja abad*'. Whether it is mad King Lear in 'the open heath', melancholic Hamlet at the sea, disguised Edgar in the country side, escapist Malcolm in spiritually symbolic region of light England or the warrior Othello in Cyprus, they all discover the truth of their existence in their 'lands of no where'. Hamlet's transformation after the sea voyage, his '*nakuja abad*', in act V has remained a puzzle for many. Transformation is so emphatic and contradictory to the Hamlet of the previous four acts that critics like A.D. Nuttal insist, 'Hamlet is not a person but a sequence of images'. Some others like Bloom argue that the discrepancies appear because Shakespeare was revising his own text of 1589 *Ur-Hamlet* (now lost). *Ur-Hamlet* as a tribute to his son Hamnet did not end tragically. After Hamnet's death, though, the play had lost its meaning and Shakespeare at a mature age of 37 rewrote the last Act; in doing so the Hamlet of the last act also grew mature. Whatever

the reason, there is hardly any argument about the transcendental features of the last Act's hero of the play who otherwise is *the arrant knave of Denmark*. Mature Hamlet of Act V always takes us to a process of self-revision, internalization and most amazingly he opens up for the audience the possibility to experience '*wujud*' and '*adam*' (Being and non-Being):

'...there is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the rediness is all. Since no man has aught of him he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? Let it be.' (Hamlet, V.ii.229-232)

These lines are spoken by Hamlet just before the fencing game. King Claudius and Laertes have prepared the perfect plot to kill Hamlet, they are certain of their success. Horatio could see it as something too visibly obvious, 'You will loose the wager'. Hamlet is himself aware of it, 'how ill all's here about my heart'. To this Horatio responded, 'If your mind dislike anything obey it'. But Hamlet knowingly goes to his 'death trap'. With his last words, 'The rest is silence', he enters the state of non-existence, the state of immutability (*adam*). Earlier his speech, an attempt to console Horatio, reminds us Ibn Arabi's concept of existence or *wujud*:

'No entity possesses real *wujud* (Since no man has aught of him he leaves). However each entity has two states or situations. When an entity is found in the phenomenal world it displays a certain borrowed existence, which it gives back to God when it disappears, as when a man dies or a stone turns to dust (a special providence in the fall of a sparrow). Nevertheless, the reality of entity never changes through its apparent existence (the rediness is all). It did not possess existence in the first place—it only borrowed *wujud* from God for a moment—so it does not cease to exist in the second place. It stays in its original state of immutability in nonexistence (The rest is silence).'⁵

It is only through this philosophy that we can have a rational investigation into the puzzle of the last Act's Hamlet. Only in this philosophy of '*wujud*' lies the answer for the inquiry, why the problems of the ghost,

⁵ W. Chittick, *Imaginal World, Lahore*, P.18

the desire for revenge or the frustration about 'lack of advancement' are not even mentioned in the last Act by the man whose life for three years had been haunted by these very thoughts. It all changed at the sea. Critics argue that the time spend by Hamlet with the pirates should be something between two weeks to two months. We can say nothing for sure because Shakespeare does not even inform us about the purpose of pirates' kidnapping Hamlet. They never demanded ransom nor they tried to kill anyone on board with Hamlet. They are a great mystery. Astonishingly, the popular critical approaches on the play ignore this episode of enormous importance. Hamlet's dramatic evolution though leads us to imagine Hamlet in that phase of isolation of several weeks reconnecting with his innerself. It was a phase of meditative trance in the middle of no where (*nakuja abad*) with 'the thieves of mercy'. In this '*nakuja abad*', Hamlet discovered that all the happenings are self-disclosures of the Real and they 'tie a knot in the fabric of existence.' At each instant the Real renews the self disclosure. At each moment all ties are undone and then retied. He realizes that:

'Bodily or cognitive act paves the way for changing perceptions of reality, changing beliefs and transformation of the soul. Each human being follows the authority of his own belief and this gives rise to indefinite variety of often contradictory gods. This does not imply that these gods are false. People worship what they understand as real. Every viewer worships and believes only what he himself has brought into existence in his heart.'⁶

Is this the reason that Hamlet of the earlier four Acts who failed to see the political implications of his mother's 'hasty marriage', in the last Act is not troubled with his confused filial realtions --- nephew-son, mother-aunt, uncle-father. Is this not the solution to the mystery of the ghost as well, who in his two appearances says only what Hamlet already percieves (*O, my prophetic soul, my uncle*). Once we agree that the play can be studied from Illuminationist aspect, we see a scope for Claudius emerging as the saviour of Denmark. Only at this stage we will be able to understand what Bloom meant when he asserted, 'in Shakespeare there are no monstrosities of virtue'. Claudius thus is not a monster. To understand his character we must keep in mind the player

⁶ Ibid

scene's evidence which suggests that Hamlet senior at the time of the crime was almost paralysed ('my operent powers their function cease to do'). This political chaos in Denmark must have been the cause of young Fortinbras' decision to invade a country without a functional head of the state. Claudius is the product of this moment of turmoil in his country's history and almost all the critics agree that at least as an enthusiastic diplomat his talent cannot be questioned. This is Ibn Arabi's 'indefinite variety of contradictory gods' performed on stage. In this play no one is false. Drama, thus, rises above the classical clash between the forces of the good and the evil. 'Diversity' becomes the soul of drama instead of 'Conflict'. Shakespeare, like Ibn Arabi, believed that diversity (*Masala-i-khilaf*) is that principle which is established by God's wisdom and compassion: "God Himself is the first problem of diversity." Hamlet of Act V is personified evidence of the principle of diversity at work in . His '*nakuja abad*' lead him to that station of wisdom where he himself becomes 'Supreme Word'.

Hamlet as an Illuminist play of Shakespeare is not an isolated example. *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Antony Cleopatra*, *Macbeth*, *As You Like it*, *The Twelfth Night*, *The Tempest*, *The Winter's Tale* and many others are references to prove that a particular insight into diversity of nature helped Shakespeare to rise above the constrains of 'Belief'. Belief, another word for limitation, is cabined within the bounds of elements. Shakespeare gave the final blow to all such stereotypes in, *The Tempest*, his last play without collaboration. Prospero, 'the fifth element of Sufis',⁷ incorporates all perfection that Shakespearean characters were ever craving for. He is the Sufi, the life principle of his society. The power of imagination, the metaphysical intensity, the harmony of civic order and physical perfection all merge in Prospero to make him the sage of a '*nakuja abad*' wherein he drags and consumes all the members of his community. He is Shakespeare's ultimate word, his supreme word. In Prospero the cognitive act paves the way for changing perceptions of reality.

The Tempest deals with the Illuminist ideal that changing perceptions are the source of transformation of the soul. Prospero is the element of balance; he is the symbol of absolute harmony with Nature. As absolute image of what I call 'monk king', he is contrasted

⁷ H. Bloom, *Shakespeare, the Invention of the Human*, Riverhead books, 1999. p.666

with Caliban and Ariel, the elements of creation. Caliban (sea and earth) and Ariel (air and energy) are two dimensions of existence; but whatever they are they represent imbalance. The benignant and the malignant natures brought into an alignment with absolute Nature is always the focal points of Shakespearean drama. Without an insight into it one cannot fully comprehend Shakespeare's concept of an ideal head of the state.

The concept of the Ruler, womanhood as perfect form of 'Kinghood' and the concept of life of balance in the midst of imbalance will be the topic of the forthcoming articles of the series we intend to call 'Illuminationist features of Shakespearean drama'. The series of these articles aims at proving that Shakespearean drama when viewed from the Illuminationist perspective offers subtle (perhaps the only) resolve for the civilizational and spiritual hollowness of the contemporary world. Shakespeare is the only surviving common phenomenon in the world today that from a New Yorker to an African herdsman and from a European millionaire to an Asian monk matters as reference of their own lost world of wisdom. Let not Shakespeare disappear in the chaos we have chosen for ourselves; let's breathe in Shakespearean drama and let's survive for the sake of the future of the mankind.

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