

# Shakespeare and Persia

**Shahab Yar Khan**

## Abstract

Order in universe is not sequential but consequential reality. We use our contemporary knowledge to try to understand the composite value of this order but sometimes intuition goes beyond knowledge and those with more developed sense of it find a clear meaning just by indicating the (set of) form of event shaping a 'consequence'. When they give expression to their 'vision', they include many cases. Great poets like Shakespeare and Goethe, in words of Mohammad Iqbal, 'rethink the thought of Divine Creation'. Shakespeare's spiritual context, his spiritual heritage connects him directly to Ibn Arabi and philosophically to the Illuminationist tradition (Hikmat al Ishraq). Shakespeare's concepts of statehood, womanhood, education of Self, Godhood, transformation of twoness to One-ness and Nature as first Principle of Diversity throughout his career especially from 1599 to 1611 echo Illuminationist disciplines. Shakespeare's interest in and knowledge of contemporary Persia is the prime focus of this study. It attempts to place Shakespeare's knowledge into its historical context. In this regard the Earl of Essex and the Sherley brothers, play prominent roles. It is certain that during this era of English collaboration with Persia and through the personal contact with Sherley's literary influences travelled to and fro. Robert Sherley, as I found out during my academic visit to Isfahan in 2015, was among the favoured disciples of Mulla Sadra, the most influential master of philosophy and sciences of his age. Illuminationist model of thought definitely reached Shakespeare and his drama took a serious structural and thematic bend towards it. In another study done in 2010, resemblances between Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *Haft Peker* of Nizami Ganjawi (1141–1209) are brought to light.

Key words: Hikmat al Ishraq, Illuminationism, Ibn Arabi, William Shakespeare, Sherley Brothers, Nizami, *Haft Peker*, *The Tempest*.

Incidents when arranged in a certain manner create certain effect as order in universe is not sequential but consequential reality. We use our contemporary knowledge to try to understand the composite value of this order but sometimes intuition goes beyond knowledge and those with more developed sense of it find a clear meaning just by indicating the (set of) form of event shaping a 'consequence'. When they give expression to their 'vision', they include many cases 'where the form of the word provides a clear indication of meaning.' These writers of 'vision' help us out, 'providing us with context in the form of its own gloss.' All such texts offer the reader 'moderate difficulty' but through these contexts of the consequence become sufficiently clear. Existence and its pasts-presents-futures only then enable us to make a guess at the meaning prevalent within the order. All great writers of the world are in this way partially 'visionaries' because they are inspired to see the deepest layer of universal order (even if it appears in the form of 'chaos') and have power to expose it in their art.

Great poets like Shakespeare and Goethe, in words of Mohammad Iqbal, 'rethink the thought of Divine Creation'.<sup>1</sup> This 'something Divine' in the works of Shakespeare has been noticed by many worthy readers of his texts. Harold Bloom while discussing the nature of 'plotless-ness' of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, passes the following remark:

'Part of the *Tempest*'s permanent fascination for so many playgoers and readers, in myriads of national cultures, is its juxtaposition of a vengeful magus who turns to forgiveness, with a spirit of fire and air, and a half human of earth and water. Prospero seems to incarnate a fifth element, similar to that of the Sufis, like himself descended from the ancient Hermetists.'<sup>2</sup>

The fifth element of Sufis is widely debated subject among the scholars of the spiritual world. It has been referred to as the essence of

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<sup>1</sup> Iqbal, Mohammad, *Stray Reflections*, Iqbal Academy, Lahore. P. 130.

<sup>2</sup> Bloom Harold, *Shakespeare - The Invention of the Human*, Riverhead New York. P. 666.

creation, the Prime matter, the First Substance<sup>3</sup> and some compare it with Greeks idea of the “quintessence”. Shahab Uddin Suhrawardi who centers his study of existence on the issue of light and darkness considers light as *Miṣdāq*, the only concept possessing a referent in the objective world (fi 'l-a'yān). Since light is self-evident, it does not need any definition. Since the order of light is marked with perpetual interplay and interaction, the possibilities of luminous realities (ḥaqā'iqnūriyya) are infinite. The Light (Al-Nūr) is understood by scholars as the First Principle and the bearer of its element attains the fifth element.

While discussing Shakespeare's spiritual context, I have recently maintained that his spiritual heritage connects him directly to Ibn Arabi and philosophically to the Illuminationist tradition (Hikmat al Ishraq). Drama when it becomes Shakespearean dram is 'interim reading of life' (*Signs of the Time*, no. 64, *Illuminationist Features of Shakespearean Drama*). Shakespeare's concepts of statehood, womanhood, education of Self, Godhood, transformation of twoness to One-ness and Nature as first Principle of Diversity throughout his career especially from 1599 to 1611 echo Illuminationist disciplines. It is within position of disposition of Nature that Shakespeare centers his interest in the last decade of his playwriting. Elizabethan model of Nature was flawed as in its scope chaos ('Confused Mixture') or as the Romantics would call it 'Negative Capability' (leaving one's place and find oneself in that of something else) is considered disposition (*Signs of the Time*, no. 64, *Illuminationist Features of Shakespearean Drama*). Shakespeare's illuminationist context on the other hand led him to see that Nature does not create 'monstrosities of virtue' and within disposition a nucleus, a reference point of position could be found. 'Disposition' then defines 'position'. We see this theme repeated throughout his great tragedies and late romances. And it is this mechanism in his plays' structure that helps them finding a place in every culture of man and in all ages of history. Inversely we find truth in his drama. 'By indirections find directions out', a line spoken by Polonius in Hamlet in Act III Sc.I, is the key through which we can develop fresh understanding of plays like Hamlet every time we have

<sup>3</sup>The substance in which the forms of all beings become manifest. It is utter darkness and utterly unknowable, but, just as the bright light of day is contained within the darkness before dawn, so the forms of the universe are contained within the First Substance. (<http://www.almirajsuficentre.org.au/qamus/app/single/701>).

a look at it. Within this disposition element of drama, Hamlet becomes to Laertes what Claudius is to Hamlet, 'murderous Dane'. Claudius emerges as an efficient politician and beloved of Gertrude who herself appears in turn to be a victim of circumstances given into a marital deal to a much older man who (least to say) was completely dysfunctional almost paralyzed in the last phase of his life. In King Lear similarly the evil daughter, Goneril, become a victim of her father's desire to go beyond the constitutional frame work of England to make the youngest Cordelia the queen. Constitutionally it is Goneril's kingdom taken away from her through political machinations. Cordelia, despite all our sympathies, would look odd to us if we were living in 17th century leading French army, an enemy army, to the soil of England.

Shakespearean drama celebrates woman as not just equal but superior to men when it comes to the qualities of spiritual states, emotional commitments, power of imagination, art of speech and motherly impulse of being an educator. This is directly related to the attitude of Ibn Arabi who considers women as the primary agent in binary conjugal conception of the universe, coupled together on the level of Creation and Gnosis in a necessary cosmic unity. Shakespearean structure incorporates within the concept of 'Ghaeb' (the absent or the one in hiding) as a hero, a very specific concept that evolved throughout the Persian dominating areas of the Islamic world where the belief in Mehdi as 'Ghaeb Imam' haunts the imagination of millions for the past several centuries. I have argued over the years, for instance, that *Hamlet* is a play in appearance only about Hamlet the prince. Thematically the hero is Fortinbrass whom Shakespeare literally conceals from the eyes of the audience. A very similar case we see repeated throughout the last decade of his career, be it *King Lear* with Edgar as a hero or *Macbeth* with Malcolm, they are all continuation and evolution of Fortinbrass. I have suggested on many occasions that the structural pattern of Shakespearean drama involves a very boldly drawn 'Na kuja Abed', 'the place of nowhere' as well. Hamlet at the sea or King Lear upon the heath are just two examples among many recurring images in the dramas he composed from 1599 to 1611.

Shakespeare's Persian context is not only visible within the references to Persia in his texts but also present dominantly in his thematic and linguistic patterns. Cyrus Ghani writes in *Shakespeare, Persia, & the East*:

‘How Shakespeare came by his interest in and knowledge of contemporary Persia is the prime focus of this study. It attempts to place Shakespeare’s knowledge into its historical context. In this regard the Earl of Essex and the Shirley brothers,<sup>4</sup> play prominent roles as well as Southampton. In addition to Essex’s military escapades, he was interested in commerce. What is relevant is Essex’s sponsorship of the Shirley brothers’ travels to Persia. Their mission was to convince the Persians to mount a campaign against the Turks and also to assess trade and commercial possibilities between England and Persia. The Shirley became known personalities in London and the public followed their adventures.

Shakespeare was writing for the average theater audience and while some of his classical allusions may have eluded them, contemporary references would more likely have been recognized. Shakespeare brought to audience names, locales, and stories from the East concerning diverse times and places, some familiar, some not so well known, but all designed for the interest and entertainment of the public. Iranian refers to their country as Iran. Greeks, rivals of Iran in Mediterranean lands, referred to the same geographical entity as Persia. Europeans thereafter followed the Greek example, as, of course, did Shakespeare. In any case, Persia was a misnomer as it referred only to the province of Pars (Fars). This was the province of Alexander’s seat at Persepolis after his conquest of Iran.... Persia was of substantial interest to England and other European countries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as they shared a common adversary, the Turks of the Ottoman Empire who had made conquests and inroads in eastern Europe, eventually as far as the gates of Vienna. There were efforts by the Pope to encourage Persia to wage war against the Ottomans thus diverting them from making further advances in Europe. There existed enmity between the Ottomans and the Safavid monarchs who had declared Persia a Shi’ite state, which the neighboring Sunni Turks regarded as heresy and a mortal threat. The major military powers promised to simultaneously wage war. Despite their encouragement and assurances, it appears that the Europeans had no intentions or lacked the will and resources to take

<sup>4</sup> Sir Robert Shirley (c. 1581–13 July 1628) was an English traveler and adventurer, younger brother of Sir Anthony Shirley and Sir Thomas Shirley. He is notable for his help modernizing and improving the Persian Safavid army according to the British model, by the request of Shah Abbas the Great. This proved to be highly successful, as from then on the Safavids proved to be an equal force to their arch rival, the Ottoman Empire. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_Shirley](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Shirley))

part in the conflict. They were content to have the Persians keep the Ottomans engaged. During the entire Safavid era there was not one coordinated campaign with Persia against the Ottomans.<sup>5</sup>

It is certain that during this era of English collaboration with Persia and through the personal contact with Sherley's literary influences travelled to and fro. Robert Sherley, as I found out during my academic visit to Isfahan in 2015, was among the favoured disciples of Mulla Sadra, the most influential master of philosophy and sciences of his age. Illuminationist model of thought definitely reached Shakespeare and his drama took a serious structural and thematic bend towards it.

I have recently suggested, while arguing Shakespeare and Mohammad Iqbal's (renowned Muslim poet-philosophers d. 1938) identical manner of creating dialogue, that due to common literary and spiritual heritage going back to Ibn Arabi striking similarities have appeared. Great literature is an institutional continuity defining the complex relationship that it forms with the emerging possibilities of future and the never entombed past. Its thematic pattern functions 'performatively' making the reader to see a past lodging within the text and a future knocking at the gates of it. When William Shakespeare spoke of 'dog's obeyed in office'<sup>6</sup> in *King Lear*, the thematic pattern was clearly welcoming a change perceived by the senses of sight and ear that the days of monarchy are numbered in England. At the same time a very bitter past resonates in the sentence which despite a distance of four centuries, relates to us as our own ongoing political crises. However, it is the quality of dialogue in all great works that expresses a keen awareness of varied perceptions of the readers inspired by the same discourse. This opaque quality of widening horizons of thoughts while reducing them to a particular socio-historical metaphor, makes a great writer a sage or in the ancient Greek sense, a prophet of the age.

It is the full potential of a language that we see deployed through the verbal skills that connects Mavlan Rumi, Nizami, Hafiz, Iqbal's epical works to the great plays of Shakespeare. Shakespeare creates a dialogue with the power of unexpectedness in the widest sense of the word as it may range from invention of a word to expression of a revolutionary

<sup>5</sup> Ghani, Cyrus, *Shakespeare, Persia, & the East*. P. 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Complete Works of Shakespeare, King Lear*, Act IV Sc. VI.

thought and from theatrical disruptive urgency to poetic silky politeness. While watching a Shakespearean play this unexpectedness keeps us haunting even if the story is well known to us. Story in this particular case stops playing its role altogether and we rise above it to find out that great literature is not created for the sake of storytelling. Story is merely another tool among many in the hand of the writer through which message is imparted. Story is an indicator of the nature of the work; it is not the work itself. It is therefore of no significance whatsoever that Shakespeare borrowed outlines of the plays from various sources and adopted themes but it is of importance that once in his hand, the existing story (no matter how many centuries old) would lose itself to his way of approaching it to become his and only his for the rest of the history of the mankind. The complexion of the story is entirely transformed when Shakespeare starts coding his messages through his metaphors and treatment of imagery delivered by his characters on stage. Dialogue is Shakespeare's creative agency. Every time we go back to a work of Shakespeare, the dialogue formation seems, as if, rearranged and automatically situationized as derivative form of the plight of existence and we look at the play every time as a new discovery, a newly found document about our own past. While writing a dialogue Shakespeare definitely keeps himself busy in engaging the character into its particular social and political 'science', psychological adventure, spiritual state, intended degree of philosophical embellishment, class and gender elaboration and linguistic resource mobilized by particular set of sensitivity. As a result such intense variety of conduct appears within the character that it is sometimes difficult to believe that the writer of the dialogues for the character of Hamlet created the text for Othello as well or the one involved in hypnotic speeches of King Lear<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For instance, see, King Lear Act III sc. II: 'Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!

You cataracts and hurricanes, spout  
 Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!  
 You sulfurous and thought-executing fires,  
 Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,  
 Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,  
 Smite flat the thick rotundity o' th' world,  
 Crack nature's molds, all germens spill at once  
 That making grateful man!

was the source behind ambling, meditative calmness of Rosalind<sup>8</sup>. If it was not for the specific kind of treatment of the imagery and the recurring thematic patterns within Shakespearean text, many conspiracy theorists would have been by now declared as authentic critics.

In another study done in 2010, resemblances between Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *Haft Peker* of Nizami Ganjawi (1141–1209) are brought to light. *Haft Peker* (Seven Beauties) is a legend about seven princesses from the seven know parts of the world. They are brought to the service of Behram V of Persia. The prince built a differently coloured dome for each one of them. He would then visit them and listen to their stories, each night one and thus the cycle of seven stories in a week would be completed.<sup>9</sup> I quote at length:

‘The following is a synopsis of the seven stories narrate narrated by the princesses and one may observe that the stories comprise of the same conflict, features the same roles and were narrated in the same order as the seven major conflicts in *The Tempest* in their chronological order four centuries later.

1. THE BLACK DOME (the exile of Prospero). A king leaves his kingdom out of curiosity about a black dress worn by someone, and arrives in a city where everyone wears black but nobody explains why. He has to find out by himself: thrown into a magical realm where he is led on by a beautiful maiden without being allowed to consummate his desire and then thrown out forever when he is beyond himself. He starts wearing black too.
2. THE YELLOW DOME (the liberating of Ariel). True love between a king and a slave girl is challenged by their inherent insecurities that are fueled by an old maid until love conquers all.
3. THE GREEN DOME (Miranda's coming of age). Bash, literally meaning ‘the human being’ in Persia, takes fancy on a fair woman

<sup>8</sup> *As You Like It*, Act III Sc. II: ‘By no means, sir. Time travels in diverse paces with diverse persons. I'll tell you who time ambles withal, who time trots withal, who time gallops withal, and who he stands still withal... Marry, he trots hard with a young maid between the contract of her marriage and the day it is solemnized. If the interim be but a se'n night, time's pace is so hard that it seems the length of seven years.’

<sup>9</sup> Nizami wrote in preface: ‘Language, if its soul is unattained, is the keeper of the treasury of the unseen. It knows the story that has not been heard and reads the book that has not been written.’

but then meets a beastly character whose animal instincts cannot be tamed. The despicable character leaves behind a beautiful widow, who turns out to be none other than the woman sought by Bashr.

4. THE RED DOME (Ferdinand's courtship). A chivalrous young man wins the hand of a princess after going through a series of trial.
5. THE BLUE DOME (Gonzalo's awakening). A traveler is caught in a labyrinth of frightening situations, only to realize that they are happening in his imagination and he needs to wake up.
6. THE SANDAL-COLOURED DOME (Stephano's plot). A character called 'Bad' usurps the ration of his fellow traveler 'Good' and attempts to murder him, only to be chased and executed by the father-in-law of 'Good'.
7. THE WHITE DOME (breaking of the staff). A young man enters his own garden through the back door, finds unknown women feasting there and takes one of them to a secret chamber. When asked who she is, she whispers, 'Fate'. The chamber falls apart.

The Seven Beauties, is the fourth masnavi in a set of five written by Nizami, collectively called Khamsa, or the Quintet.

1. THE TREASURE OF MYSTERIES (MAKHZANUL ASRAR)
2. KHUSRO AND SHEERIN (KHUSRAW O SHIRIN)
3. LEYLA AND MAJNUN (LYLEE O MAJNUN)
4. SEVEN BEAUTIES (HAFT PEKER)
5. THE EOIC OF ALEXANDER (ISKANDER NAMEH)

In *The Tempest*, the latter five conflicts are personified by characters of the play. In the Seven Beauties, each of the latter corresponds to one of the five masnavis (and therefore every character of *The Tempest* which personifies the essence of a story from the Seven Beauties also represents the corresponding masnavi of the *Khamseh*):

1. Miranda: The Treasure of Mysteries. The long poem is a list of insights about which the poet says in the prelude, 'the substance of spiritual excellence as well as the kingship is contained here.' The common substance of spirituality and kingship is personified by the heroine of the third story of Seven Beauties and by Miranda in *The Tempest*.
2. Ariel: Khusraw and Sheerin. Sheerin is an Armenian princess

contested between Khusraw, emperor of Persia and the sculptor Farhad who commits suicide when the emperor sends him false news of the death of the princess. Sometimes after his marriage to Sheerin, the emperor shows disrespect to the envoy of Prophet Mohammad (SA) despite knowing from his family tradition as well as a dream that collaboration with the last Prophet would be secret power of all the kingdoms. He is assassinated and the usurper wants to marry Sheerin, who commits suicide during a nightly vigil at her late husband's tomb. Sheerin sought by many is like the princess of the fourth story of Seven Beauties, except that her suitors are unworthy since they are yet to grasp the secret principles of power, personified by Ariel in *The Tempest*.

3. Gonzalo: Leyla Majnun. When the young Arab noble Qais is denied marriage to his beloved Layla, he takes to wilderness. There he connects with Nature, befriends all creatures; people nickname him Majnun or madman. Here we have an Arabian precursor of the Neapolitan Gonzalo. When the two lovers die, a tombstone is put on their graves to say that the sleepers will awake on the Judgment Day to be united forever – just as the protagonist of the fifth story in the Seven Beauties needs to be woken up.
4. Ferdinand: Seven Beauties. While Behram was sitting inside the dome and listening to the stories of the beautiful women, his vizier was tyrannizing the country, as Behram learnt through 'seven petitioners'. This is epitomized in the sixth story itself where Bad steals Baggage of Good. Ferdinand in *The Tempest* is quite reminiscent of Behram as he watches a masque presented by spirits and plays chess with Miranda inside a cell, just as Behram listens to stories inside the dome. As Behram eventually learns about the vizier, Ferdinand learns about the misdeeds of his father, the king.
5. Prospero: The Epic of Alexander. Alexander is merged with the Quranic figure of Zulqarnayn, a king whom God granted dominion over the inward and outward forces of the world. Iskander Zulqurnayn sets out in search of the Water of Life but only Khizr, a guide, makes it to the fountain and destiny assigns him the task of guiding the lost travellers till the end of time. In the Seven Beauties, the last story emphasizes upon the need of accepting the natural order of things. In *The Tempest*, Prospero must break his staff and burn his books, just as Alexander must

accept that his kingdom cannot last forever. In the epilogue Prospero reappears rather like Khizr.<sup>10</sup>

There is hardly need to say that Persia throughout the so called Renaissance had been a source of inspiration for the creative English men and women. 'From the late sixteenth-century, oral transmission of stories and the publication of travel books on the Orient enabled dramatists to make references to the court of the Grand Sophy', King Abbas the Great. Adventures of the Sherley brothers and the publication of Sir Anthony Sherley's *Relations of Travels into Persia* were among the best sellers. These books, travelogues were changing the entire concept of social life among the educated upper class and the new wave of reforms in social, bureaucratic and literary life was already going on by the time Shakespeare would retire himself to his native town, Stratford.

Throughout the seventeenth century the momentum continued. Among many Sir John Denham's

*The Sophy*, Robert Baron's *Mirza, A Tragedy*, Nixon's play on life of the Sherleys *The Three English Brothers* and John Day's *The Travailes of the Three English Brothers* are just a few to mention. Shakespeare, however, stands aloof as his drama incorporates the structural design and thematic pattern as well. His drama is not about Persia but in many ways of Persia. It is illuminationist in its features and at the same time sets literature free from its pseudo spiritualization. It is extremely concealed a presentation of Truth and simultaneously the most blunt exposure of it to the largest number of people through performing art. This drama is illuminationist in thematic sense but it does not confine itself to any particularities; like its theme sets free the human soul, it sets us free from formalities of 'formulations' and leads us to breath in the Cosmic spirit enjoying full independence and freedom of Self.

<sup>10</sup> S. A. Khurram. *Shakespeare According to Iqbal*. Iqbal Academy Pakistan. pp. 16–21.

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**SHAKESPEARE I PERZIJA****Sažetak**

Red u univerzumu nije slijedna, već posljedična stvarnost. Upotrebljavamo naše savremeno znanje kako bismo pokušali da shvatimo složenu vrijednost ovog poretka, ali ponekad intuitivnost prevazilazi znanja, a oni sa razvijenijim osjećanjem za to imaju jasan smisao samo ukazujući na (skup) formu događaja koji oblikuje “posljedicu”. Kada daju izraz njihovoj “viziji”, oni uključuju mnoge slučajeve. Veliki pjesnici poput Shakespearea i Goethea, po riječima Mohammada Ikbala, “preispituju misao Božanskog stvaranja”. Shakespeareov duhovni kontekst, njegovo duhovno naslijeđe povezuje ga direktno sa Ibn Arabijem a filozofski sa tradicijom iluminacije (Hikmat al-Ishraq). Shakespeareovim konceptima državnosti, ženstvenosti, obrazovanja Sebe, božanstva, transformacije dvojstva u Jedinstvo i Prirode kao prvog principa Raznolikosti tokom cjele svoje karijere, posebno od 1599. do 1611. odjekuju Iluminacionističke discipline. Shakespeareov interes i poznavanje savremene Persije je glavni fokus ove studije. Ona pokušava staviti Shakespeareovo znanje u njen istorijski kontekst. U vezi s tim, Earl of Essex i braća Sherley igraju istaknute uloge. Sigurno je da su se tokom ove ere engleske saradnje sa Persijom i ličnim kontaktom sa Sherleyjevima, književni uticaji mijenjali. Robert Sherley, kao što sam saznao tokom akademske posjete Isfahanu 2015. godine, bio je među favorizovanim učenicima Mulla Sadraa, najuticajnijeg majstora filozofije i nauka njegovog doba. Iluminacionistički model razmišljanja definitivno je stigao do Shakespearea, i njegova drama je izvela ozbiljno strukturno i tematsko skretanje prema njemu. U dru-

goj studiji koja je obavljena 2010. godine, na svjetlo su isplivale sličnosti između Shakespeareove *Oluje* i *Haft Pekera* od Nizami Ganjawiya (1141-1209).

**Ključne riječi:** Hikmat al-Ishraq, Iluminacionizam, Ibn Arabi, William Shakespeare, Braća Sherley, Nizami, *Haft Peker*, *Oluja*.