
Shakespeare's Societal Concern through Selected Contexts – A Human Right Approach

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of human rights in the selected plays of William Shakespeare, particularly *As You Like It*, *King Lear*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Tempest*. The study explores how Shakespeare's dramatic vision reflects fundamental human values such as liberty, equality, justice, education, environmental awareness, labor rights, and dignity of life. Though written in the Elizabethan age, Shakespeare's works reveal remarkable insight into issues that later evolved into modern human rights discourse. Through dialogues and character portrayals, he criticizes discrimination, social inequality, exploitation, slavery, and denial of justice. The paper also highlights Shakespeare's concern for food security, mutual respect, property rights, and protection of indigenous identity. His dramatic expressions promote moral consciousness and social responsibility among individuals and rulers alike. By connecting literary interpretation with constitutional and international human rights principles, the study demonstrates Shakespeare's relevance in contemporary human rights discussions. The research further argues that Shakespeare functioned not merely as a dramatist but also as a social reformer who advocated humane values through literature. Thus, Shakespeare's plays continue to inspire ethical awareness and universal human dignity across generations.

Keywords: Human Rights, William Shakespeare, Liberty, Social Justice, Human Dignity

Introduction

Human rights were there since the day one of civilization. It has been observed as Natural Law, later and later emerged as ‘Natural Rights’. It is noted that the earliest practices were deeply rooted in the form of tradition which led to the Natural rights. The traditional rights were passed on down to several generations. The Natural Rights were gradually associated with belief or faith. The age old were so grounded with much prejudice and penetrated into the space of another individual or group by limiting the boundaries of people by imposing different demarcating beliefs. Through his work it is clear that Shakespeare portrayed some character of human nature underlying their personal right, civil right, economic social and political rights.

J.S. Vermastated that “Human dignity is the quintessence of human rights. All human rights for all and the world is one family”. We can see a similar reflection in Shakespeare, W. (2005).

*“And all the men and women merely players
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts’ (As You Like It)*

These words supports the statement made by J.S. Verma that men and women have their roles to play in this universe and every time their role changes as they grow wise and their actions changes accordingly to their understanding.

Right to Education

*The whining school-boy with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail. (As You Like It)*

These lines from *As You Like It*, portrays a school boy getting ready for a school. An impression of education and schooling is created here to tell people why education is so important to lead a dignified life and the respect one can command from the society. With the dawn of the 16th century people were so rudiment, rustic and down to the earth, education was far from their understanding and were leading a humble life style. Only through drama and other vital entertainment, an awareness could be given and Shakespeare never failed to render his duty on telling people, their right in mentioning the importance of education.

Inheritance of Properties

Deprivation of the property may take place in various ways, such as destruction (Chiranjit Lal v Union of India). Shakespeare has had this as a central theme in most of his plays. One to mention is given here.

*He hath taken away from thy**Father perforce, I will render thee again in affection (As You Like It)*

The brother usurps the throne and sends his brother in exile to the forest, and keeps his niece in the palace with his daughter, the daughter being the cousin morally supports her cousin and promises her that whatever her father has confiscated from them will be returned by her. Here we find the moral right of the deprived and that they should be given the justice. Shakespeare has meticulously brought in the good censure through the characters when they discuss casually. Such dialogues have influenced the perspective of onlooker and such thoughts encourage him to lead a true life of conscience.

Environment

The burning global issue at present for all the nation is how to ensure clean and pollution free environment. The concern has become the prime objective. “The release of substances and waste products of human activities which result in changes usually harmful, within the natural environment.(T.N. Godavarman Tirmalpal v Union of India, 1997).

The environmental rights can be broadly classified into three categories

- a)The right to clean and safe environment-clean water, air and food security are “basic human rights”
- b)The right to protect the environment. This is inherent in the UN Declaration and associated conventions, to the right to organize and to free assembly.
- c)Citizen to play an active part in creating a healthy environment.

*Are not these woods**More free from peril than the envious court?**The seasons' difference, as the icy fang**And churlish chiding of the winter's wind**.....Find tongues in trees, books in the running brooks. (As You Like It)*

The importance Shakespeare gives through the new residents of forest. They feel the importance of the place and talk about the bounty it has to offer. These forest is free from the dangers and intrigues of the court. Forest is a place which is free from all hypocritical behavior of the court life, the changes of seasons makes the place although difficult. It is the nature's tendencies and has no flattery. The trees have plenty to say which man has no time

to listen, the brooks are like the books of wisdom, ultimately fails to understand the message and take refuge in intolerant place.

Standard of Living

The right to an adequate standard of living is recognized in to Article 25(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The main object of recognizing this right is to provide an “adequate” or “decent” living with the precondition of the right to life with dignity.

*.....the other knowing
No burden of heavy tedious penury. These Time
Ambles withal... (As You Like It)*

The dramatist conveys a social message to the audience that how ‘haves’ are ignorant about the society they live in, forgetting their moral duties of the people, they are confined to their own wellness, their responsibility to elevate the community without adopting a simple policy of “giving back to the society”. This ignorance has been in place from the day one of human civilization. The dramatist has captured the forgetfulness of the people of his time and also foreseen the ignorance of the present people. Dramatist conveys the dignity of living of human beings through this female character.

Liberty

Some rights related to several basic elements of the rule of law which are set forth as rights like Rights to life, liberty, equal dignity, non-discrimination and personal security

*Confine? I'll confine myself no finer than i am.
These clothes are good enough to drink in, and so be these
Boots too: and they be not, let them hang themselves in
Their own straps. (Twelfth Night)*

The dramatist hereby asserts that no one can influence what other have to wear as strict rules, as long as the persons attire goes well with the society, it is not a rule that it should be in accordance with the present fashion, whatever that comforts the person can wear. Here, the dramatist asserts the liberty of an individual and should be respected with the equal dignity. Also, conveys that every individual right can have his own choice of attire and none can influence over the other.

Indiscrimination

Article 26 of the ICCPR not only entitles all persons to equality before the law as well as equal protection of the law but also prohibits any discrimination under the law and guarantees to all person equal and effective protection against discrimination on any ground such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinions, national or social origin, property birth or other status. UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment 18, Non-discrimination.

*Thou, Nature, art my goddess, to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of customs, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
.....As honest madam's issue? (King Lear)*

The dramatist advocates that the person who is fulfilling his duty to the country should not keep him in false delicacy of the customs of the place when he possess the birth right from his father, and he should not be deprived because of some twelve or fourteen months behind his elder brother, he also proclaims that the proportions of body are as harmonious and his mind is as brave as those of a legitimate son born to another woman.

Court of Law for All

Article 14 of the ICCPR states that “All persons shall be equal before the courts and tribunals”. In the determination on any criminal charge against him, or of his rights and obligations in a suit at law, everyone shall be entitled to a fair and public hearing by a competent, independent and impartial tribunal established by Law”

*If your honour judge it meet, I will place you where
You shall hear us confer of this, and by an auricular
Assurance have your satisfaction; and what without
Any further delay than this very evening (King Lear)*

The dramatist insists that no individual is deprived from pleading for his justice. And it is the bound duty of the authorities to hear it from the both the party concern and discuss the subject personally to judge the issue, he also stresses that it should happen immediately and there should not be any delay in reaching to the conclusion. Here, the writer talks about the people rights to plead and to prove them from what they have been deprived of and also the speedy judgements.

Right to Science

The right to science is usually regarded as a means to advance the realization of another human right and to address “the needs of the common to all humanity.(Declaration on social Progress and Development, General Assembly resolution2542(xxiv)of 1969, Preamble.

*These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no
Good to us: though the wisdom of Nature can reason
It thus and thus, yet Nature find itself scourg'd by
The sequent effects;.. (King Lear)*

The dramatist present the rationalistic view by pointing out the ignorance that people have cultivated certain thought without have a scientific evidence that the eclipses will foretell exactly and measures the good and evils of a person. He supports that the science can explain natural events in rational terms but the natural world of man is highly complicated and finds good or evil reasons form nature rather finding the solutions from within.

Labor Rights or Worker’s Rights

The rights’ have to do with negotiating worker’s pay, benefits and safe working conditions.

*We’ll set thee to school to an ant, to teach thee
There’s no labouring in winter. (King Lear)*

Shakespeare narrates labor rights through the society of ants, there is much to learn from the society of ants they do much labor during the summer before the arrival of the winter they keep storing their granary, so that they can lead the winter in a peaceful way, likewise we cannot extract the work from people often, he indirectly proclaim that the working hours have to be fixed for his welfare.

The Evil of Dowry

According to Section 3 of the Act if any person gives or takes or abets the giving or taking the dowry, he shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than five years...

*Many a good hanging prevents a bad marriage: and for
Turning away, let summer bear it out. (Twelfth Night)*

Though it is in a crude form but the dramatist tries to set a rule for himself that many broken marriages were prevalent at that time , observing it for quite a long time the sense

made to write to the people that if such bad people are not there, their future marriage could be prevented.

Food for All

The right to food is universal human right as this right is included in the universal human rights instruments and thus the “minimum standard of nutrition and other basic necessities” must include, inter alia, adequate food. Article 25(1) of the UDHR, ‘every has the right to standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family including food, clothing, housing...’

.....*There is an old poor man,
Who after me hath many a weary step
Limp'd in pure love; till he be first suffic'd
Oppresse'd with two weak evils, age and hunger,
I will not touch a bit (As You Like It)*

The dramatist emphasizes that everyone must be free from hunger only the other rights can be enjoyed, here the person is banished from the court and he has to take shelter in the deep forest for the first few days he has to undergo the hardship of the forest till he acquaints with miseries but forth before him. Without understanding the age and condition of the person pronouncing such statement is unfair, the dramatist feels that the punishment of such deeds should also think about the food security of the person who is in exile.

Mutual Respect and Concern

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, art. 26, not only entitles all persons to equality before the law as well as equal protection of the law but also prohibits any discrimination under the law and guarantees to all person equal and effective protection against discrimination on any ground such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status (UN Human Rights committee).

*Why, what a monstrous fellow art thou, thus to rail
On one that is neither known of thee nor knows thee (King Lear)*

The dramatist presents the ideology that a wrong-doer, even if he is punished for wrong doing by suspicion or by evidence, yet, should be treated fair and given due respect until proven guilty. The dramatist also emphasizes that even if a person has committed a crime once, he shouldn't be labelled as a life-long criminal.

The legal age of marriage for girls from minimum 18 years was mooted by the Madras High Court and a make the marriage is fixed as 21 years.

*Let still the woman take
An elder than herself; so wears she to him
So sways she level in her husband's heart; (Twelfth Night)*

Shakespeare has felt the suitable age differences should be for a woman and for the man, He felt that a man should atleast one year elder to the girl whom he is going to marry. This he felt the prime message that has to be conveyed to less understanding audience.

Abolition of Slavery and Slave Trade

The Article 4 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 8 of the 1966 Civil and Political Covenant prohibited "Slavery and the Slave trade" in all their forms, slavery has existed since ancient times and it was held to be part of the *Jus Gentium*, the ancient Roman legal system.(Kevin Bales and Peter T. Robbins, 2001)

*poisonous slave, got by the devil himself
Upon thy wicked dam, come forth! (The Tempest)*

The banished King in the forest saves a person and keeps him for his service and benefit and get more work form him than the person could for the day, the king calls him as a slow-moving creature, evil-minded and malicious servant.

Protect the Rights of the Indigenous People of India

According to the Santal Pargana Tenancy Act 1949, the land is non-transferable and non- saleable, whether owned by tribals or non-tribals.

*I must eat my dinner.
This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother
Which thou tak'st from me.....(The Tempest)*

Prospero, a banished King saves a man and keeps him as his servant to assist, the servant feels that his master treats him as a slave, through this character, Shakespeare conveys that the King lives in his property which belongs to his mother, he neither has power or supremacy over his servant. It is so surprising during when man was following the lifestyle of his instinct, Shakespeare could feel the basic rights of the people as in the form of Natural law.

Conclusion

From the selected verses of the characters it is evident that Shakespeare had a sympathy for human nature. We get some understanding that during the age of instinct and people were following their life style, though acceptable but rudiment in nature, Shakespeare never ceased to educate the innocent through his works, Some of his deep insight into human nature and psychology of people which he found disturbing and against the law of nature made him to feel and express as a savior as human kind. His thoughts and perspective at present could be translated in the form of Human rights.

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