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The Political Equations of Power: A Scrutiny of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*

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A writer writes not just to express himself but also to cater to popular taste, often molding his discourse so as not to offend the sentiments of his target audience subtly effecting winds of change through his works. Shakespeare was writing for an audience steeped in patriarchy. He wrote to cater to popular choice as evinced by his rendition of the themes of primogeniture, subjugation of women, wedding laws and stress on virtues of chastity and modesty as against untamed sexuality which causes destruction of the social order. Yet his writings, rather than proving him guilty of misogyny, colonialism, and racial prejudices; expose his sensitivity in the portrayal of marginalized characters, subalterns in the plays. As an artist, Shakespeare deals with human feelings, emotions and frailties and these are not limited by geographical or racial borders.

When *Titus Andronicus* appeared onstage, it was a huge success as it provided a heady mix of Senecan tragedy with a generous sprinkling of murder, mutilations, rape and revenge, in perfect keeping with the mood of the times. Beneath the surface, however, 'Titus Andronicus' is about the complex equations of power-play. Here it becomes difficult to draw clear cut boundaries between the civilized and the savage, good and bad, right and wrong. The locus of the power keeps shifting and the privileged and the subaltern frequently trade places in accordance with the general format of revenge tragedy. Shakespeare was writing at a time when people went to the theatre to enjoy plays. Indeed his plays were written to be performed; not for armchair studies. "He had no conception of a scholarly edition of his works, though his reception of classical literary texts, which was so important to the composition of *Titus Andronicus*, owed a good deal to the practice of Renaissance humanism." (Bate 96-7) Yet, 'for two hundred years past his plays have lived even more in the study than on the stage' (Trevelyan, 218). Looking at a text through the spectacles of theory limits and polarizes our vision. We see singular streaks missing out on the sublime grandeur that the work as a whole provides us. Shakespeare has been repeatedly called a writer whose writings transcend the barriers of geography and ages. The 'universality' of his is proof enough that he writes as an artist.

The postcolonial charge on Shakespeare is falsified in 'Titus Andronicus' as we find even 'civilized' Romans vying with 'savage' Goths in committing unspeakably horrible deeds when it comes to revenge in the bloodiest manner imaginable. The play proves that there is neither 'black' nor 'white'; only varying shades of grey. Good and evil coexist in all societies and they are not markers of a 'superior' or 'inferior' race.

Subaltern is a term usually employed to refer to persons socially, politically, and geographically outside the hegemonic power structure. In the opening scene Titus appears as the future emperor- the leader chosen by consensus. Titus knows that if he accepts the empery, there will be a bloodbath and he might not be able to maintain it for long. He realizes that it is unpleasant to "be chosen with proclamations to-day, / to-morrow yield up rule" (1.1.193-4) and asks instead for "a staff of honour for mine age, /but not a scepter to control the world" (1.1.201-

2). He achieves magnanimity by bestowing the crown upon the first born of Caesar- Saturninus; thus raising high in the eyes of Romans, appeasing and indebting Saturninus at the same time. He kills two birds with one stone and saves his skin as well. In the eventuality of combat between the brothers; his credibility among Romans will be lost. Titus knows that Bassianus, for love of Lavinia, will not oppose his decision. Saturninus, too, is aware of the possible outcome of their union. Through a proposal to marry Lavinia, the currency of Titus' power, Saturninus ensures Titus' support and eliminates the chances of Bassianus' revolt threatening his position as king. Lavinia, 'Rome's rich ornament' (1.1.55), is extremely beautiful and virtuous. Her status as Titus' daughter adds to her desirability as a wife. In this scenario Lavinia emerges as a means of exchange of political power. Whosoever possesses her is privileged. That Saturninus claims her just for a political gain is evident when he comments on Tamora 'A goodly lady, trust me, of the hue/ that I would choose were I to choose anew' (1.1.265-66). By losing Lavinia, Bassianus would be rendered powerless, so he stakes his claim on her. Saturninus hasn't anticipated that Bassianus will 'steal' Lavinia. Bassianus pleads to Roman justice. Lavinia keeps a clever mum. She doesn't object to her father's offering her to Saturninus or being 'stolen' by Bassianus.

Disappointed in Lavinia, Saturninus turns towards Tamora, the eye catching trophy of victory which Titus has surrendered him, finally choosing anew. Tamora, too eager to make her fortune, promises to be "a handmaid to Saturninus' desires"(1.1.336). Soon, however, she is telling him to be "ruled" by her, "be won"(1.1.446). Tamora, the well seasoned diplomat, promises to employ her Machiavellian skills to render Titus helpless: her way of exacting revenge upon the man who allowed her son to be sacrificed. Tamora's ascension to the throne means the fall of Titus from grace as he is now rendered without agency. The situation is reversed. The same Titus who had made "a queen kneel in the streets and beg for grace in vain" (1.1.454-5) will soon write in dust (3.1.12) and "recount his sorrows to a stone" (3.1.29): for the tribunes do not hear. "If they did hear, /They would not mark me, or if they did mark, / they would not pity" (3.1.33-5), says Titus. The knell of the impending doom resounds in Aaron's speech:

This goddess' this Semiramis, this nymph,

This siren, (that) will charm Rome's Saturnine,

And see his ship wrack and his commonweal's. (1.1.21-24)(Parenthesis mine)

Rome has turned into a wilderness for the Andronici and they are about to be chased and hunted one by one. The first victim to be 'Plucked to the ground' (2.1.26) is Lavinia: the 'cordial' of Titus' age 'to glad his heart' (1.1.169). Not only do Tamora's lascivious sons rape her, but also mutilate her in the seclusion of the forest during a hunt. Sexuality thus becomes a means of assertion of power. By victimizing Lavinia, Tamora and her sons intend to hurt Titus. For centuries rape has been the most potent weapon for revenge. It hurts the victim, her family, stains her family's honor and exposes their incapacity and powerlessness. As Saturninus puts it later 'the girl should not survive her shame', (5.3.42-41) as she would renew the sorrow of the family by her presence. This, however, is just the first assault in the series of attacks on the Andronicus family. Bassianus is killed and Martius and Quintus are implicated in his murder. A forged letter proves them guilty of the treachery. Saturninus, ever on the lookout for a chance to vent his spleen on Titus, finally gets an opportunity to pounce on the Andronicus family. Martius and Quintus are taken prisoners without even being allowed to speak: a continuation of Lavinia's tongue being ripped off and the silencing of the Andronicus voice. Lavinia's mutilation is next echoed in the severing of Titus' hand as ransom for Martius and Quintus' lives. The banishment of Lucius comes next. Murdered, mutilated, silenced, and exiled: the Andronici are gradually

pushed to the peripheries of the hegemonic structure - subalterns in the very country they were about to rule.

It is only when Lucius joins hands with the Goths that he becomes a threat to Saturninus, Tamora and Aaron's conniving. Lucius' return to power shakes the foundations of Tamora's confidence and empowers Titus. Saturninus, unaware how he has been used by Tamora as an instrument of revenge, feels threatened. "'Tis he the common people love so much' (4.4.72) He says to Tamora, and adds: 'the citizens favour Lucius/And revolt from me to succor him' (4.4.78-9). Ever the cunning diplomat, Tamora quickly dispels his fears by suggesting a parley at Titus' place.

Dressed significantly as Revenge, Rape and Murder; Tamora, Demetrius and Chiron approach Titus in his state of 'feigned ecstasies' (4.4.21). Both parties play each other at the game of deceit. Titus asks for Rape and Murder to be left behind. He slits the throats of Demetrius & Chiron and bakes pasties out of their bones, blood & flesh. At the cannibalistic feast that follows, Titus stabs Lavinia; following the precedent of Virginius in slaying her daughter Virginia after being raped. He stabs Tamora too, but not before revealing the ingredients for the feast. For this 'accursed deed' (5.3.63) Saturninus kills Titus. Unable to 'behold his father bleed' (5.3.64.), Lucius kills Saturninus. The Romans accept Lucius as the new king- The new hegemon at whose hands Tamora's corpse & Aaron are to receive judgment. Aaron- the last survivor of the enemy camp is sentenced to a live burial. Saturninus is given a burial in their household's monument. But Tamora's body is thrown to beasts & birds to prey.

The punishment of Tamora sparks the debate between the accepted notions of good and evil. What is Shakespeare hinting at? Tamora is already dead. A befitting burial or a distasteful disposal, it affects her not. Like Saturninus she deserves a decent treatment in death, being the empress of Rome. Anyone can see the double standards of the Romans. Tamora's death could have been the closing of the drama. But the playwright stretches it further to expose the true nature of the self confessedly civilized Romans. Romans are hardly morally superior to the 'warlike Goths' (1.1.560). Base desires guide them. The veneer of civilization has been plucked off. The very first act by the newly ascended emperor puts the Romans in league with the barbaric Goths by stripping them completely of humanity. Civility demands that even the vilest enemy shouldn't be deprived of his last rites. The last act certainly obliterates the already thin dividing line between the Romans and Goths.

A cursory examination of the plot reveals the Romans, Goths, and Aaron nonchalantly carrying out gruesome deeds as easily as one would kill a fly. The play is a gory sequence of dismemberments, rape, murder, miscegenation, cuckoldry, a cannibalistic feast closing with a live burial and the 'cruel, irreligious piety' (1.1.133) of unperformed last rites. Titus, the tragic hero, in the opening scene allows the sacrifice of Alarbus, and kills his son in the next scene. Both these deaths expose Titus' obsession with honour, which is again reflected in his stabbing Lavinia. Is this our tragic hero? If the answer is yes, then what is the difference between him and Tamora, the villain of the piece, who insists that her bastard son be killed? The disturbing cruelty of the Romans is captured in the speech of Lucius just before the sacrifice of Alarbus:

'... with our swords, upon a pile of wood,

Let's hew his limbs till they be clean consum'd. (1.1.128-129)

And further after the sacrifice of Alarbus when he adds:

Alarbus' limbs are lopp'd,

And entrails feed the sacrificing fire,

Whose smoke, like incense, doth perfume the sky. (1.1.143-145)

The consistency of character is noticeable in his last speech when he issues orders for the disposal of Tamora's body: 'throw her forth to beasts and birds to prey'. (5. 3. 198)

Man may have progressed and evolved since his primitive days, but the animal in him lives on. Socialization may have masked the bestiality, yet he is capable of ruthlessness to the extent displayed by the three races in various ways. Virtue and vice, civilization and barbarity are just relative terms. It is the privilege of each society to consider itself socialized to a higher extent than the other races. The Romans in *Titus Andronicus* are no exception. They have been at war with the barbaric Goths for fifteen years when the play opens. At the outset two factions are introduced- the Romans and the Goths joined by the Moor Aaron. Revenge is unleashed by Titus when he sacrifices Alarbus thus initiating a pendulous cycle of blood spilling on both sides.

The whole plot presents dualities/ contrasts between the characters. Demetrius and Chiron quibble over the right of precedence in wooing and possessing Lavinia, Saturninus and Bassianus are at arms for ascension to the throne and possession of Lavinia; yet Quintus enters the 'blood drinking pit'(2.2.224) in an attempt to save his brother Martius. Marcus helps Titus all he can, even offering his hand as ransom for Martius and Quintus's lives. Lavinia 'Fame's eternal date, for virtue's praise", (1.1.17) has an acid tongue which is torn out following her tirade against Tamora. And Tamora, the 'ravenous tiger' (5.3.194), 'beastly creature, the blot and enemy' to women's general name (2.2.182-3) sheds 'mother's tears in passion for her son' (1.1.109) Alarbus while bidding Aaron 'christen' with his 'dagger's point' (4.2.86) her illegitimate son. Titus kills his son Mucius when he attempts to bar his way in his pursuit of the lovers. He even denies his bones a place among his brothers. Marcus is seen pleading 'Thou art a Roman, be not barbarous...Let not young Mutius then, that was thy joy, / Be barred his entrance here.'(1.1.383-8) The same Marcus who spoke so movingly at the death of Mutius, who offered first sympathies to Lavinia after the brutal assault on her, who even offered his hand as ransom for his nephews' lives; is impassive where Tamora's funeral rites are concerned. Lucius pleads to Titus 'give Mutius burial with our brethren' (1.1.353) and later is seen denying last rites to empress Tamora. He sets Aaron breast deep in earth and famishes him and orders Tamora's body to be thrown to the beasts.

The most disturbing thing in this saga of blood-for-blood is the response of young Lucius following the disclosure of Lavinia's rape.

I say, my lord, that if I were a man,

Their mother's bedchamber should not be safe (4.1.107-8).

Equally appalling is Marcus' response 'ay, that's my boy!' (4.1.110)

Sad indeed that such a young boy should be sucked into the consuming whirlwind of revenge. Then there is Aaron the Moor: emblematic representation of evil. As he admits himself:

Tut, I have done a thousand dreadful things

As willingly as one would kill a fly,

And nothing grieves me heartily indeed

But that I cannot do ten thousand more. (5. 1. 141-44)

Aaron may be out and out a villain and yet his characterization leaves no doubt regarding his intelligence, cunning and wit. He alone is able to justify in bold speeches that black is better because it does not take any other hue. His speeches throughout act IV scene II establish his human streak. As a Moor he is doubly marginalized in the Roman society. At first he is a prisoner of war. Tamora is acceptable in the Roman society because she is white. But Aaron being a man of color again finds himself in the shadows. Years before the black power movement of the 1970s, Aaron argues that black is beautiful with such an eloquence and wit that

not one in the whole white community can claim the superiority of the fair skin. He offers furious and scathing speeches during a manifestly racist time - the Elizabethan era, when the equivalence of black with evil and white with virtue was common sense. In a world where Titus kills Mutius over a trifle as barring his way in Rome and refuses to even give him a proper burial, and Tamora wishes to christen her illegitimate son at a dagger's point; Aaron definitely redeems himself in attempting to save his son's life. "Most productions of the Post- Othello *Titus Andronicus* emphasize the embryonic Iago in Aaron, while Aldridge's serves to remind us that there is also an embryonic Othello in him."(Bate 58)

Going through this series of killings, dismemberments and rape of justice, the boundaries between the civilized Romans, barbaric Goths and unscrupulous Moors melt and it become difficult to say which is good and who is evil. Good and evil co-exist in societies and there are no water tight compartments where civilized and savages can be separated.

Remarkably, Shakespeare doesn't take sides. He simply paints the chaos around us which we call the world. His plays are sweeping landscapes presenting panoramic images of people as they are and not how they should be. He bares the society of its ceremonious garbs to expose the base animal nature lurking beneath. However, he is quick to shake off any tag. Maybe this is why his appeal is universal. His works transcend the borders of time, place and race. Human nature is his crafting material. With his expertise he moulds it so it can be relevant to the ever changing, ever new race of human beings across the globe.

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