

Identity Recognition as a Tragic Flaw in King Lear by William Shakespeare: Application of Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic

Malik Haroon Afzal*, Mohamad Rashidi Mohd Pakri, Nurul Farhana Low Abdullah

University Sains Malaysia, Malaysia

Corresponding Author: Malik Haroon Afzal, E-mail: mharoon176@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

According to several theories of recognition it has been established that an individual counts on the feedback of another to seek identity recognition. According to G.W.F. Hegel (1977) the identity of an individual being does not rest solely in himself but in its relationship to other beings. In his opinion, consciousness of a self exists in being acknowledged by another self and true selfhood exists in acknowledging the requirements and rights of the other self. This paper aims at analyzing the identity recognition as a tragic flaw in William Shakespeare's famous tragedy *King Lear* in the light of Hegel's critiques of self and the other. In this context, King Lear's attainment of true selfhood and self-knowledge is going to be visualized as the consequence of his effort for identity recognition and then undergoing an extreme suffering. The present research aims to explore the process or stages of becoming a victim of identity crisis. The crisis of recognition for the protagonist of the play starts right in the first scene. This paper aims at discussing the identity recognition on the part of King Lear himself and others in the play as a cause of tragedy. By using Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic, this paper will open up a new research direction for the Shakespearean scholars.

Key words: Being for Self, Being for Other, Self-Recognition, Master-Slave Dialectic

INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare narrates a story of an age old King of England wishing to retire from his responsibilities as a King. He decides to hand over his kingdom to his three grown up daughters named Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. He puts up a question before his daughters to express their love for him and that whosoever loves him more gets more share of land. On the surface, it depicts the fragility of the fabric of Elizabethan age showing the vulnerability of parents and noble men to the unruly and ungrateful children. However, the causes of the situation leading to the accomplishment of the hideous motives of the children are to be traced quite carefully. The root of the trouble is the wrong decision taken by King Lear, an aging king of the Great Britain. It can be employed that King Lear had constructed an imagined world for himself where rationality had no place. Vafa Nadernia (2018) states, "In that imagined world where things appear different, mysterious, and normless, human measures such as sexism, prejudice, viciousness and other judicial realms are negotiated through atypical lenses" (p.71). However, he decides to give up his throne and divides his state among his three daughters— Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. In order to distribute his land aptly among them, he puts them through an examination. They are asked to tell him how much they love him and that the one describing the greatest amount

of love is going to own the largest share. He says to them: "Which of you shall we say doth love us the most?" (Act 1, Scene 1). This criterion of deciding about the distribution of the state among one's daughters creates confusion in the mind of the readers and audience.

The problem that why King Lear had to check the loyalty of her own daughters raises question about his own self-consciousness that provoked him to announce a contest among her daughters. At this point the study finds Hegel's dialectic of self and the other relevant for the analysis of King Lear. The study strives to find out the answer of the question that how identity crisis became a tragic flaw in King Lear? G.W.F. Hegel (1977) states the way a human being comes to consciousness of itself as a self. He says: "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged". If King Lear's decision is analyzed in the context of Hegel's philosophy, some questions can be asked such as: Does King Lear wish to seek true identity recognition although apparently he knows who he is? How does he attain true selfhood? How does he acquire self-knowledge? The play also contains a sub plot that reveals the story of Gloucester, an elderly British nobleman, and the parallels can be noticed between the main and sub plot. He also suffers at the hands of his wicked son named Edmond who is illegitimate and

contains vindictive feeling against his brother Edgar who is his father's legitimate son. Now this situation leads to two more questions: Are there some other characters in the play facing the dilemma of identity recognition? How does the identity recognition dilemma affect some other characters in the play?

This paper aims at seeking the answers to all the above-mentioned questions in order to establish the extent to which identity recognition affects the course of the play, the scheme of events and the fate of the characters. The effort to fulfill the required objectives is going to be made by the detailed study of the text of "King Lear" and G.W.F. Hegel's master-slave dialectic. Thus the mode of the inquiry is going to be qualitative and analytical.

SELF AND THE OTHER

Identity recognition is basically the motive behind every struggle made by the human beings in this world. Everyone wishes to be recognized and establishes his own separate identity. George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel presented his conviction in the fact that a person's individual self has no meaning as long as it is confined to itself. Its meaning lies in its relationship to others. In his book "Phenomenology of Spirit", published in 1807 and translated in 1977, he presents a dialectic describing the confrontation of thesis with its antithesis, and their synthesis. It is a system of interrelationships in which a dialectical struggle goes on between different individuals. Hegel presents Master-Slave dialectic and describes how a human being comes to consciousness of itself as a self. According to Hegel, the attainment of self-consciousness becomes possible for a self by confronting something that is not the self. This confrontation with the not-self enables a self to identify itself. The self gets conscious of the fact that it is a self and also that its existence must be realized and known by the other selves. Hegel calls the former "being-for-self" and the latter "being-for-others". He states, "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged" (1977, p. 178).

In Master-Slave dialectic, Hegel observes that force enters the relationship between selves. The struggle between them takes the form of a life-death struggle. One demands a constant recognition from the other but not granting the same to the other. The fight between master and slave ends with the victory of the master. The Master subdues the Slave with the help of force and obtains his recognition after making the Slave terrified for the life of the latter is at stake in this situation. It becomes evident that the recognition gained from the one who is not independent proves futile and the Master cannot possess being-for-self any more. He snatches the Slave's freedom and the concept of the not-self that is required for self-consciousness gets obliterated. Thus, the Master's selfhood, gained through force, remains hollow and it is not a true selfhood. The Slave, on the other hand, serves the master and the terror of death gets transformed into a satisfactory self-consciousness. The selfhood attained by him is the solid one.

In this way the Master-Slave relationship is ironically reversed establishing the fact that the relationships between

human beings must be based on mutuality. Hegel draws a conclusion from this situation and states: "They recognize themselves in mutually recognizing one another" (1977, p. 186). Thus, Hegel's philosophy makes us understand that our own selfhood can be attained satisfactorily only if we are willing to acknowledge that the other is also a self and has rights and needs. In order to attain true selfhood, we must realize that the other also has the right for "being-for-self". This philosophy contains a warning for human beings against their self-centeredness. It focuses so convincingly on the reciprocal relationships among human beings. Everyone pines for the establishment of selfhood and identity has to be built through our combative contact with the others. This makes us rely on others and eventually produces in us a fear or resentment for them. However, the solution lies in the way prescribed by Hegel through the presentation of his Master-Slave dialectic.

Psychoanalytical theory founded by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) can also be taken into account in order to analyze some instances in "King Lear". According to psychoanalysis, Id, Ego and Superego are three features of the mind that, according to Freud, constitute a person's personality. Freud opines that people are "simply actors in the drama of [their] own minds, pushed by desires, pulled by coincidence." King Lear possesses extensive pride owing to the lofty position and the luxurious life he spends. His decision of dividing his kingdom on the basis of the amount of love professed by his daughters for him reflects his desire for feeling superior on one hand and his inefficiency in fulfilling his responsibilities as a king on the other. Ultimately he pushes the state into a state of disorder and chaos along with himself and his family. Freud believes that some people are overpowered by the Id because it encourages them to indulge in need-satisfying behavior without considering the concept of right and wrong. The Ego contains the system of self-preservation and it takes into consideration moral and ethical commands to prevent people from being carried away by the instincts of Id. Superego works as the conscience of the mind. If the ego is compelled to suppress the demands of the id more than it can endure, it may give birth to neurotic disorders.

King Lear's supposed identity is based on the rank and status he owns as a king. His excessive pride and the sense of superiority mislead him. In order to strengthen this sense of superiority he takes a wrong decision of putting his daughters through a love-test. At this moment, he is totally unaware of the hazardous aftermath of this rash decision and the outbursts of anger and the insensitive banishment of his youngest and most loyal daughter. Moosavinia and Yousefi say, "Since social norms play a major role in the formation of the subject's identity, inconsistencies in the norms can have the same effect" (2018, p.172). Afterwards he fails to tolerate the terrible situation that emerges consequently. Thus, the mental condition of King Lear hints to the above-mentioned mental processes described by Sigmund Freud. Moreover, he reaches a position in his life, after facing those agonizing circumstances, when he gains a true selfhood exactly the way Hegel states in his Master-Slave dialectic.

Although it is very firmly believed that if Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is considered as the Plato of modern Continental philosophy, G. W. F. Hegel is no doubt the Aristotle. Hegel is a great synthesizer and a philosopher who builds a system. He leaves an irremovable impact on modern thought as well as conviction. As per him, 'an individual entity's meaning rests not in itself but in the relationship of that thing to other things within an all-encompassing, ever-changing whole'. In this scenario, the crucial is where part is situated. The modern criticism that emphasizes the historical and social context of utterances owes their existence to Hegel's theory to some extent.

Hegel's theory usually deals with 'the dialectic', which explains the confrontation of opposites, that is to say, thesis with antithesis, and their resultant synthesis which props through a process of 'overcoming'. It is true to name the dialectic as the main force behind the Hegelian system; stressing movement and change over stasis (1977). This Hegelian system, which gauges individual elements relative to each other, is in constant motion. The world does not possess 'determinate being'. However, it has only momentary resting places on the 'stages of becoming'. Hegel follows the idea that 'there will be stasis and perfection at the end of history'. Moreover, at certain places, Hegel hints to believe that his philosophy is that end, the moment where consciousness fully comprehends its own nature - its essential unity with everything that exists. Hegel most often uses Geist (spirit) as the name to designate this fundamental unity. The ultimate goal of philosophy is 'to gain the absolute knowledge' consisting of Spirit recognizing the world as its own emanation. The changes of history and its dialectical path that it follows would then come to an end. The dream of such completeness seems to be immensely attractive although it is often very dangerous. Other than that dream, Hegelian philosophy gives us an ever improving world of inter-relationships. Here, the various elements taken with one another through dialectical struggle. One of Hegel's most well-known followers, Karl Marx, to anyone's surprise takes up both - the vision of struggle and the dream of an end to strife. Moreover, Hegelian themes also echo, although in a different context, in the work of poststructuralists, Michel Foucault and Julia Kristeva, for most of the time.

In his so-called Master-Slave ('lord' and 'bondsmen' in our translation) dialectic, Hegel asks the question that: 'how does a human being come to consciousness of itself as a self (a consciousness that animals are devoid of)?' Hegel maintains that human beings are not born with the sense 'I am John Smith, and this is what I believe and am like'. If it is not so, then how we attain self-consciousness? According to Hegel, only coming across something is not the self. Contrary to it, the confrontation with my limits, which he names as 'the not-self', enables me to identify what is 'self', or in other words what belongs to me. The discovery of this self depends on two factors: I must have the consciousness that I am a self (which Hegel puts as 'being-for-self'), and my existence must be acknowledged as well as recognized by other surrounding human beings (which Hegel calls as 'being-for-others'). In Hegel's words, 'Self-consciousness

exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged.'

However, the Master finds his victory of being master hollow as the Slave, the person who gives him the pride of being recognized as a master is under bonds to do so. In other words, the slave never wishes to be as such and that he is always compelled to be a slave. Besides this other important factor in Hegelian theory of self-consciousness is that just like love, recognition is valuable only when it is given freely, when it comes from someone who is under the direct or indirect influence of the beloved, it is taken as hollow victory as in case of Master-Slave relationship. In a sense, if someone acknowledges other's existence only because the former is forced to do so, it can never calm his lurking doubt about who he is? Hegel besides anticipating the 'processes of self-formation' described by Sigmund Freud also discusses the 'existential anxiety' (as presented by the Existentialists) that may haunt any connection to 'identity'. Hegel maintains that the route of Master's access to his own selfhood is through his relationship to the Slave. Since that Slave is 'not an independent consciousness, but a dependent one', the Master 'is, therefore, not certain of being-for-self as the truth of himself'. Therefore, if the Master rules out the Slave's freedom, the Master in fact has obliterated the very 'other' that is a must for confrontation if the Master intends to achieve 'selfhood'.

KING LEAR AND IDENTITY CRISIS

The play, in the beginning, unfolds a situation in the court room of the British King Lear who is going to divide his kingdom. The audience becomes aware of this intention of the king through the discussion of the two noblemen, Gloucester and Kent. An important thing to notice here is Kent's asking Gloucester to introduce his son who is introduced by Gloucester as his illegitimate son, though he tells Kent that he loves his son despite his illegitimacy. King Lear enters his court and declares his decision of dividing his kingdom among his three daughters. However, the daughters are required to declare their love for their father first so that the property can be divided among them according to those verbal manifestations of love. He says to them: "Which of you shall we say doth love/ Us the most" (Act 1, Scene 1). This decision reflects his pride-ridden psyche. Moreover, in the light of Hegel's philosophy, it can be regarded as his effort to achieve self-consciousness. This demand reflects the concern of an old man who is in need of the assurance of his importance. His dishonest and cunning older daughters, Goneril and Regan, express their false love for him in flattering connotations whereas the youngest one, Cordelia can only utter these words: "Unhappy that I am I cannot heave/ My heart into my mouth. I love your majesty/ According to my bond, no more, no less" (Act 1, Scene 1).

On one hand, this statement of Cordelia is a proof of her honesty and the truth of her love as she does not assume the role of a flatterer in order to gain the greatest share in the kingdom but on the other hand Lear's violent reaction after listening to these innocent words of his truly sincere daughter reflects his harsh temperament and lack of insight.

He assumes that Cordelia does not love him much and he banishes him. The tremendous error of judgment is first pointed out by his faithful servant Kent but he is asked "avoid my sight" and "Get out of my sight". (Act 1, Scene 1). It can be noticed that he is only affected by appearances and is unable to see beneath the surface. Kent responds: "See better, Lear and let me still remain/The true blank of thine eye" when he is also banished by Lear. These words also refer to Lear's metaphorical blindness. Another character suffering from moral blindness, before he is actually turned blind, is Gloucester whose story runs almost parallel to Lear's. He has an illegitimate son named Edmond who betrays him and his brother Edgar in order to take over the earldom. It is important to note that another character who is tortured by identity crisis and yearns for true identity recognition is Edmond who blames the whole social order for the rights denied to him. He feels enraged for being deprived of the respect and status that is owned by his brother being legitimate. He is psychologically obsessed with the fact that he is unable to be his father's rightful heir. It seems as if he has been suffering from the sense of vindictiveness since his childhood. His soliloquy goes as: "Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land. /... Edmond the base / Shall top the legitimate. I grow; I prosper. / Now, gods, stand up for bastards!" (Act 1, Scene 2). These utterances reflect his yearning for recognition, a true identity. He gets determined to snatch the rights, denied to him, through treachery. He makes Gloucester believe that Edgar wants to kill him to hurry his ascension to his would-be status. Here Gloucester exhibits the same lack of insight in judging his sons as demonstrated by Lear in misjudging his daughters. Both Lear and Gloucester, ironically, banish their loyal children and reward the wicked ones, revealing their blindness to truth. Their misfortune becomes more pronounced as the play progresses and is observed in the form of Lear's insanity and Gloucester's physical blindness. Their suffering makes them realize the truth towards the end of the play.

After dividing his kingdom between his cunning daughters, Lear goes to live with Goneril along with his hundred knights. Now these servants are, for Lear, the symbols of his authority and status, representing his identity. Goneril uses Lear's keeping of servants as a pretext to start an argument and forces him to decrease the number of his servants to fifty. Having depressed at his daughter's cruelly selfish behavior, he intends to shift to Regan's palace but meets the worse treatment as she asks him to diminish the servants' number to twenty-five. This is intolerable for him as it indicates the decline of his remaining power and his daughter's respect for him. On Regan's query he says: "O, reason, not the need!" (Act 2, Scene 4). This reflects that his keeping those knights with him is not only a requirement for being a king but for being a human being. This is his supposed identity. However, he soon realizes the true significance of his being when he starts wandering on a heath dejected and torn by the hard-heartedness and ingratitude of his hypocrite daughters. He asks the disguised Kent: "Dost thou know me, fellow?" (Act 1, Scene 4) and Kent replies: "No, sir" to his utter bewilderment. The

concept of identity gets shattered. The commanding tone used by him as a king changing into the one showing diffidence. Observing Kent in stocks, he inquires; "Who put my man i'th stocks?" (Act 2, Scene 4) but to his shock again there was no response.

He is, in the beginning just concerned with the injustice that he receives at the hands of his daughters but he accepts the storm because it is natural and it does not owe him anything. He says: "No rain, wind, thunder, fire are my daughters; / I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness/ I never gave you kingdom, called you children; / You owe me no subscription" (Act 3, Scene 2). Noticing there that the other human beings are also suffering and feeling compassion, for the first time, for the plight of others he demonstrates the growth of modesty. It marks the transformation in his personality. He seems to realize his inefficiency as a king for not attending to the needs of the wretched and the homeless. His self-criticism and newfound sympathy for the plight of others mark his humanization. Facing the harshness of weather he asks the gods to help: "poor naked wretches, whosoever you are/ That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm" (Act 3, Scene 4). He reproaches himself saying: "expose thyself to feel what wretches feel" (Act 3, Scene 4). He is frightened of his predicament and utters these words: "Is man no more than this?" (Act 3, Scene 4).

He realizes that quite contrary to what flatterers told him and what he himself wrongly and conceitedly believed himself to be he is also just like common human beings, as much exposed to the cruelty and harshness of weather as others are. He observes: "Beneath each man's clothing/ Is a poor, bare, forked animal" (Act 3, Scene 4). He regretfully notices that "A flimsy surface of garments" is the only difference between a king and a beggar. False praise cannot be of any use. He further remarks: "Through tattered clothes small vices do appear/ Robes and furred gowns hide all" (Act 4, Scene 6). This madness leaves him to sanity as he just like Edgar flees from civilization leaving the luxurious world behind in favor of chaos and confusion of natural world. However, he acquires self-knowledge. Thus, Lear attains true selfhood, according to Hegel's philosophy "They recognize themselves as mutually recognizing one another". He experiences transformation from a conceited to caring and from an ego-centric to affectionate father and begs forgiveness from Cordelia and admits that she has "some cause" for hating him. She, however, replies: "No cause, no cause" and in this way they reconcile. Even then the fact remains that the terrible consequence of his hamartia brings on a catastrophe and leads to the deaths of many good people including Cordelia and Lear himself along with the wicked ones producing a sense of waste. After the explanation of theory of self-consciousness presented by Hegel, we are quite well-equipped to take up the text, both in terms of dialogues as well as situations, of the Shakespeare's play, 'King Lear'. Here, the text will be read in context with the above discussed Hegelian theory. We in fact intend to have the analysis of the play with reference to various actions by the characters and the consequent reactions by the affected characters suffering from the crisis of identity recognition.

The conflict of identity recognition with characters kicks off right in the first scene of the play where almost all of them are introduced to the audience. Before the arrival of King Lear and others, Kent and Gloucester (two of the faithful courtiers of Lear) are shown discussing and in fact clarifying to the audience what is in the offing. However, King Lear uses the words 'darker purpose' in his speech which creates suspicions in the minds of audience though they are quite aware of what is to happen on the basis of preamble presented by Kent and Gloucester before Lear's arrival. This two-word mystery leads to something which was not explained by the Kent and Gloucester. Lear in fact hints at that hidden 'incestuous' relation with daughters, especially the unmarried Cordelia that he wishes to see flourish as the outcome of the 'division of kingdom'. This is where Hegelian theory meets at the cross-roads with the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud – the theory in which Freud describes the sex as one of the two chief drives of human sub-consciousness.

At the start of play, Lear is completely sure of himself as to what he is about to unfold to the gathering that includes his loved and closed ones. His 'division of kingdom' in favour of his daughters confirms that he is confident of the power he holds. The first threat to his identity is posed by his most loving daughter Cordelia's 'nothing'. This enrages the king and therefore, is suggested by many critics as the climax of the play. The catastrophe starts right here in the first scene and that too in a few initial lines. As per Hegel, the love should be unconditional in order to achieve 'selfhood' and so expresses Cordelia in her speech that she cannot put his heart into her mouth and that she loves her father on merit, no more nor less. The king's counter attack in the form of his decision of banishing Cordelia without any 'bounty' creates a gap of self-consciousness or identity recognition in the daughter as well. As discussed in the previous section, the gap of identity is created in one by the rejection of other. Here, in case of the father, the word 'nothing' tantamount rejection as a rebellion. On the other hand, to devoid the daughter from the dowry of her father creates the crisis of recognition in her. Furthermore, Burgundy, on hearing the decision of banishment withdraws his proposal to marry Cordelia which is even further pinching for her.

However, this very gap of self-consciousness created in Cordelia is tried to be filled by King of France who not only comes up with a protest against the king's unjust decision but also likes Cordelia's fair nature that she presents while expressing her love for his father in the truest words as 'according to my bond, no more nor less'. The King of France compensates and thus endeavours to neutralise the situation by accepting Cordelia as his wife. King of France provides Cordelia with the strength not to stumble and stand firm against her father's decision. Later, he remains to be the catalyst in assembling Cordelia's army and subsequently launch an attack on the British territories in order to free the land from the wicked rulers like her elder sisters Goneril and Regan. In this way Cordelia's identity somehow remains recognized. Besides King of France another character that

comes forth to console Cordelia is Kent - a loyal courtier of King Lear. He also attempts to make the King realise the mistake he is about to commit but to no avail. On the other hand, the dethroned Lear faces the severity of this identity crisis even further when his daughter Cordelia walks away (though dejected) without mending her words as ordered by the father. This loss of identity as king and as father on part of Lear infuriates him even more leading him to madness. Therefore, he puts up the agonizing question: Who is it that can tell me who I am?

The aftershocks of Lear's decision of 'division of kingdom' fall heavy on him when his two cunning daughters, Goneril and Regan besides mistreating him also encourage their servants to extend the most disrespectful behaviour to Lear – the father who has given his daughters everything. The half-mad King is provided with some compensation of his lost recognition as a king when Kent (disguised as Caius) accompanies him along with another faithful – the Fool. Kent has to present himself in front of the king in disguise because he has also been 'banished' by the furious king charged with the crime of protesting against king's decision for Cordelia. Kent manifests the height of honesty by persisting to be the king's loyal subservient even after receiving admonishing remarks that culminate on an adverse decision. These two characters don't only keep giving the realization to the king of 'being' a king but they also help him restore from the shocks through their encouraging (by Kent) and amusing (by the Fool) words.

CONCLUSION

When studying the text of Shakespeare's *King Lear* and the analysis of the main scheme of events with the help of the detailed study of G.W.F. Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic, it becomes evident that Lear's wish for identity recognition through the public display of confirmation of his daughters' love for him causes the tragedy he suffered with. His status as a king, his excessive pride and the sense of superiority for holding the loftiest position, is considered by him as his true identity. However, it is highly ironical that he hardly knows himself and the ones linked with him. His supposed identity is not the true identity but the sham and hollow one. At this stage he is a self-centered, proud, conceited, ego-centric and insightful man who has always been surrounded by the flatterers and admirers and who has never been isolated and whose commands have never been refused. His horrible error of judgment in believing the hypocritical flattering remarks of his opportunistic and wicked daughters and his insensitive banishment of the most loyal, true, innocent and sincere daughter wreaks a havoc upon his familial as well as political world.

Hence, it is stated that the objectives of the study have been fulfilled. It is evident that identity recognition on the part of Lear proves to be the fundamental hamartia leading to his tragedy. Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic has helped in the understanding of the spiritual journey made by Lear in the process of reaching the ultimate attainment of true selfhood. Identity crisis afflicts some other characters in the play including Edmond, Gloucester, Edgar, and Kent. However, the

greatest tragedy is the one faced by Lear as he has lost everything—a heart-rending result precipitated by his ignorance of his true identity, an effort for the true identity recognition.

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