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**Title:** Unkindness Towards Children: In the light of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, *SrimadBhagavatam*, the *Mahabharata* and Tagore's *Karna-KuntiSa.nbaad*

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**Unkindness Towards Children: In the light of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, *Srimad Bhagavatam*, the *Mahabharata* and Tagore's *Karna-Kunti Sambaad***

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In the twentieth century, the authority of the author was challenged with the emergence of Marxist criticisms, reader-response, and post-structural criticism. Instead of aiming to arrive at a final reading, 'post-structural critics in recent times are sensitive to issues of gender, power, patriarchy, misogyny, and the treatment of the mob in Shakespeare's plays' (Foakes, 120). Simultaneously, we see other disciplines and departments, such as Commerce, Philosophy or Business Administration, are seeking in Shakespeare, a model of their derivatives and conclusions. For example, '21<sup>st</sup> Century Ethics: 16<sup>th</sup> Century Advice from William Shakespeare' is a paper written by Dr. Carson H. Varner, Jr, who is a Professor of Finance, Insurance and Law in Illinois State University. The paper 'is intended as an explanation of how Shakespeare portrays the problem of ethical leadership in a critical time in English history (Varner, Jr.). Another example is an anonymous article 'Ethical Leadership Lessons from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*', where the writer observes, 'We use *Macbeth* to examine shadow leadership potentials. We learn how to identify excessive and dangerous behaviours – both in ourselves and others – before derailment becomes inevitable'. This inter-disciplinary phenomenon, quite interestingly, has restored much of the authority of



Shakespeare, because he is referred to as the philosopher par excellence and his works are potential areas of research for the students of Business Administration or of Social Ethics or of Social Psychology.

Education of the child by parents and corporal punishment given by parents are areas where our ideas have changed drastically. Parents in 46 countries today do not have the right to inflict corporal punishment on their children at home (Wikipedia 'Corporal'). The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child and opened it for signature on 20 November 1989. No less than 194 countries are party to it (Wikipedia 'Convention'). 'Article 19 of the Convention', as recorded in Wikipedia, 'states that state parties must "take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence" (qtd. in Wikipedia 'Convention'), but it makes no explicit reference to corporal punishment. It is quite evident that human society is today finding other means of preventing the child from being spoilt than using the rod in the literal sense. It is almost a universally acknowledged truth that the rod, in the literal sense, has to be spared.

Like issues of gender, power and patriarchy, Shakespeare's plays are deeply concerned with the relation between father and child. Interestingly, it is intertwined with the patriarchal attitude towards women. The problem of parental care and guidance of the children by parents have surfaced in many of his plays as one of the main problems of human life. It is very prominently present in *Hamlet* in the relation between Hamlet's mother and her son and also between the ghost and Hamlet; the theme is also present in the sub-plot, in the relation between Polonius and Laertes, and in Polonius's decision to let 'loose' (2.2.163) his daughter to spy on Hamlet. Both Gertrude and the ghost of Hamlet's father were responsible



to a considerable extent for the hero's tragic doom. The tragedy of Romeo and Juliet were brought about partly by the enmity between the Montagues and the Capulets. Shakespeare has touched upon the theme in *Othello* as well, between Desdemona and her father Brabantio. In the last plays- the tragi-comedies- the relation between father and daughter is dominant but there the relation has a harmony which is missing in the tragedies. But in *King Lear* it constitutes the major theme. Moreover, *King Lear* is particularly concerned with the ill treatment of sons and daughters by fathers.

Although the play starts with disharmony there is also the reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia, the sweetness of which spills into the last comedies. Children, like Lady Macduff's son, are rare in Shakespeare but the problems between father and sons and daughters make us ponder about the role of fathers in shaping the conduct and world-view of his children and this is perhaps most conspicuous in *King Lear*. Shakespeare has recurrently shown that a parent's love, especially that of father for his children, may be fraught with insensitivity and callousness. In *King Lear* at the very outset of the play we see a father callously joking- even in the presence of his illegitimate son- on his mother:

*Kent.* I cannot conceive you.

*Glo.* Sir, this young fellow's mother could; whereupon she grew round-womb'd, and had indeed, sir, a son for her cradle ere she had a husband for her bed.(1.1. 11- 15)

Although Gloucester, as he claims, is 'braz'd' to his shame, he is unmindful of the chain of consequences his remarks might bring forth in his young son. To witness an insult on oneself and on one's mother committed by one's father and that in public is an experience inexplicably painful. But Edmund, without any protest, listens silently to his father's



conscienceless account of sexual pleasure: ‘...Though this knave came something saucily to the world before he was sent for, yet was his mother fair, there was good sport at his making, and the whoreson must be acknowledged.’ (lines 20- 4). Gloucester here is representative of patriarchal mindset which Shakespeare introduces at the very outset of the play. Gloucester thinks he is generous to his son but actually he is blind to the insensitivity with which he treats his son. Moreover, he makes Edmund believe that he is ‘whoreson’ – the stigma which sticks to himself as well as his mother- in contrast to Edgar, who is ‘by order of law’(l 18). This is a mistake more terrible in consequence than fathering Edmund, who, as it turns out, learns to disrespect his mother and hate his father and becomes an enemy to the society. Instead of Mother Mary or Jesus, blind ‘Nature’ is Edmund’s ‘goddess’ (1.2.1). As the play proceeds we realize that Gloucester’s folly is not only a folly of his character but also that of the culture to which both he and King Lear belongs. They belong to a society and a culture which is insensitive to women and children.

Gloucester’s lack of conscience the opening scene is actually a preface to Lear’s profound and melodramatized callous treatment of his daughters. Lear’s folly in the opening scene has been commented upon incessantly by Lear’s fool as well as Shakespeare’s critics and scholars. But the opening scene also makes me guess about the innumerable follies which Lear must have already committed leading to the development of his three daughters. An ancient motif of the father’s foolish pride and the child’s defiant wisdom may be found in *SrimadBhagavatam* (*BhagavataPurana*). In the seventh canto of this Purana, there is an account of the myth of King Hiranyakashipu who attempts more than once to kill his son Prahlad because Prahlad openly defies his orders causing embarrassment for the proud king. Finally Hiranyakashipu faces the wrath of Lord Vishnu who appears in the shape of



Narasimha<sup>1</sup> and kills the proud king. Like Cordelia, Prahlad sticks to the truth he believes, defying his father. Like Prahlad, Cordelia is rooted in truth while both the fathers are rooted in pride. While Prahlad is rescued by Vishnu, Cordelia is rescued by France. But unlike Hiranyakashipu, Lear is not physically killed although he faces the wrath of nature in the storm scene. Lear is reborn as an enlightened parent who is shorn off all the baggage of patriarchal society and who can treat his daughter with the love and respect Cordelia deserved. Interestingly, the Purana provides answers to the question of the child's upbringing to which the text of Shakespeare leaves us guessing. According to this Purana, the ambitious Hiranyakashipu left his abode *fortapasya*<sup>2</sup> in order to please Lord Brahma. The devatas or gods, in his absence, invaded his home and dragged his pregnant wife Kayadhu to heaven. The devatas wanted to kill the child as soon as he would be born as they feared that the child could be as powerful and as threatening as the father. They met Narada, the divine sage and devotee of Lord Vishnu in their way. Narada persuaded the devatas to leave Kayadhu to his care, assuring them that the unborn child is sinless and predicting that the child would be virtuous. He took Kayadhu to his ashrama and used to give the pregnant mother lessons on spirituality and Bhakti. According to this myth, Prahlad, in his mother's womb, could hear the lessons taught by Narada and he was born with an innate nature of love for God; but as his father stuck to his pride, Prahlad stuck to his 'Bhakti' for Lord Vishnu. Like Lear, Cordelia lacks the 'oily art'. (Lear does not oil Goneril and Regan even when he is helpless). Like Lear she can risk even her own life rather than compromise. Like Lear she is spiritual. Lear gives away his kingdom; it is a renunciation but at the primary level as he has not given away his crown, symbolical of his ego. Yet he has taken the first step of entering into the





kingdom of God. 'The spirit truly is ready, but the flesh is weak'. (Mark 14, 38). At the reconciliation scene he is all 'ripeness'.

The character of Cordelia and Prahlaḍ, in contrast with Goneril, Regan and Edmund indicate that a child inherits a mass of potentials which circumstances and guidance or misguidance channelize into positive or negative goals. The text of Lear, when compared to the myth of Prahlaḍ, brings before us some very important questions. Did Cordelia learn the lessons of humanity from her father or her mother or was there a Narada factor, as in the case of Prahlaḍ? Did the two elder sisters have their inhuman and villainous nature shaped by follies and callousness of their parents?

In both the texts punishments inflicted upon daughter and son are expressions of anger and outcome of pride rather than sincere attempts to correct the behaviour of children. One of the main reasons for the banning of corporal punishment by parents in several countries is the fact that they are actually a result of the parents' inability to control their own passions. Another point which is deemed important by modern thinkers of education and which is depicted in the two texts discussed above is the parents' blindness to their children's point of view. Hiranyakashipu willingly remains blind to his son's point of view although the latter tries to reason with him. Lear neither understands Cordelia's rebellion nor Goneril and Regan's flattery. Not listening to children and not able to see through children's behaviour handicap the parents seriously. Both the texts show this truth.

Insensitivity to children's perspective is paired with insensitivity and brutality to women in both the texts. The gods' brutality towards Kayadhu suggests the brutal attitude towards women in ancient Indian society. Simultaneously, *King Lear* portrays a society highly insensitive towards women. It is surprising that neither Lear nor any of his daughters



ever mention of their mother. Shakespeare's text is surprisingly silent on Lear's wife. Even when he is out in the stormy night, exposed to the elements, he does not recall his wife. Thinking upon the ruthlessness and cruelty of his daughters he is surprised at his own parenthood: 'Judicious punishment: 'twas this flesh begot/ Those pelican daughters' (3.4.70-1). We reach here the depth of tragedy. But it also exposes Lear's patriarchal attitude towards procreation and education, for it was not only his flesh but also his wife's which begot the 'pelican daughters'. A woman, then, has no genetic contribution to make to her child. She bears the child in her womb like a beast of burden. Moreover, Lear has no reflection regarding the upbringing of his daughters. Reflecting on the unkindness of his 'lawful' daughters (in comparison to Gloucester's 'bastard son') the mad Lear vents the ingrained prejudice of his subconscious:

Behold yon simp'ring dame,  
Whose face between her forks presages, snow,  
That minces virtue, and does shake the head  
To hear of pleasure's name,  
The fitchew nor the soiled horse goes to't  
With a more riotous appetite. Down from the waist  
They're centaurs, though women all above.  
But to the girdle do the gods inherit;  
Beneath is all the fiend's. There's hell, there's darkness,  
There is the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding, stench, consumption. Fie.  
fie, fie; pah, pah!  
( 4.6. 116- 26 )





This dehumanization of woman into a cross between heaven and hell was rooted in the patriarchal mindset to which womanhood is a cross between Mother Mary, the emblem of innocence and Eve, the cause of man's loss of Eden. It took hundreds of years for the menfolk to understand that even a 'simp'ring dame' has sexual appetite, just as men have and it is perfectly natural. Lear is much closer to reality at this stage than before but he is culturally ill-equipped to acknowledge the truth. His prejudiced view of women is an obstacle in realizing the equality of man and woman. Hence he is a failure as a father of three daughters. The patriarchal milieu to which Lear belongs, paralyses his chances of becoming a good father to his daughters.

Patriarchal values and prejudices makes the two fathers, Lear and Gloucester, act in an irresponsible manner in the opening scene. Otherwise they are not inhuman and unkind. It is the most irresponsible act of Lear- being the father- to 'disclaim' (1.1.113) his unmarried daughter Cordelia for disobeying and insulting him, leaving her absolutely unsheltered, although from Cordelia's point of view, it was courageous of her to protest all the nonsense and flattery being carried over by his father and two sisters, while risking her share of her father's property. When she is disclaimed from all 'paternal care', when Burgundy, one of the suitors is disinterested, she desperately tries to reason with her father:

It is no vicious blot, murder or foulness,  
No unchaste action, or dishonour'd step,  
That hath deprived me of your grace and favour.  
( 1.1. 227-9).

A new-born child is utterly helpless and entirely dependent on parents. As parents love the child, the child also begins to love them. The motherless and unmarried Cordelia, being a



woman in the Shakespearean world of medieval England, is again resorted to the helplessness of a child with no parental love. In Lear's view she is of no value, of no significance. He reintroduces her daughter to Lord Burgundy, one of the suitors to Cordelia as an unsubstantial being whose 'price is fallen':

But now her price is fallen. Sir, there she stands:

If aught within that little seeming substance,

Or all of it, with our displeasure piec'd,

And nothing more, ...

( lines 196- 99 )

From a feminist perspective, this dialogue makes Lear a villain who deserves to be punished. Bereft of parental care (including the promise of dowry), Cordelia is nothing more than all the 'little seeming substance' whose 'price is fallen'. By Lear's 'all of it' Cordelia has nothing more than an animal, sexual identity. In other words, in the English society even in the seventeenth century, Cordelia could only exist as a prostitute unless she is married to a man. Here, Lear is posited before us not as a father but as a representative of the brutality of patriarchy. Conversely, from the perspective of Cordelia, in being reduced to a mere female in public by her own father, Lear is the worst father a woman can imagine. Lear's perspective is worse than Gloucester's. Although Gloucester says that the 'whoreson' must be acknowledged, Lear disinherits his daughter. It is a naked display of callous individualism and patriarchal mindset which plagued Renaissance Europe and which Shakespeare could not fail to notice. Here we may also refer to Polonius, who 'looses' his daughter on Hamlet like a dog: 'At such a time I'll loose my daughter to him.' (2.2.163). In fact, both Lear and Cordelia



are victims of patriarchy. Perhaps Lear would not have chosen to satisfy his ego in arranging a love-game among his daughters if he had three sons instead of three daughters. He is trained to treat women as insignificant objects. Moreover, he has no knowledge of her daughters's natures. He is oblivious of how Goneril and Regan can use the situation to their selfish advantage and how Cordelia may react. It was not customary in medieval or in Renaissance European society to be bothered much about daughters. Lear supposedly bothered more about his knights and his fool than his daughters throughout his life.

Beside these cruel fathers let us see how Shakespeare depicts a cruel mother. Lady Macbeth boasts before her husband that she knows 'how tender 'tis to love the babe...' (1.7.55) that suckles her; yet if she is promised she can dash the brains of the suckling child. This is perhaps the utmost picture of cruelty one can imagine and brings to mind the character of Medea of the ancient Greek play. But Lady Macbeth is merely boasting. She cannot harm even the old Duncan as he resembles her father. In actuality, Lady Macbeth, as we see her in the murder scene and the banquet scene, guards her husband from mental breakdown even at the cost of her own mental disintegration. Here we can draw a line of compassion that connects Lady Macbeth and Cordelia, who shows almost motherly care to her father.

In the old chronicle play the love-game was Leir's ploy to get Cordelia married, but not in Shakespeare's play. Here Lear wants to retire from the duties of kingship and therefore wants to divide his kingdom among his daughters. But he could have done that without the love-game. Hence it is solely a way of self-gratification. Simultaneously, from the social perspective, the love-game is not shameful, but rather something on which the king could feel



proud, otherwise Lear would not have arranged it. Lear desired the opportunity to gratify his ego in public. Hence Lear's outburst of anger is caused not only by Cordelia's obstructing his desire but also by the insult it brought upon Lear in public. This argument becomes more comprehensible when compared to the tragic fate of Karna and Kunti in the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. Karna is the illegitimate child forsaken by his mother Kunti. Kunti forsakes her first newborn child because it is socially disreputable for an unmarried woman to give birth to a child. Similarly, Lear conducts the love game partly because it is socially prestigious for him to hear his daughters declare their love for him. Both Kunti and Lear are misguided by what their respective societies accept as shameful or prestigious. These characters alarm us that even in the twenty-first century we might be similarly misguided by what society accepts as 'prestigious' or 'shameful'. One might realize one's folly later but then it will be too late. In Tagore's adaptation of the episode of Karna and Kunti, titled *Karna-Kunti Sa.nbaad*, Kunti calls herself 'ku-mataa', 'bad mother'. In most Indian languages the term is a serious appendage against any mother because it is believed that mothers are always and inevitably good. Yet Karna tells her that you can never return me what you have deprived me of:

একদিন যে সম্পদে করেছ বঞ্চিত

সে আর ফিরিয়ে দেওয়া তব সাধ্যাতীত।

Hence unkindness to children cannot be repaired when the childhood is gone. Then a parent has no choice but to suffer. Kunti wonders in amazement at the curse she has brought upon herself: that her once forsaken son has returned in arms to kill her other sons, that is, his own brothers:



সেইদিন কে জানিত হয় ,

তাজিলাম যে শিশুরে ক্ষুদ্র অসহায়

সে কখন বলবীর্য লভি কোথা হতে

ফিরে আসে একদিন অন্ধকার পথে ,

আপনার জননীর কোলের সন্তানে

আপন নির্মম হস্তে অস্ত্র আসি হানে ।

এ কী অভিশাপ!

That Lear's folly in forsaking Cordelia brings only curses upon himself is quite evident. But the way Goneril and Regan treat their father throughout the play indicate, especially in the light of the above quotation from Tagore, that Lear must have committed some serious mistakes while his daughters were little.

In the reconciliation scene, the 'ripe' Lear treats his daughter with the respect which no man ever gives to any woman in the play. Lear, on recognizing Cordelia, kneels before her before saying anything. Lear is reborn as a seer of truth, devoid of all anger and pride and prejudice. This scene represents the truth which the playwright posits before patriarchal seventeenth century English society, which had just passed her golden era under the reign of a woman. In the final scene, for Lear, Cordelia is no longer a mere female animal, but the darling daughter, symbolical of all the flowery tenderness of the father's heart. Now his sensitive soul cannot bear the pain of the death of Cordelia.



The father's demand for daughter's love is one of the key preoccupations of Shakespeare's tragedy. But what about the daughter's thirst for love of the father? This is a crucial question as far as our understanding of the problem of parental cruelty is concerned. In Tagore's dramatic poem *Karna-KuntiSambad*, adapted from Udyogparva of the *Mahabharata*, Karna speaks of his thirst for mother's love:

....Indeed I had heard  
that I had been abandoned by my natural mother.  
How often in the depth of night I've had this dream:  
that slowly, softly my mother had come to see me,  
and I've felt so bleak, and beseeched her in tears,  
'Mother, remove your veil, let me see your face,' –  
and at once the figure has vanished, tearing apart  
my greedy thirsty dream.

(translated from the original Bangla by KetakiKushari Dyson).

Did Cordelia dream of her father after being abandoned by him? From the play, it is obvious that Cordelia was aware of the softer side of Lear. She is very likely to feel thirsted for his father's love. Confessing her sins Kunti tells Karna that she has come to receive him now with due honour. Karna refuses because he cannot betray his friend Duryodhana and join the Pandavas at the time of crisis. When Kunti assures him that he will be the king of Hastinapur if he desists from battle, Karna is surprised, but gathering his sense, he points out the irony that she is offering kingdom to that person who has returned mother's love. Tagore implies that even an entire kingdom is of little value in comparison to mother's love:





কর্ণ । সিংহাসন! যে ফিরালো মাতৃস্নেহ পাশ —

তাহারে দিতেছ , মাতঃ , রাজ্যের আশ্বাস ।

The contrast between kingdom and love runs throughout Shakespeare's tragedy. Lear gives kingdom in return for love; Cordelia refuses to sell love for kingdom. But in the last act of the play Lear has no need of the world. He offers to his dear Cordelia, 'Come, let's away to prison'.



Notes

1. One of the ten incarnations or avatars of Lord Vishnu in Hindu mythology.
2. *Tapasya* is meditation enduring the hardships of nature; in Indian epics and Puranas, we find several demons doing *tapasya* for supernatural powers and boons from Brahma or Shiva.

Quotations of Shakespeare are from *The Complete Oxford Shakespeare*, Vol.

3. Tragedies, edited by Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1994. All quotations of *Lear* are from the Folio text. Quotations of Tagore are from [www.rabindra-rachanabali.nltr.org](http://www.rabindra-rachanabali.nltr.org)



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