

Q. Discuss Macbeth as a tragedy of character (ambition) written by William Shakespeare.

Ans.

Bradley establishes the theory that the hero of Shakespearean tragedy suffers due to some fault in his character. As Meredith says —

"In tragic life, God wot,  
No villain need be; passions spin the plot  
We are betrayed by what is false within."

In "Macbeth" we however find a case of predestination. The witches predict that Macbeth will be thane of Glamis, the thane Cawdor and king of Scotland in succession. Soon after the prediction Macbeth learns that he has been <sup>made</sup> the thane <sup>of</sup> Glamis and Cawdor. Then Macbeth inspired by Lady Macbeth, kills Duncan and becomes the king of Scotland. In this way the prophecy is fulfilled. When Macbeth becomes king, he gets Banquo murdered and then sees his ghost in a Banquet. He sees the witches who ask him to beware of Macduff and say that he will be killed by a man not born of a woman when the Birnam forest moves. Macbeth gets the family of Macduff murdered in the absence of Macduff who organises an army and attacks

Scotland. The soldiers of Macduff advance with branches of trees as cover, so the Birnam forest seems to advance. In a forest battle Macduff kills Macbeth who is told that as Macduff had a premature birth, he is not the son of a woman. In this way the second prophecy is fulfilled. So it seems that Macbeth's character has nothing to do with his rise and fall. It is all the work of fate as the tragedy of Oedipus is due to fate.

But a close analysis of the play shows that within the framework of predestination "Macbeth" is a tragedy of character. The prophecy made by the witches abets Macbeth to kill Duncan. He hesitates but his wife's strong words put an end to his hesitation. She says:

"Was the hope drunk in which you dressed yourself?"

Macbeth's own "vaulting ambition" goads him on and he kills the king. Then he becomes the king of Scotland. Kingship does not come to him like the thaneship of Glamis or Cawdor; on the contrary, he works for it. Moreover the witches predict that Macbeth will be the king of Scotland but they do not predict that he will be a murderer because his ambition

is impatient. The tragedy of his life is due to that murderer. After the murder he says:-

"This my hand will rather  
The multitudinous seas incarnadine  
Making the green one red."

Lady Macbeth feels that a little water will clear them of the dead. When Banquo is murdered and Macbeth sees his ghost, Lady Macbeth says that the ghost is nothing but a product of his hatred brain. Macbeth has already started envying Duncan because

"After life's fitful fever he sleeps well."

Tragedy lies in self knowledge and acceptance. Macbeth's self knowledge has started. It becomes complete when Lady Macbeth dies after a period of sleep-walking. He is then facing the army of Macduff. He says:

"Out, out brief candle!

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
who struts and frets his hours upon the stage  
And then is heard no more, it is a tale  
Told by an idiot full of sound and fury  
signifying nothing."

Macbeth thus realizes the futility of his pursuit and accepts his self knowledge completely. This tragedy has its beginning in the murder of Duncan which is an act of will impelled by ambition. Fate has no part there except that of abetment. We thus feel that even if there is no witches Macbeth's life will be a tragedy.

So like all other tragedies of Shakespeare "Macbeth" is a tragedy of character. The fault in him is his vaulting ambition. The tragedy due to this fault takes place within the framework of predestination. Thus the tragedy has a Greek look, but it is really Shakespearian.



Dr. Sharmim Ahmad

HOD

English

Oriental College

Rafra city