

Use of Folktales in the plays of Shakespeare

Jitendra Kumar Bharti

Research Scholar

Dept. of English and MEL,

University of Lucknow.

Uttar Pradesh, India

DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2020.4.6.11

Abstract

The present paper aims at to discuss the use of folktales in some notable plays of William Shakespeare. World widely he is well accepted and acknowledge a great dramatist, but this fame of Shakespeare is relied on his use of folklores of various languages and cultures. He became master in using folklores in his plays with new flavour and glamour. As we know that folklores are the foundation of modern literary forms. They are deep rooted in cultures and languages. Folklores have a tradition that they are not available in any written form but they are moulded in order to suit best in new modern literary forms. Shakespeare was the master in doing so. Folklore is a very broader term includes everything about humans and their cultures. For most of his plays, Shakespeare borrowed the material from folklores. But it's very unfortunate that many scholars of Shakespeare concentrated themselves only on literary forms instead foundation of his plays ignored or paid no attention. So here I am making a small effort to talk about those folklores that supplied rich materials for his plays The Merchant of Venice, King Lear, The Taming of The Shrew, The Comedy of Errors, Titus Andronicus, All's Well That Ends Well, Cymbeline and The Tempest. Apart from this there are some well-known literary sources as Holinshed's chronicles, Plutarch's The Lives of Noble Greeks and Romans and Ovid's Metamorphosis.

Keywords- Folk Tales, Fairy tales, Riddles, Superstitions, Cultures and Languages

It's really a matter of great interest for me to work on Shakespeare's use of folktales in his plays. Shakespeare used a number of folktales in most of his plays derived from various cultures and languages and depicted them in his plays beautifully with glamour and new flavour without any harm in resemblance. And it was really a difficult task to the scholars of Shakespeare to trace these folktales in his plays initially as these folktales are not a written document but transmitted by words of mouth generations to generations, society to society, culture to culture. But due to growing impact of Globalization and multiculturalism, cultures

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

www.thecreativelaucher.com

are losing their original effects. So it is more necessary to search and research on it to find out folktales used by him in his plays.

Undoubtedly, Shakespeare was world's great dramatist. Apart from this, if we look at him through his plays, we find that he was such a man who had deep interest in mankind that is why his understanding about folks is beyond of time and limit. He will have been a very good listener of tales. Whenever he heard a new story, he never hesitates to borrow it for his own creation in different way and he did that perfectly and became master in using such tales in his plays. As his adaption of the folktale 'A Pound of Flesh' for his play *The Merchant of Venice*. This tale was a very popular one in different cultures and languages. Likewise his play *King Lear* borrowed its plot from the tale 'Love Like Salt' which tells the same story where there was a king who asks his daughters how much they love him, then vanishing the youngest when her bitter but true answer displease him.

According to Charlotte Artese, a professor of English at Agnes Scott College edited a book titled *Shakespeare and The Folktale: An Anthology of Stories* in which he included stories of various eminent writers like J.M. Synge, Zora Neale Hurston, Italo Calvino, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Gerald of Wales and Marie Catherine d'Aulnoy. In this book, he writes that there are forty versions of folktales related to the eight plays of Shakespeare. These tales derived from different parts, cultures and language of the world as from Europe, Middle East, India, The Caribbean and South America. J. M. Synge in his *Aran's Island* gives detail account of Shakespeare's using folktales in his plays. On this Island he encountered with a farmer who told him a story about a young farmer named O'Connor who borrows money from a strange little man who demands five pounds of O'Connor's flesh if he fails to repay the loan on time. Those who read William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, they will find a close resemblance in both the stories. Synge has remarked that "It gave me a strange feeling of wonder to hear this illiterate native of a wet rock in the Atlantic telling a story that is so full of European associations." There is another Chilean folktale 'White Onion' which have the same plot and resemblance with *The Merchant of Venice* in which a young man faces a prospect of having a kilogram of flesh cut from his rump if he fails to repay the loan on time. It is really amazing to point out that all these stories or tales were told in a distinct place, culture, language, and genre and have close affinities to each other, such stories have their origin in the medieval past of which few versions survived during Shakespeare whether vocal or written nothing is clear. J. M. Synge states that "both folktales and Shakespeare's plays are cultural survivors thriving in scores of languages and cultures through the ages. Just as modern writers, playwrights, and filmmakers endlessly adapt Shakespeare's plays, so Shakespeare drew from the tales in the culture of the time.

As nowadays across the world people are working to preserve some animals and their rare species to understand their past and ancestors, likewise folklorists, cultural thinkers and

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

www.thecreativelaucher.com

so on are doing the same. The folktales collected in the modern world will give us insight to peep into past and understand the past culture, traditions, men and manners. In connection with Shakespeare, it is really very difficult to assert that this folktale or that is the actual source of his plays because it might be Shakespeare had acquainted with various folktales of the time. As we have seen in case of *The Merchant of Venice*.

This is fact that folklore has supplied a vast material for Shakespeare's plays. Readers and audiences of different cultures and languages may be acquainted with such tales of their own culture that seem very close to them. Let us talk about our Indian context and culture then we shall find many movies and television shows they adapt sources from folktales such as 'Ali Baba Chalis Chor (Ali Baba and Forty Dacoits)', 'Atif Lailla', 'Akbar and Birbal', 'Chndrakanta', 'Chndragupta Maurya', 'Vikramaur Betaal', 'Jhansi ki Rani' and so on. These adaptations reflect the old culture and traditions in present not as it is but with slight change that Shakespeare did wonderfully and taught all of us to do so. In this sense we can say that Shakespeare was the first great folklorist. It's not only Shakespeare who did so but his contemporaries also did the same. As Henry B. Wheatley remarked about them and him, "He was a conscientious controller who did not invent, but saw the inherent beauty of popular mythology and presented it to the world with all the gorgeousness and beauty which he alone could give it."

Indeed William Shakespeare was master in using sources from folklores that is a very broader term. Kenneth Muir has thrown light on the vast area of folklore. "Folklore now covers a multitude of fields, any one of which could keep one busy for a lifetime- folktales in many languages, proverbial wisdom, folk-plays, witches, ghosts, fairies, seasonal festivals, anthropology, flora and fauna, magic, sports and pastimes, popular medicines, jest-books, totem and tabu, even religious rituals...." Now it has made clear by this remark that Shakespeare has used many of these in his plays. The time he lived plays were written for the courts or the aristocrats. Folktales were a common knowledge among them, still they like these tales of different cultures and languages with great interest.

The Taming of the Shrew is a comedy of William Shakespeare written about 1590 or 1592. The main plot of this play features the courtship of Petruchio and Katherina, a shrew. Nothing is clear about the exact source of the play but the similar stories found in many folktales that have close resemblance to the main plot of the play. Such story is also found in *Arabian Nights*. 'Lord for a Day' is also very close to the main plot of the play but it wasn't translated in English until the mid-18th century. It is widely accepted that the Danish folktale 'The Most Obedient Wife' is the source of this play and it has very close resemblance to the play's main plot. Apart from these two folktales, there many like this in different culture and languages; even I had heard such a tale from my mother when I was very young. As a result we may say that Shakespeare may have known many by words of mouth. A similar opinion

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

www.thecreativelaucher.com

has expressed by Jan Harold Brunvand, “the title ‘The Taming of the Shrew’ apart from Shakespeare’s comedy has been applied to many literary creations, sub-literary pieces and folktales in which a bad is improved.”

The Comedy of Errors is the earliest comedy of Shakespeare. The plot of the play is direct adaption of *Menaechmi*, a Roman play of Plautus. But the play is based on a folktale known as ‘The Twins or Blood Brothers’. As Shakespeare indebted for the plot of this play of a folktale likewise many film-makers adopted the theme of this play and gave popular films such as ‘*Big Business*’ (1988) a Hollywood film and Indian cinema highly indebted to this play of Shakespeare. Many Indian movies are based on the same plot in different Indian languages such as ‘*Do Dooni Char*’, ‘*Angoor*’, Hindi films, ‘*Bhrantibilas*’ a Bengali film, ‘*Uta Palta*’ a Kannada film, ‘*Uta Palta*’ a Telugu film and ‘*Double Di Trouble*’ a Punjabi film. Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* is a tragedy written in collaboration with George Peele. The plot of this play is based on a myth of Philomela. The rape and mutilation of Lavinia, the main plot of the play, is the direct adaption of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* which tells the story of Philomela. Shakespeare may be indebted of *Gesta Romanorum*, a thirteenth century collection of tales, myths and legends.

The plot of *The Merchant of Venice* of Shakespeare has resemblance to various folktales so it is very difficult to say this particular tale is the exact source of the play. As we earlier have discussed that the main plot of this play has affinity with the folktales ‘A Pound of Flesh’, ‘The White Onion’ and ‘The Maiden without Hands’. Scholars of Shakespeare accept the play has borrowed many elements from different sources such as *Il Pecorone* by Giovanni Fiorentino, where from ‘a pound of flesh’ scene has derived and ‘Three Caskets Scene’ from *Gesta Romanorum*, a collection of tales and the ‘Trial Scene’ borrowed from *The Orator* of Alexandre Sylvane. *All’s Well That Ends Well* is a comedy but it is considered as a problem play. The literary source of the play is accepted Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. As we know that *Decameron* is a collection of folktales that provided ground for many later writers. If we talk about folktale source of the play, ‘The Man Who Deserted His Wife’ is considered its folktale source. This play is a nice amalgam of riddles and fairy tales.

Cymbeline of William Shakespeare is the best example of amalgam of folklore. In this play Shakespeare combined one folktale plot ‘The Wager on the Wife’s Chastity’ with another folktale plot ‘Snow White’. They are mixed in one play as their motif is same. This play makes us to recall a fairy tale in which there is a princess, a wicked stepmother, a tyrannical father, a jealous husband, an orphaned hero, a buffoonish villain, valiant country rustic, a loyal servant, ghosts and gods. Critics like Johnson inadvertently gave us a hint as to how *Cymbeline* should be interpreted as a fairy-tale. In this regards Northrop Frye’s comment becomes more significant, “Cymbeline is not, to put it mildly, a historical play; it is a pure folk tale featuring a cruel stepmother with her loutish son, a culminated maiden, lost princes

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

www.thecreativelaucher.com

brought up in a cave by a foster father, a ring of recognition that works in reverse, villain's displaying false trophies of adultery and faithful servants displaying equally false trophies of murder along with a fire work display of dreams, prophecies, signs, portents and wonders." Like *Cymbeline*, Shakespeare's another important play *The Tempest* is full with extrinsic references of folklores in the form of folktales, fairy tales, witchcrafts, superstitions and so on. 'The Magic Flight' folktale is considered its primary folk literary source because of resemblance. In 'The Magic Flight' the magician ends up the story overpowered and dead and his daughter having deceived and overmastered by her father uses powerful magic to flee with her beloved. She seems quite unlike Prospero's daughter Miranda. Prospero is the main embodiment of folk belief and supernatural power who with his magical power guided and controlled the life of his daughter and island. Professor Walter Clyde Curry has made an extreme study and analysis of Prospero as a magician and in his "Sacerdotal Science in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*" where he put that "Prospero's enchantments...are no sense the products of black magic, nor are the ministers he employ the demons and devils of superstitions or fallen angels of Christian theology," but "the sorcery of Sycorax and enchantments of Prospero represent that aspect of later Neo-Platonic philosophy known as sacerdotal science or theurgy.

At last after making this analysis, I would like to say that the greatness of William Shakespeare rest upon the use of the folklores that was orally transmitted generation to generation and these folklores were storehouse of cultures and traditions which are losing their effects in the light of modernism. So it is the need of time to seek the germ of cultures in the classics.

Works Cited

- Artese, Charlotte (editor). *Shakespeare and the folktale: An Anthology of Stories*. Princeton University Press, 2019.
- Wheatley, Henry B. D.C.L. "The Folklore of Shakespeare". *Folklore*. Vol. 27, No. 4, P. 378, Taylor and Francis Online Publication, 1916.
- Muir, Kenneth. "Folklore and Shakespeare. *Folklore*. Vol. 92, No. 2, P. 231, Taylor & Francis, Ltd. 1981.
- Brigstocke, W. Osborne, editor. *All's Well That Ends Well*. London, Methuen and Co., 1904.
- Butler, Martin, editor. . *Cymbeline*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Frye, Northrop. *A Natural Perspective*. United States, Columbia University Press, 1965.
- Curry, Walter Clyde. "Sacerdotal Science in Shakespeare's *Tempest*." Louisiana University Press, 1937.
- Johnson, W. Stacy. "Folklore Elements in the *Tempest*." *Midwest Folklore*. Vol. 1, No. 4, p. 223, Indiana University Press, 1951.

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

www.thecreativelaucher.com

Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*. Harlow, Essex, England: Longman, 1994.

Shakespeare, William. *Titus Andronicus*. New York, Penguin, 2000.

Shakespeare, William. *The Taming of the Shrew*. New York, Signet Classic, 1998.

Shakespeare, William. *The Comedy of Errors*. New York, 1988.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Harvard University Press, 1958.

Rawnsley, Ciara. “‘An Ancient Tale New Told’ Shakespeare Use of Folk- Fairy Tales as Source for His Plays.” University of Western Australia, 2013.