

The portrayal of nationhood in Shakespearean Texts

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Abstract:

The paper focusses upon the theme of the narratives pertaining to the tenets of nationhood and nationalism as embedded in the text of plays written by Shakespeare. The paper does a brief content analysis of the twin plays of the order of Richard II and Macbeth in order, to, eke out an apt understanding of the nationalistic themes and undercurrents as they lie strewn all across the content of these two plays. The paper highlights the "Spectred Isle" speech: in Richard II delivered by a dying John Gaunt lamenting about the precariously poised state of the nation. The paper argues about the presence of nationalist prose and poetry as an able *deus ex machina* in these two Shakespearean texts.

Keywords: nation state, nationalism, nationhood, Richard II, narrative, textual

Introduction

What is the nationhood debate all about?

When one dwells inside the stereotypical and quintessential definition of a nation state , then a pricey foursome criteria comes to the fore. A nation needs to have a legitimate Government, whether, royal, democratic or authoritarian in nature to govern its subjects. Second, the Regime of the day of whichever denominations needs to enjoy the fulsome legitimacy, control and commandeering along with the sovereign authority of planning, decision and implementation in the attendant realm. Thirdly, there needs to be a well defined and delimited land territory with borders along with loyal and patriotic subjects which subsist inside the terrain , realm of the nations within its legally inscribed boundaries which separate the nation from its other sovereign neighbor.

The abovementioned enunciation had been propounded by James Garner is very much coterminous with the theme of the Westphalian nationhood since the promulgation of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. The other idiom is the Sanatani and the Indic ideal not of the

no de plume of nationhood and nationalism but which perceives the entire national trajectory of Bharat as a cultural, spiritual, divinely ordained notion all constituted by all the all pervasive percept of “the Civilizational Ethos” which is an indigenous enunciation emanating from the Indic Vedas and other literature of the yore and the attendant times.

It's the third criterion of the popular opinion aka the citizens of the nation or the vox populi and the constituent hoi polio which lend the all the pervasive legitimacy to the Regime and the larger idiom of nationhood which the Shakespearean plays posit before us both as a bombast, rhetorical literacy device aka *a Deus Ex Machina*¹ and a grandiose narrative which lies as the subterranean meaning in Shakespearean plays of the order of Richard II and Macbeth. Its in all these twin plays that the undercutting narrative impinges upon the Hobbesian construct of, “Fear and the Nation were born as the twins,”² assumes its meaning as a definitional instrument of the realm and its attendant literature.

¹ An unexpected power or event that saves a situation that seems without hope, especially in a play or novel

² Thomas Hobbes, “The Leviathan”, Penguin Books: New Delhi, 1992

Protestants, the nomenclature emanates from the word, " protest", where in the reformists went together created a conglomerate of apostates in order to usher in reforms in the established tenets of Catholic Church, that is, in the established tradition, history and myth and lore. The constituent populace of the Protestants involves the Baptists, Presbyterians and the Lutheran Churches. The entire myth and lore of the Protestant ethics can be traced to the mythical and historical days of the Guttenberg Press in the 16th century where in the intended reforms and constructive changes in the religion and its practice were pinned up on the wooden gate of the Church.

It can be conveniently argued that the entire panoply of reforms and reformative inclinations and trends were part and parcel of the larger movement of Reformation.³ Some scholars and historians have argued that the Protestant reforms were blandly and directly related to the replacement of the bad religion by Good religion. Still, others have been critical of the word Reformations and its utility, where in they contend that though Protestantism

³ Susan Wais Baur, "The History of Renaissance World: From the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Conquest of Constantinople," WW Norton Company, 1998

is definitely part of the body fabric of revolution and change but it was not truly age or epoch changing as its made out to be.

Another theme apart from royalty and forbidden love and mad cap and crazed kingship, the theme of nationalism too pervades the nook and cranny of the larger theme of British literary tradition. The dressage, life styles, the pomp and splendour of the royalty along with the grime of the masses, all seem to have been deciphered in a larger way as far as the Mass Media, theatrical and Cinematic depictions of Shakespearean works⁴ have been treated and managed by both the elitist literary traditions and even the popular culture and pop cannon in a post modern depiction of "Simulacra". Paromita and Poonam write that, "Diverse filmic genres, starting from the earliest silent cinema, to diasporic films made for global audiences, television films, independent films, and documentaries, thus expanding the very notion of 'Indian cinema' while also looking at the different modalities of deploying Shakespeare specific to these genres. Shakespeareans and film scholars provide an alternative history of the

⁴ Poonam Trivedi, Paromita Chakravorti, "Shakespeare and Indian Cinemas : Local Habitations," New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2004

development of Indian cinemas through its negotiations with Shakespeare focusing on the inter-textualities between Shakespearean theatre, regional cinema, performative traditions, and literary histories in India.”⁵

One may also contend that how can the nation be conveniently compared to a rich, flower strewn and verdant garden with birds and flies fluttering and jumping from one flower patch to the other. It was in *Richard II*, the Shakespearean play that the nation is compared to a terrain which is up for, “Playing for keeps”.⁶ The Gardner is compared to a King which can maintain and sustain the peaceful vibrancy and verdancy of the nation and its citizens my tending to the plants flowers and the grassy knoll all in an allegorical manner. Its here that the ideational incarnation of Shakespearean works can find a reflection through the depictions in the Mass Media, primordially the Cinematic constructs, the world over. The idiom of the “Idea” can makeover the “Ides” of the popular culture and elitist pastime too. As an instance, North

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Shakespeare, William. *King Richard II*. Edited by Charles R. Forker. London: Arden Shakespeare, 2002.

Campus Colleges used to arrange theatrical shows called as "Plays in the campus with the depictions being backed by modern clothing, theatre characters along with the sight and sound spectacle and the accompaniment of trumpets, guitars and electric guitars and drums to synchronize the tenets of a modern and a mad crazed world all in grapples with the ecosystem of modernity. But, as the saying goes, one needs to act like a Roman while being in Rome and another dictum, Never disrespect the river Goddess while crossing the river."

The Texts as Such!

One may zero in upon the text of *Richard II* and *Macbeth*, where in the all important and worth martyring for realm becomes the foci of the presented narrative and the context of the play which stresses upon how a nation has to be sustained, watered, its trees and fruits gathered timely and trimmed by a Gardner akin to the nation which too has to be managed and strengthened both in the realm of the internal security and external relations amounting to maintaining domestic stealth and self along with external guardianship in the face of foreign threats and external subterfuge.

The depiction and literary portrayal of treachery, chicanery and clandestine deceit are well reflective of the subterfuge present in the actual national and royal household in the Westminster. Both the plays of the order of Richard II and Macbeth portray and assiduously reflect the unstable and portentous nature of the life and times of a nationhood which derived its role and meaning from the unsettled royal households all prey to individualistic and personal power ambitions, power fed dreams and far fangled fancies which finally lead to the disparagement and the belittlement of the Project on nationalism and nationhood per se.

In Act II Scene I, in the play Richard II, the John of Gaunt delivers a nationalistic and patriotic speech which largely sets the tone for the nation state's quintessential context for Great Britain as a proud, powerful and a sea faring nation by utilizing a slew of imageries, analogies and metaphors.⁷

The sceptred Isle speech is a kind of dirge and a tragic lament when the island nation of England has been practically sold off and rented out. The speech delivered is

⁷ Ibid

considered to be in the style of a Dialogue,⁸ which is rendered as a conversation between the twin partners and characters in any play's or text's narrative. The dying Gaunt talks to the Duke of York and contends about the miserable and pitiable condition of the land that is, England. He contends that, "This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle, / This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars, / This other Eden, demi-paradise, . . . This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England . . . Is now leased out—I die pronouncing it— / Like to a tenement or pelting farm."⁹ The manner in which the nation state of Great Britain was threatened by internecine rivalries and royal and in house deceit also happens to be a key reason why the John of Gaunt delivers his parting message which serves to ignite the sparks and the swansong of country love for the British Empire about which it was truly said that, The Sun never sets in the British Empire".¹⁰

A further incursion into the literary and the socio-political of the sceptred Isle speech opens up traditional

⁸ Dialogue is the spoken exchange between characters in stories, plays, poems, or films. It is distinct from a monologue, which is a long speech by one person. The objective of the dialogue is to develop the contours of the character along with the development of the plot structure.

⁹ Text of Richard II, A Historical Play by William Shakespeare

¹⁰ Ibid

nationalistic and mainstream vistas for the bedevilled and besieged British nation. One can latch on to an attempted analysis of the nomenclature, verbiage in the dialogue and the theatricality of the glum British situation too in order to eke out the quintessential nationalistic paean for the country.

A literary critique pens that, "When Gaunt goes on to observe that England is 'this seat of Mars', he reminds us that kings have only held onto their kingdom because of their warlike nature, Mars being the Roman god of war, of course. England is like another Garden of Eden, halfway towards being paradise: an earthly paradise."¹¹

This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands,
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,

¹¹ Analysing Shakespeare, URL: <https://interestingliterature.com/2019/12/analysis-john-of-gaunt-this-sceptred-isle-speech/> (Online: Web), Accessed on April 10, 2026

John of Gaunt then goes on to analyse England's advantages in terms of might and defence: these come down to its island status, as being a 'precious stone set in the silver sea', standing apart from the mainland of Europe."¹²

If we make an analytical venture inside the textual content of *Macbeth* then the idiom of the fissiparous and centripetal forces aiming to main and break England comes to the fore in a very poignant manner. In the textual narrative of *Macbeth*, one might be made to assert that the entire edifice of the *Macbeth's* textual prose rests upon the historical fact that it was King James's I who worried about the fractured nation and brought about a unification and convergence of the terrains and lands of Scotland and England.

. When we look at works such as *Macbeth*, which was written by the Englishman William Shakespeare, further promoted an image of Scottish people being barbaric and power hungry, whereas the English were seen as

¹² Ibid 1

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benevolent and pure.¹³ By integrating this image into his story, Shakespeare allowed fellow English citizens to feel superior, which continued their nationalist sentiments.¹⁴ In the momentous year, 1568, Mary, Queen of Scots fled to Britain from the mountains of scraggy Scotland as an aftermath of her captivity in Scotland when she rebelled against the Regime and the authority of the day. The alternate movement came through after she planned the decimation of her husband. .¹⁵

“Robert S. Miola argued that Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (1623) reflects local and specific contemporary stereotypes about the barbarous Scots and the civilizing English just as it interrogates racial prejudices and the myths of national identity”¹⁶. The same author contends that, “If positive cultural encounters acknowledge others in their otherness to build mutual communication and trust, as Pope Francis would have it, negative cultural encounters trade in stereotypes for the

¹³ Scott Newstock, Ayanna Thompson, Eds, “Weyward Macbeth: Intersection of Race and Performance,” Palgrave 1956

¹⁴ The Role of Nationalism in Macbeth, URL: <https://www.bartleby.com/essay/The-Role-Of-Nationalism-In-Macbeth-By-CACA38B2C99736AE> (Online: Web), Accessed on April 12, 2026

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ “The Scottish Play: Race and Nation in Macbeth”, URL: <https://global.georgetown.edu/events/the-scottish-play-race-and-nation-in-macbeth> (Online: Web), Accessed on 20 April, 2026

purpose of conquest and exploitation. *Macbeth* appears to record such a negative encounter as it concludes with the civilizing English rescuing the benighted Scots from themselves, tyranny, and witchcraft. As such, the play appears to support the political ambitions of King James I of England for the union of Scotland and England under English rule. Through the play's action, as well as in its omissions and suppressions, it meditates compellingly on the power dynamics of conquest and colonialism, myths of national identity, and the paradoxes of archipelagic history."¹⁷ Thus, though the Shakespearean lore is ever present in the narrative of *Macbeth* but, still the "Ides" of treachery, Black magic and the metaphorical threat to the nation is the quintessential order of the day where in the Three witches ruminate upon the theme of meeting again when the political unrest and rebellion in the land is controlled and subsides down. Thus, the question of the nation under threat becomes a Shakespearean formulaic instrument which adheres to the nature and pageantry of the nation state along with the perceived and non perceived threats to the spirit of unity and integration in

¹⁷ Ibid

the nation which was marred by fissiparous external forces and the all troubling question of Race and Identity in the bedevilled land.

Conclusion:

The narratives offered by William Shakespeare the bard have had a great and all pervasive impact on the local habitations. The plays selected for a brief content analysis happen to be the ones of the order of Macbeth and Richard II where in the snippets and the literary set pieces related to and explanatory about the threesome consonance of nation state, nation state and nationhood are touch upon here within the random mode of content analysis. Even the ever present threats presented to the nation , that is, the sceptered isle as narrated by John of Gaunt perplexes , educates the masses about the fact that if the internal dissensions are too many and fissiparous and disruptive forces to the " garden of Eden" are too many and multi fold then the , "Paradise on Earth" is endangered and under fire. The three witches opening sequence in Macbeth, also, pin-points towards the threats to the nation, solidarity and normalcy by malevolent factors and forces. In a manner, one deciphers that strewn

all across the content analysis of these two pioneering and timeless play masterpieces are the scattered but fairly visible snippets of nation state, nationhood and nationalism.

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