

THE ISSUES OF ELIZABETHAN ERA AS REFLECTED IN THE THEMES OF SHAKESPEARE'S *MACBETH*

Endang Suciati

Universitas Pesantren Tinggi Darul Ulum Jombang

endangsuciati24@gmail.com

Abstrak

Artikel ini berbicara tentang tema-tema di *Macbeth* karya Shakespeare yang memiliki korelasi dengan kondisi dinasti Tudor khususnya di era Elizabeth. Berdasarkan konsep yang diajukan oleh Arnold Hauser pada *Sociology of Arts*, artikel ini menemukan bahwa beberapa tema di *Macbeth* karya Shakespeare dipengaruhi oleh kondisi sosial di era Elizabeth karena Shakespeare hidup di zaman itu. Dengan menganalisis teks dalam Drama *Macbeth* dan menggabungkannya dengan informasi tentang Shakespeare, karya-karyanya dan periodenya sebagai sumber tambahan, akan memunculkan beberapa tema yang mencerminkan era Elizabeth. Tema tersebut adalah ambisi, maskulinitas, dan kodrat serta ketidakwajaran.

Kata kunci: Elizabethan Era, Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

INTRODUCTION

The life of art and society can not be separated. They have an interaction in their growth, even they influence each other. As Hauser (1982: 89) says that art both influences and is influenced by social changes, that it initiates social changes while itself changing with them. It means that the changing in society will make the changing in art and vice versa. Hauser (1982: 92) also adds that art and society are in a state of continuous mutual dependance which propagates itself like a chain reaction. This means not only that they influence each other, that society is modified by the art whose product it is, and that art in a given society confronts a structure which presupposes many of its characteristics, but also that every change in one sphere is linked to change in the other and calls forth a further change in the system in which the change originates. The statement above shows that the changes will be further and further and it, of course, for its occasion of change has its own characteristics that we can see in the work of arts. The example can be seen in Shakespeare's works. His works are influenced by some issues of Elizabethan society since they were in Elizabethan era.

William Shakespeare lived in (1564-1616). This age was Elizabethan era which was exactly (1558-1603). In sixteenth century, the kings dominated in England (Ford, 1991: 15).

It, of course, influenced the writers' works at that time, specifically William Shakespeare. His works talked more about the life of the kings or the noblemen and the kingdom's life, for examples *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*. Those titles become the names of the main characters.

The political condition was one of the prominent issues relating to the government or kingdom's life at that time. Since Queen Elizabeth did not have son, the crown would be another problem when the Queen was dead. There would be "abortive coup" when people tried to get the power to be the king. It can be said that fighting and war was not a strange thing. It was actually preceded by the history point of view that in 1030 Roman Empire invaded England so violence at that time was "human".

The cultural condition in Elizabethan era was indicated, one of them, by the "Globe Theatre" or the theatre which go around. This kind of theatre was still showed the very patriarchy system. As we know that in Shakespeare era that the rights of women in England was very limited. Although in fact, for over four decades, England was ruled by a female monarch, most women had little power over the direction of their lives. Most writings about the life of the family during this time in history centered around the traditional patriarchal paradigm that of "domination and submission." Just as the kingdom was ruled by a monarch, the father and head of the household ruled over his wife and children.

The economic and social condition also have an important role to the idea of Shakespeare's work. In connection with capitalism London was a violent place. The more serious rioting occurred in rural areas against enclosure of property by landlords and the crown. This type of protest was very popular during Shakespeare's career, especially from 1590-1610. The life of rural society or country side was affected by feudalism in England. As Ford (1991: 27) said that Elizabethan country life kept in the main to the pattern left by feudalism: the same manorial organization, the same common field system of farming. And the government, backed by public opinion, sought to preserve these arrangement by holding labourers to the land by force of law. On the other side, generally the economic condition got many benefits by the trans-atlantic trading although it was still in capitalism.

Shakespeare's age was also in transition era. It was in the late of sixteenth century or medieval era where there was a strong belief in supersition, ghosts, fortune, etc. this can be seen from his works which was indicated by the appearance of ghost or witches or poison used. It was also in the early seventeenth century or renaissance era where people had their free will such as in *Macbeth* when he had to follow his ambition and his wife's to be the king

and do the witches' prophecy, then killing the king was also the choice he took as the way to be the king although blue blooded person like him had the opportunity, so still there was 'free will' - 'to be or not to be'.

Since Elizabethan period was in the Tudor era, it inherited the medieval world-view a coherent system of beliefs bearing in social order. (Ford, :18). Here there was the order of nature, it meant that if the high degree people were dead or in the downfall, the order of the society would be influenced. There would be many chaos and unstable conditions in the country or kingdom. There was a belief also that the health of a country was directly related to the goodness and moral legitimacy of its king.

Shakespeare's works portrayed several conditions of Elizabethan era. One of them is in his tragedy. There were many Shakespeare's tragedies and most of them related to the tragic flow. In relation to tragedy, according to A.C Bradley in Levin (1960: 149) the idea of Shakespearean tragedy can be seen from the number as the 'hero' (for one person) and 'hero and heroine' (for two). For example in *Macbeth*, it is only *single star* and the hero will be dead, it happens also to all his tragedies when the hero find their death.

The tragedy in Shakespeare is also concerned with persons of 'high degree' often the kings, princess, leaders. It occurred because Shakespeare lived in feudal society. Then, the tragedy is also called exceptional calamity leading to the death of man in high esteem. In his tragedy. Still Bradley in Levin (1960: 152), Shakespeare shows occasionally an abnormal condition of mind; insanity to the characters, he also introduces supernatural in his tragedy. It occurred since he was in transition era where the influence of medieval era was still strong.

Based on the explanation about society and art, issues in Elizabethan era, the Shakespeare's age and his tragedy, this paper will take *Macbeth* (one of Shakespeare's tragedies) that focuses only on its certain themes like nature and the unnatural (as the influence of medieval era), ambition (as the impact of feudal system/king or noble person that people want to be the king), and masculinity (as the influence of patriarchy system).

DISCUSSION

The writing of *Macbeth* tragedy is usually dated to 1606. The writing of *Macbeth* has correlation to the political views of King James of Scotland, who had just succeeded Elizabeth I by becoming the English monarch as well. James believed that the ruling monarch held a sacred authority that was essential to maintaining the order of the State and even the

universe. The killing of a king, regicide, was the worst of crimes because it offended God and undermined the social order. Such a murder heralded chaos and could not be justified. So that in *Macbeth* the hero face a tragic flow and the state condition goes to the chaos after the death of King Duncan by Macbeth. The regicide committed in this play leads to horrible consequences and serves as a literary representation of a universe that punishes those who defy the divine right of kings.

The next background of *Macbeth* writing was the correlation to James I interest in witchcraft. James I wrote a book on the subject of witchcraft, titled *Demonologie* (Beardwood, 2011:8). However, he was not sympathetic to witches: there were witch-hunts and trials under James rule in both Scotland and England, with those found guilty being put to death (usually by hanging). In this case, Shakespeare created the witches besides its medieval era influence.

The rest of the reasons behind *Macbeth* writing of course dealt with the other social condition in Elizabethan era. So that there will be limitation of the themes that represent Elizabethan era I take as the discussion here.

- **Ambition**

The first prominent theme is ambition. It has the most powerful expression in the plays that is reflected by two main characters: Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Macbeth is a general of the king's army who is at first a loyal servant. But through the play his personality changes and develops. He becomes hard and more ambitious. The reason is from the weird sisters/the witches and, of course, his wife. In Act 1, scene 3 the witch says: *All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter*. Then in Act 1, scene 5, Lady Macbeth says *The raven himself is hoarse, That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan, under my Battlement.....* So that Macbeth's ambition leads him to the murder of Duncan, he really wants to be the king and his wife wants to be the queen. It has correlation to the Elizabethan era that King held a power for everything so becoming the king was a big honour.

We can see also in the quotations In Act 1, scene 3, we can see that Macbeth is already imagined about the murder,

*...My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is
But what is not.*

Finally, Macbeth did the murder, as in Act 2, scene 2 Macbeth says *I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear a noise?* Here we can say that the murderer has to be very ambitious and this is exactly what Macbeth is like.

Macbeth's tragic flaw is taken to be his ambition, that he himself identifies as in Act 1, scene 7, Macbeth says

*If it were done when 'tis done,
then 'twere well,
It were done quickly: if the assassination,
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch,
With his surcease success; that but this blow,
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases,
We still have judgment here; that we but teach,
Bloody instructions, which, being taught....*

He actually realized what he has done will have consequence but his ambition always drives him until the next of the Acts he challenges the fate by ordering the murders of Banquo and Fleance. He fails to achieve the outcome he desires, as Fleance escapes and Banquo's ghost haunts him at the banquet. So Macbeth finally comes to his tragic flaw.

- **Masculinity**

The next prominent theme is about masculinity. It happened because there was a patriarchal system in the Elizabethan era, although Elizabeth was the Queen, but the society still considered man more dominant. In almost every act, the actors say something about it. For instance, when Lady Macbeth persuades her husband to kill Duncan in act 1, scene 7, "*When you durst do it, then you were a man; and, to be more than what you were, you would be so much more the man.*" It indicates "man" will be "the real man" if he can do more than what he can. Another example is in act 4, scene 3, where Macduff heard that his family was killed, Malcolm says "*Dispute it like a man.*" Macduff answers "*I shall do so; but I must also feel it as a man...*" Malcolm "*Be this the whetstone of your sword: let grief convert to anger; blunt not the heart, enrage it.*" In case a man has to be a hero. For Macduff, he is a hero for his wife, his children and his king / country.

Then, in Macbeth's first appearance, covered with blood and receiving high praise for the slaughter of others, indicates the acceptable patterns of behaviour, which governs the "masculine" side of this world. We can see it in Act 1, scene 2 below:

*For brave Macbeth--well he deserves that name!--
 Disdaining fortune, with his brandished steel
 Which smoked with bloody execution,
 Like valour's minion
 Carved out his passage till he faced the slave,
 Which ne'er shook hands nor bade farewell to him
 Till he unseamed him from the nave to th' chops,
 And fixed his head upon our battlements.*

The quotation above shows that Macbeth receives the title of "brave Macbeth" amongst his friends for his role and responsibility.

- **Nature and the Unnatural**

In medieval times, it was believed not only to the existence of the witches but also the belief that the health of a country was directly related to the goodness and moral legitimacy of its king. If the King was good and just, then the nation would have good harvests and good weather. If there was political order, then there would be natural order.

So that the "Nature and the Unnatural" become one of the prominent themes here. Almost all the play is about Macbeth unnaturalness. Macbeth kills his king, his friend, a woman and her children. In the end he is destroyed when nature itself appears to become unnatural: trees walk and Macbeth has to fight a man not of woman born. We can see in act 2, scene 4, An old man says "*'Tis unnatural, even like the deed that's done. On Tuesday last, a falcon, towering in her pride of place, was by a mousing owl hawk'd at, and kill'd.*" Then Ross answers:

*"And Duncan's horses (a thing most strange and certain) beauteous and swift,
 the minions of their race, turn'd wild in nature,
 broke their stalls, flung out, contending 'gainst obedience,
 as they would make war with mankind."*

It can be seen also previously that the witches give the signs of unnaturalness. As Banquo describes them act 1, scene 3, "*What are these, so wither'd and so wild in their attire that look not like inhabitant o' the earth. And yet are on't?*", and "*You should be women, and yet your beards forbid me to interpret that you are so.*"

Then, in Act 1, scene 5, the witches do seem to have access to 'more ... than mortal knowledge', but the destruction caused by their use of this knowledge and makes them in a very negative light. Their knowledge even really influences Macbeth to drive his ambition to be the king by the murder.

That is why the nature and unnatural play important role in the Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and the unnaturalness becomes one of the impact of Macbeth tragic flow. It is one of the signs of the hero's tragic flow.

CONCLUSION

Based on the description above, we can say that the writers as the person in a society will create a work of art that is close to the social condition where they live. Shakespeare was living in Tudor dynasty, it was in Elizabethan era, his works specifically his tragedy was portraying the issues in his society. Some themes of his tragedy reflected the issues of Elizabethan era since he lived and created his works in this era.

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