

KING LEAR AS A STUDY OF SENILE DEMENTIA

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Abstract

Senility or senile dementia is a term originally used for long-term and gradual decline in cognitive abilities of people aged above 65 years (Homma, 2001). The recent literature indicates that dementia is growing rapidly and its prevalence rises with rising age, normally above 65 years (Handels, et al., 2014; Moon et al., 2016). Burns and Iliffe (2009) and Hersch & Falzgraf (2007) in their work highlight that people with dementia also suffer from emotional instability, lack of motivation, language difficulties and memory loss in daily life functioning. Moreover, the report prepared by Alzheimer's Australia (April 2008) in collaboration with Melbourne Neuropsychiatry Centre claims that dementia is normally hard to diagnose as it possesses various characteristics that are part of normal ageing conditions. Various studies also indicate that the onset of dementia spoils relationships and changes intimacy into isolation as caretakers also respond to the detachment they face (Hellström, & Torres, 2016; Shanley et al., 2011; Wuest, Ericson, & Stern, 1994). Previous literature has also shown that people suffering from dementia have many behavioral and psychological expressions as they display inappropriate verbal and physical behaviors (Cohen-Mansfield, 2004; Senanarong et al., 2004). With growing age, people face personality changes as well as they lose motivation, are irritable, show self-centered behaviors, express insensitive behaviors and many others (Kar, 2009; Lishman, 1987).

Introduction

Shakespeare is known for writing about human nature and psychology as some of his themes in his plays. Physical and mental suffering; human nature; chaos and confusion; and characters' psychological and inner development and trauma are some of the predominant themes in King Lear (Aziz et al., 2018). According to Bucknill (1964), Shakespeare's plays are studied and renowned for the "psychological knowledge displayed" meaning thereby that the abnormal psychological behavior appealed to Shakespeare's attention, making it a theme of his work.

William Shakespeare is the only non-psychiatrist who has enjoyed the status of being referred to and quoted by many famous psychiatrists like Conolly, Bucknill (1964) and many other psychiatrists of the 19th century. He is known for understanding human nature. Even some syndromes have been named after his characters viz., Othello and Ophelia (Ottilingam 2007).

The plot of King Lear, a famous Shakespearean masterpiece, revolves around circumstances caused by the dementia of King Lear. The play shows how great a capacity dementia has to dismantle the very foundations of a family or even a kingdom. According to Jing & Li (2025), the play presents a critique of governance and power, and depicts the way Lear's pronouncement to give away his kingdom on the basis of flattery results in suffering and chaos. Commonly, senility is referred to as dementia. According to the National Institute on Aging (2017), dementia is not an ailment. Rather, it is a term employed to refer to symptoms of improper behavior of brain cells. These cells can affect the thinking process, recalling some piece of information as well as the communication process. Most commonly, senile dementia is related to a person's loss of intellectual ability linked with old age. Thus, observing King Lear from the lens of senile dementia is worthy of study.

King Lear is famous for being studied for the madness of King Lear, but the real problem is not the madness, rather it is the senile dementia from which the character of King Lear suffered. Moreover, madness in our society is often characterized by a huge variety of inappropriate behaviors and not necessarily due to any 'clinical insanity'. Dementia is basically an umbrella term under which lie a variety of symptoms like impaired thinking and memory.

Dementia is made up of two Latin words *de* (meaning out) and *mentia* (meaning the mind), which means out of mind or a severe loss of memory. In French language, there was a word in 1381, known as *demence* but today it is understood as the loss of an individual's ability to participate in their social and environmental functioning. This definition is given by the Diagnostic and statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (1994). According to them, this is a disease, and it has an interesting history. Historically, in 2000-1000 BC, the Egyptians and the Greeks were aware of the problem of memory loss with the advancing of age. In the Chinese culture, the phrase *Zhi Dai Zheng* is used for dementia, whereas for senile dementia, the phrase *Lao Ren Zhi Dai Zhong* was used and according to them, it is associated with complete muteness as well as lack of reaction to anything going on around old people. But it is not compulsory that every old person gets this loss of memory because it is associated with some elderly people, not all.

Shakespeare depicted this through his characters' plays like 'Macbeth', "As you like it" and "King Lear" around 1606- all displaying symptoms of dementia. Moreover, Senile Dementia is progressive by nature, which means it gets worse with the passage of time or advancing age. Following are the symptoms of Senile dementia:

- Difficulty in making decisions
- Confusion
- Repeating things
- Hallucinations
- Impairment in reasoning
- Mood changes (easily getting upset)
- Trouble with expressing thoughts
- Hallucinations
- Severe loss of memory

Human Behavior: The Central Theme in King Lear

Cordelia's first speech is very important in the sense that it shows the play's central theme when she says that she loves the king, her father, according to their relationship as he "begot", "bred", and "loved" her. Consequently, she obeys, loves, and honors him most. She wonders what her sisters' husbands have if they claim to love all. She justifies her claim by saying that she has reserved half of her love for the husband she would marry and who would marry her, who would take care of her through thick and thin.

The whole story revolves around these lines. As the play starts, King Lear, who is almost 80 years of age, is tired of being the king. He wants to retire from his services. Thus, he chooses to distribute his kingdom among his heirs who are three daughters, childishly based on the love they have for their father rather than their abilities, strengths, or skills. The two elder daughters are married, whereas the youngest one i.e., Cordelia, is unmarried. However, the elder two daughters show their exaggerated love in a flattering language to their father and receive what they want to, but the youngest daughter, Cordelia expresses her love in true words, as mentioned in the above lines as her honest nature does not allow her to make any false diplomatic protestations of love.

But as King Lear was expecting more from her, he banished her from his property and distributed the kingdom between the two elder daughters. On the other hand, Cordelia was married to the Duke of France, without any dowry. After the distribution of the kingdom, King Lear goes out and where a storm starts which shows that nature is also angry at the wrong decision of the king. In the storm, King Lear realizes his mistake and wrong decision after listening to the speech of the fool.

If the language of the play, “King Lear”, is analyzed, we can notice the shift in the language of the play which is sophisticated at the start as compared to the ending, and so is the perspective of King Lear, which changes with the passage of time as well. At the play’s end, the king sees the youngest daughter, who comes back, for the first time, and observes her tears closely, which he never did before. But now it was too late. Cordelia died because of her elder sisters and the two elder sisters fought each other for one man they both love and thus killed one sister. That man also died in war and by hearing this, the younger daughter also commits suicide. Watching his three daughters dying, King Lear also dies. The topic of retribution as well as requited love are the two concepts which are highlighted as the socially expected consequences for the characters in the true spirit of a timeless tragedy.

At the start, Lear is a drained and somewhat ill-advised King preparing for stepping down. Though, when the two daughters confess elusive sums of love for their father, they are given huge fortunes for the amount of love they confess. But when Lear’s paranoia pushes him to exile, his selfless, honest and sincere youngest daughter, Cordelia, he sees his heart and he soon ends up fighting himself symbolically. As Lear realizes that he has given his power to his children out of misplaced anger and indecisiveness, out of frustration, he steps out into the storm, which is quite dangerous. When he is in the storm, he goes through his behavior with Cordelia. It was that moment when the Fool enters the stage and spells out the reason for Lear’s confusion and mental trauma and indicates the only voice of reason throughout Lear’s changeover. He wants to amend what he has done, but it is too late. When Lear gets over his problems which he imposed upon himself, the Earl of Gloucester’s changeover from unawareness to understanding (after being blind) demonstrates the societal rules which were not common but suitable in an early modern age society. The idea of vengeance and unanswered love are decorated as the societal hope of importance for the ill-fated characters of a typical tragedy.

In contrast to the first image of King Lear, there is another side of his character which is revealed after the transformation towards the culmination of the play when he is settling things with Cordelia, his “tone is familiar, the word-order conversational and proselike” (Leider 47), which is equally as deep as his way of thinking about her. Leider (2013) explains the transformation of Lear in a very simple observation “for the first time, he sees his dearest daughter at close range; he notices her tears (47).” This very small thing is as much of importance to pen down as his new side after transformation. Following his hearings and misfortunes—and just as he lives the storm—the King changes into a weak common man who “now wears lenses that allow him perspicacity” (Leider 47).

Shakespeare’s depiction of Human Psychology in King Lear

As pointed out earlier, Shakespeare is celebrated for the remarkable work he has done in the literary world. However, it is through the representation of the characters like King Lear that serves as an example for the qualities of abnormal behavior of the human race. As Truskinovsky (2009, 345) says that most of the plays by “Shakespeare in general and King Lear in particular” are a source of clinical observation as well as for the treatment by many psychiatrists in the past. Most of the researchers agree on the point that King Lear’s mental description is close to life.

Most of the researchers (Bucknill, 1964; Truskinovsky, 2002; and Becker, 2010) think that Shakespeare's uncanny ability to infer human mind and thinking is due to his keen observation of the people and their minds. Not only this, Shakespeare also judges the human mind by noticing his surroundings. Thus, he is best regarded as a social scientist. In one of his articles, "Shakespeare's Psychopathological Knowledge," Edgar (1935), cites a quote by Bucknill (2009), saying that Shakespeare excels not only all other poets but all other writers in his psychological understanding.

Some of the researchers think that Lear was mad from the start of the play, whereas others say it was due to the circumstances around him which turned him mad. As well as the point of his old age is also important in this aspect. As Bucknill (2009) says

The critics have not seen symptoms of insanity in King Lear's character. Until the reasoning power itself alienates as represented through his mental illness that insanity is a trait of intellectual and not a trait of an emotional part of nature.

When looking at the emotional side of the character of King Lear, we should also take into consideration the theme of revenge as well because it is the force of revenge which prompts Lear to banish Cordelia and Kent because they refused to obey their king as Cordelia was not able to flatter and Kent took her side. This was his effort to maintain his influence and authority. In addition, it is the best portrayed character to show the mental illness of the character and thus is one of the best pieces of literature of all times.

The one phrase which describes the whole downfall of King Lear and his family is "Reason in madness, madness in reason" which is actually a twofold paradox. Lear's nature and the family of greatness is made explicit when they are torn apart and different conflicts emerge among them. When power is given to a person who cannot control the essence of it, or who is not wise enough, or who is not in a stable condition or age for it, chaos is the result as shown in this play. To repeat, the irony clarifies the way the normal characters act with imprudence, and those turned mentally unstable display greater vision and understanding and act normally. The perfect example that describes this dual paradox to be true is the character of King Lear. When he was mad, he exiled his honest daughter and his best advisor, but then after transformation resulting from disillusionment, he sees his error and shows up as a King as well as a father.

In the play's beginning, the King makes a terrible mistake and the biggest error of the entire play. When Cordelia frustrates his wish to be flattered with buttery language for showing her love and affection for him, he banishes her and denies her right to any part of his empire. A line from Act I demonstrates Cordelia being honestly explaining to her father when she says that though he has "begot", "bred", and "loved" her, she would not marry "like her sisters to love" her father wholly (Act I, scene I, Lines 94-104).

Cordelia, in these lines, openly expresses her love for King Lear and shows that her love for him is as true as befits a daughter, but Lear at that time, is so unsighted with the flattering language of his other two daughters that Cordelia's words are of no use and trigger his anger instead. As a result, he divides his kingdom between his two elder daughters and banishes Cordelia from his kingdom, and calls her an unfaithful daughter who, in reality, was the faithful daughter. It is clear here that King Lear shows an impulsive decision-making on the bases of his emotions only, and when his most loyal friend, Kent, tries to advise him, Lear banishes him as well, which is a sign of his poor decision-making and judgement typical of dementia. One more dialogue from Act I depicts Kent attempting to reason with Lear:

“Kill thy physician, and thy fee bestow
Upon the foul disease. Revoke thy gift,
Or whilst I can vent clamor from my throat.”
I’ll tell thee thou dost evil.” (Act I, Scene 1, Lines 187-190)

The Earl of Kent openly requests him to take back his gifts from the Dukes of Albany and Cornwall, because Kent, being a person with reason, realizes it will be a chaos and the death of Lear’s kingdom. Lear does not listen to him and acts like a man with mood swings and full of anger. Eventually, at the end of the play, Lear realizes his mistake and shows up as a better King and a doting father.

Hallucinations is one of the symptoms of Senile dementia, and there are many examples in King Lear where we see this symptom e.g., we see Edgar referring to “the foul fiend” haunting the King acting as “poor Tom” in a nightingale’s voice; and “Hoppedance” crying in his “belly for two white herring.” (Kind Lear, Act 3, Scene 6).

Hearing unreal voices is another symptom of serious mental ailment associated with old age. People in the early days considered this a part of mental illness, but with the development of science and technology, it is now proven that it is a medical problem known as dementia, which is the source of mental illness and which resulted in the hearing of different sounds or voices by Lear (Ottilingam, 2007).

Hallucinations are also obvious in King Lear’s speech that he makes in Act 3 where he imagines many creatures in conflict with each other with full rage and fury in front of his mind’s when he refers to “the fretful elements” bidding “the wind blow the earth into the sea”, or swelling “the curlèd waters” so that “things might change or cease.” Here he is shown to be tearing his grey locks like a madman. Man, according to Lear, in his world struggles against “conflicting wind and rain.” His hallucinations continue to be displayed in these lines:

“This night, wherein the cub-drawn bear would
couch,
The lion and the belly-pinchèd wolf
Keep their fur dry, unbonneted he runs
And bids what will take all.” (Act 3, Scene 1, Line 4-17)

Act 4 also has a speech by King Lear demonstrating hallucinations:

“That fellow handles his bow like a crow-keeper:
Draw me a clothier’s yard. Look, look, a mouse!
Peace, peace; this piece of toasted cheese will do’t. There’ my gauntlet;
I’ll prove it on a giant. Bring up the brown bills.
O, well flown, bird; i’t’h’ clout, i’t’h’ clout: hewgh!
Give the word.” (Act 4, Scene 6, Line 91)

Lear also in many instances throughout the play, talks to himself which is considered as a symptom of dementia. The patient imagines a person who is not actually present, but the person thinks and talks to that person as if he is present there in reality.

“His talk with nobody”
“Who is it that can tell me who I am?”
“O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven
Keep me in temper: I would not be mad!”
“I am a very foolish fond old man,

Fourscore and upward, not an hour more or less;
And, to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind.”
“You must bear with me:
Pray you now, forget and forgive: I am old and foolish.”

Quick mood swings, change of mood or easily getting upset are also associated with dementia.

As the Earl of Kent requests Lear to show compassion for Cordelia, he ‘explodes’ and banishes both Cordelia and the Earl of Kent from his monarchy. It is difficult to mention the place in the play to point out when King Lear becomes mad or ill because this is not madness, rather, it is senile dementia and according to the symptoms of senile dementia, it is with the old age and eventually shows up rather than just like other diseases because it seems normal. When Kent tried to advise Lear and asked him to reconsider his decision, Lear’s mood swing makes him banish Kent, as well, who was his loyal friend as shown in the lines:

“Peace, Kent!
Come not between the dragon and his wrath.
I loved her most and thought to set my rest
On her kind nursery.
Hence and avoid my sight! [To Cordelia]”
(Act 1, Scene 1, Line 120)

When Lear’s eldest daughter, Goneril, persuades him to decrease his entourage of attendants and knights, he rants thus:

“Degenerate bastard, I'll not trouble thee”
(Act 1, Scene 4, Line 242)
“Detested kite, thou liest!”
(Act 1, Scene 4, Line 251)
“Is it not as this mouth should tear this hand
For lifting food to't? But I will punish home.
No, I will weep no more. In such a night
To shut me out! Pour on, I will endure.”
(Act III, Scene 4, Lines, 15-18)

Confusion is another sign of dementia. Lear fails to recognize his daughter Cordelia and sees her as the deceased Duke of Gloucester:

“You are a spirit, I know; when did you die?”
(Act 4, Scene 7, Line 48)

Lear conveniently understands his cognitive complications and perplexities. He expresses his confusion and bafflement in his words thus:

“Pray do not mock me;
I am a very foolish old man,
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less;
And, to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
Me thinks I should know you and know this man,
Yet I am doubtful: for I am mainly ignorant
What place this is; and all the skill I have
Remembers not these garments, nor I know not

Where I did lodge last night.”

(Act 4, Scene 7, Line 60)

“LEAR Am I in France?”

(Act 4, scene 7, line 75)

King Lear’s elder daughters were familiar with his condition and growing disease caused by senility since Act 1, Scene 1, as referred to in these lines:

Goneril “You see how full of changes his age is...

He always loved our sister most,

and with what poor judgment

he hath now cast her off appears too grossly.”

Regan “Tis the infirmity of his age,

yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself.”

(Act 1, Scene 1, Lines 313-318)

Impairment in reasoning is observed in Scene 1 when King Lear is distributing his empire:

“Which of you shall we say doth love us most,

That we our largest bounty may extend.”

Apathy or lost interest in activities is depicted in these lines:

“Mean time we shall express our darker purpose.

Give me the map there. Know that we have divided

In three our kingdom; and ’tis our fast intent

To shake all cares and business from our age,

Conferring them on younger strengths, while we

Unburden’d crawl toward death.” (Act-I)

Lear, while going through his emotional suffering, pronounces his elder daughters as animals due to their ruthless lack of care and selfishness and refers to them as "pelican daughters"-

We see a Lear with increased association with his emotions thus "A poor, infirm, weak and despised old man." He deserves to be consoled. The likeness of the man that Lear explains perfectly fits his situation: "I am a man more sinned against than sinning." This line is so tragic and sad, too. In the beginning, we see a mighty and self-opinionated man and, in this scene, a mentally upset, old man sinking in miserable self-indulgence.

"Is it the fashion that discarded fathers should have thus little mercy on their flesh."

"Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?"

(King Lear Act 1, Scene 6, Lines 74-76)

This is a logical and existential side to the daughters and their behavior.

Madness is the name given in the past times to the people who do not act normal according to the societal norms but with the advancement of science and technology, it is discovered that senile dementia is a disease which has some symptoms to which people can act like a mad person but in reality, this is senile dementia as the definition and symptoms of senile dementia are given in the start and by collecting and analyzing all the evidences from the text of King Lear discussed above, it is clear that King Lear was going through senile dementia. Shakespeare portrayed him so well that the play, King Lear, can undoubtedly be considered as a case study in the disease written much in advance of the disease was discovered and named.

When looking at the emotional side of the character of King Lear, we should also take into consideration the theme of revenge as well because it is the force of revenge which prompts Lear

to banish Cordelia and Kent as if they refused to obey their king as Cordelia was not able to flatter and Kent took her side. This was his effort to maintain his influence and authority. In addition, it is the best portrayed character to show the mental illness of the character and thus is one of the best pieces of literature of all times.

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