

# Bard of Avon - William Shakespeare

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We have gathered here today for a birthday celebration - not of a political leader, not a superstar from Bollywood or Kollywood, not a sports star advertising Pepsi and Cola but a Writer. This writer lived four and half centuries ago. He lived in a far away land which most of us have seen only in our School Atlas. He hailed from a culture quite alien to ours. He wrote in a language which often sounds incomprehensible — to the native speakers, leave alone non-native Indian speakers of English as a second language. But still, every Indian seems to cherish the memory of Shakespeare. How has it been possible?

Considering the global scenario, this seems quite incredible! The million dollar question in the mind of every Shakespeare devotee, is will he or won't he? "Will he survive the test of time or will he be forgotten like his contemporaries Ben Johnson and Kyd?" if you would like to put it as a Hamletian dilemma.

Different professors give different answers to this question. According to Professor Douglas Brelis from the University of Texas at Austin, "Shakespeare will always be with us of course, but eventually, he will be what Geoffrey Chaucer has eventually become - a brilliant author, whose works can be read intelligently in the original, only by few people."

Alan Craven, Professor Emeritus at UTSA,

however, offers a different perspective. He says, "the enduring popularity of Shakespeare is a testimony to his relevance," additionally he has made major contribution not only to the English language but to the way in which people think and behave. Shakespeare has quite literally shaped society in many ways, making Shakespeare relevant in a very real way.

What makes Shakespeare relevant in a real way in India? Why do we still rush to buy tickets whenever a Shakespeare theatre group visits the country? Why do we have adaptations even in Tamil, of Shakespeare plays the Romeo and Juliet or King Lear? The answer is simple. As Gull Stoker puts it, Shakespeare addresses some of the burning issues today - for example, class division, racism, sexuality, intolerance, the role and status of women, crime, war, death, disease...

Intolerance is the word bandied about, used and abused and misused in the political scenario today. We are branded as an intolerant nation. But Hindus through the Muslim Shrine Nagore Dargha, Muslims supply flowers regularly to Hindu temples. Many Hindus never miss the annual festival at Velankanni Church. We celebrate Deepavali or Pongal, Idd or Christmas with equal fervour. But still we call ourselves intolerant because it pleased the powers that be. The media blows up trivial incidents out of proportion and creates an illusion.

Shakespeare depicts religious intolerance through many of his characters – Malvolio the Puritan, Shylock the Jew. In the Merchant of Venice, Antonio and Bassanio are the so called ‘good’ characters and Shylock is the ‘villain’ so to say an epitome of intolerance. But look at his agonized self defence,

“If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?”

Intolerance in a different form is rampant in our society today. Sons and daughters cannot tolerate their old parents. And old parents prefer to settle down in old age homes rather than be tortured by their offspring. When Cordelia says she has ‘nothing’ to say, King Lear shouts in anger, “Nothing will come of nothing.” But later when Goneril and Regan, his ‘beloved’ daughters, who praised him to the skies, chase him out mercilessly into the raging storm, Lear realizes his folly and screams.

“How sharper than a Serpent’s tooth, it’s to have a thankless child”.

Our heart goes out in sympathy to the old man. How we wish there had been old age homes in Shakespeare’s times’!

Yet another form of racism is raising its ugly head in India today. Our national anthem glorifies Bharat as the union of several states:

“Punjaba sindhu gujarata Maratha Dravida  
Utkala Vanga Vindhya Himachala Yamuna  
Ganga Vuchala Jaladhitanenga. But today  
an Assamese cannot tolerate a Behari; a UP  
wallah tortures a Manipuri.

Shakespeare’s “The Tempest” forewarns us of this sentiment.

Prospero, the celebrated Duke of Milan, the magician par excellence, is the colonizer, usurping the island where Caliban, the colonized reigned supreme. No wonder he cries in frustration,

“You taught me to speak

And I learnt to curse!”

Scholars still are unable to find an explanation for Iago’s animosity towards Othello, the Moor – what is termed as “motive hunting of motiveless malignity”. Was it because Othello was a black —?

In spite of the soul filling song of American Negroes, “we shall overcome, some day, in spite of Obama’s thundering success as American President for two terms, still, negroes suffer in many pockets in the United States of America.

Above all, the ISIS is a classic example of a small group of fanatics, determined to demolish the whole of civilization to set up their own empire of horror – shooting thousands of innocent people in public; bombing crowded places where thousands gather; annihilating without rhyme or reason. Does this not remind you of Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar? Caesar was stabbed, not once, but several times, not by one, but several of his so called friends and he died moaning, “ You too Brutus then fall Caesar” when he saw his trusted friend Brutus, stabbing him. Or take the case of Macbeth who went murdering one after another because of his unbridled ambition – people who had never harmed him, people who had never suspected him.” But just as

a Mark Antony emerged to espouse the cause of Caesar, let us hope, a great hero will arise to end this terrorism of all terrorisms!

Feminism has been a dominant issue in the twentieth century in India we are clamouring for 33% reservation for women, a significant place in the Cabinet and Parliament. We pride ourselves of having had a woman President, a woman Prime Minister, and several women Chief Ministers. In a society the tables are turned and girls today are more demanding than boys in the matrimonial scenario. They do not think twice about rejecting proposals from men; nor do they worry about seeking divorce.

I wonder if you would agree with one if I say that Shakespeare's heroines also displayed features of feminism though the term 'feminism' was not used by him. Consider Viola in Twelfth Night or Rosalind in As You Like It. Against all odds, they put on the disguise of a man and woo their lovers and confidently march forward towards happy marriage. They belong to the category of feminists who live and let live. Lady Macbeth is a feminist par excellence but she dominated her husband and goads him on to commit murder after murder. Ultimately she ends up, as a psychiatric wreck, wondering if all the perfumes of Arabic would wash the blood off her hands.

Cleopatra, belongs to a class by herself.

"Age cannot wither, nor custom stale their infinite variety."

She may be called the tragic flaw in Mark Antony's life. Like a sorceress, she entices

him back from the call of duty. And ultimately their love is no poignant, so powerful, that it leads them to their death. But what a difference between Romeo and Juliet who also die for each other!

This brings us to another theme of Shakespeare's, which is as relevant today – the issue of love, there are several kinds of love depicted in Shakespeare, which find their parallels in today's world. For instance, love that fails as in the case of Ophelia – She dies because she lacks courage and confidence. Juliet is forced to die due to the enmity of the Montagues and Capulets. Cleopatra chooses to die for the sake of love. We have already seen cases of love leading to happy married life. Shakespeare also has a 'dig' at the difference between love before marriage and love after marriage. He says

"Men are April when they woo,  
December when they wed!"

Quite a feminist sarcasm, don't you think?

Shakespeare, the philosopher, is as relevant today as he was 450 years ago. Consider Hamlet's famous soliloquy, "To be, or not to be, that's the question".

How often have you and I felt like Hamlet?  
How often have we felt that life is too much to bear?

Or consider the famous lines from "As you like It"

All the world's a stage

And all the men mere players.

They have their exists

And their entrances.

And one man, in his time,

Plays many parts

His acts being seven ages.

You are a son to your parents, a father to your children; a husband to your wife; a boss to your colleagues; a master to your servants; a citizen in your country; a member of a club and so on.

And in your life, you pass through several stages, from an infant “making and perking in the mother’s arms” to a decrepit old man “sans eyes, sans teeth, sans everything, walking on all fours.

Isn’t this all true of us today as it was of men once in Shakespeare’s times?

Shakespeare will continue to live forever because he is the most quoted of all English writers – in fact of all world writers. The irony, in fact, is that we keep quoting Shakespeare without knowing that we are quoting Shakespeare! Here are some “quotable quotes” to shock you into awareness.

Polonius in Hamlet advises his son Laertes:

“Neither a borrower, nor a lender be.”

In the Merchant of Venice,

“All that glitters is not gold”

In Hamlet,

“there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so”.

From Henry IV Part II,

“Uneasy he is the head, that wears the crown”.

In Midsummer Night’s Dream,

“The course of true love never did run smooth”.

From As You Like It,

“Sweet are the uses of adversity,

Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,

Wears yet a precious jewel in the head,

To get back to the question, “Will Shakespeare survive the test of time?”, Is he a man for all seasons?” What is your answer? I’m sure it is a resounding “Yes; he will live forever!” We love Shakespeare because we find a “Hamlet” procrastinating in ourselves. There is a Macbeth with unbridled ambition in each one of us. There is a Lear in you and me, “more sinned against than seeming”. We quote repeatedly from Shakespeare because he says things which are perennially true; because he brings before us a panorama of people who are familiar with – Kings and clowns, heroes and villains, philosophers and idiots, criminals and victims – a very colourful but neat, real world; because he deals with themes like love, jealousy, ambition, courage, confidence, impatience...” which will always continue to haunt us as long as human beings live in this world!

Thank you Shakespeare, for being there! We love you, we adore you, we worship you! We need you!

Long live Shakespeare!