



## **Heaven Mirror: The influence of the Elizabethan Worldview on Shakespearean drama.**

***Yamini Pal<sup>1</sup>, Mr. Snehashish Sarkar<sup>2</sup>***

<sup>1</sup> Bachelor of Arts-Sem-5 (Department of Arts and Humanities), Kalinga University.

<sup>2</sup> Supervisor: Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Department of English, Kalinga University, Naya Raipur.

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### **ABSTRACT :**

Elizabethan era is shaped with complex and hierarchical worldview which mainly influenced, Literature, threaten, and culture throughout. Elizabethan era is a flourishing for new beginning in literature with new ideas and achievements. Elizabethan worldwide was belief in a divinely oriented cosmic hierarchy often called "The Great chain of begin". Where God was on the top, below him angles, than humans, then animals, plants and inanimate matters. Shakespearean was a writer of his time who was deeply influenced by the beliefs, values, traditional and dramatic style of the Elizabethan periods. His work also reflects the moral idea and spiritual beliefs that were common in that era. This research paper explores how Shakespearean drama shows the common beliefs of the Elizabethan time, but they also question and sometimes challenges those ideas. By examining plays such as Macbeth, King Lear, Hamlet, Othello, and the Tempest, the study investigates how concept like divine order, fate, Kingship, human nature, and the Supernatural permeate. Shakespeare's dramatic visions. For example, Macbeths shows what happens when someone breaks the natural and political order. King Lear shows how both family and the larger world fall apart when order is lost. Hamlet raises deep question about life, death and doing what's right in a world Torn between old religious beliefs and new human ideas. The Tempest, often seen as Shakespeare's final message explores power, Forgiveness, and colonialism- all seen throughout the beliefs of the Elizabethan time.

This paper also looks at how Shakespeare's characters often struggle within themselves. Showing the bigger conflict of their time like the fight between free will & destiny, or between logic & emotion, and between natural instincts and how they were raised. Shakespeare doesn't just copy the beliefs of his time he explores their problems and doubts too. Things like prophecies, signs, madness, and ghosts in his plays shows how unsure people were about understanding the world, even though they believed it was controlled by a divine order.

By closely studying the texts and the history behind them this research shows that Shakespeare's plays are both shaped by the Elizabethan Worldview end also respond to it. His works reflects what people of that time hoped for, feared and struggled to understand as their beliefs were changing- from the clear rules of the medial world to the questioning spirits of the Renaissance.

In the end, Shakespeare's plays acted like a mirror of society, showing its values & beliefs, but also giving room to question and rethink them.

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**Keywords :** Elizabeth world view, Hierarchy, interrogation, cosmology, conflict.

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### **Introduction**

The Elizabethan Age, from the late 1500s to the early 1600s, was a time of major change in England—politically, religiously, and intellectually. As Queen Elizabeth I and later James I brought stability, people began to see the world in a very structured and ordered way. This view, known as the Elizabethan Worldview, was based on ideas from ancient philosophy, medieval religion, and Renaissance thinking. It described the universe as being carefully arranged by God, where everything had a proper place—from angels and kings down to animals and stones. This belief system was called the Great Chain of Being, and people thought that disturbing this order would bring chaos and disaster.

Shakespeare lived and wrote during this time, and his plays reflect these ideas. But his works were not just stories for entertainment they explored deep moral and spiritual questions of his era. Shakespeare's plays deal with themes like power, leadership, the soul, and the struggle between logic and emotion. This research shows that Shakespeare didn't just follow the Elizabethan worldview he also questioned it, pointed out its weaknesses, and explored its limits. His plays act like a mirror, reflecting both the high ideals of the time and the flaws of human nature. The Great Chain of Being placed everything in a strict ladder of importance: God at the top, followed by angels, humans, animals, plants, and so on. Humans were in the middle they had reason and a soul, but they were also affected by emotions and sin. People believed that keeping this order was necessary for peace, and breaking it could cause trouble in the world. Shakespeare's plays often show what happens when this order is broken: wars, deaths, or kings being overthrown. In Macbeth, for example, when Macbeth kills the king, it's not just murder it's an attack on divine order. This leads to strange and unnatural events, showing that the

world has gone out of balance. In *King Lear*, when the king gives up his throne and his daughters betray him, both the family and the kingdom fall into chaos. These stories show how strongly Shakespeare connects human actions with larger cosmic consequences.

But Shakespeare didn't only support these ideas he also left room for doubt and deeper thinking. In *Hamlet*, the main character struggles with questions about life, death, and duty. His famous line "To be or not to be" shows how unsure people were about life and morality during this time. In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare reflects on ideas like forgiveness, knowledge, and power, especially related to colonialism and justice. He does all this while still using the beliefs of his time as a background.

The use of supernatural elements like ghosts, witches, and prophecies also shows how people of the time thought about fate and destiny. But Shakespeare doesn't make these things simple. The witches in *Macbeth* give confusing messages, and the ghost in *Hamlet* might not even be telling the truth. This shows that Shakespeare was interested in the tension between free will and fate, a big issue in post-Reformation England. Shakespeare also explores political power and kingship in a thoughtful way. People in his time believed kings ruled by divine right, but Shakespeare shows that being a king also means being responsible and moral. In *Richard II*, the king is weak and loses his throne, even though he has the divine right. In *Henry IV* and *Henry V*, leadership is earned through strength, wisdom, and service to the nation, not just through bloodlines. Shakespeare shows both the beauty and the danger of power. Religion also plays a big part in his plays. After England became a Protestant country, many people still had Catholic memories or fears. Shakespeare's plays reflect this religious conflict carefully. He includes religious ideas, Bible references, and moral dilemmas but instead of giving clear answers, he focuses on human struggles like guilt, repentance, and grace.

In the end, Shakespeare's plays are full of the ideas and beliefs of the Elizabethan time. But they are not stuck in the past they are alive, open to questioning, and full of complexity. This paper argues that Shakespeare's plays are not just about showing divine order they are about exploring human nature, with all its strengths and weaknesses. His stories show the tension between the order of heaven and the imperfections of people and that's what gives his tragedies depth and meaning.

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## 1. The Great Chain of Being and Cosmic Order in Shakespeare

In the Elizabethan Age, people believed the universe had a fixed, God-given order. This belief was known as the Great Chain of Being. Everything had its place from God and angels, to kings, nobles, commoners, animals, plants, and even rocks. Breaking this order was thought to bring chaos to both nature and society. In *Macbeth*, we see this clearly. When Macbeth kills King Duncan, he breaks the natural and political order. As a result, the world itself reacts: strange darkness covers the sky in daytime, and horses are said to eat each other. These unnatural events show how serious the disturbance is. Shakespeare uses nature to reflect moral and spiritual disorder.

*King Lear* also explores this idea. Lear gives up his throne and divides his kingdom, going against the natural order of kingship and family. His daughters betray him, and soon the land is torn apart by war and terrible storms. The storm on the heath reflects Lear's inner confusion and the larger cosmic breakdown.

In *Richard II*, Shakespeare questions whether kings really have a divine right to rule if they act foolishly. Richard believes he is chosen by God, but his failure as a ruler leads to his downfall. Later plays, like *Henry IV* and *Henry V*, show how leadership should also be based on merit, wisdom, and justice not just birthright.

In all these examples, Shakespeare reflects the belief in divine order, but he also shows that it is fragile. When leaders go against their roles, or when moral duties are ignored, both nature and society fall apart.

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## 2. Fate, Free Will, and the Divine

One of the major debates in the Elizabethan period was whether people were ruled by destiny or had free will. After the Reformation, people wondered if their lives were already planned by God, or if they had the power to choose their own path. Shakespeare's plays reflect this tension. In *Hamlet*, the ghost tells Hamlet to take revenge for his father's murder. This pushes Hamlet onto a path of destiny. But throughout the play, Hamlet struggles with doubt. His famous "To be or not to be" speech shows his confusion about life, death, and moral responsibility. He keeps asking: Should I act? Should I wait? Is there a greater plan?

*Macbeth* is another powerful example. The witches give Macbeth a prophecy that he will become king. But they never tell him to murder Duncan. Macbeth decides to do that himself. His downfall is a mix of fate and his own ambition. Shakespeare shows that while destiny may give us a path, we are responsible for the choices we make. Through these characters, Shakespeare explores the balance between divine control and human freedom. His plays don't give clear answers, but they capture the anxiety of an age where old religious beliefs were being questioned.

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### 3. Kingship, Authority, and Political Morality

Kingship was a serious topic in Elizabethan England. Monarchs were believed to rule by divine right, meaning their power came from God. But Shakespeare's plays often show the problems with this belief.

In *Richard II*, the king believes he is untouchable because he rules by divine right. But he is a weak and selfish ruler, and eventually he is overthrown. Shakespeare shows that being king is not just about birth it's about character and responsibility. In *Henry IV* and *Henry V*, we see a shift. Henry IV takes the throne without divine right, but struggles with guilt. His son, Prince Hal, eventually becomes Henry V, a wise and heroic king. He wins over the people with fairness and strength. Shakespeare seems to suggest that true kingship is earned, not just inherited.

In *The Tempest*, Prospero rules a magical island. But instead of staying in control, he chooses to forgive his enemies and give up power. This act shows that real leadership is moral and merciful. Authority should bring justice, not fear. Overall, Shakespeare shows both the beauty and the danger of power. Kings must rule with wisdom and virtue, or chaos will follow.

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### 4. Supernatural as Moral and Cosmological Signifier

Elizabethans believed in signs, omens, and the supernatural. Ghosts, witches, and visions were seen as real messages from the divine world. Shakespeare uses these elements in many of his plays not just for drama, but to explore deeper truths. In *Macbeth*, the witches predict Macbeth's rise and fall. Their words are mysterious and tricky "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." They reflect a world where good and evil are hard to tell apart. Macbeth trusts their prophecy, but it leads him to murder and ruin. The supernatural here shows moral confusion. In *Hamlet*, the ghost of Hamlet's father appears with a message: seek revenge. But is this ghost from heaven or hell? Can Hamlet trust it? The ghost raises moral questions, not just plot tension. It represents the uncertain voice of the past calling for justice or perhaps for more bloodshed.

In *The Tempest*, magic is used differently. Prospero controls spirits like Ariel, but he uses magic to guide people, not harm them. In the end, he gives up magic and chooses forgiveness. The supernatural here represents harmony and divine justice. Shakespeare uses the supernatural not just for mystery, but to explore human decisions, morality, and cosmic balance.

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### 5. Human Nature and Inner Conflict

Elizabethan thinkers saw humans as a mix of reason and emotion, angels and animals. People were believed to be capable of great wisdom, but also vulnerable to sin and passion. Shakespeare's characters reflect this inner struggle. Hamlet is thoughtful and intelligent, but he cannot make decisions. He knows what is right but hesitates. His mind is full of questions about death, revenge, and morality. He shows how difficult it is to act with perfect reason in a messy world. Othello is a noble soldier, respected by many. But his deep love turns into jealousy when Iago manipulates him. His inner conflict between love and shame, trust and doubt, leads to tragedy. Shakespeare shows how emotions can overpower even the strongest people. King Lear is another example. Lear begins as a proud king who demands love and obedience. But when he is betrayed, he suffers greatly. Through pain, he gains wisdom and humility. His journey shows the human ability to change and grow even in old age. These characters make Shakespeare's plays so powerful. They reflect the strengths and weaknesses of human nature, in all its beauty and brokenness.

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### 6. Colonialism, Authority, and Forgiveness in *The Tempest*

By the end of the Elizabethan era, England was beginning to explore and colonize new lands. This brought new ideas about power, otherness, and control. *The Tempest* reflects these themes. Prospero, the rightful Duke of Milan, rules an island where he has control over Caliban, a native inhabitant, and Ariel, a spirit. Caliban is often seen as a symbol of colonized people he resents Prospero's rule, calling himself a slave. Miranda, Prospero's daughter, feels pity for Caliban, but also sees him as different.

The play raises questions about power and justice. Does Prospero have the right to rule the island? Is Caliban truly evil, or just angry at being treated unfairly? These questions reflect the early attitudes of Elizabethans toward colonized lands and peoples. In the end, Prospero chooses to forgive those who wronged him. He lets go of his magic and returns home. This act of forgiveness brings peace and restores balance. Shakespeare uses this moment to show that mercy can be stronger than revenge, and that true authority must be guided by morality.

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### Conclusion

Shakespeare lived in a time when people believed the world was ruled by order, reason, and divine justice. His plays reflect these beliefs, especially the Great Chain of Being, which placed everything in the universe in a fixed position. But Shakespeare didn't just accept these ideas he explored their limits and asked hard questions. In *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, breaking the natural order brings chaos. In *Hamlet*, fate and free will are in conflict. In *The Tempest*, power is used both to control and to forgive. Shakespeare's characters often face big moral questions: What is the right thing to do? What makes a good

leader? Is our life already planned, or do we have control? Shakespeare's plays work as a kind of mirror showing the values and fears of his time, but also showing where those values might be broken. He invites the audience to reflect on justice, power, love, duty, and what it means to be human. Even though his world was different from ours, Shakespeare's questions are still important today. We still deal with conflict between tradition and change, power and responsibility, emotion and reason. His work stays alive because it speaks to the human heart across time. The phrase "Heaven's mirror" captures the spirit of this research. Shakespeare's plays reflect the heavens that is, the divine, the moral, the cosmic but they also show the cracks caused by human actions. And in those cracks, we find truth, beauty, and understanding.

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