

# The Dimensions of the Supernatural Element in Shakespearean Plays

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**Abstract—***This study tackles the use of the supernatural element in Shakespearean plays. It attempts to identify this phenomenon and disclose the dimensions of its existence and its dramatic importance at the Shakespearean theater during the Elizabethan era the period when the supernatural element was used richly. The first section discusses methodological framework, whereas the second section studies the theoretical framework which includes the religious and historical origins of the phenomenon of the supernatural elements in the theater. The third section tackles the dramatic importance of the supernatural element in Shakespearean theater. The conclusion and the results sum up the findings of the study.*

**Index Terms—**Dimension, Phenomenon, Supernatural.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The supernatural element is the factor that causes events that man cannot control because it exceeds the level of his ability. The supernatural element is a phenomenon that forms a key element in drama since the appearance of the theater and it increases during the Elizabethan age due to the belief of the communities, then this belief decreases after the trend toward realism and naturalism. This study addresses this phenomenon in Shakespearean theater because it is rich of the use of the supernatural elements.

## II. SECTION ONE: THE METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

### A. The Problem and Importance of His Study

The supernatural element refers to the powers that cause the actions that cannot be done or controlled by normal humans because they exceed the level of their abilities. The supernatural element is an essential element that humans refer to it when they face huge events beyond their ability to understand. It is only natural that the supernatural element is used by men of religion, philosophy, literature, arts, and others through all times. Thus, the supernatural element has been used in theater

to display a dramatic effect on the audience since the inception of the theater. The supernatural element has reached the highest dramatic impact of the theater at the Elizabethan age due to the faith of the community in the supernatural powers at that time, in addition to the spread of the prevailing theory and literature about ghosts, witches, and magic. This element has declined gradually with appearance of the trends of realism and nature. A general revision of the history of theater or reading the various texts of historical eras pre-realism can show us clearly the common presence of that supernatural and metaphysical element in the forms of gods, magicians, ghosts, apparitions, witches, demons, and prophecies. These elements constitute milestones that often have a great role in the transformation of the events and the changing course of the dramatic action.

The phenomenon of the existence of supernatural elements is one of the attributes of Elizabethan theater and earlier ages, and their presence is normal for the people of these ages because they believe in their existence and effectiveness. Shakespeare belongs to the Elizabethan era and his plays are performed in front of the royal court and the whole English public.

This study deals with the phenomenon of the supernatural elements in Shakespearean theater such as the ghost in Hamlet and the witches in Macbeth where the supernatural element is very evident from the beginning of the play. The supernatural element in these two plays interferes in the texture of the dramatic actions in a way that rarely exist in any other Shakespearean text.

There are four scenes of the three witches (sisters Destiny) in the play of Macbeth where they exhibit their powers, visions, and prophecies. The play also shows the ghost of Banquo twice in one scene and the appearance of something inanimate (a dagger) that flies in the air. This dagger stands peer to the character of Macbeth or as an objective equivalence to force an opponent or a hero. There are many characters that have supernatural powers in Shakespeare's Macbeth (witches and ghost), no doubt this is a noteworthy element that controls the atmosphere of the play and has its influential effectiveness in driving the dramatic action toward escalation and more excitement and suspense. This study has been initiated to identify the phenomenon of supernatural element and the dimensions of its existence and its importance in the dramas of Shakespeare's plays.

### B. The Need for this Study

This is a precedent study because it addresses a noteworthy phenomenon in Shakespeare's plays that are not fully covered

before in a single study, so it may be considered a new addition to the knowledge of Shakespearean theater studies.

The importance of the study is evident in shedding the light on the phenomenon of the supernatural element and the disclosure of its historical, ideological, and social dimensions and its dramatic importance in Shakespeare's plays to be beneficial study to the researchers and students of this field.

The study aims to identify the phenomenon of supernatural element and reveals the dimensions of its existence and its significance in Shakespearean plays.

### *C. Limits of the Study*

This study is limited to the study of the phenomenon of supernatural element in Shakespearean plays because they are richly equipped with this element.

## III. TERM DEFINITION

### *A. Dimension*

This term is of enlightened space engineering. The pragmatic and the cognitive dimensions are marked as distinctive levels that contain the events enclosed within the message of the writer (Saeed, 1985, p. 51).

### *B. Procedure Definition*

Dimensions are the horizon of the meanings, or the connotations intended or tolerated by a single character or a single image, or a concept contained in the text or a theatrical show.

### *C. The Supernatural Element*

Philosophical terms have it that the term supernatural is: "Everything that violates the usual laws of the nature of things", and it differs from the miraculous element in that the miraculous can be achieved by challenge, whereas the supernatural cannot be achieved by any challenge or hard effort cause it is beyond human powers or knowledge. The supernatural element is considered supernatural in compare with human powers not in compare with the power of God, of course.

Supernatural elements could be mixed with the prescience or the occultism or sometimes with the destiny or Ghaib which is often mentioned in the Holly Quran:

ما كان الله ليذر المؤمنين على ما أنتم عليه حتى يميز الخبيث من الطيب" وما كان الله ليطلعكم على الغيب ولكن الله يجتبي من رسله من يشاء فأمنوا بالله "و رسله و إن تؤمنوا وتتقوا فلکم اجر عظيم

(القران الكريم سورة آل عمران آية 179)

"Allah will not leave the believers in that which you are till He shall distinguish the evil from the good. Allah will not let you see the unseen. But Allah chooses from His Messengers whom He will. Therefore, believe in Allah and His Messengers, for if you believe and are cautious there shall be for you a great wage" (Ale-Imran, p. 179).

God keeps the Ghaib or destiny unseen or unknown to human beings and no supernatural element or power can ever control destiny. Humans do not know the destiny and it is just natural that they always get worried

and afraid about it. In the middle of their way to ensure their safety from the unknown fate, they do, sometimes, depend on the supernatural element to explain events they cannot understand or make some events happen using the supernatural element such as magic, conjuration, sorcery, prophecy, and reincarnation of souls. Not revealing the Ghaib or destiny is a kind of Divine wisdom so that man would always had hope of better things to happen or trust God in all his affairs and be sure that God, and on one else, (has the keys of the unseen):

وعنده مفاتيح الغيب لا يعلمها إلا هو ويعلم ما في البر والبحر وما تسقط من ورقة إلا يعلمها ولا حبة في ظلمات الأرض ولا رطب ولا يابس إلا في كتاب مبين"

(سورة الأنعام آية 59) القرآن الكريم

"With Him are the keys of the unseen, none knows them but He. He knows that which is in the land and sea. No leaf falls except He knows it, and there is no grain in the darkness of the earth, fresh or withered, but is recorded in a clear Book" (Al-Anaam, p. 59).

Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, says that "the keys of the unseen are five known only to Allah the one God: God knows when Doomsday comes, knows how to make it rain, knows what is in the wombs, knows what you can earn tomorrow, and knows where anyone dies."

The supernatural element or power is something unlimited in comparison with the normal human capacity due to the unexplained secrets according to human perception. It is worth mentioning that doctrines and communities believe in the uncanny sensor capabilities of some special people in spiritual contact with others or with objects.

## IV. SECTION TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### *A. The Religious and Historical Origins of the Phenomenon of the Supernatural Element Theater*

Theater is always associated with the culture of its intended audience with the intention of getting closer to identify the taste of the audience and to ensure the targeted interaction. When the author produces a text in which he addresses general problems, the text undoubtedly will contain something of the traditions, customs, and habits of the author's community, even if he restricts himself to the highest degree of abstraction. He cannot help keeping some of the social and historical images and concepts and this is clearly shown in the texts of the Elizabethan era and specifically those texts of Shakespeare.

Authors of that time and all times write their piece of work to get the desirable satisfaction of the audience or readers. At the same time influencing them and attracting their attention. One of the oldest means of attraction is the use of the supernatural element in the structure of the play.

Researchers and anthropologists have it that "human society in general believes in the supernatural powers and metaphysical forces to the extent that some primitive societies lead rituals specially to ensure satisfaction of the supernatural forces and to avoid its outrage" (Qais, 1981, p. 94). It seems that the supernatural element is widely believed in and it

is very important for the integration of the theatrical show since the beginning of theater in ancient Greece before more than 2500 years. This dramatic manifestation is related to the prevailing pagan religions at that time.

This makes theater ritual manifestations that include simulation of gods and heroes, and the embodiment of their legendary tales and the required appearance of the supernatural elements and forces. This case extended to the Elizabethan era, the era of William Shakespeare.

Nowadays, a lot of people still believe in the supernatural element, particularly what is associated with religious rites. Real believers in God are immune to irrational or illogical explanations. They relate everything to God's will and commands.

In ancient religions, supernatural elements are associated with legends which are one of the oldest forms of oral literature. The legend is the sacred story of the faith of its community. Researchers in anthropology have it that "the primitive origin of human world is controlled by metaphysical and magical the dogmas and depends on rituals not necessarily committed to the logic of empirical and rational reality" (Ibid, p. 11). This means that it is difficult to explain or it has no logical explanation in the first place. However, the influence of the supernatural element is evident in the communities and apparent in their culture. Others think that "the main purpose of legends is to provide the reasons behind many of the phenomena seen by primitive man in his real world" (Al-Sawaah, 1989, p. 11). A legend is man's first attempt to interpret and understand what is happening around him from the phenomena of nature and incidents of destiny in the pre-scientific explanation period. A good representation of the supernatural element in culture is in literature. Todorov identifies three functions for the supernatural element:

1. Pragmatic function; the supernatural element is impressive and scary, or in the least, it baffles and confuses the reader
2. Semantic function concerning the meaning and significance for the supernatural element expresses its own self
3. Structural function for the supernatural element enters in the evolution of the narrative and this function attributed to every literary work more than the previous two functions (Tzvetan, 1970, p. 165).

In theater, there are many evidences of using the supernatural element in literary works before and after the Elizabethan era. Sophocles's Oedipus is the best example of classic old theatrical texts where the prophecy of Tiresias, the soothsayer, plays a key role in the transformation of events. That prophecy constitutes a core event from which all other events flow. It inspires all the characters of the play. The presence of the Sphinx or just talking about his supernatural powers enforces Oedipus's power when he surpasses the Sphinx.

Oedipus play is an example, but it is worth also considering the works of Aeschylus and Euripides which are full of supernatural elements such as the emergence of the gods and prophecies of soothsayers. Whereas the cruel bloody brutality of the plays of the Roman writer Seneca has its shades over the Elizabethan theater, theater rises again

after quite a long period of cutting out during the Middle Ages. English theater develops gradually from the religious drama based on miracle or mystery plays of the Middle Ages that were performed in or near the churches using events of religious history of Christianity. The subject of these plays dealt with things such as "the disobedience of Adam and Eve, Abraham and Isaac, Noah and the great flood, events in the life of Christ, and so on. Although the Miracle plays were serious and religious in intention, they gave way to English comedy" (Thorenly and Gwaneth, 1984 [1968], p. 20). Then, the morality plays of the Medieval and early Tudor period, which were a type of allegory, in which the protagonist is met by personifications of various moral attributes who try to prompt him to choose a Godly life over one of evil. The subjects of these plays were virtues such as truth or bad qualities such as revenge or hate (Ibid, p. 21). It should be mentioned that the supernatural element has been taken into account since the early inception of the theater in old times. This is evident in allocating part of the stage for the entrance or appearance of the supernatural element and is considered a part of the usual theatrical techniques used at that times, this is obvious just by inspecting the designs and buildings of Greek, Romanian, and Elizabethan theaters.

The techniques used in these times are called the divine machine, Dues Machine, a Latin expression literally means God out of the machine, and in sense of theater, it is the divine intervention or trick of the play and the divine machine is a technology that was used in the Greek theater and the Roman where the stage was equipped with a machine through which "God comes down and resolves intractable problems of the play" (Mary and Kassab, 2006, p. 68). This shows the importance of the presence of the supernatural elements in theatrical performances in that time.

Regarding the importance and necessity of the existence of the supernatural element in a theatrical text, Allardyce Nicoll says: "The royal blood hero was not the only way used by old dramatists to ensure a global public spirit in their plays but also that there are many other obvious ways in both Greek and English plays, one of these is the demonstration of the supernatural element. This element can immediately serve creating an atmosphere that can never be done by abstract individual incidents on stage" (Allardyce, 1992, pp. 154-155). One can identify three functions for the supernatural element in the theater:

1. Ensuring the sovereignty of the universal spirit
2. Creating an atmosphere of ambiguity, peculiarity, surprise, and astonishment
3. Pushing forward the dramatic action for the supernatural element can easily change the course of events.

Bearing in minds that the problem of the presence and influence of the supernatural element depends on three key points:

1. The extent of the audiences' belief in the existence of the supernatural element
2. The writer's ability of convincing and persuasion about the necessity of the supernatural element in the play
3. The power of creating illusions done by the supernatural contribution in making the general psychological atmosphere.



## V. SECTION THREE

*A. The Dramatic Importance of the Supernatural Element in Shakespearean Theater*

It is important to show the philosophical framework and religious – theological and historical foundations of the Elizabethan drama. There are three schools of thinking about ghosts in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries before religious reform movement. The faith in the existence of ghosts is not an intellectual difficulty among ordinary people because the presence of purgatory in the Catholic teaching prepares a full explanation in terms of theology. Though thinkers like St. Thomas Aquinas and others sometimes enter meditations to anticipate the subsequent Protestant theoretical thinking. The fact is that religious dogma and popular belief – in this case – support each other. Most Catholics at Shakespeare's time believe that ghosts are the souls of the dead. The third school of thinking is Reginald Scott's school and his book "Magic discovery 1584," which was followed by his other book "In search of demons and spirits." It is said that it is one of the Shakespeare's sources in writing some of his plays. As a Christian, of course, he does not deny the existence of spirits, but what he discusses to refute is "the possibility that these spirits take physical forms."

These schools of thinking are associated with religious ideology prevailing at the time and they are present in the mind of the recipient, forcing the authors, and playwrights to take them into account because they are writing their works to be presented to the public and to ensure the popularity of their drama. This is because theater is the space that combines all classes of society and is part of the culture. The Elizabethan theater is a popular for all classes of society with special places for elite audiences. The largest space is the patio, which is allocated for the lower strata of society. Allardyce Nicole describes an Elizabethan theater seating according to the social classes in the Elizabethan stating that the roofless building which consists of a ground without seats is allocated for the poor audience who cannot afford to pay for seats, whereas the comfortable hall is allocated for those who are able to pay for their seats. As for The Hall of Lords, it is allocated for the few who can afford to pay the full amounts of fees. The front part of the lower chamber is close to the stage so that the audiences are watching an open platform facing the middle of an area of nearly 40 square feet which is partially roofed and based on poles to secure actors from severe weather. The stage is roofless and supported from the back by a two-door pillar or more used by the actors in the exit and entry. The movable furniture does not say if the event is going on inside or outside, dark or night. Thus, a tree can replace a whole forest, a table and a number of seats can stand for an inn, whereas a moving bed refers to a room and a glowing torch may give the impression of warmth of the sun in June (Allardyce, 1980, p. 88).

There are those who believe that every detail in the design of the Elizabethan theater building is an integrated model where the places of actors and audiences are mixed together with highly investing all dimensions of space horizontally

and vertically. The stage by the audiences is called the Downstage which is roofed with a stage called the Upstage that consists, sometimes, two floors to provide the scenes of balconies, windows, and walls as well as holes at the bottom of the stage, for ghosts to appear and disappear. They are called traps (Ibid, p. 183). This description clarifies the tasks of every detail of the stage, its holes, and its space. It shows the importance of the supernatural element in the Elizabethan theater by allocating special places in the stage for them to enter and disappear.

Shakespeare was one of the founders of the Lord Chamberlain's company in 1594. He played a triple role in this company as an actor, a representative of the holder of shares and a playwright institution. The company owned its own theater (The Globe) in 1599. When James I came to throne in 1603, the company became under direct royal patronage and its name was changed into (The King's Men). This shows how important it is to the actors to please their audiences and community and attract them to the theater, noting that the English audience is known of being hard and harsh in expressing its opinion. To attract the audiences and communicate with them Shakespeare uses the methods of diversity of the plays according to the general directions of the people of England in that age, Shakespeare writes both tragic and comic drama most of which based on historical background and this explains the presence of historical figures and facts in his works. Many of his plays can be classified as historical plays. He is endeavoring to create a consensus with the taste and trends of contemporary English audience of his time.

Shakespeare's intellect is reflected in his four tragedies Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, and King Lear, "The final supreme expression of his tragic art" (Robert, 1985, p. 258). They are the most famous among his 37 plays and they occupy the broader realm of research and studies written about Shakespearean literature.

The use of the supernatural element is evident in a number of Shakespearean plays such as Hamlet, Julius Caesar, Macbeth, and The Tempest. It is a Mysterious phenomenon that calls for various interpretations according to age, vision, and cultural background of the reader. Some readers of modern literature may disapprove the existence of supernatural element in Shakespeare's plays, whereas others consider the supernatural element the finest esthetics of Shakespearean stage used for excitement and suspense it also gives a hint of ambiguity on the general psychological atmosphere of the play. One of the reasons behind the existence of the phenomenon of the supernatural element in Shakespearean plays is to cope with the knowledge and taste of the doctrine of Elizabethan audience. yet Shakespearean plays have their own scope of freedom and do not have to be obliged by the taste of a certain layer of society because Shakespearean theater belongs to all Elizabethan people of different cultural levels.

The architectural design of the Elizabethan theater gives us a clear impression about the nature of the play at that

time, especially the Shakespearean play. The existence of special places for entry and exit for the supernatural elements such as gods and ghosts in the architectural design of the Elizabethan theaters shows clearly that the presence of the supernatural constitutes a necessity in the theatrical show at that time. The supernatural element is important because it is part of the esthetics of the show as the mysterious element appears and carries out miracles, dazzles audience, and pushes event forward. The task of the supernatural element is to create a shift in the dramatic action. In Hamlet, the shift of events starts with the appearance of the ghost asking for revenge. In Macbeth, the shift in dramatic action starts when Macbeth and Banquo meet the three witches who throw prophecies that have an important role in the construction of the following actions.

## VI. RESULTS

It is found that the existence of supernatural element in Shakespearean plays has three dimensions:

1. The social dimension: Its purpose is to keep pace with the Elizabethan audiences by displaying something important to them and constitutes a significant part of their culture. The presence of the supernatural element is a social necessity and a way to attract the audiences/readers of that era
2. The historical dimension: In many of his historical plays, Shakespeare simulates historical events, such as the meeting between Macbeth and the witches, rewrites them luxuriously in an elegant form of literature. Shakespeare's historical plays are "based mainly on *Holinshed's Chronicles* (1577) and are not necessarily historically accurate. The *Chronicles* are a source of interest to many because of their links to Shakespeare's plays" according to Wikipedia
3. The historical/dramatical dimension: Elizabethan theater is considered an expansion of the Greek and Roman Theater that are well known in being rich in using the supernatural element. Shakespeare adapts this element dramatically to convey his message to the audiences/readers.

## VII. CONCLUSION

It is found out that the existence and impact of the supernatural element and the related events that happened depend on the belief of the people in the supernatural element and the writer's ability in convincing the people of its existence and the extent of delusion the text or play has in creating the psychological atmosphere. The supernatural element has a remarkable significance in Shakespearean theater because it is one of the esthetic elements and it is a source of ambiguity and attraction. The supernatural element makes the vital transformations in the dramatic course of events and in the predications of the following events.

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