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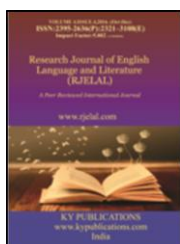
**STORM, THE AGENT OF PURIFICATION AND TRANSMUTATION: A STUDY OF WILLIAM
SHAKESPEARE'S *KING LEAR* AND PATRICK WHITE'S
*THE EYE OF THE STORM***

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ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare, the dramatic genius holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. *King Lear*, one of the four tragedies of Shakespeare, presents a hero who suffers from misfortunes and meets a sad fate mainly on account of his own faults. It also depicts the physical and mental sufferings of King Lear. *The Eye of the Storm* is one of Patrick White's most intriguing novels, and Elizabeth Hunter is one of Patrick White's most complex characters. The entire action of the novel revolves round the life of Elizabeth Hunter. The story begins with Elizabeth Hunter and ends with her death. The storm in William Shakespeare's *King Lear* and in Patrick White's *The Eye of the Storm* appears to be a dynamic force and wipes off all the forces of antagonism and conflict. It is a turning point in King Lear's and Elizabeth Hunter's lives. Both undergo a transformation and learn to love instead of giving way to resentment. This article entitled, Storm, the agent of Purification and Transmutation: A Study of William Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Patrick White's *The Eye of the Storm* attempts to explicate how storm acts as an agent of purification and transmutation in the central characters, King Lear in William Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1603) and in Elizabeth Hunter in Patrick White's *The Eye of the Storm* (1973).

Keywords: faults, misfortune, suffering, purification, transmutation, love

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Critically acclaimed as the "Bard of Avon", William Shakespeare, an English poet, playwright, and an actor is widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's pre-eminent dramatist. His dramatic genius holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. *King Lear*, one of the four tragedies of Shakespeare, presents a hero who suffers from misfortunes and meets a sad fate mainly on account of his own faults. It also depicts the physical and mental

sufferings of King Lear. Being the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973, Patrick White, the Australian novelist is well-known for his powerful dramatization of human isolation. He is concerned with the private life of the individual, who dissatisfied with society, runs away from the actual sphere of life to seek solace in his self-conceived world of imagination. *The Eye of the Storm* is one of Patrick White's most intriguing novels, and Elizabeth Hunter is one of Patrick White's most complex

characters. The entire action of the novel revolves round the life of Elizabeth Hunter. The story begins with Elizabeth Hunter and ends with her death. This article entitled, **Storm, the agent of Purification and Transmutation: A Study of William Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Patrick White's *The Eye of the Storm*** attempts to explicate how storm appears as an agent of purification and transmutation in the central characters, King Lear in William Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1603) and in Elizabeth Hunter in Patrick White's *The Eye of the Storm* (1973).

King Lear's flaws are misjudgment, pride and uncontrollable anger. At the beginning, he foolishly values appearances above reality. While dividing his kingdom among his three daughters, he asks his daughters how much they love him. Goneril and Regan impress King Lear greatly with flattery words. But Cordelia who loves him the best failed to impress him. She makes matters worse by telling him that, after she gets married, half of her love will go to her husband. Lear loses his temper and without giving any further thought to the matter, disowns her and declares that the share of the kingdom meant for Cordelia will be divided equally between Goneril and Regan. This decision of Lear is rash and impulsive and this recklessness costs him heavily afterwards. This also shows an utter lack of judgment on his part. The story of Patrick White's *The Eye of the Storm* begins with Elizabeth Hunter in her sick bed. She is completely at the mercy of those who attend on her. She is the only person who sees herself so clearly. Through her children and the solicitor, Wyburd, and by her own excellent memory the readers get glimpses of the past impinge on the present. The antagonism between Elizabeth and her children is deep seated and has many facts. Dorothy hates Elizabeth as she fails to match her mother in looks. She is a princess by value of her marriage to a French nobleman, Hubert de Lascabanes. While her marriage was something of a social event, she has never been happy. Hubert's family despises Dorothy. Unlike her mother, she is a misfit everywhere. There is a sharp sexual jealousy between mother and daughter, awakened by Dorothy's resentment of her mother's charm and good looks. Basil, the son of Elizabeth, who has his

knighthood, is a failure in his married life. As his mother fails to care him in his childhood, he is unable to come to terms with his opposite sex. He is supposed to love his mother but out loves himself. Elizabeth Hunter kills the very love and life in her husband Alfred and her children, Basil and Dorothy. Neither as a wife nor as a mother, she is faithful. These incidents show how both the characters King Lear in *King Lear* and Elizabeth in *The Eye of the Storm* fail to find and identify the true nature of their children.

King Lear is incapable of distinguishing between the most forced and wholesome flattery of Goneril and Regan and the genuineness of deep and silent love of Cordelia. It is a pity that he is placed between the two ungrateful daughters and is tossed like a shuttlecock from one to other with insult and disdain. As a result of the cruel treatments of his daughters, he rushes out into the tumultuous storm crying that he shall go mad. Nature shows its cruel side by making a storm blow exactly at a time when Lear has left his daughters and has nowhere to go. The storm has its own share in bringing about Lear's madness. The storm intensifies Lear's sufferings. King Lear's indignation and fury know no bounds when neither of the two daughters- Goneril and Regan are willing to allow him to keep even half of the knights with him. He swears to revenge on both the daughters and decides to leave them. His ego has been shattered and his self-respect has received a heavy blow. The ingratitude of his two daughters has come as a heavy blow to him and he goes out into the storm not knowing where to go.

The storm scene appears in Act III where Lear addresses the elements of nature, rain, wind, thunder and fire. Lear describes himself as a poor, infirm, weak and despised old man and says that elements in their fury are serving as the agents of his "two pernicious daughters". Lear himself feels that nature has combined with the evil forces as represented by his two daughters, in order to attack and assail him in his old age. He is helpless against the storm as well as against his two daughters who asked Gloucester to shut the gates of castle to get rid of him and his knights.

In the same scene, a few moments later Lear tries to exercise some control over his feelings when

he says: "No, I will be the pattern of patience, I will say nothing". (Act III, Scene ii) It also makes one feel that nature is in sympathy with the turmoil that has taken place in human affairs. In the same scene ii, under the stress of the storm and with the painful consciousness of his daughters' ingratitude, Lear makes a speech which marks a new beginning in him. He speaks in a moralizing tone, and says that the dreadful storm provided an occasion for the gods to find out their enemies.

In Act III, scene iv, Lear refers to the storm that is blowing within him. He recalls the kindness and the generosity he had shown to his daughters but realizes that such memories will lead him to madness. His own suffering during the storm has made him conscious of the miserable plight of the poor. He realizes that he had never before given any thought to this aspect of human life. The storm has thus aroused the social consciousness of King Lear and made him sympathetic towards the have-nots. The storm not only has joined hands with Goneril, Regan and Cornwall to persecute and harass Lear, but also has produced a beneficial effect upon him. While wandering in the country side during the storm, he comes to renounce politics and mere appearances and realizes what matters most in life is true love. His only wish is to live with Cordelia and be contented to remain in prison. He also begins to feel a strong sense of empathy for others. Lear's mind was already moving in the direction of madness and the storm accelerates the process. The violation of the moral code by Goneril and Regan has caused a tumult in the life of Lear and has led to his becoming an outcast. The storm is unprecedented and seems to be unnatural. The two convulsions- one caused by filial ingratitude and the other caused by the fury of element together prove to be unbearable for Lear, and so he goes completely mad. The madness represents the climax of his suffering from which he will eventually emerge as a redeemed man.

In Patrick White's *The Eye of the Storm*, Dorothy and Basil have come to Elizabeth because they need money. They think that too much money is being spent by her, and Basil hates the atmosphere of reverence she seems to have created around her. Dorothy is annoyed at the hiring a car to

fetch the charwoman and the wastage done by the cook, Mrs. Lipman. Both Dorothy and Basil decide to put their mother into the Thorogood village, an institution for old women. But Elizabeth very well understands the motive of her children. She says, 'Then why does everybody come flying from the ends of the earth?' (55) Basil and Dorothy announce their proposal to shift her to the Thorogood village for old people. But Elizabeth is not disturbed by this proposal. She has her own strength. Her own strength comes to her from an unforgettable experience that she once had: 'Something I found out'... 'on that island-after you had all run away-nothing will kill me before I am intended to die' (401). It is at this point that Elizabeth evokes the memory of the eye of the storm.

Elizabeth Hunter's instant of illumination is the central point of her experience in the novel. She arrives at it by a chance. On a visit to the Brumby Island, with her daughter Dorothy, she meets a Norwegian ecologist Edward Pehl. Dorothy who is furious with her mother's attempts to charm Pehl runs away from the Brumby Island. Elizabeth is left alone on the island. She becomes the victim of her own vaulting ambitions. Her psychological condition on the eve of the cyclone is also related to some of the facets of herself "at another level... an irrelevant figure" (408). The storm is set as a background to impart clarity and vividness to human moods and situations and serves to intensify human emotions. Shaik Samal comments, "Elizabeth Hunter in *The Eye of the Storm* passes through a comparable experience of personal and social illumination". (89)

The weather is described at its worst. It possesses a great transforming effect. Patrick White wants to suggest that storm thought as stern, fierce and destructive, could be at the same time benign, gentle and peaceful. It contains the contrasting qualities of loving kindness and devastating anger, sweet reasonable and ferocious strength. In such a night, Elizabeth rushed out in search of her deadly companion without thinking of self-preservation. She looks back and sees "... the groaning house break into sticks" (409). The storm produces a slumbering effect on Mrs. Hunter. It is revealed as an active even a sentient force. The external disaster seems to insinuate the possible inner resurrection.

Mrs. Hunter realizes her limitations and acknowledges the terrifying inadequacy of her nature. She is filled with a sense of hopelessness and helplessness. She wades out into the debris, feeling shorn of her identity, "just as she was no longer a body, least of all a woman: the myth of her womanhood had been exploded by the storm". (411) Elizabeth comes face to face with her own destructive handiwork. She recognizes "... her own type of useless beautiful woman, ... who had encouraged her lovers' lust" (402). Elizabeth recollects how she had dragged the bodies of men to her bed and how she was responsible for the under-nourishment of Basil.

The storm is all pervasive. It brings out the worst and the best in Mrs. Hunter. Michael Cotter opines that the storm most fully unifies the work:

The main character's past, present and future experiences are gathered within it into a single moment, so that the storm episode becomes a microcosmic enactment of the whole novel. (23)

Elizabeth confesses her faults. The storm produces in her "... a rare sense of freedom" (403). She is put to test harshly. She herself confesses that she is a hypocrite. For the first time she is disturbed by the mystery of her strength. The storm becomes her teacher and mentor. She realizes that power, fame, pomp, wealth and the applause of men can never bring satisfaction. She is delivered from the bondage of senses. The storm is to cleanse her from all unrighteousness, negations and self-deceptions. It functions effectively as an instrument of harmony. The natural element, the storm appears as the agent of purification and transmutation. Elizabeth Hunter emerges "physically battered but spiritually leaner" (162-163). In her new humbleness, she discovers that the desire to possess has left her. She surrenders her physical self. After that she suffers a physical break down, followed by collapse of the will. It is her initiation into death:

'... After I had been deserted - and reduced to shreds -not that it mattered: I was prepared for my life to be taken from me... I think I was reminded that one can't escape suffering. Though it's only human to try to escape it. So I took refuge'. (397)

She realises the basic unity between life and death and understands that life is but a preparation for death. Hence for her, death is no longer a regrettable event or an inescapable evil by a boon in disguise.

Elizabeth is confused and asks herself why she is given to experience the Eye even when she is unworthy and did not possess any extraordinary qualifications to deserve it. Nature she feels is, generous and bountiful to her. She survives the storm and is reintegrated into the fabric of the society. She looks back and sees that she has benefited greatly through the experience, though painful and unpleasant.

Elizabeth has to undergo some real test of inner discipline and outward courage before the final salvation. The final trial comes in the form of her children's suggestion to move to Thorogood village. She has just signed a legal document handing over a pink sapphire ring to Flora. She asks for the sleeping pills from the nurse. It shows how deeply the decision to move her from her home has affected Elizabeth. Elizabeth now prepares, deliberately and calmly, to die. Alone Elizabeth faces her decision. She is back in the eye of the storm, longing to walk down to the water and the swans. The only human being who can be with her there is Alf, her husband, whose memory has protected her on the night of the storm. She calls out to him at this juncture, "Alfred my dearest dearest you are the one to whom I look for help however I failed". (535) She imagines that she is walking over the sand, towards the water, where the swans are stretching out their necks towards her. Finally Elizabeth's will does triumph, she feels her life slipping away. Mrs. Hunter voluntarily renders her children the service: "... I alone must perform whatever the eye is contemplating for me" (535). It is the gift of herself. Mrs. Hunter's earthly defeat is transformed into a spiritual triumph. Dorothy and Basil fail to attend their mother's funeral.

Storm, the destructive aspect of nature thus, turns out to be a life-giving force in the lives of Lear in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Elizabeth Hunter in Patrick White's

The Eye of the Storm. Storm acting as a healer and a redeemer, purifies their soul. Both the central

characters suffer a lot and undergo a transformation in their path to self-actualization.

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