

Justice in Measure for Measure: An Approach through Sri Aurobindo's Yoga Psychology

Goutam Ghosal, Visva-Bharati University, India

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Abstract

The theoretical approach applied in my paper is based on the 'consciousness investigation' of Sri Aurobindo(1872-1950), who gives us a detailed map of the human consciousness using his own terms for the different areas of our being, like the Physical, Vital, Mental, Psychic(in the *Upanishadic* sense), their various subdivisions and the blend of those planes operating in us. Like Jung, (*Transformation and Symbolism of the Libido*, 1913), Sri Aurobindo goes against Freud's idea of *Libido* (the Indian uses the words 'Vital' or 'Physical-Vital' for *Libido*) as a mere sexual impulse and believes in its capacity for creativity and inspiration, especially if it is influenced by the *Psychic*, our inmost being, hidden behind the physical, the vital and the mind. For Sri Aurobindo, 'the *Psychic* is our soul in evolution from birth to birth'. I agree to the Christian interpretation of *Justice in Measure for Measure*. But then, can Justice be perfect without a change of consciousness in the judges? What does Shakespeare mean by the *Justice* of the Duke? The present paper wishes to examine the consciousness of the characters in *Measure for Measure*(1604), especially that of the Duke, and find out the real nature of *Justice* offered in the court and prison of Vienna, where we find the important locations of action in the play.

Keywords: Justice, Mercy, Corruption, Vital, Psychic (the Indian definition of the word).

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Measure for Measure is placed among the dark comedies of Shakespeare, where a tragic situation is awkwardly converted into happiness by a Christ like character in the form of a Duke. But then, the happy ending fails to erase from our minds what has passed throughout in the play. It is commonly guessed that Shakespeare himself must have been passing through an uncertain period in his life while writing these dark comedies. However, going by Sri Aurobindo's lens, through his yoga-psychological approach, one can penetrate into the inner aspects of human crisis, as we see in *Measure for Measure*, a crisis which Shakespeare wished to present deliberately for his audience. A brief image of Sri Aurobindo's map of the human consciousness will help us move comfortably into the inner mechanisms of the characters like Angelo, Isabella and the Duke.

Sri Aurobindo's concept of the outer consciousness is formed by the physical, the vital and the mental (mind). Behind these outer layers lies a vast subliminal self consisting of the inner being, the inner physical, the inner vital and the inner mental supported by the inmost being, which Sri Aurobindo calls the psychic being. He calls Shakespeare "a great vital creator" in the *Future Poetry*, (Complete Works Vol : 26: 79) meaning his observation that all Shakespeare's characters are vital creatures. The vital is a plane located between the heart and the sex-centre(Satprem 68). There is a higher vital and there is a lower vital. The higher vital is not all sex; it has a great drive for creativity, generosity and many refined aspirations. But, the higher quite often sinks into the lower vital, projecting our hidden desires, as it happens with Angelo, the man in power. Power, money and ego smoothly work in combination to drag the lower vital down to a crude bargaining for sex. All the good wishes for true justice are being swept away by this irresistible call of the lower nature in Angelo, as Isabella comes to beg for her brother's life. While Angelo is gripped by his lower vital, his consciousness begins to interpret Isabella in terms of his own consciousness, which is above his consciousness. At least, Isabella is residing on a finer vital plane. She does not always have that mellow speech style of a Rosalind or a Miranda. That does not mean she will sink down to the lower vital by a putrid "justice" from a man of power. If she is at a loss on some moments, it is because of the imminent death of Claudio, her own brother. In his soliloquy in Act ii, scene ii, Angelo realizes his desire, and for a moment at least thinks Isabella to be virtuous. But Power corrupts and drags people down to the lower vital and the crude physical. The seed of unlawful sex is planted in the ruler's consciousness and it comes out on the surface in Act II, scene iv. This consciousness in a person in Power cannot bring justice to humanity.

Redeem thy brother

By yielding up the body to my will;
Or he must not only die the death,
But thy unkindness shall his death draw out
To ling'ring sufferance. (Das Gupta 49)

The action taken by the disguised Duke is also intriguing. He is creating a circular plot instead of taking action against Angelo instantly. Since his is the last word in Vienna's court and since he knows a lot about Angelo's past guilt, it looks awkward for a Christ-like Duke to act in the most un-Christly manner. P.C. Ghose quotes from *The Wheel of Fire* by G. Wilson Knight:

the plot is so arranged that each person receives his deserts in the light of the Duke's--- which is really the Gospel-ethic... The Duke, like Jesus, is the prophet of a new order of ethics... The Duke's ethical attitude is exactly correspondent with Jesus': the play must be read in the light of the Gospel teaching, if its full significance is to be apparent. (Ghose 66)

But then, it is difficult to accept wholly this generalized remark by Knight in view of the multiple attitudes of a human being. The Duke is after all an imperfect human being with an imperfect consciousness. Man is, according to Sri Aurobindo, a transitional creature. He is not final. Nature cannot be satisfied by an imperfect creation. A super race is in the making, who will go beyond man in consciousness. Until that new species arrives, no justice can be perfect, as the human consciousness cannot be perfect. Yet, the Duke does what he can, keeping his mind on Christ as he judges in the final moments of the play.

Shakespeare's mingled vision of life is well known since the time of Dr. Johnson. And this mingled vision has a close relation with the Aurobindonian psychology, which claims man as a multiple personality. And the consciousness-tiers presented by Sri Aurobindo are far more detailed than Freud's, like the gross physical, the vital proper, the lower and the higher vital, the mind with its four subdivisions, the physical mind, the vital mind, the mechanical mind and the reasoning mind. Then there is the subliminal, which contains the inner mental, the inner vital and subtle physical bodies and the inmost or the psychic being. The Duke operates his sense of justice from the higher vital, which is influenced by the psychic from behind. His decision to marry Isabella is a mental choice influenced by the psychic. It grows out of a kindness, which has a distinct influence of the psychic from its hidden centre in his subliminal being. This kindness is central to the character of the Duke, which helps him do justice in a better way than the average kings and rulers. He is a human being after the ideals of Christ. Naturally, one cannot expect a perfect perfection in his justice.

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