

ASTROLOGY AND FREE WILL AS DEPICTED IN ENGLISH LITERATURE AND BY TWO INDIAN MASTERS

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Astrology, as we all know, is the Science of Time. When we speak of Time, we are reminded of the famous lines penned by Charles Dickens in "A Tale of Two Cities" written in 1859, which may probably be the most famous opening lines in all of English Literature.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only."

It means it was a time of contradictions. The two cities referred to were London and Paris during the turmoil of the French Revolution. For the oppressed citizens of 18th-century France, the revolution promised hope but for those of the ancient regime, it was a period of gloom.

Astrology, Witchcraft, Sorcery, Fairies and devils are mentioned in English literature even 2000 years back. The Elizabethans were superstitious people. In Shakespearean literature, many strange events were blamed on supernatural.

In a world which is unpredictable and inexplicable, Elizabethans needed their occult beliefs to make sense of the unknown. In the period 1592 – 1594, one – sixth of London died of Plague; Seven years of Shakespeare's dramatic career was lost on account of this epidemic. We also need to remember that Shakespeare lived only for 52 years but his literary output was prolific and in his works we

find several references to the influences of stars, planets and comets which broadly come under the gamut of Astronomy and Astrology. For every misfortune there was a justifiable cause and this could be the reason why people of that era placed their belief on the planetary influences on terrestrial affairs.

In ancient times comets were considered an evil portent while the eclipses forebode grim possibilities for the future.

Calphurnia was fully aware of the significance of omens or the implications of the appearance of comets, when she says, "*When beggars die, there are no comets seen; The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes*" (William Shakespeare in Julius Caesar Act 2 Scene 2)

Caesar's murder was foretold by a number of inauspicious omens, but was persuaded by one of his closest friends, Brutus to ignore them and go to the Senate and it was the latter who eventually turned out to be one of the conspirators. Caesar was also warned about personal danger to him on or by the Ides of March 44 BC.

The words of the soothsayer to Julius Caesar proved truly prophetic – "Beware the ides of March" (Julius Caesar, Act 1, Scene 2).

In Act1, Scene 2 of "Julius Caesar" we have an interesting speech by Cassius, one of the conspirators in the plot to assassinate Julius Caesar.

"Men at some time are masters of their fates.

The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars.

But in ourselves, that we are underlings"

This discourse by Cassius reminds us of the famous statement of Franklin Roosevelt, "*Men are not prisoners of fate but only prisoners of their own minds*".

The soothsayer's prophecy is all about fate while the speech of Cassius is all about Free – Will. **So one may say Shakespeare lived in an era when the pull of destiny was an accepted belief but there was a parallel argument or belief that destiny could be thwarted by strong efforts.**

We have two types of characters portrayed by Shakespeare – one exhibits his weakness by surrendering to the stars while the other exhibits inner strength to overcome planetary influences.

This line of argument can also be seen in another play of Shakespeare, "**All is well that ends well**", which is a comedy of his and is an acclaimed work in English literature.

The protagonist of the play is Helena who is considered a clever, self – willed, active and powerful female character with a strong affinity towards Astrology. She falls in love with a nobleman Bertram thereby having twin problems – Bertram does not like her and he is also above her rank in society. Instead of accepting this as fate, she takes necessary action to elevate her rank and also initiates action so that Bertram falls in love with her and marries her. Eventually Helena succeeds on both counts and finally Bertram proclaims his love for Helena and both are happily married. In this context, Shakespeare's words make a lot of sense when he says through the expression of Helena,

"Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie which we ascribe to heaven; the fated sky gives us free scope"

(All is well that ends well, Act 1, Scene 1)

The soliloquy in **King Lear** (Act 1, Scene 2) where Shakespeare expresses through Edmund that when we are sick in fortune, we blame the Sun, Moon and the Stars; we are villains by necessity; knaves, thieves and traitors by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars and adulterers by obedience to planetary influence; we are evil due to divine intervention. Due to the evil

influence of Dragon's tail and Ursa major constellation I am lecherous.

*This is the excellent foppery of the world,
that when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits
of our own behavior, we make guilty of our disasters
the sun the moon, and stars; as if we were
villains on necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion;
knaves, thieves, and treachers by spherical
predominance, drunkards, liars, and adulterers by
an enforced obedience of planetary influence.*(I.i.128-135)

During Shakespearean times, Almanacs were getting published and they were bought by people, who used to rely on them for making day to day decisions. In **Winter's tale** of Shakespeare, we have Autolychus selling cheap almanacs. By 1600, about 600 almanacs had been sold in England. What were the contents of these almanacs?

In the words of Richard Allestree,

*Wit, learning, order, elegance of phrase, Health and the art to
lengthen out our day's*

Philosophy, physic and poetic

All this, and more, is in this book to see.

Elizabethan almanacs contained all information useful to an Englishman of that era. The first section of an almanac consisted of astronomical events such as eclipses and the movements of planets and stars. The second section contained the year's dates and months. The third dealt with astrological prognostication which included details of weather, outbreak of epidemics and harvests. There were also almanacs which were useful to an individual. By using this the reader could calculate his own horoscope.

The stars and planets were viewed as having a disruptive influence on human affairs. This, the Elizabethans, believed was not due to the faults of the celestial bodies. This was the result of the original sin committed in the Garden of Eden. The celestial bodies were viewed as inherently good. Due to the fall, their forces were in opposition to the sublunary realm. This resulted in both good and bad influences upon Mankind. God's Will was orderly and the planets were considered as executioners of Divine will. The sin of mankind, resulted in the vagaries of human fortune. Therefore, in his earthly sojourn man's life involves both fortune and misfortune.

Some of the consultations which Elizabethans had was with regard to missing servants, missing ships and buried treasure. Medical Astrology was also popular. In this era, there were two categories of Astrologers – the scientifically minded and the charlatans.

In **Winter's tale** we have Hermoine, wrongly accused of adultery blaming the planets for her predicament. The allegation is made by her husband Leontus.

"I must be patient, till the heavens look

With an aspect more favourable – (The Winter's Tale, Act 2, Scene 1)

Hermoine decides to wait till the stars turn out to be favourable. To avoid death sentence, she feigns death and spends time concealed in her friend Paulina's house. Leontus repents for his mistake and she returns when the time is favourable.

By not becoming desperate in the face of misfortune, Hermoine is able to return home in happier times. **So, here we have two characters Helena and Hermoine who battle the stars and emerge successful. These two characters of Shakespeare bring out the triumph of free will over fate.**

An important principle where Man can use Astrology to his advantage is to use the favourable planetary influences and gain through them. Such an individual is Prospero in *The Tempest*. The celestial influences give an opportunity for restoration of political order. A storm brings the ships of his enemies within the reach of his magical powers. This is acknowledged by Prospero as the working of fortune.

Know thus far forth.

By accident most strange, bountiful Fortune
(now my dear lady) hath mine enemies
Brought to this shore; and by my prescience
I find my zenith doth depend upon
A most auspicious star, whose influence
If I now court not, but omit, my fortunes
Will ever after droop. (I.ii.177-184)

Romeo and Juliet is a tragedy written by Shakespeare in 1597 about two Italian youths in love with each other meeting with a tragic end. The silver lining in this story is that both of them hail from feuding families but the feud ends with the tragic death of the lovers. For centuries this work has been analysed and eulogised. There is an astrological theme which runs throughout this work commencing with a Prologue introducing Romeo and Juliet as star crossed lovers.

In the prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare writes,

“From forth the fatal loins of these two foes. A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life”. This implies that eventually Romeo and Juliet were an ill-fated pair of lovers.

The most significant astrological allusion in this play is the role of the Moon. Moon represents the mind. Here the Moon has an important role in influencing the mood of the lovers – when Romeo sets his eyes on Juliet, he describes her as the Sun rising from the east. Romeo and Juliet is a remarkable play with which uses Astrological symbols to emphasise significant moments and decisions relating to the lovers. Secondly it creates a deep symbolic and psychological dimension to the theme. Thirdly it enhances the emotional impact of the play. In an overall sense, Romeo and Juliet could be said to be one of the profound works of English Literature, with astrological allusions adding to its literary merit.

Romeo and Juliet is a work wherein Shakespeare emphasises the power of Destiny in moulding the lives of Men. Human efforts fail when Destiny is All Powerful which is found to be true in certain cases.

Before we conclude this narrative I will put forth the views of two Indian Spiritual stalwarts, while we are on this topic.

Sri Aurobindo has spoken of Astrology in the following words. *Many astrological predictions come true, quite a mass of them, if one takes all together. But it does not follow that the stars rule our destiny; the stars merely record a destiny that has been already formed, they are a hieroglyph, not a Force, —or if their action constitutes a force, it is a transmitting energy, not an originating Power. Someone is there who has determined or something is there which is Fate, let us say; the stars are only indicators. The astrologers themselves say that there are two forces, **daiva** and **puruṣakāra**, fate and individual energy, and the individual energy can modify and even frustrate fate. Moreover, the stars often indicate several fate-possibilities; for example, that one may die in mid-age, but that if that determination can be overcome, one can live to a predictable old age. Finally, cases are seen in which the predictions of the horoscope fulfil themselves with great accuracy up to a certain age, then apply no more. This often happens when the subject turns away from the ordinary to the spiritual life. If the turn is very radical, the cessation*

of predictability may be immediate; otherwise certain results may still last on for a time, but there is no longer the same inevitability. This would seem to show that there is or can be a higher power or higher plane or higher source of spiritual destiny which can, if its hour has come, override the lower power, lower plane or lower source of vital and material fate of which the stars are indicators. I say vital because character can also be indicated from the horoscope much more completely and satisfactorily than the events of the life

(Sri Aurobindo, Letters on Yoga – I: Fate and Free-Will, Karma and Heredity, etc. – I)

Paramahansa Yogananda has spoken of Astrology in the following words. “The deeper the self-realization of a man, the more he influences the whole universe by his subtle spiritual vibrations, and the less he himself is affected by the phenomenal flux.” These words of Master’s often returned inspiringly to my mind.

Occasionally I told astrologers to select my worst periods, according to planetary indications, and I would still accomplish whatever task I set myself. It is true that my success at such times has been accompanied by extraordinary difficulties. But my conviction has always been justified: faith in the divine protection, and the right use of man’s God-given will, are forces formidable beyond any the “inverted bowl” can muster.

*(Paramahansa Yogananda. Autobiography of a Yogi. Chapter 16
Outwitting the stars)*

Therefore, a study of English literature could prove fruitful to a lover of Astrology especially if one could unearth the gems which lie submerged in the literary ocean.
