



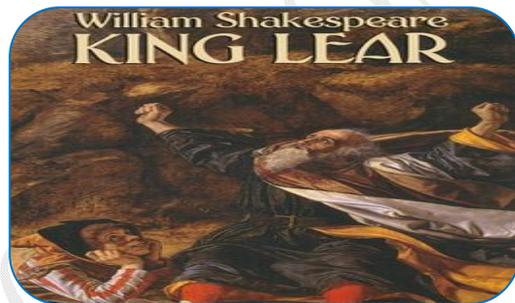
SOCIO- LINGUISTIC GENES IN LITERATURE: A CASE STUDY OF KING LEAR

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ABSTRACT :

Emergence, evolution and significance of literature in human life can be understood in a much better way, of course with some limitations by drawing an analogy between the language that precipitates in the form of discourses and influences the human society and biological genes that determines the biological nature of an organism. This paper draws an analogy between the role played by biological genes in determining biological features of an organism and the role played by socio-linguistic genes in social life of all species in general and human beings in particular. Like genetic material, here also basic linguistic units remain same, though, words, phrases, sentences, texts, discourses formed out of basic units carry different values and meanings. These artifacts are produced by change in the pattern of basic units, which is caused by the pressure of change in social, political, economic conditions, natural environment, and individual's perception of these things. Socio-genetic study of Shakespeare's King Lear aims to highlight two things: first, King Lear as a carrier of pre-existing socio-cultural genes and secondly, King Lear as a site where some new ideologies emerge and struggle for existence. Shakespeare's writings at many places give voice to the new socio-economic structure that was a threat to the traditional social hierarchy. This paper works on the premises that both medieval social structure and emergence of capitalistic society serve as major sources of Shakespearean Drama.



KEYWORDS : Socio-genetic, socio-linguistic genes, phylogenetically, psychological space, mutation, Cartesian theory, ontogenetic, muted groups.

INTRODUCTION

We can understand the emergence, evolution and significance of literature in human life in a much better way, of course with some limitations by drawing an analogy between the language that precipitates in the form of discourses and influences the human society and biological genes that determines the biological nature of an organism. The word "Genetics" is commonly used in biological sciences to highlight that every organism has a set of chromosomes, made up of genes, which determine the biological nature of that organism. The genes are constituted of genetic material: RNA or DNA. Though genetic material remains same, its concentration and pattern differ from individual to individual and species to species. Genetic structure of organisms undergoes change sometimes under the pressure of external environment and sometimes due to intermingling of genetic material at the time of its transfer from one generation to another generation. Any mutation at the level of genes changes the life of coming generation of entire species.

The term "Socio-genetic" draws an analogy between the role played by biological genes in determining biological features of an organism and the role played by socio-linguistic genes in social life of all species in general and human beings in particular. The concept of socio-linguistic genes is used to analyze socio-political and economic aspect of language that exists in the form of variously patterned and concentrated linguistic codes found in the form of written texts, oral discourses, socio-religious customs, myths, superstitions etc. Like genetic material, here also basic linguistic units remain same, though, words, phrases, sentences, texts, discourses formed out of basic units carry different values and meanings. These artifacts are produced by change in the pattern of basic units, which is caused by the pressure of change in social, political, economic conditions, natural environment, and individual's perception of these things. These artifacts when popularized influence the perception of reality by forming a different relationship with it, by reflecting and refracting it differently and therefore; social reality is created and projected through socio-linguistic genes.

Any change in either the structure or meaning of socio-linguistic genes alters the society; its structure as well as its perception of physical reality, at the same time social structure and economic, political circumstances interact with socio-linguistic genes and mutate them. Taking the American psychologist James Mark Baldwin as his anchor point in the natural sciences, Deacon seems to support socio-genetic study, when he says:

...the ability to use language symbolically has phylogenetically affected the human brain, not in a direct cause and effect manner, but indirectly through its effects on human behaviour and on the changes that human behaviour brings about in the environment. Even though the ability to use language as a symbolic system doesn't bring about genetic changes in the nature of the human brain, the changes in environmental conditions brought about by human symbolic responses to that environment can, in the long run, bias natural selection and alter the selection of cognitive predispositions that will be favoured in the Future(Kramsch: 241).

Socio-religious customs, myths, superstitions, ideologies and all other things of socio-cultural value remain stored in language. Once stored in written texts, they cannot become extinct, though sometimes they become dormant, but when they enter the collective psychological space through the personal psychological space, they manifest in the form of social changes. It implies that the linguistic genes determine the socio-cultural economic and political life of human beings. Mutation of linguistic genes takes place in human brain, which:

...is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together(Eliot: 298).

Here it can be added that the human brain is not just a receptacle rather it has a unique combination of structure supplemented with hormones and partially controlled by external physical environment. The genetic study posits mother-father not as originator and shaper of child but a "space" in which genes and external factors produce a genetic code peculiar to that child. Similarly, the socio-genetic study does not consider the human subject as an originator and shaper of a work. Here the human subject is seen as a unique "space" in which conventions, codes and circulating locutions, under the unique hormonal and physical circumstances precipitate in the form of a particular text. Wilham von Humboldt reflects on the linguistic nature of social reality in the following words:

By the same act whereby (man) spins language out of himself, he spins himself into it, and every language draws about the people that possesses it a circle whence it is possible to exit only by stepping over at once into the circle of another one(Humboldt: 60).

One can escape from one language to another but no escape is possible from language, because like genetic material, language plays an important role in determining social reality. Phylogenetic perspective (the development of human species) forwarded by Terrence Deacon supports the socio-genetic study of human discourses. He propounds that the acquisition of symbolic reference, in contrast with iconic or indexical reference, represents a quantum leap, which no other creature could make, in the development of humankind that has led to the development of unique human thought.

Vygotsky reverts the traditional Cartesian theory that upholds the pre-eminence of thought over language. His ontogenetic perspective (the development of the individual human organization) shows, how language as a social activity influences thought. The language the child hears and experiences on the social plain becomes internalized in the form of inner speech on the psychological plane, thus leading to both language acquisition and language socialization. He formulated the “general genetic law of cultural development” to show how symbolic activity derives from social interactions. As per this theory:

Any function in the child’s cultural (or, higher mental) development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an inter psychological category, and then within the child as an intra psychological category. This is equally true with regard to voluntary attention, logical memory, the formation of concepts and the development of volition(Vygotsky: 163).

It implies that “Child’s cultural [...] development” happens through language. As a child inherits biological genes from genetic pool of that group or species so, a child inherits linguistic genes from the socio-cultural genetic pool of that particular society or cultural group. Like the biological genes, the linguistic genes also interact with the physical environment and social environment, change it, and in turn are changed themselves:

Every sign, as we know, is a construct between socially organized persons in the process of their interaction. *Therefore, the forms of signs are conditioned above all by the social organization of the participants involved and also by the immediate conditions of their interaction* (Emphasis in original) (Voloshinov: 21).

A large part of “their interaction”takes place through language that conditions it. Therefore,there is a close and complex relationship among literature, cultural background,the economic conditions and numerous other factors. It implies that there is a definite correlation between the socio-economic conditions and the kind of cultural and aesthetic works produced. Literature and art embody the images; dominate emotions of an epoch and the change in outlook.

Socio-genetic study of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*aims to highlight two things: first, *King Lear* as a carrier of pre-existing socio-cultural genes and secondly, *King Lear* as a site where some new ideologies emerge and struggle for existence. Shakespeare’s writings at many places give voice to the new socio-economic structure that was a threat to the traditional social hierarchy as observed by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan:

...a new kind of self emerged in the Renaissance, the expressive, oftentimes, violently willful bourgeois individual, who sought wealth and power in the evolving world of early market capitalism. This self finds expression in Shakespeare’s tragic character, from Hamlet to Lear. This self-expression or Willfulness is always depicted as tragic because Shakespeare himself, though a son of bourgeois parents, was a member of the court, a player for the King (Rivkin: 239).

Here to understand Shakespeare’s works we can use T.S. Eliot’s theory of impersonality, according to which, human mind serves as a receptacle for dominant ideologies of past and present,

emergent ideologies and socio-economic influences, where they interact with each other and produce a new ideology. When public reads these works, the socio-linguistic genes enter into the minds of people, replicate and manifest themselves in their social-cultural attitudes. In this way:

His (Shakespeare's) works cohere with the "public world of emotions" of which he was a part. While expressing the bourgeois illusion that the world is a field for the free play of self will, he also therefore argues in *King Lear* especially, in favour of the court's "coercive imposition of its will" on the emergent bourgeoisie. All of the willful characters in his plays must end tragically (Rivkin: 239).

Medieval social structure, on the one hand and emergence of capitalistic society on the other hand serves as two major sources of Shakespearean Drama. The interaction of these two traditions results in the emergence of Shakespeare, the dramatist. Unlike other dramatists of the age, he shows mutations in socio-linguistic genes when he reflects the popular taste, and ever changing socio-economic structure. In other words, Shakespeare's brain serves as a place where linguistic genes undergo mutation and take a shape most suitable to the socio-economic atmosphere, which was characterized by the rise of capitalism:

...in a century of steeply rising prices, brought about radical changes in the composition of society...a new spirit of composition loosened the whole social hierarchy(Salingar: 170).

Like the creatures unable to undergo mutation, under changed physical environment became extinct, so many dramatists of Elizabethan age, who failed to undergo socio-linguistic mutation became extinct. Shakespeare is still remembered because the union of old and new is so perfect that both the nobility and the common masses liked them. The process of close contact and intercourse between humanism and popular taste served as the deterrent force:

A number of plays were specially prepared for select audience of 'the judicious' at the Court, the Universities, or the legal Inns. But the great majority were written for the commercial theatres, whose repertory the court shared, and in which the judicious were outnumbered and often outweighed by 'the groundlings' who paid their penny for standing room. "Your corman and tinker," Dekker wrote in 1609, "claim as strong a voice in their suffrage, and sit to give judgment on the play's life and death, as well as the proudest Momus among the tribe of critics." If the tribe of critics at their best called out the force and subtlety of a classical training, it was the groundling who saved the drama from academic stiffness and preserved its essential bias towards entertainment, which was also a criticism of life (Salingar: 54).

King Lear embodies voices of different social-groups such as women, illegitimate children, patriarchal ideology, monarchy, faithful servants etc. and this act of giving voice to these marginalized sections is a revolutionary step at that time. The voice of dominant groups seems to succeed it was so because in the days of Shakespeare it was propounded by the renaissance theorists that art was, or should be a construction of human reason, continuing and completing the work of nature they also believed that the whole universe was governed by divine will; Nature was God's instrument, the social hierarchy a product of Nature. It followed for Tudor theorists that subordination and unity were the natural rules for families and corporations and, above all, for the state, a 'body politic' that should be subject to a single head. The state was concerned with men's souls as much as their goods. However, at the same time, the order founded on Nature existed for man's benefit, and man as such was an integral part of it. Under the influence of this concept the theatres were quick to satirize social climbers and projectors, and tried to save the souls of common people on the behalf of the state and Shakespeare is no exception, however he highlights their intellectual qualities.

There are three social climbers in the play: Edmund, Regan and Goneril. All of them refuse to accept their passive roles imposed upon them by the society. They make a very cunning use of language to achieve their aim. However, the writer in particular and many readers in general condemn them for their cunning use of language. The writer stands for the social hierarchy but he also gives space to the muted groups and let them speak. It is clearly a case of socio-genetic mutation because with the passage of time concept of bastard child and the concept of right of girl child underwent a lot of change. Taking the pre-existing socio-linguistic genes as background, the characters with mutated socio-linguistic genes are treated as unnatural and condemned, but they are the most important characters for they represent the emergent consciousness of the age:

The two daughters, by their actions, by what they say, and by the imagery of beasts of pray so consistently associate with them, represent a ferocious animality. Their indifference to all claims but those of their own egotism is made explicitly by Edmund, who brings into the play conceptions of Nature and human nature, radically opposed to the traditional conceptions that were beginning to emerge in the consciousness of the age(Knights: 335).

Pre-existing socio-linguistic genes seem dominant in Shakespearean drama. Through the character of Edmund, it is projected that the babies born out of illegal relations are wicked by nature; education and upbringing have no positive influence on them. This medieval ideology regarding bastard children is manifested through the character of Edmund, who is an illegal child, as his father Gloucester confesses:

KENT. I cannot conceive you.

GLOU. Sir, this young fellow's mother could; whereupon she grew round-wombed, and had, indeed, Sir, a son for her cradle ere she had a husband for her bed (Shakespeare: 4).

Through the character of Edmund, wickedness is projected as a natural trait of a bastard child that is evident in the plot of the play, which is apparently points out that Edmund, will take unlawful course only because he was born out of unlawful relations. To make the things convincing Edmund is made to announce his evil plans.

EDMUND. Thou Nature, art my goddess; to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of customs and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me(Shakespeare: 24).

Shakespeare catered to the medieval ideology that supported the idea that lust in the nature of parents, results in the birth of a lustful child that is why Edmund the bastard child is portrayed as a lusty person, who is determined to acquire wealth either by lawful or unlawful means.

EDMUND. ...Legitimate Edger, I must have your land:
Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund
As to th' legitimate. Fine word "legitimate"!
Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed,
And my invention thrive, Edmund the base
Shall top th' legitimate -: I grow, I prosper;
New, gods, stand up for bastards(Shakespeare: 25)!

Social discourses of the age contrived the reality in such a way that the evil seemed to emerge from the individual, who is bastard by birth, though it was the social structure that compelled a bastard child to use unlawful means to fulfill his ambitions, because it deny them all chances of social

preferment. The social structure of the age restricted the “others” in a very subtle manner; at that time both virtues and sins were treated as natural traits. It was supposed that like biological traits they were transferred from one generation to another. That is why children of sinners were treated as sinners. Nature in its raw form is considered as opposite to society but at the same time, the word nature is used to project the naturalization of social hierarchy, therefore;

...the play’s essence has thus involved the sharpest possible juxtaposition of rival conceptions of ‘Nature’, even though these conceptions are, for the most part, implicit and embodied rather than explicitly proclaimed. In the Edmund-Goneril-Regan group the philosophy of natural impulse and egotism has been revealed as self-consuming, its claim to represent strength as a self-bred-delusion (Knights: 340).

Out of two concepts of Nature: the raw human nature that stands against civil society and the other that argues in favour of the naturalization of human society, the second one is shown to register edge in the play. The adverse changes in outer nature and perversions in human nature are shown to be interlinked to make this theory convincing and persuasive, in the following statement:

GLOU. These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us: though the wisdom of Nature can reason it thus and thus, yet Nature finds itself scourg’d by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide : in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond crack’d’ twixt son and father. This villain of mine comes under the prediction; there’s son against father : the King falls from bias of nature; there’s father against child (Shakespeare: 30).

This statement of Gloucester further confirms the socio-genetic basis of human society. Any deviation from socio-genetic code of that particular society is considered abnormal. Edmund’s statement on the other hand reflects the socio-genetic mutations under the pressure of capitalism, scientific discoveries, and liberalization of social structure. He rejects Gloucester’s faith in medieval ideology when he says:

EDMUND. This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits of our own behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, the stars; as if we were villains on necessity, fools by heavenly compulsions, knaves, thieves and treachers by spherical predominance, drunkerds, liars and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on. An admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition to the charge of a star! My father compounded with my mother under the dragon’s tail, and my nativity was under *Ursamajor*; so that it follows that I am rough and lecherous. Fut! I should have been that I am had the maidenlist star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing (Shakespeare: 31).

This statement shows the shift in the idea of source of wickedness in human nature from inheritance of wickedness from parents to socio-economic atmosphere. In this way, Shakespeare’s mind serves as a site where these two different ideologies codified in the form of socio-linguistic genes, intermingle and interact. The dominant ideology of the traditional ideology is projected as transcendental. The struggle that goes on in the mind of the writer becomes manifest in the conflict between different characters who follow different ideologies as clear from Kent’s following statement:

KENT. Come sir, arise, away! I’ll teach you differences: away, away: If you will measure your lubber’s length again, tarry; but away! Go to; have you wisdom (Shakespeare: 40)?

This struggle between ideologies manifests not only at textual level but also at social level. At both levels it is projected and imposed too, that women are always softhearted, if they are not so, it is treated as unnatural and a sin. Woman with *unwomanly* qualities are always condemned in all medieval and renaissance literature in general and in Shakespearean drama in particular such as Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Goneril and Regan in *King Lear*. It is projected that a woman inherits *womanly* qualities genetically. In reality as Simone de Beauvoir says, "one is not born, rather she becomes a woman. ...it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as feminine"(Beauvoir: 295). *Womanly* qualities are transferred from one generation to another generation through socio-linguistic genes. Any deviation from this socio-linguistic code is condemned as King Lear does. He curses his daughters Goneril and Regan for *unwomanly* nature:

LEAR. It may be so, lord
Hear, Nature, hear! dear Goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful!
Into her womb convey sterility!
Dry up in her the organs of increase
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honour her(Shakespeare: 51)!

Social nature is allied with biological nature that supports the socio-genetic dimension of social discourses. Social qualities are shown as genetic traits, and it is believed that if a woman loses her *Womanly* qualities, she will also lose her natural ability to give birth.

If on the one hand Goneril and Regan represent the mutations in the concept of *perfect* woman, Cordelia embodies the concept of *perfect* woman. In this way, she serves as a carrier of socio-genetic code of a *perfect* woman. Plot of the play is constructed in a way to arouse pity for Cordelia and reader feel sympathy for her and tries to imitate her. The socio-linguistic genes presented in the form of Cordelia's character, enter into the mind of reader, replicate there and manifest in the form of male hegemony over women, by persuading them to take up *Womanly* role. During medieval ages, girl child is considered only a guest in her parent's house, who is to be gifted. They are not supposed to have deep love relation with their parental family. This idea is embodied in the character of Cordelia, as reflected by her speech:

COR. Unhappy that I am, I can not heave
My heart into my mouth : I love your Majesty
According to my bond, no more, no less(Shakespeare: 9).

This "bond" exists in the minds of people in the form of socio-linguistic genes. Anyone either parent or girl, whoever violates this code is considered abnormal, that is why Goneril, Regan and King Lear are considered abnormal and hence condemned by Cordelia :

COR. Good my Lord,
You have begot me, bred me, lov'd me: I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honour you.
Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
They love you all? Happily, when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty
Sure I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all(Shakespeare: 9-10).

Kent like a genetic engineer follows the socio-genetic structure of the society and foretells the future attitude of various characters. He could do so because the socio-linguistic genes, by and large determine the social constitution in real life as well as in art, and a person having deep knowledge of this system can predict the course of events. Kent is a person with appropriate knowledge of socio-linguistic genes, their cause and effect. Enabled by this knowledge he forecasts that Regan and Goneril both will betray their father, King Lear because they have already betrayed their husband by professing deep love for their father that is a violation of the “bond”, Kent states:

KENT. Let it fall rather, though the fork invade
The region of my heart: be Kent unmannerly,
When Lear is mad. What would'st thou do, old man?
Think'st thou that duty shall have dread to speak
When power to flattery bows? To Plainness honour's bound
When majesty falls to folly. Reserve thy state;
And, in thy best consideration, check
This hideous rashness: answer my life my judgment,
Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least;
Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds
Reverb no hollowness (Shakespeare: 13).

Soon after delivering this statement Kent calls himself a “physician” and condemns King Lear, Goneril and Regan for violating the socio-genetic code and plunging the life into disarray, when he says:

KENT. Kill thy physician, and thy fee bestow upon the foul disease (Shakespeare: 14).

Kent considers socio-genetic mutation as “foul disease” and himself a “physician”. To him following social conventions based on dominant ideology is the only healthy social practice; any violation of this ideology is taken as a social disease. Therefore, Kent serves as a mouthpiece for the dominant ideology of the age. Shakespeare becomes a carrier of this ideology when he condemns ambitious women through the characters of Goneril and Regan. On the other hand, acceptance of dominant ideology is considered a virtue, which is projected through praise of Cordelia who asserts her personality only as per the social bond. To make it more convincing, authentic, and hence effective, Shakespeare makes Cordelia declare herself “richer” than her sisters:

COR.
I yet beseech your majesty,
(If for I want that glib and only art
To speak and purpose not, since what I will intend,
I'll do't before I speak), that you make known
It is no vicious blot, murder or foulness,
No unchaste action, or dishonour'd step,
That hath depriv'd me of your grace and favour,
But even for want of that for which I am richer,
A still-soliciting eye, and such a tongue
That I am glad I have not, though not to have it
Hath lost me in your liking (Shakespeare: 19).

Struggle between these two ideologies in the plays is actually taking place in the mind of Shakespeare himself. Traditions, customs, and social conventions pull the writer in one direction and compel him to create characters of Cordelia, Kent and Edmund; changing socio-political and economic

conditions of the age exert pressure on the poet and compel him to give voice to muted groups like woman and bastards who question the social structure that brands them bastards:

EDMUND...Why bastard?Wherefore base?
When my dimensions are as well compact
My mind as generous, and my shape as true,
As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us
With base?With baseness?bastardy?base; base(Shakespeare: 24-25)?

Shakespeare condemns ambitious women like Lady Macbeth, Goneril, and Regan, who possess manly qualities, under the pressure of dominant ideology of the age. But even this portrayal (though for condemnation) of the woman who violate the socio-genetic code, come out of domestic life and think of possessing power and pelf, hints at the changes taking place at socio-genetic level that paved way for the concept of independent women of today. In this way, the changes in the social attitude that were viewed as perversions at that time became part of normal behaviour with the passage of time.

Pithy and epigrammatic statements delivered by the Fool that serve as a formula solution to some contemporary social problems are based on the dominant ideological mindset of the people of the age. Like the basic biological genes that are carried by the members of a species throughout history these pithy statements are socio-linguistic genes that are equally carried by people of all ages and cultures that is why the following statement of the Fool satisfy the reader of all ages and cultures:

FOOL. Winter's not gone yet, if the Wild-geese fly that way
Fathers that wear rags
Do make their children blind,
But fathers that bear bags
Shall see their children kind.
Fortune that arrant whore,
Ne'er turns the key to th' poor.

But for all this thou shalt have as many dolours for thy daughters as thou canst tell in a year(Shakespeare: 85).

This study tries to highlight the conflict that takes place in both the individual mind and the collective mind. Social structure precipitated in human psyche in the form of socio-linguistic genes and changes in the individual mind set due to its interaction with the external environment can be taken as mutations in the socio-linguistic genes that in turn cause changes in socio-economic circumstances. Shakespeare represents this conflict through the character of Edmund when he says:

EDMUND. ...I will persevere in my course of loyalty, though the conflict be sore between that and my blood(Shakespeare: 129).

The conflict between dominant and emergent ideologies goes on in every age and culture is reflected in the socio-linguistic artifacts of that age. Socio-genetic study concentrates on the texts and characters in these texts that reflect this conflict to the maximum. Edmund, Goneril and Regan in *King Lear* reflects this conflict, therefore these are the most important characters from this point of view. The emergent ideologies condemned through the condemnation of these characters gained momentum with the passage of time. Thus in short it can be said that ideologies are transferred from generation to generation, individual to individual, society to individual, individual to society, and one culture to another culture through socio-linguistic genes and due to mutations it keeps on changing.

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