



Hamlet : A study in Postmodernism

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Much ink has been spilled on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The bewildering variety and complexity of this tragedy have hardly left any reader or audience unstirred. No wonder, right from its production down to the present times, critics have showered profusion of phrasings to epitomize the uniqueness of the tragedy of *Hamlet*, but in vain *T.S. Eliot* described *Hamlet* as the 'Mona Lisa'¹ of world literature. *G. Wilson Knight* called Hamlet "the ambassador of death walking amid life"².

Spurgeon focused his critical searchlight on the imagistic aspect of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, *A.C. Bradley* employed 'Interpretative Approach' to explore the mysterious aspects of Hamlet's character. The Romantic critics like Goethe and Coleridge focused their 'Impressionistic method' to unravel the wonderful psychological and divine forces at work in the nature and character of Hamlet and other Shakespearean characters. The present paper is a humble attempt to critically analyse Shakespeare's *Hamlet* through postmodern perspective.

The desire to break away from the aegis of Aristotelian authority had been an intention in literary criticism even before Nietzsche appeared with his book, *The Birth of Tragedy* in which at loggerheads with the therapeutic effect of the response to tragedy in 'Catharsis', he conceives of its vitalizing power born of its 'Dionysian Origin'³. The ecstatic reality which Nietzsche calls 'Dionysian Urge' has its origin in the profound layers of human psyche.

The rigour of unity and simplification of experience and language in a monosemantic preoccupation as per the Aristotelian ideal, proves to be too much of strain even for a dramatist like Brecht, who appears to carry defiance of the Aristotelian precepts towards the creation of a trend of drama for his ideal of 'Epic Theatre' which is very much evident from his masterpiece, *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Reacting sharply against the illusionist theatre of 'Naturalists' by Stanislavsky, Brecht developed his 'Epic Theatre' which is basically non-illusory where there is not a mirror reflection of reality but a re-presentation, a critical reproduction of reality. In the contemporary drama we come across playwrights who sought to re-present realism when actors try to set up a direct rapport with audience without any pretension. But then the actors/ the persona are quite aware of their roles and responsibility. *Pirandello* came out with a new technique showing actors 'standing outside their characters'⁴ as embodied in his famous play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.

Tirading against the fixity and monophony of expressions, critics like *Bakhtin* introduced 'Dialogic Imagination' and called a text an open-ended discourse marked by polyphony and ambivalence of voices. The Postmodern critics – Derrida, Barthes, Lyotard, Baudrillard, to name the few, constantly pronounced upon the inconclusive, undecided and indeterminate nature of a text. Both Derrida and Barthes tiraded against Sausure's preoccupation with 'signifier-signified' fixity and studied texts from the

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standpoint – A text is an endless play of signifiers without any labored or conscious reaching after a grand finale or ultimate meaning. Appreciated from these standpoints, *Hamlet* appears to be a tragedy as much true to the contemporary times as it was at the time of its reproduction. It would seem that stylistically, the tragedy of *Hamlet* demonstrates tone and tenor of postmodernism.

The central crisis of the tragedy of *Hamlet* is the profound impact of a mother's guilt (Gertrude's) upon her highly sensible son (Hamlet) who studied philosophy at Wittenberg University. The crisis is deepened all the more when the philosophical son (Hamlet) was visited by the ghost of Hamlet's father who informed him that he was, in fact, murdered by his uncle (Claudius), the present king of Denmark and his mother who betrayed him for lust and power. The hasty marriage of Claudius and Gertrude on the very day of the funeral of the late King (Hamlet's father) shocked the sense and sensibility of Hamlet. The more the ghost compelled Hamlet to take revenge of his father's brutal murder, the more he withdrew because he always took the problem of revenge metaphysically. It is here that Shakespeare departs from traditional revenge theme of the British Chronicle dramatized in *Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy*. Due to his philosophical nature, he took the problem of revenge and problem of evil in its universal proportion. Needless to say, he suffered from endless procrastination. Even Denmark turned out to be a metaphor of universal crisis robbed of grace/glory. He cried: "Denmark is an unweeded garden", "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark". (Ham, I, IV, 1036)

The persona reacts to the crisis philosophically and like a crusader he wills to remedy the malaise prevailing around. The range and dimension of crisis which Hamlet feels is enigmatic and irremediable. There seems to be neither beginning nor end to the crisis. That's why, when Horatio doubts the existence of ghost and authenticity of its words, Hamlet retorts him like a postmodern philosopher :

"There are more things in heaven and hell,
Horatio than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Hamlet deploras:

The time is out of joint, o cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right. (Ham, I, V, 1038)

In the character of Hamlet, we find something like a skeptic who feels incapable of resolving the crisis around. It seems that the persona experiences pervasive anarchy and confusion. He realizes, 'whips and scorns of time', 'Oppressor's wrong', 'Law's delay/insolence of office'. (Act III, Sc-I)

Jean-Francois Lyotard, a leading postmodern critic says in his classic observation, "This is a period of slackening"⁵. W.B. Yeats aptly remarked in one of his famous poems:

Things fall apart,
Centre cannot hold
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the well⁶.

Shakespeare dramatizes the mounting tension and sense of chaos going on in Hamlet's mind. He was called upon by the ghost to take revenge against the corrupt king of Denmark (Claudius) but because he is a meditative soul, he probes the pros and cons of the revenge. At the outset, he wants to ensure who the murderer is. As he is imaginatively resourceful, he plans out to stage a play entitled, '*The Murder of Gonzago*' intended to confirm the ghost's words regarding the murder and murderer. Deliberately, he



invites King Claudius and Queen Gertrude to be the chief guests on the inauguration of the play. The setting and dialogue of the play are well-designed. Expressing the purpose of the play, Hamlet says: “The play’s the thing Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king.” (Ham, II, I, 1046)

In the ‘Play-within-the play’ episode, Shakespeare dwelt on the role and significance of language games in dramatics which is rather descriptive and dialogic than prescriptive and monological. The dialogues and speeches designed are marked by irony, metaphor, paradox and other linguistic devices which come closer to the contemporary medium of communication than to the traditionally prescribed mode of fixed and artificial mode of communication. *Inga-Stina Ewhank* rightly observes: “Shakespeare’s own peculiar force came to be his ability to release, in his metaphors, the energy of the English language and at the same time to render the proper quality, the unique being, of thoughts, feelings, or dramatic situation”⁷. This seems to be reflected when Hamlet instructs his player so aptly:

Be not too tame neither, but let your discretion be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance, that you O’erstep not the modesty of nature..... O, there be players that I have seen play – and heard others praise, and that,they imitated humanity so abominably.

(Ham, III, II, 1048)

In fact, Hamlet’s emphasis on the right and proper use of language to represent the inner feelings of characters and humanity remind us of Aristotle’s emphasis on “the proper method of delivery” in *The Art of Rhetoric* in which he discusses in detail persuasion, style and proper arrangement and moderation. Hamlet asks his actors to represent the humanity has an echo of Ovid who talks of “copious style”. As *McKeon* observes: “From Ovid.... Shakespeare develops this copious infusion of sensuous imaging into the speeches of his characters at the most intense dramatic moments, giving, those characters a haunting sense of detachment from their own circumstances and, in turn, an interiority that mimics our own self-consciousness.”⁸

In fact, Shakespeare was quite aware of self-expository method of characters to appeal to the widest commonality spread. “Through ‘Play-within-play’ device, he brought about a sort of dramatic rendering of character revelation beyond time and space. The player King and Queen speak out their own dialogues and this profoundly stirs the conscience of the actual King and Queen (Claudius and Gertrude) so much so that they quit the show disturbed.

Player King:

My operant powers their functions leave to do,
And thou shalt live in this fair world behind,
Honour’d, belov’d, and haply one as kind
For husband shalt thou –

Player Queen:

The instances that second marriage move
Are base respects of thrift, but none of love.



A second time I kill my husband dead,
When second husband kisses me in bed. (Ham, III, II, 1050)

The recourse to the language game is a kind of repeated reminder to the readers that there is nothing outside the text as *Derrida* would say. Baudrillard, a postmodern critic aptly observes:

We live in a meaningless universe of words which bear no
relation to sense impressions and felt experiences and where
language is no more than its own pure simulcrum.⁹

A resourceful soul as Hamlet is, he draws upon the wide range of allusion to stir the conscience of audience. Obliquely, he calls it ‘The Monsterap’ and refers to it profusely:

This play is the image of a murder done in Vienna – Gonzago is the Duke’s
name, his murder done in Vienna – Gonzago is the Duke’s name, his wife
Baptista – you shall see anon. ‘Tis is a Knovish piece of work, but what O’that?
You Majesty, and we that have free souls, it touches us not.

(Ham, III, II, 1051)

One notices what may be called some sort of eclecticism in Hamlet’s allusions to various sources to ‘pluck out the heart of my mystery.’ (Act-III, Sc-III) When the guilty conscience of the King and Queen is stirred and they quit the scene, we discover in Hamlet not only a poor son but also a resourceful poet having penchant for allusion to the Roman King, Nero who murdered his mother in the most brutal manner. He speaks out his heartfelt sense of agony due to his mother’s heinous crime:

The soul of Nero enter this form bosom,
Let me be cruel, not unnatural.
I will speak daggers to her, but use none.
My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites:
How in my words somever she be shent,
To give them seal never my soul consent. (Ham, III, III, 1053)

On the occasion of Shakespeare’s 400th birth anniversary, *Harry Levin* takes up the issue of eclecticism so vividly :

Poets, playwrights, and novelists may justifiably venture to found schools, take stands or issue manifestos, for they are involved and licensed, committed to experiment or one-sided by design. Critics can scarcely be other than open-minded, unblushingly eclectic rather than doctrinaire, ready to entertain any possibility – to exclude no insight or procedure that promises to illuminate or enrich the matter at hand.¹⁰

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare’s allusion to the Roman and Greek mythology also debunks *Ben Johnson’s* view that the Bard of Avon knew “Small Latin and lesse Greeke.”¹¹

It seems that Hamlet is not merely an Elizabethan play of entertainment, but as a representative play of the time it raises issues, debate and discussion thereon, critical flux and reflux which go on unresolved. *Sir Philip Sidney* rightly explains that the Renaissance literature “Counterfeited figured forth, or spoke metaphorically only to create speaking pictures, in order to teach and delight.”¹² It is in this sense that Hamlet, more than any other Shakespearean play, emerges most postmodern as the characters



in this tragedy represent various issues like crime v/s punishment, thought v/s action. Hamlet is always in the grip of his second thought and deliberations. This drags him to the horns of dilemma. Hamlet himself reveals it :

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles. (Ham, III, I, 1047)

The puzzling procrastination of Hamlet is also due to the fact that Hamlet weighs and considers over the pros and cons of action metaphysically. Partly because of his pricking conscience, partly because of his fear of the unknown, Hamlet cannot act and this makes him suffer from conflict, chaos and confusion ad infinitum:

But the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country, from whose bourne
No traveler returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ill we have.
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And, thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied O'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.
(Ham, III, I, 1047)

Hamlet is well aware of the division of his self and applauds those who enjoy the bliss of oneness: "Blessed are those/ whose blood and judgment are so well commingled." (Act-III, Sc-II)

The juxtaposition of conflicting emotions is what constitutes the core of the Shakespearean drama thereby making it contemporary. Like a postmodern playwright, Shakespeare strives to show human nature in its multiple, different and contrary aspects. His dramas in general, and his tragedies in particular are conceived in what may be called paradoxical and ironic vision of life. Macbeth's opening words: "Fair is Foul, Foul is Fair" (Act I,I) seems to be true to all of his tragedies. In *Hamlet* also Shakespeare shows similar response towards the paradoxical state of human nature.

Hamlet : I must be cruel only to be kind. (Act III, Sc-IV, 1056)
Polonius : By indirections find directions out. (Act-II, Sc-I, 1039)

Polonius who was the first to notice Hamlet's transformation and pointed out his lunacy paradoxically said:

How pregnant sometimes his
replies are – a happiness
that often madness hits on. (Ham, II, II, 1043)

A.C. Bradley notices a sort of apathy or 'lethargy' as the possible cause of his melancholy. He says: "Hamlet's melancholy is his own inability to understand why he delays."¹³ Be it his madness or be it his melancholy, it always mars his readiness and decisiveness. And his soul becomes a cockpit of endless conflicts and confusions.



Hamlet senses the growing obscurity in the behaviour, the manner and character of his sometimes beloved (Ophelia) and Schoolfellows (Rosencrantz and Gui Idenstern), let alone his frail mother (Gertrude). He reacts to God's creations of humanity with philosophical stance:

This goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile
promontory the most excellent canopy A
foul and pestilent congregation of vapours What
piece of ink is a man...! The beauty of the world,
the paragon of animalsquintessence of dust. (Ham, II, II, 1043)

It seems that Hamlet derides what may be called in *Patricia Waugh's* words "unique, fixed and coherent"¹⁴ In his deconstruction of the traditional concept of man as an essentially noble being, Hamlet seems to unravel man's indefinable expansion ending up with what may be called in Waugh's words "Open-ended postmodern uncertainty."¹⁵ In his non-stop use of puns and verbosity, Hamlet foretells what constitutes the crux of the Postmodern literature i.e. difference and dissensions.

It seems that the Elizabethan Age had ushered in the age of quest and enquiry. The critical attitude towards tradition and mythology is what constitutes the heart and soul of the Renaissance Age. *John Donne*, the leader of the Metaphysical Poetry rightly remarked: "The new philosophy calls in doubt."¹⁶

The genius of Shakespeare also shows a unique blend of critical and creative faculties Quite akin to Coleridge's views of a great artist in *Biographia Literaria*, Oscar Wilde remarks pertinently about the synthesis between creative and critical faculty:

The antithesis between them is entirely arbitrary. Without the
critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all worthy of the
name that fine spirit of the choice and delicate instinct of selection
by which the artist realizes life forces, and given to it a
momentary perfection.¹⁷

The spirit of questioning the authority or any traditional belief in the form of Epic or God or Centre is what constitutes the crux of the philosophy of postmodernism epitomized as Deconstruction by Derrida and carried forward by Bakhtin, Barthese, Baudrillard, to name the few. Striking enough, in Act V, '*GRAVE- DIGGER SCENE*', the critical conversation of the two grave-diggers may be read as a kind of questioning attitude to the Christian belief of suicide as a sin, committed willfully or unwilfully. The tone of the grave-diggers is marked by irony, humour and doubt rather than blind adherence to dogma or myth. Their dialogue deserves to be quoted at length:

Grave-digger : Why, there thou say'st. And the more pity that great folk should have
countenance in this world to drown or bang themselves more than their
even christen. Come, my spade. There is no ancient Gentleman but
gardeners, ditchers, and grave-makers – they hold up Adam's profession.
(He digs)

Another : Was he a gentleman?
Grave-digger : A was the first that ever bore arms.
Another : Why, he had none.



Grave-digger: What, art a heathen?

How dost thou understand the scripture?
The Scripture says Adam digged could be dig
Without arms? I'll put another question to thee
Not to the purpose, confess thyself -

Grave-digger: What is he that builds stronger than other the mason, the
shipwright, or the carpenter?

Another : The gallows-maker, for that frame outlives a thousand tenants.

Grave-digger: I like they wit well in good faith, the gallows does well. But how does it well? It
does well to those that do ill. Now, thou dost ill to say the gallows is built
stronger than the church, argal, the gallows may do well to thee.

(Ham, V, I, 1065)

It seems that grave-diggers do not blindly follow Christian beliefs, rather they try to question, doubt and deride the traditional stereotypes as if they do not take any pattern as Absolute / Ultimate. In fact, the Grave-digger's in Shakespeare's time were on the margin of social spectrum. He endows them with human and intellectual qualities thereby bringing them to the mainstream of the play. It is a sort of subverting the stereotype. It is Shakespeare's conviction in the complexity of any action which makes Shakespeare contemporary and immediately appealing. The way Grave-digger trifurcates an action into different parts shows it:

Grave-digger : It must be se offendendo,
it cannot be else;
For here lies the point :
If I drown myself wittingly,
It argues an act, and an act
Has three branches – it is to
act, to do, to perform.....

Here not only they signify the physical drowning of Ophelia but also their submergence into a language-game that defies any finale. One come across a striking spirit of defiance against any fixity or coherence in Shakespeare's characters which fittingly make them Postmodern persona rather than stereotypes. There is something versatile and mobile about them. Hamlet does realize "in my heart there was a kind of fighting." (Act-V, Sc-II). He realizes that the loss of centre or absence of finale is due partially to the fact man is not free to act, rather some superhuman power controls our actions:

Let us know
Our indiscretion sometime serve us well
When our deep plots do pall, and that should learn us.
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will.

(Ham, V, II, 1068)

Hamlet is quite aware 'Of mighty opposites' at work. He infers that let things have their course. He calls upon man to respond to the flux, the never-ending process of becoming beyond time and space. What



happens is not expected and what is not expected does happen. It is the unpredictability and inevitability which seems to constitute the crux of the language-game:

We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man, of aught he leaves, knows aught, what is't to leave betimes.?

(Ham, V, II, 1070)

If unresolved conflict is the soul of postmodernism, *Hamlet* is a masterpiece on this theme. A postmodern persona is self-divided, so is Hamlet. His madness, his insanity, his procrastination issue from his divided and disorganized self which always stand in the way of his action and decision. Hamlet confesses it so poignantly:

If Hamlet from himself be taken away, / And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes, / Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.... Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong'd; His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.

(Ham, V, II, 1070)

It is towards the end of the play that we experience a sort of endlessness, 'more mischance of plots and errors' (Act-V, Sc-II) and bloody question' (Act-V, Sc-II) hovering the protagonist's mind. Both dying Hamlet and surviving Horatio experience the inscrutability and harshness of the world. Horatio wishes to relate the tragic end of Hamlet's eventful life to the world at large: "High on a stage be placed to the view" (Act V, Sc-II). Hamlet implores his friend Horatio to convince the audience and readers of the genuine reasons of dilemma which always prevented him from taking revenge of his father's foul murderers. Through Hamlet, even Shakespeare presupposes the superior significance of readers/audience in deciding the real meaning of a text. This is how an author is placed in the background to activate the mind of the readers towards interpreting a text afresh. In his best-known essay, 'The Death of the Author' *Roland Barthes* makes a classic observation: "The Birth of a reader must be at the cost of the death of the author."¹⁸ Hamlet, too, wishes the readers/audience to be taken into confidence to really deconstruct a text and make it 'a writerly text'¹⁹. There seems to be something Barthian in Shakespeare's extending the margins of a text to the world of readers who alone can justify the character and action of the persona in the given context:

Things standing thus unknown shall I leave behind me.
If thou dost ever hold me in thy heart, absent thee from
felicity awhile, and in this harsh world draw thy breath
in pain to tell my story. (Ham, V, II, 1071)

He solicits Horatio "Report me and my cause aright to the unsatisfied". (Act-V, Sc-II)

The dying words of Hamlet still leave us shocked, unanswered and speechless. He says : "The rest is silence". (Act-V, Sc-II). This is where we witness the unresolved, endless, incommunicable



problematisation of crisis/dilemma which signify postmodernism. This is where differences are activated hinting at multiplicity of meaning. Jean-Francis Lyotard rightly observes: “Let us be witness to be unrepresentable; Let us activate the differences and save the honour of the name.”²⁰

In the life of the above deliberations and discussions, it may obviously be inferred that Hamlet by Shakespeare, undoubtedly, befits to be called a postmodern text as it bears the essential characteristics of postmodernism in *Patricia Waugh's* words, “Difference, plurality, fragmentation, non-totality, contingency, language-games.”²¹

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