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Hamlet's Exclusive Solitariness: Born Existentially

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to study *Hamlet*, the masterpiece of Shakespeare in the light of existentialism. The key features of existentialism, dread, anxiety, alienation, un-decidability- are to be found in the play in abundance. The play poses many fundamental questions such as what is man, what is the meaning of human life, what is death and so on. The protagonist is tossed in the most complicated situation having lost his father, mother and the crown. His encounter with the spirit of his father intensifies his trouble. The existential philosophers like Sartre and Albert Camus have shown their interest in the role of mysterious working of the forces of the nature in human life that decides the course of existence. *Hamlet* in many ways exhibits the predicament of human life and depicts the universal human dilemma.

Key Words- *Existentialism, Anxiety, Dilemma, Meaninglessness, Nothingness.*

The unanimous applause to Shakespeare for being the greatest playwright of the world owes to the fact that his plays are full of possibilities and interpretations. His plays can be analyzed in the light of existentialism, new- historicism, post-colonialism, phenomenology and Upanishadic thought. Existentialism at bottom deals with the issues such as human life, human body, human soul, individual freedom, individual choice, individual responsibility, absurdity of life and un-decidability of human life and human nature and so on.

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Sartre writes that “Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards” (*Existentialism and Humanism* 28). He indicates that an individual has the ability to decide how he or she stands in relation to his or her own life. This idea underpins his famous dictum “existence precedes essence” (28). Similarly, Heidegger describes *Being and Time* as an inquiry into the ‘being that we ourselves are’ (60). For existentialists, existence is always in a state of flux, constantly being formed through an individual’s actions and choices.

Sartre is of the opinion that man is what he chooses to be. In *Hamlet* the protagonist is placed into most complex situation. On the one hand the present king of Denmark offers him the privilege to enjoy his status. On the other hand his father’s ghost assigns him the duty to avenge his father’s assassination. Now, Hamlet is left with the choice between easy and difficult task but he prefers for the difficult one and undergoes tremendous pressure, yet sticks with his resolve:

Remember thee!

Ay thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat

In this distracted globe. Remember thee!

Yea from the table of my memory

I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,

All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,

That youth and observation copied there;

And thy commandment all alone shall live (*Hamlet*, Act I Scene V, 29)

The preference of Hamlet is to avenge the criminality done to his father, it determines his character and reveals his attachment to his father and his sense of responsibility in accordance with the then existing ideals. Eventually, when he succeeds in taking the revenge, though on the cost of his life he is regarded as an able son and loyal prince. Fortinbras’s applause, “for he was likely, had he been put on/ Too have proved most royally” (Act V Scene II, 137).

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Hamlet undergoes poignant suffering owing to his choice as Claudius assures him that he should enjoy as the prince of Denmark under his kingship because by the virtue of their relation he is still the heir to Denmark. The king also requests him to remain in the court of Denmark as the chief counselor. Nevertheless, Hamlet is irresistibly drawn towards his duty as a son of a deceived father and stained mother and could not reconcile with the offers of luxury promised by the offender and willingly chooses for the vengeance wrong done to his father, mother and himself. At the end he shows the anxiety of doing good from which he constantly suffered thereby he requests Horatio to draw his breath in the unkind world to tell his story. Thus, Hamlet is what he chooses to be.

Existentialists view that every individual is supposed to take responsibility to exercise his choice. Hamlet realizes his responsibility as a prince of Denmark so he wishes to eradicate corruption from Denmark and ensure justice to the state, "The Time is out of joint O Cursed spite/ I was ever born to set it right!"(Act I Scene V, 33). The commitment shown by Hamlet is an illustration of his sense of moral responsibility that he procures even by sacrificing his own life. Goethe observes, "A beautiful, pure, and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which makes the hero, sinks beneath a burden which it can neither bear nor throw off..." (as qtd. in Verity's Introduction of *Hamlet*). In the last scene of the play he is fatally wounded but feels satisfied by killing Claudius. Since, Hamlet was aware of the fact that Fortinbras, is a man of action and good faculties, would rule over Denmark, so he dies with satisfaction.

The most interesting fact and happening of human life is irrationality and implausibility. However, every one of us tries to rationalize everything. For instance, in *Hamlet* the protagonist suffers most poignantly due to the loss of his father, mother and throne. The fact remains that he has not committed any error so his suffering can be said illogical. Critics are right regarding him more sinned against than sinning. The case of Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern falls in the same category. Similarly, the case of Duncan in *Macbeth*, Cordelia in *King Lear* and Desdemona in *Othello* are other examples.

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Exhibiting unjust treatment to all the above mentioned characters Shakespeare shows that life is indeterminable and illogical phenomenon where cause and effect do not necessarily follow. Perhaps the playwright wanted to advice common people that why something happens is beyond rationale so that when we come across such thing in our life we should not be perplexed.

Existentialism highlights the idea of freedom; it discusses the individual's existence in this world. Existentialism underpins the idea that life is a meaningless affair. At the core of existentialism there is belief that individuals are powerless, alone, and helpless. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* displays similar view in the twentieth century, "nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes it's awful" (34). There is no plan or fate of our existence. Human world is absurd and one is left to cope up with absurdity by his choice. The following lines of *Hamlet* highlight the futility and absurdity of human existence:

Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander
returneth into dust; the dust is earth; of earth we make
loam; and why of that loam whereto he was converted
might they not stop a beer-barrel?
Imperious Cesar, dead and turn'd to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away
O, that that earth which kept the world in awe
Should patch a wall to expel the winter's flaw; (Act v scene I, 119)

Hamlet is spiritually oriented and elevated being therefore, he has a great foresight to understand the secret of life. In the below quoted lines his conception of life contrasts with the commonly held view of life in Elizabethan age. For others man has the grandeur of being superior species which is comparable to God but for Hamlet man is nothing else but the quintessence of dust:

What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason!

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How infinite in faculties !in form and moving, how express and admirable! in
action how little an angel!

in apprehension how like a god ! the beauty

And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me; no nor
woman neither, though by your smiling

you seem to say so (Act II scene II, 48).

Hamlet, the magnum opus of Shakespeare, exhibits that the protagonist is trapped in the meaningless world. He tries to discover meaning in life and questions life after death. When he analyses his wish to die after receiving the most sever shock owing to the hasty remarriage of his mother to Claudius. He begets self-hatred and wishes for 'self-slaughter' because he finds the 'world, weary, stale, flat and unprofitable? Moberly states that the basic affinities of our nature are always present to Hamlet's mind. He thinks of body as hiding from us the freshness, life and nobleness of God's creation. He wishes that body should melt because he is completely broken. But at the same time he shows his consciousness of "His canon against self -slaughter". He resembles Christian religious belief that life is given to us by God so we are none to finish it by our choice. "O that this too too, solid flesh would melt, /thaw, and resolved itself into dew" (Act I Scene II, 13). Hamlet's anguish time and again leads him to think over his existence in this world that is "unwedded garden". He broods over sustaining his life and expresses his dilemma, "To be or not to be: That is the question".

He is tossed in a situation where he is utterly confused. However, he finally settles himself to suffer the mortal pains in order to avoid soul's damnation. Hamlet gives physicality lesser significance and after life is of greater importance to him:

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,

And by opposing end them?

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The undiscovered country from whose bourn

No traveler returns, puzzles the will.

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all; (Act III, Scene I, 60).

Bradley regards *Hamlet* along with *Macbeth* as the most religious plays by Shakespeare because heaven and hell, body and soul have been thoroughly discussed in these plays. Even a villain like Claudius is conscious of his guilt and expresses, "thought without action does not heaven go". The heaven remains the ultimate goal of every individual. Existentialists claim that there is no ultimate, transcendent meaning to the world. Human beings create gods, religions, and teleology because they want to believe the world is ordered and purposeful. According to the existentialists, responsibility for one's life lies entirely with oneself. Although there are religious and Christian forms of existentialism, the major thinkers argue that the world contains meaning only because individuals have projected meaning onto it. This shift towards a more secularized view of human meaning largely came about as a response to the increasing dissatisfaction in Europe with theological constructions of meaning. The question of the human creation of meaning arose as a result of Nietzsche's questioning of the validity of a universal moral code and thus paved the way for the argument that human life is meaningful because man chooses to make it so. Hence, the existentialist element to discover the meaning of life is one of the chief features of the play, *Hamlet*. The purpose of life is to secure redemption of soul in Hamlet.

Hamlet is regarded to be an idealist by Goethe who is misfit in the corrupt world. As we find that his arch enemy, Claudius was kneeling down at prayer and he finds him defenseless he was able to dislodge him easily but his spiritual sense and moral nature intervenes and Hamlet spares the king on the ground that his soul would reach heaven because he is at prayer and it will be a kind of stipend to such a villainous man whereas his attempt is to send his soul to hell failing which his revenge would be in complete. Nevertheless, critics pounce upon Hamlet for this act of sparing his enemy and label him the charge of inaction and lack of courage. Bradley notices, "The incident of the sparing of the

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King is contrived with extraordinary dramatic insight. On the one side we feel that the opportunity was perfect. Hamlet could not possibly any longer tell himself that he had no certainty as to his uncle's guilt" (108). Earnest Jones has gone to the extent of saying that he does not kill the king because he suffers from oedipal complex. He loves his mother, he does not want to see his mother sad as she is attached to Claudius and consequently, spares the king. Goethe gives his theory that he considers the political insecurity in Denmark and also that he thinks of the soldiers who will lose their lives if Norway attacks Denmark. He wants to expose the king publically. Whatever may be the reason but this incident proves to be fatal for him. Existentialism gives sanction to the dilemma. Human beings are not sure about the consequences of their action hence dilemma ensues. Hamner, in 1730 to be sure, remarks that there appears no reason at all in nature why this young prince did not put the usurper to death as soon as possible but Bradley defends Hamlet's action and observes it does not even cross his mind that this apparent 'absurdity' is odd and might possibly be due to some design on the part of the poet.

Drama is regarded to be verisimilitude of life. What Shakespeare apparently wishes to dramatize through the play *Hamlet* is that life is a riddle. The moment Hamlet is dispatched for England to be secretly executed there the audience feels Rosencrantz Guildenstern are going to be the instrument of Hamlet's death but eventually, they themselves are executed and Hamlet safely returns to Denmark. This incidence reveals the mystery of life. Bradley writes in his *Shakespearean Tragedy* "of course Hamlet appeals powerfully to our sense of the mystery of life" (73). He further says, "What is required of him, therefore, if he is not to perish with his duty undone, is the utmost weariness and the swiftest resolution. Yet it is not too much to say that, except when Horatio forces the matter on his attention, he shows no consciousness of his position. He muses on the graveyard on the nothingness of life and fame, and the base uses to which our dust returns, whether it be a court-jester's or a world-conqueror's." (116).

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The character of Hamlet is highly celebrated on account of multiple shades that are weaved in him by Shakespeare. Henny Mackenzie remarks about Hamlet as, he possesses 'indescribable charm'. He is unique in the sense that he has the ability to introspect and retrospect as he finds prince Fortinbras leading the army to launch an attack for the sake of egg-shell. According to Edward Dowden "His words are not deeds. They are uttered self-indulgently to please the intellectual or artistic part of him, or to gratify his passing mood of melancholy, of irritation or of scorn"(146). He immediately compares Fortinbras with himself and vehemently criticizes his delay of action, alongside examines life and speaks of its futility:

Why all occasions do inform against me,
And spur my dull revenge! What is a man,
If his chief good Market of his time
Be but sleep and feed? A beast no more.
Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and God like reason
To fust in us unused (Act IV Scene IV, 95-96).

Hamlet the prince of Denmark who is compared to the rose of the fair state suffers from acute sense of loneliness after the death of his father and remarriage of his mother. A C Bradley remarks, "For Hamlet self-reproaches, for his curse on his enemy, and his perplexity about his own in-action, one and all imply his faith in the identity and truthfulness of the Ghost. Evidently this sudden doubt, of which there has not been the slightest trace before, is of genuine doubt; it is unconscious fiction, an excuse for his delay-and for its countenance" (104). Dr. Johnson opines that Hamlet is through the whole piece, rather an instrument than an agent.

The notions of alienation and absurdities are still important for existentialism, but they must be properly explained and qualified. Hamlet seems to be alienated even from his

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self. Ophelia, his beloved is also distanced from him (as he interprets on the basis of her conduct) When she returns gifts of Hamlet. He has only companion in the form of Horatio, a scholar and thorough gentleman but he cannot share his feeling about his mother even to him and he expresses "I must hold my tongue". As he speaks to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that something has gone wrong and he has lost all mirth and laughter as he finds nothing interesting in life. In fact he has developed world weariness. He says that he puts his life at pin's fee. He further expresses that even women do not attract him. He is highly sensitive person who not only thinks but feels too much. Verity remarks that if the prince would be able to feel less and think less he would have been able to act more. He suffers from multiple contradictory traits and his soul becomes the battle ground, torn apart. Walt Whitman is of the opinion that Hamlet contradicts his own views because he "contains multitudes". Lastly he submits himself to fate and says if I am to be killed now, nothing can save me and if I am not to be killed nobody can harm me so let me go and fight, readiness is all. The major portions of Hamlet's views are revealed in his soliloquies evidently, his circumstances make him recluse and he is in love with thought. Here it is pertinent to cite the views of Coleridge who opines that the excessive thinking causes procrastination in Hamlet that becomes fatal for him.

Shakespeare's observations of the world in *Hamlet* are based on his practical experience of life. Like a true artist he has universalized his personal experiences of life. He comes closer to the thesis of Indian epistemology i.e "Neti neti". As Greek dramatists put destiny in the center and the Elizabethan's believe in the theory of action crucial to what happens to an individual. Shakespeare gives sanction to both the views. Particularly, in *Hamlet* he seems inclined to the working of Providence as he expresses, "Man proposes God disposes" even "Sparrow does not fall without His wish". He believes that Divinity shapes our ends to a great extent. But if we analyze Shakespeare in entirety we find that he is of the view that all world views are worth respecting, life is great enough to encompass all of them. It is apt to quote here Dowden "the providence in which Shakespeare believed is a moral

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order which includes man's highest exercise of foresight, energy, and resolution. The disposition of Hamlet to reduce to a minimum the share which man's conscious will and foresight have in the disposing of events, and to enlarge the sphere of the action of powers outside the will has a dramatic, not a theological significance" (158).

Shakespeare seems to extend his thesis through Hamlet that life contains enormous strangeness and unpredictability and inexplicability. The protagonist's dilemma, his contradictions, his perplexity, his worries, his anxiety, his fears and his questions are related to all of us because he represents every human being.

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