

The Dilemma of Hamlet in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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Abstract. Hamlet is often perceived as a character-expounding and thoughtful-technically termed as relativist, existentialist, and sceptical. The various theories set up by critics, but sympathetically, has at all times puzzled them, bear a partial truth that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is poignantly a study of the tragedy of thought and reflection, but, at the same time it equally bears a fractional truth, sensitively accepted, that Hamlet's 'dilemma' (that tossed his whole soul) delayed his thoughts and actions and furthered his final performance. In addition, the present paper also makes an effort to unveil Hamlet's preoccupied and existential problems and his equilibrium with his inner-self and his constant- ecstasy of self-torture that deferred his ultimate resolution of avenging his father's murderer. This way, the play *Hamlet*, the most prime of Shakespeare dramatic art, gathers a serious critical attention, amidst its most turbulent psychological crisis, and conveys such a psycho inclination that even in the 21st century world, every psychoanalyst peers it as the fundamental problems of humanity, still driven with. The present pursuit realises truly, the admired maxim that literature should 'hold mirror up to nature', and therefore, uniformly probes into the exceptional, conceptual anguishes of Hamlet.

Keywords : Dilemma; psychoanalytic; enigmatic; conflict; outrageous; absolute; nobility; honour; revenge; ambition.

Hamlet (originally *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*) is a historical play, a monument of talent, by Shakespeare which involves a tragic hero –Hamlet, who holds an elevated position in his society with some key character traits motivate him to perform an action set in a series of actions. Hamlet is plagued by intense guilt about his failure to achieve revenge (i.e. revenge of his father's death). It is more in Hamlet's nature to ponder over the various possibilities and their consequences than to actually take action. Hamlet dives into an ethical, epistemological, and ontological cesspool seemingly fully equipped to reverse the pattern of decay and rot plaguing Denmark.

The all time famous soliloquy in *Hamlet* is often used to reveal the innermost thoughts of the character, Hamlet to public view. It may also be considered as an act of bearing the soul. Hamlet says:

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. (*Hamlet* III i)

Hamlet's soliloquy has become the focus of many analytical exercises. For example, one analysis characterises the passage as a deliberation on the conflict between reason and passion. Another portrays the soliloquy as universal in perspective i.e. as the dilemma applied to the universal man—sort of everything to everyone—the all in all decision. We find Hamlet, like that of Augustine, is working out a theorem, which is of general application based on a fundamental question—perhaps question concerning human life, the desirability of having it at all. This question—to be, or not to be—is that which comes at the juncture of freedom and bondage for every human being, because the true essence of real freedom is the freedom we have of our choice—to be, or not to be.

To identify with dilemma, it is a situation that requires a choice between options that are available or seem equally unfavourable and mutually exclusive. Many earlier critics tried to make people realise the Hamlet's dilemma of delay in killing Claudius in terms of socio-political issues of Denmark. Later, a closer analysis of Hamlet's unconscious reveals that he delays because of his suffering from a dilemma – a dilemma between killing Claudius and not killing him. For him, taking the revenge of his father's death and not killing Claudius both are of equal importance and ultimately he is in a maze of making a very difficult choice. Hamlet hopes that death is all nothingness, that death will end the heartache and the thousand natural shocks. But he fears that, in death, he will be haunted interminably by bad dreams of life itself, by dreams heavy with the memory of fear and pain. Ultimately, he says, that's why humans dread death. We fear that our consciences will torment us forever. Thus, human beings choose life, with its torment and burdens, chiefly to avoid death, the great unknown. However, death is, like life, inescapable, and Hamlet curses his luck for having been born at all. Even to Hamlet himself, when he moves through Elsinore, apparently in control of his outward behaviour, questions begin to arise to which he seems incapable of answering with any certainty.

For the notion of revenge has left with the question of what is right and what is wrong. Likewise, when Hamlet confronts the dilemma of whether to avenge his father's murder, he is haunted by an anxious ambition to "set things right" leading him to ponder whether it would be truly nobler to endure evil inactive, or if the true dignity of that which is man demands that he actively fight and conquer the evils that beset him. Considering the political, religious, and ethical aspects Hamlet's delay in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is caused by his pursuit of absolute nobility, while his melancholic nature also sporadically detains him from being resolute and decisive. The ambiguous and contradictory nature of revenge as defined by powerful institutions versus society makes Hamlet wonder which authority he should follow in order to be noble. According to Church and State Hamlet's thirst for blood-revenge is evil, and, he is obliged to act passively and suppress his will for vengeance in order to appear righteous.

On parallel, his soul and body haunt, how could Hamlet, prompted by his morals and conscience, not seek vengeance actively? How could Hamlet not defend his honour? According to the counter-code, failing to avenge meant incompetence, and Hamlet is bound to torture himself with what he considers to be cowardice. In the play we witness that the Elizabethans believed that the man who destroys evil partakes in the nature of God; the man who endures evil is no more than a beast. According to the average critics, the command to avenge arises from an ethic of action and leads to great enterprise; the command to patience arises from an ethic of "passivity and leads to physical, intellectual, and spiritual dry rot. In this case, Hamlet's passion for revenge is indeed justified, or even honourable, carrying with it the nobility that he desperately longs for. The root of Hamlet's hurdle is that both the Church and State's and the counter code's definitions of revenge appear to be equally reasonable and ethically correct. As a result, Hamlet struggles with the question of which one of them has the capability to make him rightly and guide him towards nobility. Therefore, in order to perceive the "true" nature of revenge and achieve the "true" nobility, Hamlet must think precisely on the event and delay his act of revenge.

When Hamlet eventually finds the indication from God, yet incidentally slays Polonius, the murder, carrying with it inevitably severe consequences, has violated his principles of "nobility," and Hamlet is forced to decelerate his motion. When he is preparing to leave his mother's chamber, he turns to the dead body of Polonius and considers what the murder has led to, "To punish me with this, and this with me, that I must be their scourge and minister." (II. ii) According to the church doctrine, when the act of vengeance on the guilty necessitated the performance by the agent of a crime, like murder, a man already damned for his sins was selected to be a scourge. A minister of God, in contrast to a scourge, is an agent who directly performs some good and will visit wrath under the protection of God. By arguing whether he is a scourge or minister, Hamlet has realised that his vengeance has towed him into a potential punishment from God, carrying with it the inevitable penalty for blood. Hamlet cannot afford any more severe consequence and any wrong step in his pursuit of religious nobility. As a result, Hamlet becomes over concerned with consequences, pushing him to examine everything, including his motive, his thoughts, and the circumstances, over-scrupulously, which eventually contributes to his delay. Besides these questions over the revenge itself, some historical aspects also have an impact on Hamlet's nobility, debate and his hesitation.

Although, Claudius has the most power of the state, Hamlet nevertheless has the righteous reason to slay him, considering the fact that Claudius has committed an immoral crime. Therefore, if the Ghost is a real agent of God, its command, appointing Hamlet as God's agent to punish the criminal, Claudius, even though at odds with Hamlet's intention of obedience to the ruler, would be indeed justified

and have a positive influence to the nation. Hamlet, as implied by Shakespeare in the first scene, is a well-educated prince who is quite conscious of his responsibility in maintaining peace in the state and promoting the benefit of the state. Subconsciously, he is aware that when “time is out of joint,” he is duty-bound to set it right. Yet these opposing authorities, altogether, make it impossible to define “right.” Does the well-being of the state come from obedience and passivity? Or does prosperity come from eradicating evil and taking action? In his anxious and even painful ambition to bring order to the kingdom and eventually achieve his nobility, Hamlet is inevitably going to be disturbed by these two opposing ideas when he confronts the terrible question of revenge. Such suspicion and uncertainty has made his goal extremely perplexing and frustrating and requires that Hamlet evaluates the situation cautiously, which eventually contributes to his delay. Hamlet’s internal debates and bewilderment during his pursuit of nobility, together with all the misfortune that besets him, pull Hamlet into a melancholic disposition that detains him from being resolute and that eventually contributes to the delay. No doubt does Shakespeare ably attempt to portray in his *Hamlet*, the constant fear and depression, with an intention. In fact, like the England of sixteenth century, plague was threatening the life of every citizen in London, here, Denmark in *Hamlet* is also “plagued,” not by a particular disease, but by human corruption.

Hamlet’s family, his kingdom, and even his life are completely ripped apart by such corruption, which seems to gnaw at the kingdom, growing more and more potent everyday. As a result, Hamlet is overwhelmed, and he does not know how to act. Hamlet is shocked. His reverence for his mother, his imagination of a healthy kingdom, and his admiration for the great power of men have been ruined thoroughly, and Hamlet is thrust into reality. Moreover, all the debates and the dilemmas that Hamlet is experiencing constantly torture him and push him into a more agonizing position. As a result, he cannot refrain from sinking into deep melancholy, a temporary depression that paralyses him in contempt for everything - the world, the flesh, and himself, “O that this too solid flesh would melt / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew”. (III. i) His brain reels and totters, his mind is tainted with bewildered horror, then loathing, then despair over human nature. Such a state of feeling is adverse to any kind of decided action. However, his passion urges him to take action. Every instinct of his soars to exact blood-revenge and slays his uncle, who appears to be utterly contemptible in his eyes. And in the face of all this passion, his depression holds him bound. As soon as the tide of passions fades, Hamlet sinks back to his melancholy and continues his disgust for life. As a result, Hamlet “constantly intervenes between the outburst of passion and the relapse into melancholy.” (Bradley 104) He wonders “to be, or not to be”. In fact, he is “diseased” by the contrast of his inner desires and his sporadic mental depression, which ultimately contributes to the delay.

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In conclusion, the crux of Hamlet's dilemma lies in his pursuit of sheer nobility as well as in the weakness of his personality. His revenge, unsettled by the disruptive question of the nature of revenge and of the Ghost, threatened by constant apprehension of the consequences, and complicated by the competing demands of rival authorities, altogether makes his goal of nobility unachievable. He hesitates. He delays; moreover, he becomes a giant of thought but a dwarf of action. In fact, it is nobility that ultimately causes Hamlet to be immoral. Through careful analysis of the various soliloquies, one can trace the spiritual crisis that the very complex character of Hamlet undergoes and allows the readers to follow the progression of Hamlet's spiritual crisis and they also help to bring out his complex mental state. In the end enigmatic Hamlet comes to accept his purpose and the fact that guilt must be atoned for. The play finally offers a hero who, in a world where good and evil inseparably mingled, is tempted to shun his lot in life, but comes to embrace it, choosing finally 'to be' and revenge his gracious father's death.

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