



Modernity In *Hamlet* The Play

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Abstract- Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, even though written in the early 17th century, has remained a favourite of not just modern readers and audiences but also of literary critics. The play's engagement with issues of psychological complexities and various other human concerns has kept it relevant even in today's time. Across centuries numerous literary critics have read and re-read the play and in turn they have tried to challenge the more traditional readings of the play which saw it as "old, barbaric, and wild". This paper tries to bring together the arguments of various critics and readers of Shakespeare and tries to challenge the more conventional takes on the issue of modernity in the play. Modernity in *Hamlet* must be seen in terms of Hamlet's own interiority and subjectivity. Unless there is a shift from the action of the play and a departure from the past, locating modernity in *Hamlet or Hamlet* is an almost impossible task.

Keywords- Modernity, Inwardness, Consciousness, Individuality, Subjectivity, Pathos

Shakespeare's plays have always attracted a variety of readings, and even readings against those readings. To read *Hamlet* and look for modernity in it is a reading against the conventional readings of *Hamlet* which saw it as "old, barbaric, and wild". The conventional readings of *Hamlet* have been such that Hamlet himself has been expunged from the reading. To discuss modernity in *Hamlet* requires a deep insight into Hamlet's "deep and complex inwardness."

Since the time of its conception, *Hamlet* was seen old and barbaric, however, it was, Margreta De Grazia argues, after 1800s that newer insights into the old were made. Modernity in *Hamlet* can be seen in terms of, and with reference to the hero Hamlet, who is also a modern hero. Modernity in *Hamlet* must be seen in terms of Hamlet's own interiority and subjectivity. Unless there is a shift from the action of the play and a departure from the past, locating modernity in *Hamlet or Hamlet* is an almost impossible task.

That which Hamlet has within is deeply injured, first by the death of his father and secondly by his deprivation from the throne of Denmark. However, for a long period of time, his mental condition, which is a direct result of such events, has been paid less attention to by the other characters in the play, as well as by the readers and critics of *Hamlet*. As a modern hero and withholder of “modern consciousness”, Hamlet not only reflects on his own thoughts, but also makes others think over his thoughts, he constantly drives attention to that which is going on inside him. His psychological complexities are important markers of his “modern consciousness.”

One of the many preconditions for the development of the modern consciousness is a detachment from all sorts of materiality, including land. It is only when we ignore the materiality, that we can see the complex interiority of Hamlet. Hamlet’s loss of the crown of Denmark is a loss which disassociates him from materiality and enables him for an “internalisation of the self.” The language of the play always refers to people and their relationship with land. To Hamlet human beings are just clay. Land, in the grave scene, becomes an extension of human body. De Grazia suggests that once we disassociate him from the land and focus on his interiority, he’ll lose all his monadic worldliness. Once Hamlet is drifted away from the land-driven plot of the play, he “assumes a self-determining autonomy.”¹

It was through this detachment from a land-driven plot and shift of focus towards Hamlet’s inner self that critics like, Coleridge, Hegel, Lacan, Freud began to look “within” Hamlet.

For Coleridge, Hamlet is a “self-determining” character. He is somebody who has a world within himself, and thus he doesn’t require a plot. For him, Shakespeare’s breaking away from the ancient unity of time and space gave an advantage to the modern. It “consigned it to the arbitrary control of the imagination.” Coleridge used the term Psychological for the first time to refer to “Shakespeare’s singular insight into character: his power to discern the habits of the mind.”² Coleridge’s suggestion paved the path to look at *Hamlet* in psychological terms rather than historical terms. For Coleridge, it was only after reading *Hamlet* that he was driven to philosophical criticism.

Hegel too suggested that conflict in Hamlet resides in the “inner life of Hamlet. Comparing Hamlet to Orestes he argued that this kind of “inner life” was not present in the characters of Classical Drama. “Their

¹ Grazia, De Margreta, “*Hamlet*” without *Hamlet*, Introduction Page-4

² Grazia, De Margreta, “*Hamlet*” without *Hamlet*, Chapter-1

inner being doesn't look out of them as self-knowing inwardness." The characters in ancient drama are identified as per their actions, however, in modern drama there is a gap between the intention of the character and the action of the character. There is a "swithering of reflection", and this is a sign of modernity. Hamlet, due to his "beautiful inwardness", doesn't find a connect with the external. "He persists in the inactivity of a beautiful inner soul which cannot make itself actual or engage in the relationships of his present world." His "sinking into himself" is a sign of modernity.

Freud's analysis of *Hamlet* and Hamlet also stands important. Freud goes a step further from Coleridge and Hegel and points towards not only inwardness but also sub-inwardness. He moves from the conscious to the sub-conscious. While in the ancient drama incest and patricide were a major part of the enactment, in modern drama such as *Hamlet*, they were repressed. This crucial shift from enacting patricide and incest to repressing it is a marker of an advancement "in the emotional life of humanity."

Picking up from Freud, Lacan suggests *Hamlet's* modernity is not in the repression but in the "inexpiable loss." "It is a play about mourning, not guilt." The problem that we come across in Hamlet is also the problem of the "modern society." The play is full of mourning, and death. And when the loss which was compensated by the ceremonies after death is abandoned, "leaves a gap or "hole in the real" that activates the "scar of castration", the primary oedipal loss of the phallus. The injury is permanent, and as it has already been suggested, Hamlet has an "injured within" and the loss of the loved ones simply triggers the other losses, the loss of his father, the loss of his throne of Denmark, loss of phallus.

Even though these critiques have attempted to look "within" Hamlet, critics like T.S. Eliot have had strong disagreements with it. Eliot argued that "the play is the primary problem, and Hamlet the character only secondarily". He criticises Goethe and Coleridge and says that they see in Hamlet a "vicarious existence for their own artistic realization." He calls them "weak, creative critics" and accuses them of ignoring relevant historical facts. But, Alan L. Ackerman argues, Eliot himself fails "to believe that criticism requires the same kind of historicizing.

The problem with Eliot's idea is that he thinks that "the notion that the world of things in *Hamlet* becomes intelligible only through analysis of Hamlet's mind is an ideological development of the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries." It is quite clear how Eliot chooses to turn his back to the importance of this implication. He fails to acknowledge that the shift in criticism, which hugely impacted modern drama, is a

derivation of the writings of eighteenth and nineteenth century which focuses on “subjectivity” “experience”, and the “self” that lies within.

It is the dichotomy between inside and outside, that which constitutes the inside and that which constitutes the outside which stands crucial to *Hamlet*. Hamlet’s “inner-life”, the “world within”, the depths and complexities of his “inner self“, the departure from the ancient mark the complexity of *Hamlet* and make it a modern play.

References

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