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The Theme of Revenge in Shakespeare's plays: Hamlet and The Merchant of Venice

Mr. Ahmed Mabkhoot Ahmed Khamees

Research scholar, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Aurangabad.

Dr. Pradnyashailee Sawai,

Research Supervisor,

Department of English,

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Aurangabad, Maharashtra, India.

Abstract

This research examines the issue of vengeance in Shakespeare's plays Hamlet and The Merchant of Venice by comparing and contrasting the two texts. First, this research will define the meaning of the term revenge from a linguistic and social viewpoint, as well as providing a synopsis of both works. Second, by a detailed analysis of the texts, this study illustrates the aspects and motivations that led to retribution in both works. The researcher explains the concept of revenge in the two plays, each of which has a different sort of revenge and a different tale in the discussion part. The researcher then shows how Shakespeare expressed the study's theme in his two plays. The outcomes of the investigation and what the researcher discovered after completing the study are presented at the conclusion of the research.

Introduction

Revenge becomes a famous theme in most literary works, and it continues to do so in contemporary work. Shakespeare's dramas Hamlet and Merchant of Venice are solely built on retribution to attain justice. In modern times, justice is generally administered, and most crimes and wrongdoings are prosecuted and punished. Few people go above and beyond the norms, taking justice into their own hands.

William Shakespeare's works are noted for their tremendously dramatic situations. After studying Shakespeare's use of revenge and how it pulls out the life of his plays, it is good for writers of literature to include a lot of violence and death in their works and literature. In Shakespeare's works, vengeance is used to get to the source of violence and to stir the audience. His writings leave a noticeable and important message that vengeance is not always the best approach to address problems, yet his use of vengeance in his works encourages the use of vengeance in literature.

There were various causes and conditions in both literary works that compounded the concept of revenge; if these aspects did not exist, the two characters in both works would desist from vengeance. The idea of revenge was increased by Shakespeare through dialog or internal struggle, and using eye language in whole play, for example, "I am thy father's spirit, doomed for a certain term to walk the night and for the day confined to fast in fires till the foul crimes done in my days of nature are burnt and purged away" (Shakespeare, 1987, p. 185).

Literature Review

Because it "touched important questions of the day: the social problems of personal honor and the survival of feudal lawlessness; the political problem of tyranny and resistance; and the supreme question of providence, with its provocative contrasts between human and divine vengeance," (Salinger, 1995). In Elizabethan drama, Revenge was a famous theme.

What precisely is revenge? Revenge is defined as the act of inflicting hurt, harm, or humiliation on someone who has been wronged. The idiom "an eye for an eye" is a citation from various sections of the Hebrew Bible (Leviticus 24:19-21, Exodus 21:22-25, and Deuteronomy 19:21), in which a person who has hurt another's eye is compelled to compensate with the worth of his or her own eye. Many works of literature, including Shakespeare's Hamlet, are based on this mythological perspective (DiYanni).

Revenge is defined as "an act of harming a person or group in response to a grievance, usually in order to obtain justice in illegal means, using one's own hands" (revenge, 2019). Bacon (2011) stated that "Revenge is a kind of wild justice, which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out. For as for the first wrong, it doth but offend the law" (p. 384).

An injured person's desire to exact retribution on his or her assailant regardless of the law or religion, i.e. "blood for blood," is described as revenge. Retribution was a prominent theme from the middle of 1580s to the beginning of 1640s. Among the famous playwrights of the time who contributed to this theme were Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe, George Peele, and William Shakespeare, with his play Hamlet. John Marston wrote about this issue in his play Antonio's Revenge (1600), calling it as "an example of theatre that masterfully emphasizes all of the features of the revenge tragic tradition." (4)

Several more retribution plays debuted about the same period, all of which displayed "a profound insight into the moral and spiritual ramifications of revenge." Among the top five are Henry Chettle's *The Tragedy of Hoffman* (1602), *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606), and *The Atheist's Tragedy* (1610-11). In all vengeance plays, a crime is done first and foremost, and for many reasons, laws and justice are unable to punish the perpetrators. As a result, the victim takes the law into his own hands and, despite everything, exacts his revenge. The revenger then goes through a time of doubt about whether or not he can carry out his retribution, which usually entails difficult and sophisticated planning. Finally, he resolves to exact his revenge. The appearance of a ghost to persuade the revenger to carry out the deed, bloody deeds, intrigues, insanity, high melodrama, and the revenger death and occasionally his collaborator at the moment of success or even during the course of revenge are other characteristics that are common in revenge plays. The Greeks, who composed and performed the first planned plays, are the originators of all revenge plays. After the Greeks, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, a Roman philosopher and dramatist, arrived (4 B.C. - A.D. 65).

The play *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, according to Taylor (2002), was one of his most popular works and is still one of his greatest works. The play's principal topic is revenge, which results in the murder of several innocent people (pp. 2-8). Instead of his uncle's horrible crimes, the author focuses on Prince Hamlet's issues, which are portrayed as elegant. The ghost of King Hamlet appears to Prince Hamlet at the beginning of the play, telling him that King Claudius poisoned him. Prince Hamlet regrets his father's death as well as his mother's remarriage to the new King Claudius, which occurred only a few weeks after the late king's death. Then Hamlet strives to uncover the truth about his father's death and plots his vengeance. In the course of discovering the truth, Hamlet behaves insane and deceives a large number of people in order to conceal his genuine intentions.

Methodology

The researcher offers the methodological techniques and data employed in the study in order to attain the study's goal by delivering the study's idea and thought. To reach the study's goal, the research used material acquired from original sources (*Hamlet* and *The Merchant of Venice*), as well as thesis, dissertations, books, and other secondary resources. Furthermore, certain Shakespeare lines from the two plays, as well as statements from books and articles, are used to support the study viewpoint.

The Theme of Revenge in Hamlet

The presence of the ghost in *Hamlet* was the most essential catalyst for the idea of vengeance, as well as a symbol of fate. When the ghost revealed his true identity to Hamlet, saying, "I am thy father's spirit, doomed for a certain term to walk the night and for the day confined to fast in fires till the foul crimes done in my days of nature are burnt and purged away" (Shakespeare, 1987, p. 185), Hamlet was inspired to seek vengeance on his uncle Claudius, who poisoned King Hamlet.

Hamlet mistakenly kills Polonius for Claudius, who is hidden behind a curtain., as a result of the madness of retribution. He had no regrets, and all he could see was retribution for his father's murder. Following the assassination of Polonius, Hamlet declares, “Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell I took thee for they better” (Shakespeare, 1987, p. 278). Hamlet then killed Laertes with a poisoned sword at the end of the play.

When their ship was attacked by pirates and Hamlet returned to Denmark, he killed his childhood friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, leaving them to die alone. He was also indirectly implicated in the drowning of his love Ophelia, as Gertrude described it: “clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke, when down her weedy trophies and herself fell in the weeping brook” (Shakespeare, 1987, p. 319). Furthermore, Hamlet was indirectly responsible for Gertrude's death when she was accidentally poisoned by Claudius..

Some reviewers noted that Hamlet's delay in killing his uncle and exacting revenge was morally driven, and Shakespeare emphasized this to demonstrate Hamlet's moral side: “Haste me to know it, that I, with wings as swift as meditation or the thoughts of love, may sweep to my revenge” (Shakespeare, 1987, p. 186). Despite the tragic deaths of both heroes, many detractors dismissed this viewpoint. In one way or another, both writers rejected the concept of vengeance. For the viewers or readers, this verified a moral aspect.

The central theme of the drama is vengeance. The play's key events depict several individuals expressing their desire to exact vengeance on someone who has wronged them in the past, which sets up the tragic conclusion of the play, as revenge almost always leads to disaster.

The prince of Denmark, Hamlet, sought vengeance on his uncle, the current king of Denmark, for the assassination of his father, the previous king of Denmark. Hamlet chooses to become insane in order to get his revenge, but in the process, he mistakenly kills Polonius, Lord Chamberlain, and the father of his buddy Laertes due to a mix-up with Claudius the King. On the other hand, Laertes conspires with King Claudius to poison Hamlet in order to revenge his father's death, albeit King Claudius had his own reasons for wanting to kill Hamlet.

Hamlet's father assassinated the king of Norway, and his son Fortinbras, the prince, vowed vengeance on Denmark as well. However, Hamlet is the sole survivor of the tragedy, and thus becomes the future king of Denmark. All of this is thought to have occurred as a result of King Hamlet's death. In Shakespeare's revenge plot, innocent souls are slaughtered, and the theme is used to show how the pursuit of vengeance frequently leads to tragedy.

The Theme of Revenge in The Merchant of Venice

The Merchant of Venice is a play about A Jewish moneylender intends to take off a pound of flesh from a Merchant with whom he has a past. The fundamental theme of Shakespeare's play "The Merchant of Venice" was vengeance. Other elements in the text, such as friendship and prejudice, however, help to stress retribution as the play's major focus.

Revenge is a key theme in the play and among the characters. Shylock is driven by a desire for vengeance against Antonio. Jessica is, in some ways, seeking retribution for her father's "hell" at home. Jews were not considered humans in Venice during Shakespeare's time. They were persecuted because of their beliefs and the conviction that Jews were to blame for Christ's murder. Jews were forced to wear red hats anytime they went out as a result of their estrangement, making them easy targets for abuse and discrimination. Shylock has been subjected to such discrimination, with Antonio spitting on him and referring to him as a "cut-throat dog." Even after obtaining a loan, Antonio says in Scene Act 1, Scene 3, "I am as like to call thee so again, to spit on thee again, to spurn thee too." This demonstrates Antonio's contempt for Shylock just because he is a Jew. It's no surprise that Shylock seeks Antonio's vengeance.

Shakespeare explores the core theme of retribution through the extremely emotive issue of anti-Semitism, looking at the source of revenge and the need for the offender to explain it. Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, is enraged by the play's Christian characters, particularly Antonio, the trader mentioned in the title. He has faced cruelty and suffering just because of his Jewish faith, which is at the center of his existence and defines him as a man. He has been branded a "dog" and spat upon. His soliloquy reveals the depth of his anguish and hurt (Act 3 Scene 1). "If you prick us, do we not bleed? ... If you poison us, do we not die?" he says, revealing his humanity. The viewer is able to comprehend the roots and need for vengeance because of this depth of feeling. Shylock must also justify his right to vengeance to himself as well as others and makes a case for why vengeance is both necessary and justified. He states that, "If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge." Shakespeare provides Shylock's desire for revenge depth and meaning by juxtaposing the issue of anti-Semitism, establishing revenge as a prominent element of the play.

The audience is introduced to Shylock, a Jewish moneylender in Venice, in Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice. The contract created between Antonio and Shylock in the name of Bassanio, Antonio's great friend and in need of the ducats, is one of the play's key focal points. Antonio undertakes to either pay back the ducats in three months or give Shylock a pound of his flesh from whatever part pleases Shylock as a result of the arrangement. While the contract first appeared unthreatening to Antonio, it quickly becomes a problem and a vehicle for Shylock's vengeance. Despite the struggle between Antonio and Shylock, Shylock uses his speech in Act III, Scene I to defend himself to others by contrasting Jews and Christians. As a result, Shylock's

logic for justifying his revenge can suggest a sense of awareness regarding his obligation to recover what Antonio owes him.

When Shylock enters Act III, Scene I and meets paths with Salerio and Solanio, the speech is delivered. Concerned for their comrade Antonio, Salerio and Solanio question Shylock about the pound of flesh. Shylock's next statement expresses his disdain for Antonio's current predicament and how he must now offer a pound of flesh to Shylock. Furthermore, the speech adds to our understanding of Shylock's long history of abuse by Antonio and other Christians. Shylock's statement on his past maltreatment by others inflames his animosity and inspires his desire for vengeance. The maltreatment of Shylock by others generates a character that has been victimised and mistreated by others. The fact that Shylock is portrayed as a victim aid in understanding his desire for vengeance. Aside from being portrayed as a victim, Shylock conveys the message that there is little difference between Christians and Jews, and that they are both human beings. He makes this connection to bolster his argument that, as a Christian, he has every right to retaliate. While the battle between Antonio and Shylock is a central theme in the play, it may also be seen as a metaphor for the larger conflict between Jews and Christians.

Throughout *The Merchant of Venice*, there is a confrontation between people of Christian faith and those of Jewish faith. In the speech where Lancelot is considering whether to serve Shylock, a Jewish man, or serve Bassanio, a Christian man, such prejudice against Jews by Christians may be evident. Lancelot's struggle to choose between doing the right thing and staying with Shylock or accepting the prejudice that "the Jew is the very devil incarnation" can be compared to the struggle of doing the right thing and staying with Shylock or accepting the prejudice notion that "the Jew is the very devil incarnation" (2.2. 25). The fact that Shylock is referred to as "the Jew that is the very devil incarnation" reflects the general prejudice that Christians have against Jews. The fact that the play's Christian characters repeatedly disparage Jews contributes to a sense of compassion for Shylock's character. Furthermore, the fact that Shylock has been biased and wounded by others explains his desire to justify his retribution. Despite the fact that he has lost his servant and his fortune, Shylock is a Christian who has every right to feel and maintain hatred.

Shylock's monologue in Act III, Scene I, explains what motivates him to seek vengeance and why he has every right to do so. His vengeance for Antonio, on the other hand, can be viewed as unmerciful and inhumane. Shylock is a figure who has lost and suffered as a result of other people's acts. Overall, Shylock's persona is a minor blip on the radar of a larger war between Christians and Jews. Shylock seeks vengeance on his Christian foes, but he is doomed when they conspire to deceive him. Perhaps if he had followed justice instead of retribution, he might have had greater success. The Christians, elated by their judicial triumph, exact vengeance on Shylock, seizing his possessions and compelling him to convert to Christianity.

Conclusion

The first and last cause of both heroes' terrible deaths was vengeance. In both literary works, tragic occurrences were the driving force behind the concept of vengeance. Hamlet by William Shakespeare was a beautiful and humorous revenge drama. The retribution motif was used in the beginning part of the play, and it was continued until the finish. The spirit of Hamlet convinced Hamlet to seek vengeance on Claudius, Hamlet's father's murderer. He eventually realised that there would be no just justice, therefore he had no choice but to take matters into his own hands. Hamlet's mind was frazzled and he was suffering from the symptom of indecision as a result of completing this difficult and perilous act of revenge. At the same time, Hamlet used his famous and greatest soliloquies to maintain connection with the audience, notably the famous "To be or not to be..." (Act III, Scene I Hamlet became enraged when he saw his mother with the villain Claudius, which was the most stunning moment in the play. The problematic mental condition of Hamlet, as well as the mad scene of Ophelia when she learned of her father's death and Hamlet, who was also sent to England, were all present in this play. Ophelia was so surprised and frustrated by these two incidents that she committed suicide by drowning in the river. The audience saw the entire royal family die at the end of the play, and the entire kingdom was on the verge of destroying its former greatness. As a result, Hamlet was regarded as a tragedy with utter and absolute revenge.

The notion of revenge is introduced as a parallel topic to the theme of mercy in *The Merchant of Venice*, yet there is no common ground between them. Mercy and vengeance never go together because the lack of one implies the presence of the other. Shakespeare attempts to elucidate the binary antagonism of vengeance and kindness. He sees this issue as crucial to either the survival of the human species (mercy) or the devastation of human life (revenge). Shylock is tortured by his thirst for vengeance throughout the play. A thirst for vengeance also drives him to his tragic conclusion.. His choice of vengeance over mercy at the hands of the court system causes him the most misery. Shylock says:

I pray you give me leave to go from hence,

I am not well. Send the deed after me,

And I will sign it. (4.1.391-393)

Because it is a major subject that Shakespeare wants to address and relate to his own environment, the dreadful repercussions of revengeful deeds and their wider ramifications is an important axis of discussion here. Human beings' lack of pity and compassion is the source of the vengeance and animosity that destroys one and all. Shakespeare subtly alludes to the prevalence of revenge in his own society by bringing it up. He wants to argue that any efforts stemming from a desire for vengeance will only benefit the avengers. No enterprise can succeed if the spirit of vengeance is present, because it is detrimental not only to its victims but also to itself.

Various social and political powers that engage in vindictive acts against society's established rules end up terribly.

Shakespeare depicts prejudice between Christians and Jews through several characters based on anti-Semitism. One of the main characters in the drama is Shylock. Christians are harsh with him. He is unable to avoid the harassment he is subjected to from them. Prejudice fosters a culture of mutual contempt between Christians and Jews. The Jews in Venice are rejected by the Christian population because of their unique lives and faiths. In the drama, religious prejudice wins over justice.

The Merchant of Venice is an artistic portrayal of the playwright's thoughts on society's current pressing issues and the need to unite its disparate social and political structures. The multiplicity of societal activities and practises urgently need unification, rather than homogenization. Because the society's splendour is based on its celebration of distinctions and variety, which eventually serves the nation's larger social and political unity. This fascinating Shakespearean dramatic vision seeks to discover the social and political agenda at the centre of this unity in difference.

In the full range of Shakespearean characters, Shylock is one of the most well-known and highly discussed figures. He's a Jewish moneylender who used to demand exorbitant interest rates on the money he lent to the poor. He is Jessica's father and Antonio's adversary. Without a question, Shylock is a wicked character, but some critics argue that he should be handled with sympathy. He is vengeful in his actions, but he is not only the perpetrator of wrongdoing but also the victim of wrongdoing. He is depicted as a representative of the Jewish people in Shakespeare's time, which was despised by Christians. Shylock is a type of national pain, national sympathies, and national antipathies, according to Fletcher, and he is an object of cruel reproach. He is surrounded by his Christian opponents, whom he is powerless to confront; he has no life among them, only money, no claim on them other than interest, no sympathy for them other than hatred, and no indemnity from them other than revenge.. (171) (1983).

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