

The Famished Vortex of Estrangement and Disintegration in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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Abstract: This study focuses on the tragic sense of disintegration and alienation, which has covered the whole atmosphere of the royal domain with suspicion and uncertainty. It tries to display the mode and mood of sense of displacement, which keep all the characters apart from one another. All the leading characters may seem to be well associated but indeed, there is an ocean of stormy gap among them. The study tries to display the drowning characters moving towards the famished vortex of disintegration and non-existence by creating a fake world of utopia. Eventually, the study makes an attempt to bring to light the cost of betraying or losing one's beliefs, as well as the trust of the ones who are near and dear to us.

Keywords: famished vortex, alienation, social disintegration, sense of uncertainty

INTRODUCTION

Man is born soft, mild and free from any contamination. He loves association and socialization, but what happens as he moves ahead towards the path of growth and maturity if you call it, he gets disintegrated from his surroundings? As we browse through the dusty pages of history, we see this mysterious game of disintegration. It seems that man is fully determined to imprison himself within his own dark dungeon of loneliness and solitude.

Sense of disintegration has covered most of the world nationals like a dark and melancholic shroud of non-existence. This eroding and frustrating sense is born when one is deprived of his innate right, which is his private territory. This territory may be encroached by both the internal and external forces. The internal forces may derive from the various prevailing conflicts, which an individual undergoes and the external forces may be the unbearable characters of differing and *destructive* stances.

Indeed, it may be because of the unleashed sense of selfishness, which is far beyond the self-interest that most of the characters are pulled and pushed in the disastrous world of alienation. Brassy and Barber (2009) very aptly quote Aristotle on self-interest and selfishness, "The love of *self* is a feeling implanted by nature, said Aristotle. But *selfishness* is rightly censured, because selfishness is not mere love of self, but the love of self in excess, like the miser's love of money." (p. 97)

When one is stuck in such a situation, he is deprived of taking actions. He unconsciously shows reaction to an imposed action. Osho (2004) gives a pertinent comment on reaction:

So try first to understand the term reaction. It means you are acting unconsciously. Somebody is manipulating you. Somebody says something, does something, and you react. The real master of the situation is somebody else. Somebody comes and insults you and you react, you become angry. Somebody comes and praises you and you smile and you become happy. Both are the same. You are a slave and the other knows how to push your buttons. You are behaving like a machine. You are an automaton, not a human being yet. (p. 53)

The most heart lacerating point is, as man reaches a higher level of mental and physical height, he steps down lower and lower, as far as humanity and human values are concerned. As he moves ahead on the chronological bedrock of life, he gets more dependent upon *I, me* and *my*; he gets alienated with the term *the other*. This sense of alienation with *the other* makes him do anything possible to come first at the each and every race of life, even if it may cost lives. This mysteriously tragic and appalling mental texture seizes him away from the altruistic realm of justice and inevitably throws him in the isolated dungeon of cruelty and brutality. Newman (2001) beautifully quotes Jacques Derrida:

There is an avenir for justice and there is no justice except to the degree that some event is possible which, as an event, exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations.' Justice is an event that opens itself to the other, to the impossible. (p. 16)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has always been the incessant research target of various researchers of the academic world. The researchers has just selected a few of them who have touched the different layers of this well-acclaimed play. Ottez (2001, p. 39) focuses on the analysis of the otherness of the Ghost as a blend between pagan and Christian creeds, a cocktail of Catholicism and Protestantism, etc., and a number of other forms of alterity such as violence, oblivion, insanity, usurpation, incest and adultery with references to critics such as Victor Hugo, Jacques Derrida, Stephen Greenblatt, Alan Sinfield, Jean-Paul Roux or G. R. Hibbard. Ahdipour (2003) deals with the existential aspect of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Hooper (2003) asserts that:

Hamlet is a living "pun," forced to live in more than one ideological space at a time. Such a painful and disorienting condition directly causes his own verbal puns in his language, his confusion and delay over revenge, and finally, the outbursts of violence that lead to Polonius' murder and Ophelia's suicide. Strangely, the only way he can destroy his punned existence is to assume another doubled nature: he must take on the role of his father in order to destroy these corrupting doubles and restore order to Denmark. (pp. 120-21)

Maleki (2012) deals with the polar concepts in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. He comments, "by drawing a paradigm of polar concepts throughout Hamlet, or any other text, readers would be able to enjoy different levels of meanings without being petered out by the dexterity of literary devices and tropes ." (p. 19) Alsaif (2012) speaks on the religious aspects of Hamlet. He scrutinizes the significance of religion in *Hamlet*: He attempts to provide a new interpretation to understand how religious beliefs influence the characters' motives. Text analysis shows Hamlet's social surroundings are receptive to metaphysical beliefs. Hamlet is fundamentally more religious than his religious community; therefore, he seems reluctant to take a position on his father's murderer because of his fearing to be a sinner. Hooti (2013) looks at *Hamlet* from a Derridean deconstructive outlook. He believes that Derrida's "galvanizing deconstructive stand may give a new soul to Shakespeare's Hamlet." (p. 3903)

HAMLET AND THE SENSE OF DISINTEGRATION

Hamlet has got his own typical determination and non-submissive nature. This is the kind of inflexibility of mind that ensures conflict and from that drama is created. In fact this kind of determination and inflexibility is the very characteristic of all Shakespeare's heroes. They are all very determined and uncompromising. They do not easily give in to the views of others; they work hard to defend their position and views. They try to upset the established patterns of behavior and attitude. But they discover that they are incapable of such absolute change in their favor. This diminishes their spirit, slows down their rage and makes them feeble and isolated. They feel helpless and pressurized and find outlet to their tensions in their invectives and tirades. But they never submit to the prevailing situation, nor compromise with the surroundings. They continue to maintain their independent and unaffected life-style. Hamlet is inflexible in his attitude to his surroundings and very tough in his treatment of his mother. Nothing changes his attitude; even the good and compassionate behavior of Gertrude does not change his mind. He continues to humiliate her and even blame her for her inability to understand him. Hamlet is ready to abandon even Ophelia but not his attitude.

Hamlet counts the world responsible for his frustrated and isolated existence. He believes that his near and dear ones have conspired to neglect him and his desires, and so he is completely unable to hold relations with others. He cannot communicate what he feels and in order to do so and examine the reactions of others he adopts several means of communication from mock cross-examination to rhetorical speech. It is this way that he is inflexible and determined. He is painfully conscious of himself and finds the world making most of his faults. Hamlet is not happy with himself and his unhappiness with the outside world is the reflection of his inside turbulence. The relationship fails because of such inward lack of happiness and understanding.

His outbursts are the overflow of his bitterness whenever his mother fails to measure up to the standards of devotion that he expects. Hamlet's biting sarcasms are in a sense really directed inwardly against himself. He tortures himself by torturing others. He deliberately tries to destroy Ophelia's love for him because it is not the love he had expected. It is a kind of self-laceration and it springs from his isolation from himself.

He lives in a critical condition, which leads to his isolation from the world he hates and from his mother whom he loves and hates. He distances himself from his surroundings because they take him away from his set of views and values. His tirades are his reactions against his isolation. He deliberately does not want to be the part of the world in which he lives and it consequently isolates him. He cannot adjust to anything because he does not want to adjust, as it would be contradictory to his assumptions. Behind all such rage and disapproval works the theme of isolation. Hamlet feels the pressure of isolation and in order to dispel it he bursts out in the form of tirades and invectives. His separation from his environment, his estrangement from his beloved, mother and friends shows the extent of his isolation. He cannot make up with anything and anybody and that shows his complete isolation.

Hamlet's anger and despair thus spring from his deep sense of frustration and isolation. The play however contributes to consolidate this implicit theme of isolation. The characters in their own way attempt to express the isolation and loneliness that is the result of their failure to establish contact with one another and with the outside world. Dialogue in the play is the vehicle of deeply troubling sense of isolation. Hamlet's invectives are the manifestations of his inward loneliness, the estrangement from the worldly practices and patterns.

All the characters of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* suffer from the torturing sense of non-belonging. In this confused world of disintegration, they are not more than fake actors. They try to act different roles to cover the vacuum of isolation and alienation. Schlegel finds *Hamlet* quite mysterious:

Hamlet is singular in its kind: a tragedy of thought inspired by continual and never satisfied meditation on human destiny and the dark perplexity of the events of this world, and calculated to call forth the very same meditation in the minds of the spectators. This enigmatical work resembles one of those irrational equations in which a fraction of unknown magnitude always remains that will in no way admit of solution. (cited in Smith, 2004, pp. 29-30)

Hamlet

Hamlet, the prince of Denmark finds himself in the furious vortex of his father's mysterious death and his mother's snubbing marriage. The short gap between the sorrowful Mourning sobs and the Wedding March has made him thoroughly jarred and stunned. This unjustifiable issue has created a sense of non-belonging both towards his mother and the palace as well. Elsinore, which once was the paradise of joy and the safe haven for his unfulfilled dreams, has changed into a rankling and festering palace, where he finds his existence buried alive. He finds all the dwellers of the palace crook and destructive moving figures. The palace is not a safe haven for him anymore. Lamb asserts:

nine parts in ten of what Hamlet does, are transactions between himself and his moral sense, they are the effusions of his solitary musings, which he retires to holes and corners and the most sequestered parts of the palace to pour forth; or rather, they are the silent meditations with which his bosom is bursting, reduced

to *words* for the sake of the reader, whom must else remain ignorant of what is passing there. These profound sorrows, these light-and-noise-abhorring ruminations, which the tongue scarce dares utter to deaf walls and chambers, how can they be represented by a gesticulation actor, who comes and mouths them out before an audience, making four hundred people his confidants at once? (cited in Smith, 2004, p. 24)

Hamlet has very beautifully displayed the real sense of absurdity of non-existence on the circumstantially imposed cradle of existence. His detachment from the world around shows how he finds the cumbersome flow of life frustrating and burdensome. Indeed, he finds the current fragments of life devoid of any promises of joy and contentment. His dialogues with Guildenstern and Rosencrantz show his barren sense of attachment to the existential values of the life.

HAMLET: Then is doomsday near. But your news is not true. Let me question more in particular. What have you, my good friends, deserved at the hands of fortune that she sends you to prison hither?

GUILDENSTERN: Prison, my lord?

HAMLET: Denmark's a prison

ROSENCRANTZ: Then is the world one.

HAMLET: A goodly one, in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons, Denmark being one o' th' worst.

ROSENCRANTZ: We think not so, my lord.

HAMLET: Why, then, 'tis none to you, for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so. To me it is a prison. ((Alexander, 1991, p. 1042/Act II, Scene II-henceforth Alexander)

Tung (2007) also gives the following comments on Hamlet's face up with Guildenstern and Rosencrantz:

In the face of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet is all circumspect. He immediately suspects that they are Claudius's spies. He taunts them with worldly wisdom, and finally contrives to save himself and send them to death, just as a wary and scheming man will do to his enemies. (p. 11)

This disappointing sense of imposed existence in non-existence is quite tangible all over the play. Hamlet keeps on challenging this imposition by passing caustic and poignant remarks to all the acting characters around; he even passes remarks to his own duality of self. He resorts to his deep rooted rhetoric and tirades to show his sense of disintegration to his fellow beings. As Alexander (2004) avers:

Hamlet's use of language is sensitive and brutal; he listens and he does not listen; his speech is built on sympathy and on total disregard of other selves; his relationship with words is his greatest strength and his greatest weakness. (p. 174)

Hamlet's first soliloquy gives a vivid picture of his pessimistic view on his breathing dead life:

Oh, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! Oh, God! God!
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on 't, ah, fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden.
That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to this.
But two months dead—nay, not so much, not two.
So excellent a king, that was to this
Hyperion to a satyr. So loving to my mother
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly.—Heaven and earth,
Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on, and yet, within a month—
Let me not think on 't. Frailty, thy name is woman!—
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father's body,
Like Niobe, all tears. Why she, even she—
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer!—married with my uncle,
My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules. Within a month,
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her gallèd eyes,
She married. O most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
It is not nor it cannot come to good,
But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.

(Act I, SCENE II)

Domanico (2010) gives the following opinion on Hamlet's sense of isolation:

The third soliloquy of the tragedy begins with Hamlet's understanding of his solitude. He is physically alone—no one is near enough to hear him speak—but his solitude also signals the isolation Hamlet is subjected to during the course of the drama. He is under the surveillance of a court full of Claudius' spies and has nothing to trust but his intense self-awareness and aptitude for introspection. Hamlet's isolation is part of his identity; it is in his solitary soliloquies that he ascertains part of who he is. (p. 4)

Gertrude

Gertrude is a character, who plays a key role in creating the apprehensive sense of non-belonging in the other characters; her unexpected and bohemian hasty marriage is indeed, the triggering point, which paves the path for the birth of the sense of individual self-imprisonment. As Hooti (2012) comments:

Gertrude is a quite passive character, who seems to enjoy remaining a queen. She does not seem to bother how to maintain this status. It seems nothing has changed in her life. She was a queen and still is a queen. She does not care who her husband is, indeed for her to remain a queen has the paramount importance; that is why, very easily, she surrenders herself to Claudius. She does not care about her only son, Hamlet; she is so absorbed in her new life that has clean forgotten her deceased husband's two month old demise. Even, she complains that why Hamlet does not forget his father's death, which consequently invites his ironic reaction. (p. 3001)

Gertrude very easily loses the sense of belonging that she has to her husband Hamlet, and much more easily loses the same sense to her son. She even does not wait for the religio-culturally accepted rituals to come to an end, which means that she is even delinked from the cultural and religious values. This sense of indifference creates a wide gap of non-belonging between Gertrude and the people around her. Her following words show her vivid sense of disintegration, which indeed become a disintegrating link to her current and as well as upcoming flow of life:

GERTRUDE:

Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off,
And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.
Do not forever with thy vailèd lids
Seek for thy noble father in the dust.
Thou know'st 'tis common. All that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.

(Act 1, Scene 2)

The same sense of non-belonging may be observed differently in Act 3, Scene 4:

GERTRUDE:

O Hamlet, speak no more!
Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,
And there I see such black and grainèd spots
As will not leave their tinct

HAMLET:

Nay, but to live
In the rank sweat of an enseamèd bed,
Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty—

GERTRUDE

O, speak to me no more!
These words like daggers enter in my ears.
No more, sweet Hamlet.

(Act 3, Scene 4)

Claudius

Claudius is the main master-minder of the chaotic world of terror and apprehension. He is a man of high courage but low sense of precaution and prudence. His act of murder is the indicative of his sense of non-belonging to his surroundings. Indeed, he chooses murder as a way to get away from the feeling of nothingness, but all in vain. As Hooti (2012), avers “there are certain categories of individuals who find the true essence of existence in attaining the sense of superiority.” (p. 2999)

Actually, after this horrendous act of murder, a new but more dreadful sense of non-belonging haunts Claudius. He starts feeling alienated both within his own internal world and the world around. This sense of disintegration drags him out of the natural flow of life. The following soliloquy shows his self-alienation:

Oh, my offence is rank. It smells to heaven.
It hath the primal eldest curse upon 't,
A brother's murder. Pray can I not.
Though inclination be as sharp as will,
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
And, like a man to double business bound,
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
And both neglect. What if this cursèd hand
Were thicker than itself with brother's blood?
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy
But to confront the visage of offence?
And what's in prayer but this twofold force,
To be forestallèd ere we come to fall
Or pardoned being down? Then I'll look up.
My fault is past. But oh, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn, "Forgive me my foul murder"?
That cannot be, since I am still possessed
Of those effects for which I did the murder:
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.
May one be pardoned and retain th' offence?
In the corrupted currents of this world
Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,
And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
Buys out the law. But 'tis not so above.
There is no shuffling. There the action lies
In his true nature, and we ourselves compelled,

Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults,
To give in evidence. What then? What rests?
Try what repentance can. What can it not?
Yet what can it when one can not repent?
O wretched state! O bosom black as death!
O limèd soul that, struggling to be free,
Art more engaged! Help, angels. Make assay.
Bow, stubborn knees, and, heart with strings of steel,
Be soft as sinews of the newborn babe.
All may be well. (*kneels*)

(Act III, Scene III)

Claudius confesses his miserable contaminated life soaked in the stench of blood. He cannot free himself from the thorny shackles of his guilt-stricken conscience. He finds himself left in the stormy flood of helplessness, where he can do nothing but salute the world of non-existence.

CONCLUSION

This study tried to display the dark and repressed sense of solitude of the world of Hamlet, where all the characters except Hamlet did their best to live in a pretentious and disguised utopia. Indeed, the dystopian world of Hamlet gradually contaminated the whole fake utopian world of Gertrude and Claudius and when they used all the available means to get away from this disastrous and unexpected challenge of life, they found themselves fighting for survival in the vortex of the ocean of blood, where they were swallowed and pushed into the dethroned world of non-existence. The study also tried to show the irretrievable repercussions of the deep sense of greed and selfishness, which makes an individual have imprudent choices in life. The study came to its closing mode by showing that we cannot lead a peaceful life until and unless we respect our own and others' personal territory, which may not be observed in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. When one loses his personal territory, he inevitably finds himself drowned in the oozy swamp of non-belonging, where breathing becomes challenging and burdensome.

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