

Hamlet and Pluralism: A Postmodernist Metaphor

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Abstract

The present study means to investigate Hamlet in the light of a postmodernist-deconstructive theoretical framework. The play seems to reinforce the overarching dominant patriarchal meta-narrative, with supposed unitary voice and unified identities. The current reading means to show that the play is a metaphor of postmodernism with pluralistic subjectivities, and multiple alternative micro-narrative voices. It manifests the postmodernist notion of subjective, personal and local truth, against the idea of universal truth and reality. Its major features are self-difference, undecidability, and uncertainty. The regimes of truth in the form of dominant ideology are challenged, deconstructed and undermined, creating a zone of the postmodern condition of reality and truth as the effect of power and rhetoric. The postmodern condition does not push for the replacement of one totality with another. It creates a third space of pluralism, where all the voices are disjoined in a zone of the difference without hierarchy.

Key Words

Pluralism, Uncertainty,
Absolutist, Undesirability

Introduction

In spite of countless critiques of *Hamlet* through the centuries, its potential and need for further readings are ever inexhaustible. The study is divided into two parts. Part one focuses upon those aspects which constitute the dominant narrative and reinforce the dominant ideology. Part two dismantles the façade of metanarrative through the identification of alternative micro-narrative voices which challenge and dismantle the dominant ideology. The study means to show that the play *Hamlet* is a strong metaphor of the postmodern condition of pluralism and multiplicity. The study is expected to make its contribution towards unveiling some of the still invisible aspects of the play.

Literature Review

A brief literature review is presented below to create the context and justification of the present study.

Wilson Knight (1977) is right about the agony and the misery experienced by Hamlet at the death of his father and the remarriage of his mother. He highlights the sense of betrayal experienced by Hamlet at the conduct of her mother. His particular reading contends that the parting words of the ghost are most indelibly printed in Hamlet's mind. The learned critic is impacted by the rhetoric of Hamlet. Hamlet does make a promise to ghost but it never gets translated into deeds. He does not keep his oath, as is claimed by the learned critic, except in words. The learned critic does not notice the discrepancy between the words and the deeds. The gap between words and deeds is never bridged, as this the study intends to explore. Further, the learned critic is given to binary thinking, therefore, the talk is of healing, the creation of harmony and cleansing through revenge. The learned critic narrows down the multidimensional notion of Shakespearean love to a particular, limited scenario. Knight reads Hamlet's ethics of avoidance for the sickness of his soul and his wit being diseased. The current study means to show that this state is actually the manifestation of the postmodern condition.

Eliot (1975) is absolutely right to assert that the foremost task of a critic is to treat *Hamlet* as a work of art. He straight away dismisses the criticism of Goethe and Coleridge as the most misleading. However, he is full of praise for the critical contribution of Stoll and Robertson, especially of Robertson, on the issue of delay. His own conclusion is that *Hamlet* is an artistic failure. Eliot finds the play "puzzling" and "disquieting". He is critical of the play for its "unstable" thought and workmanship. His final judgment on the play, being the Mona Lisa of literature, was meant to be a demerit. He is critical of the play for "being unknowable", "a puzzle" and for attempting to express "the inexpressible horrible". Eliot wanted *Hamlet* to be an "intelligible" and "self-complete", a play "in the sunlight". He finds *Hamlet* "deficient". Incidentally, the present

study attaches the utmost importance to these aspects of the play as its merit. These very aspects anticipate the postmodern condition.

Leonardo Tennenhouse (1986) has examined *Hamlet* from the angle of power. He assumes that the inability of Hamlet to exercise power shifts all action onto a mental plane, where any show of force gets translated into self-inflicted aggression. This results in suicide talk and self-condemnation. He thinks tragedy resides in the impossibility of Hamlet ever rising to power. He very comprehensively discusses the power dynamics in the context of the play. It is a good study on *Hamlet* for the creation of a proper context for this study.

David Leverenz (1980) has investigated Hamlet from a feminist perspective. He ascribes Hamlet's resistance to the commandment of the ghost to the partial female identity of Hamlet himself. It is a very good study, reflective of mature insight and the gift of analysis, but some of the observations are off the mark. His suggestion of the traces of homosexuality in the bond that exists among the men in the play is not convincing. Some of these remarks border on absurdity. Leverenz observes that Hamlet acts upon the role prescribed to him, the present study means to show it as misreading.

Marilyn French (1982) has critiqued *Hamlet* in the context of ambiguity surrounding the person of ghost. She does refer to the element of doubt and incertitude, but she confines it only to the being of the ghost. Her remark regarding the absolutist values of Hamlet is interesting but debatable. The focus of her critique is the principle of chaste constancy. She rather regards the suggestion of multiplicity as the demerit of the play. She also seems to agree with Eliot on the issue of there not being an objective correlative in the play.

The critique of *Hamlet* by Rebecca Smith (1980) investigates the representations/misrepresentations of Gertrude from different angles. It is a well-focused study. The textual analysis is quite convincing. The thrust of her study is the debate regarding Gertrude's guilt or innocence in the murder of king Hamlet. She establishes the innocence of Gertrude in the murder of king Hamlet and rejects the possibility of her pre-marriage relationship with Claudius. The reading redeems the image of Gertrude from many creative or critical misrepresentations.

Showalter (1985) has critiqued the play from a feminist perspective, with a special focus upon the representations of Ophelia and its interpretations, both in art and literature, through history. She has examined the issues relating to the sexuality of Ophelia from different angles, in the light of different theoretical frameworks, especially the Freudian concept of Oedipal-complex.

The critique of *Hamlet* by Calderwood (1983) anticipates the postmodernist approach, even though the oppositional binary thinking is also not missing in the critique. He comments on the process of generation of meaning, the formation and the collapse of identities. He has suggested the concept of the lingering traces of the absence. The current study means to expand upon these observations.

Belsey (1985) has critiqued the play from the perspective of revenge. Belsey is right to highlight the ambiguous and questionable nature of the ghost. She also refers indirectly, in a passing way, to the element of uncertainty, which the current study intends to investigate.

John Hunt (1988) undertakes a critique of *Hamlet* from a unique angle. He combines the traditional and modern method to focus on and analyse the imagery of body used in the play, both in the limited, immediate sense and the larger sense of body politic of the country.

The brief literature review, given above, has adequately established the context and justification of the present study.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The postmodernist-deconstructive theoretical framework questions absolutist, and foundationalist assumptions, which are projected as objective, and universal truths. It questions the notion of metanarratives in the form of dominant ideologies and identifies alternative micro-narrative voices which challenge the regimes of truth (Waugh, 2001). The postmodern literary theory emphasizes difference without hierarchy and means to show that reality is a subjective, personal, local, discursive formation, brought into being by language. Language is supposed to create reality instead of describing some pre-existing reality. The present study proposes to analyse the play and its major characters in the light of postmodern literary theory to show that the play is the site of pluralism, multiplicity, uncertainty, and undecidability. The major proposition of the study is that the play and its major characters manifest the above mentioned conditions and do not reinforce and strengthen the dominant ideology through metanarrative.

The following research questions are devised to keep the study focused on:

- 1 Do the play and its characters suggest that language creates reality instead of describing it?
- 2 Does the play reinforce or undermine essentialist and foundationalist assumptions?
- 3 Does the play project the dominant ideology as the regime of truth through the dominant narrative voices?
- 4 Do the alternative micro-narrative voices challenge and dismantle the established regimes of truth in the play?

- 5 Do the major characters show the postmodern condition of pluralism, schizophrenia, undecidability, multiplicity and a subjectivity marked by self-difference?
- 6 Does the play *Hamlet* reinforce or undermine the concept of truth as the effect of power and rhetoric?

Discussion and Analysis

Reinforcement of the Regimes of Truth through Dominant Narrative Voice

Hamlet appears to be a patriarchal play, supporting and reinforcing the dominant patriarchal ideology. However, on closer inspection, pluralism and multiplicity are unconcealed. The characters in the play can be divided into two groups, the one which reinforces the dominant narrative and ideology and the other which only seems to support the dominant ideology. Ghost King Hamlet, Polonius, Laertes and Fortinbras belong to the first group. Prince Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude and Ophelia belong to the second category.

The return of ghost King Hamlet from the next world for the punishment of the offenders of the dominant ideology shows its power and authority. The ghost King is the arch symbol of the ruling ideologies. The ghost king overshadows the play and as a consequence, the play seems to reinforce and reproduce the dominant overarching patriarchal meta-narrative. Patriarchy and other social-cultural constructs, like honor, masculinity and female-fidelity seem to be the regime of truth supported and reinforced by the play and its major characters. This seems to be the only dominant narrative voice. The dominant patriarchal ideology has the status of commonsense and the received truth. People are expected to perform their roles in light of the dominant ideology. Any deviation from it can be a cause of shame and humiliation. Role performance is regulated by the ideological institutions and their attendant social-cultural constructs. This is why Prince Hamlet is immersed in deepest melancholy at the conduct and betrayal of his mother, because she has failed to perform her proper role as a patriarchal woman.

Ghost king Hamlet stands for the absolute patriarchal ideology. He returns from the next world to settle his accounts with his brother for disrupting the established patrilineal order and demands of his son for revenge. He is like the dead father of Portia, who imposes his will upon his living daughter (Shakespeare, 1984). As a patriarch, ghost King Hamlet expects his son to perform his proper role as a good son. Patriarchy has the status of a norm and commonsense here. He believes it is only natural that his son should fight his war. Nature is defined in light of the dominant ideology. Patriarchy defines the world from the perspective of fathers.

The ghost King Hamlet also expects his wife Gertrude not to re-marry even after his death. He expects her to be like the Penelope, the pious wife of Odysseus, (Homer, 2006) a totally patriarchal woman, who has internalized the ideology and lives by it. The abusive language used by ghost against queen reflects the rage of ghost King Hamlet at the violation of patriarchal code. It is a graphic representation of the conditions mentioned by Althusser (1971). Hamlet has been interpellated by the ideology, therefore makes a promise for the fulfillment of the command of the ghost.

Polonius is a conformist to dominant ideology and patriarchal social-cultural constructs. He cannot see the relationship between Ophelia and Hamlet from her perspective. He means to control her sexuality as a weapon of patriarchy. Ophelia obeys her father. Ophelia is different from Hermia (Shakespeare, 1997), who openly revolts against patriarchy. The resistance of Ophelia to patriarchy is of a different kind. The patriarchal Polonius is a man of double standards. He is prepared to turn a blind eye to immoral engagements of his son Laertes, but controls the sexuality of his daughter. Polonius identifies himself totally with the dominant ideology.

Laertes is thoroughly interpellated by patriarchy. He has unitary and unified subjectivity, and therefore he is never assailed by doubt or undecidability. He views things with a patriarchal gaze. His exhortation to Ophelia is reflective of the desire of patriarchy to prescribe the place for women and to control their sexuality. Women are not allowed agency, which converts them into commodities. His reaction to the accidental murder of his father establishes his absolute allegiance to patriarchal ideology. Nothing is more important, including his life, than the self-imposed task of revenge. Like Faustus (Marlow, 1976), he can risk anything, including the eternal damnation of his soul to perform his duty. Pyrrhus and Fortinbras are also interpellated by the dominant ideology and its attendant constructs. They are prepared to sacrifice their lives for their respective causes.

Dismantling of Established Regimes of Truth by Alternative Narrative Voices

The fact that the play opens with a question regarding the identity of some characters, has great symbolic importance. It alerts us to the world of questions and doubts about identities, nature of narratives and unfolding of the nature of realities and truths. The play becomes a site of contest and conflict among several perspectives and narratives. On the surface, Prince Hamlet does have a unitary, unified identity, and his allegiance to the dominant ideology of patriarchy seems absolute. However, the deconstructive lens reveals that Prince Hamlet inhabits the zone of multiplicity, undecidability, pluralism, and schizophrenia. He thinks of committing suicide but cannot do this, for he does not have the singularity of thought and being. He is fed up with this world and curses it in

strongest possible terms, but still cannot free himself from it and its compulsions. He does not want to think about his mother but cannot help himself from thinking about her. He condemns this marriage as incest but almost fails to undo it. It is obvious that his subjectivity is marked by self-difference.

Hamlet is capable of creating his own personal, local, subjective reality in his imagination and can see the things with the eye of his mind. He equates the subjective reality with the objective reality. In his person, the boundaries between reality, hyperreality, counterfeit, original and copies are conflated. He raises questions and doubts about identities, the nature, and place of man in the scheme of things and the social-cultural constructs. He underlines like Cordelia in *King Lear* (Shakespeare, 1978) the inadequacy of language to express the reality in the mind, anticipating the postmodernist notion of the gap between understanding/conception and imagination/expression. Verbal and non-verbal language cannot express his grief. In his subjective, personal world, he creates his own reality of Denmark being a prison. He can consider himself a king, though bound in a nutshell.

Hamlet finds himself standing at the crossroads of pluralism and multiplicity. In his encounter with Ophelia, he thinks he exists in-between heaven and earth, a true postmodernist condition. His subjectivity is marked by self-difference and multiplicity. Though he does not practice what Rotary calls a "suitably cavalier, laid-back attitude" which is expected of a postmodernist character and play the role of an "ironist" (1989), he rather vents his rage by abusing his mother, showing the lukewarm subscription to the dominant ideology.

His initial declaration of absolute allegiance to ghost and his commandment reflects his interpellation by patriarchy. After his meeting with the ghost, he proposes to give up one binary position for another, the world, for the commandment of the ghost. He means to live only for one cause, the revenge. At this moment he seems to be free from doubt and uncertainty. He seems ready and prepared to render any sacrifice for the task in his hand. He means to attain the absolute single-mindedness of "the lover" of the sonnet, 116, (Shakespeare, 1997). He slides back into his multiple selves, resulting in pause and paralysis on his part. Hamlet's discrepancy between words and deeds is very similar to that of Othello before he murders Desdemona. (Shakespeare, 1994). The fact that in spite of his conscious declaration of an oath of allegiance to the commandment of the ghost of his father, he fails to take revenge for the murder of his father, shows the existence of his multiple selves. His schizophrenia is responsible for his ambiguity, uncertainty, and undecidability. Repeatedly, he tries to rationalise this discrepancy between his original conscious allegiance to the word of ghost and his subsequent failure, due to his pluralistic subjectivity. Many of his soliloquies/discourses can be read as the representations of the postmodern condition of multiplicity and pluralism. He is paralyzed by this orchestra of multiple strands in his subjectivity, his call for, "more relative grounds", is only an attempt at rationalisation. Eliot misunderstands this as a demerit of the play (1975).

He questions the concept of objective universal reality and comes up with a postmodernist private and subjective concept of the creation of reality. He anticipates the idea of reality created by language and mind. Hamlet also anticipates Russell (2004) by his suggestion of the inherent insignificance of man as, "quintessence of dust". One is reminded of Andrei when he falls wounded in the battlefield (Tolstoy, 1957). In his conversation with Polonius, he unwittingly parodies the written philosophies for being nothing more than gossip and slander, not more than empty and idle words, merely the language games: a true postmodernist position.

His celebrated soliloquy "to be or not to be" is the essence of the postmodern condition. This proves that his subjectivity is marked by self-difference and schizophrenia. All his rationalizations have failed to bridge the gap between his words and deeds. Thought of suicide is another possible way out of his dilemma. His state of mind is reflective of a condition, Russell calls as Pyrrhonism, the old name for absolute skepticism (2004). He is in a state of mind where one can never choose from the available choices and options. He is faced with undecidability, in the face of multiple alternative options. His multiple subjectivities have been fully unconcealed.

His failure to kill Claudius, when he is praying, proves the main thesis of the study that Hamlet exhibits the postmodern condition of pluralism and undecidability, with a subjectivity marked by self-difference, resulting in the ethics of avoidance. His subjectivity plays off alternative worlds in a state of pluralistic anarchy. He sits back with a decentered, fragmented, postmodernist subjectivity. Even the issue of his madness remains undecidable.

Claudius is also a symbol of "free-floating, self-referential autonomy". Of course he is not absolutely decentered and fragmented subject, but he is not fully controlled or affected by the dominant ideology. He is practically divorced from ideological referents. He is supposed to be the defender and protector of his brother, like Macbeth (Shakespeare, 1984) but he subverts and undermines all the social-cultural constructs which have been there as the regime of truth. Unwittingly he wages war on the totality. He is a man with multiple subjectivities and shows the self-difference of a pluralistic being. His revolt against and the murder of his brother is an assault on the dominant ideology. He disregards pre-established rules and rejects the notion of external reality and creates his own reality through rhetoric. He murders his own brother, marries the wife of his dead brother. He lives by the reality created by his personal rhetoric. This great pretender, thief and killer create himself as a nationalist, a democrat and a law-respecting ruler through his rhetoric. He can distort and dissimulate his naked self-interest and pass it off to his people for national ideology. Throughout, he remains playfully ironic and cavalier in his attitude. He

creates his personal, local, subjective reality and truth and becomes a metaphor of postmodern condition. His oscillation and paralysis result from his multiple and pluralistic subjectivity. He wants to seek the forgiveness of God, but he does not want to surrender the benefits of his crime, so he is bound to multiple businesses and his personality is revealed as schizophrenic. The analysis confirms him as a decentered, fragmented postmodernist subject.

The murder of King Hamlet by Claudius is a form of resistance and challenge to the status quo. Claudius is not one coherent, unified subject, subscribing to one absolutist ideology. He does not believe in the existence of objective universal truth. He can manufacture truth through power and rhetoric, highlighting the postmodernist notion of truth as an effect of the discursive, linguistic and textual phenomenon. Like queen Sersi in *Game of Thrones* (Martin, 1996), Claudius believes that history is manufactured by kings. He creates the reality of his deepest sense of grief for the sad death of his brother. He can create himself as a true patriot. The rhetoric of nationalism is the disguised working of will to power. He uses rhetoric to transport the action from the sphere of personal to national. He creates the reality of his love and affection for Hamlet. He would have been quite successful with his truth making, but for the supernatural intervention in the form of the ghost.

Gertrude is already a “seeming-virtuous queen”. She is expected to play her proper role as a patriarchal woman, faithful even to the memory of her dead husband. She resists her placement and role performance through her marriage with Claudius. Her remarriage has brought her into a zone of postmodernist ambivalence. She is never in an open rebellion against the dominant social-cultural constructs, but in practice, she wrecks and dismantles all the major social-cultural constructs. The marriage itself is a violation of the ideologies of the society and church. Her ambivalence and schizophrenia surface again when she confronts her son regarding his conduct towards Claudius. She confirms and reinforces the postmodernist postulate about the nature of reality by saying that it is merely the coinage of one’s brain.

Ophelia is denied an opportunity to become an author of her life. She is required to respect her placement as alterity and perform her prescribed role as a patriarchal woman. The dominant patriarchal narrative tries to silence and oppress her. She subverts the grand narrative of patriarchy from inside. Her personality is schizophrenic. She resists both her brother and her father from inside and tries to subvert patriarchy from the available space. She wages her small war on totality in her own small way through an alternative micro-narrative voice from the outer margin. Her polite protests amount to the alternative narrative voice, which challenges the established regimes of truth. Though on the surface she obeys them both, yet she stands for the third space, incorporating both the perspectives, the patriarchal and the not-patriarchal disjoined in her. This is what Derrida says about the coexistence of to be and not-to-be in his reading of Hamlet in *Specters of Marx* (1994) This shows that she does not have a single form of subjectivity. Her self-difference and schizophrenia lead to her madness which is a form of resistance (Waterman, 1999). Her resistance of meta narrative through disruption by her micro-narrative and the multiple strands of consciousness and pluralism in her being and subjectivity make her a postmodernist subject.

Conclusion

The conclusion of the study is that the play *Hamlet* is the site of the postmodern condition of pluralism, multiplicity and schizophrenia. The study has shown that the notion of unitary, unified identity is a myth. Characters don’t perform their proper roles as defined by the dominant ideology. There are no watertight compartments and boundaries, ensuring proper role performances. Everything is in a postmodernist mess of overlapping ambivalence and chaos. The play has shattered the myth of objective, universal reality and replaced it with the idea of the reality as personal, provisional and subjective, made possible by language. The study has shown that there are different multiple micro alternative narrative voices without hierarchy in the play. The play has dismantled the metanarrative of patriarchy. Essentialist, foundationalist assumptions are brought to the level of mere fictionality and they give way to micro politics, contingencies and ironies, a proliferation of depthless surfaces, what Jameson calls “copies without originals” (1991). Finally, the play manifests postmodernism as envisioned by Dorris Lessing (1988) and Waugh (2001) with their soft versions of hybrid postmodernism.

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