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Existential Choices in Macbeth and Hamlet

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Abstract



Macbeth and Hamlet are the great tragedies of William Shakespeare. Much has been written on these plays and also on other plays of Shakespeare from different perspectives. My perception here is Existentialist. In these tragedies we notice extraordinary choices made by the main characters and their destruction as the consequences of them. Macbeth was over ambitious and this was the basic factor behind his gradual decline and destruction. Under the influence of his vaulting ambitions, he made choices which were not in accordance with Universal Morality or Ethics. In the case of Hamlet, we come across a very hard choice that is to live a life of a coward or to fight against the evil forces as a hero. The first choice of Hamlet can lead him a life of passivity but security and the second choice lead him to a life of bravery but with lot of dangers. This article is an attempt to understand and share the universal message behind these great tragedies of the world.

Keywords: Macbeth, Hamlet, Tragedies, Existence, Existential Choice.

Background of the Study

William Shakespeare is supposed to be one of the greatest playwrights of the world. His tragic plays signify the destruction of the hero by the forces of nature (especially by the forces of evil). This is a result we can get from a general study, but if we look to see we feel that the destruction is not only because of the forces of nature or of evil but also due to the extraordinary choices of the heroes. The destruction comes as a result or consequence of them.

Apparently, the whole story of Macbeth seems to be a story of Fatalism, Determinism and Pessimism. But if one looks to see within this broad circle, there exist many small and important circles having great social, moral and philosophical significance. Macbeth was influenced by Three Witches and also by his wife (Shakespeare, 2010). The forces of nature (as mentioned above) were at work and wanted him to do something nasty and wrong. Actually, this could not be the whole story. The tragic hero of Shakespeare cannot be that passive and helpless. Through the story and plot of the play, we come across the guilty consciousness of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Now the question arises, where does this guilty consciousness come from? If Man is completely helpless under the forces of nature or the outer world then he or she is not responsible for his or her right or wrong doings. The existence of guilty consciousness proves that in moral life Man is not that helpless.

In Hamlet, we come across a different story, a different plot and different characters but again we come across the freedom of the main character in a very dangerous situation. This freedom creates a serious life and death situation in the life of Hamlet. His father is murdered by his uncle and his mother gets married with the murderer (Shakespeare, 2003). Now the moral question for Hamlet is what should he do? He has very limited choice in this situation. That is why Shakespeare wrote *To be or not to be: that is the question* (Shakespeare, 2003, 60). He can choose the life of a coward or a life of a warrior. He can make Fatalism as his refuge, he can deceive himself, he can make fool of him. In the course of the events of the play, we notice that at one point he pretends to be insane. (Shakespeare, 2003). But at last, he has to make a choice that is to act as a warrior accepting all the possible dangerous consequences.

Research Questions

The research questions emerging from this article are

- i. How much Man free in his or her doings and how much he or she is bound?
- ii. Can Fatalism be defended philosophically or not?
- iii. Is it possible for a human being to be completely helpless?
- iv. Is it possible for a human being not to make a choice at all?

Research Objectives

From the careful study of the great plays of Shakespeare (especially Macbeth and Hamlet) the research objective should be

- It is the service of any society to give awareness about the freedom and responsibility of individuals in their day to day lives and especially in their right and wrong doings.
- One of the major objectives of this article is to make people understand that we can comprehend many things related to human personality on one hand and human society on the other through the proper appreciation of Literature.

Macbeth

At the start of the play, we see Macbeth as a successful warrior coming from a battle and *accidentally* meeting with Three Witches (Shakespeare, 2010). In the tragedy of Macbeth, we notice the forces of evil operating to trap a human being. Their appearances are very confusing and confounding. They are like females but have beards. They look half human and half inhuman. They speak in the language of human beings but disappear in a very mysterious way (Shakespeare, 2010). They also give Macbeth the news of his being future King. The predictions given by them are also ambiguous in nature. When Macbeth reaches home and tells his wife about the predictions of the witches, she starts planning of a grave crime (to murder King Duncan). Macbeth is brave in fight but weak in his will and the witches and his wife seem to know about his weakness and are determined to make him capable of committing the murder. After committing the murder Macbeth gradually loses his nerves and becomes guilty and frightened. He sees the ghost of murdered king here and there and feels insecure and fearful. Lady Macbeth acts very bravely at the start but gradually becomes more guilty and frightened. She develops a habit of loud thinking and washing her hands again and again (Shakespeare, 2010). In the language of Freudian Psychoanalysis, she was the victim of Obsessional Compulsion (Freud, 1915). After much depression and suffering she commits suicide. One major reason of her suicide is her loneliness also. After the combined murder of Duncan, the relationship between husband and wife gradually gets distorted.

The philosophical and intellectual point in this play neither lies in the prediction of the witches nor in the planning of Lady Macbeth. It is in the lust and ambitions of Macbeth. There have always been many murders in the World Literature.¹ Then, what is special about Macbeth? What is special about the play which is supposed to be the great play of the world? In my humble opinion, the greatness of the play lies in the wisdom of the author (Shakespeare) who invites us to think, or reconsider the very act of murdering the King and the consequences of it afterwards.

Macbeth (apparently) was under the spell of the predictions made by the witches and also under the rhetoric of his wife but this is not the whole truth about him. He listened to them because he wanted to listen to. He was confused and at pains in the whole course of the play because he was basically afraid of his own ambitions. This play reminds us an important thing that we listen what we want to listen, we see and hear what we want to see or listen. We are being trapped because we want to be trapped. First, we intend and then the forces of good or evil start their working. This interpretation of Macbeth gives this play a philosophical and theological character (Baker, 2019). If we are not free in our choice of good or evil at all then there should not be any question of reward and punishment (Sharif, 2018). The destruction of Macbeth as a human being cannot be justified without considering him a free agent. The role of the witches in his life along with the role of his wife is negative and it leads to his destruction, but the basic problem is within his choice - choice to murder the King and choice to act upon his vaulting ambitions.

Hamlet

Same is the case with Hamlet. One night the ghost of his murdered father appears and tells him how his uncle murdered his father and married his mother (Shakespeare, 2003). Apparently, the fault is with his birth, the time of his up-bringing and the spatial-temporal situation. But if we look to see what is there in these unfortunate and dangerous situations, Hamlet is not completely helpless. He is still free to choose one of the following:

- i. He can ignore the ghost of his father considering it as an illusion.
- ii. He can ignore the thought of revenge from his uncle because it is too dangerous and it is a matter of life and death for him.

¹ For example, murders in the plays of Shakespeare and in the novels of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy.

iii. If he chooses to revenge then he has to accept the consequences of it as a result.

The play starts with the appearance of the ghost of Hamlet's father one night. The ghost was seen not only by Hamlet but also by two or three guards (Shakespeare, 2003). The appearance of the ghost cannot be considered as an illusion. Hamlet recognizes that it is the ghost of his father and draws attention towards him. The ghost confirms that his uncle murdered his father. After telling the truth the ghost disappears. The situation for Hamlet is extremely torturous. What should he do? The remaining events of the play are nothing but the constant representations of his torturous mind. The life for Hamlet is not easy now. To do something is a choice. Not to do anything is a choice. To consider the ghost of his father as an illusion is a choice. And to make Fatalism as an excuse is a choice. In any case he has to make a choice and every choice has its own consequences.

Different Interpretations of Macbeth

There could be many interpretations of this play. This play can be considered as a story of crime and punishment. This play can be considered as a story of guilty consciousness. This play can also be explained as a story of the evil forces of nature around human beings.

In my humble opinion the above-mentioned interpretations or explanations cannot do justice to the great play of Shakespeare. This great tragedy of Shakespeare generates many important questions and the above-mentioned interpretations cannot answer them. These questions are as follows

- i. Is Man free in his or her moral life or not?
- ii. Is Fatalism a reality or an excuse?
- iii. If Man is totally determined by the forces of nature, then what is the justification of guilty consciousness?
- iv. If Man is free then he or she must choose and choices will make them, what is called in the Philosophy of Existence as Authentic beings (Blackham, 1985).

The above-mentioned questions are of great importance and cannot be answered accepting Fatalism. In the light of these questions, one has to reconsider the story of Macbeth. It is true that Macbeth was influenced by his wife and both of them were influenced by the forces of evil in nature. But the fact remains that they can be prevented and protected by God if they would not have been that ambitious and greedy for power. The most important lesson we can get from this play is that a Man can be influenced if he or she wants to be. A Man can be cheated if he or she wants to be. In most of the cases in our social life we are influenced because we have the tendency to be influenced in some particular way. This is the story of lust, greed, crime and ambitions. In my personal opinion this interpretation is also in accordance with the teachings of Great Religions (Khaliq, 2004).

Different Interpretations of Hamlet

Hamlet can be interpreted in many ways also. It can be interpreted as a story of great revenge. Or a story of a restless soul which informs some important things even after its death. This play can be interpreted as a story of a brave warrior or the story of a brave and loving son.

Again, in my humble opinion this great play of Shakespeare cannot be explained or interpreted fully without the help of the Philosophy of Existence called Existentialism. Hamlet does have choices though very limited in nature. Hamlet can revolt. He can commit suicide. He can lead the life of a hypocrite and coward. He can ignore the ghost of his father considering it just an illusion (as mentioned above). One thing he cannot do is to deceive himself though *deception* can also be considered a choice. Existentialism is important because it is the only philosophy in Greco Roman Tradition which emphasizes individuality, individual choice, human will and human responsibility as a consequence of his or her choice (Sarte, 1996). In my humble opinion Macbeth and Hamlet cannot be explained without the help of the Philosophy of Existence.

Existentialism

Kierkegaard is supposed to be the father and founder of Existentialism. He is of the opinion that the authentic choice of person is always on a very sensitive stage of his or her life and in most of the cases we have to have decision solely by our own preferences and thinking (Kierkegaard, 1954). Philosophically we can present the argument in two different ways.

- i. If we accept the human freedom especially in the sphere of morality then we have to accept the concept of responsibility as the natural outcome of it. If someone makes a choice, he or she only can do when he or she feels freedom. In the absence of freedom, one cannot make choices but acts according to the given situation and its pressing demands. This choice does

not have a consequence as a material result of it and we have to accept it and take the burden of it.

- ii. If we, as a student of Philosophy do not accept human freedom anywhere and also think this freedom as non-existent in the sphere of morality then, there is no question of reward, punishment, destruction or construction. All things will dissolve in the mist of Fatalism. Both of the plays of Shakespeare can be interrupted in both ways.

We can argue that the tragedies lie in the plays as the fates of these characters. It was written in the fate of Macbeth to be murdered from the hands of Macduff and it was in the fate of Macbeth to be influenced by the Three Witches and his own wife (Shakespeare, 2010). The problem with this interpretation is that in that sense the whole play becomes the play of merciless power of nature especially the evil forces of nature. It will arise many philosophical and logical points.

- i. If the destruction of Macbeth and Hamlet was due to their circumstances then what was their contribution in it?
- ii. If everything is decided by nature then what is the concept of justice? In this way the whole universe becomes a combination of merciless material events.
- iii. Fatalism destroys optimism and also destroys the concept of freedom and responsibility.
- iv. Fatalism not only destroys the concept of optimism but also the existence of a Merciful God.
- v. The tragedies of Shakespeare in general and Macbeth and Hamlet in particular signify the human choices and their related consequences.

Significance of the Study

- i. This study can lead to the proper understanding of the great Literature of the world.
- ii. This study can make people understand how to infer a universal method from a make belief situation.

Conclusion

Despite of being trapped by Three Witches and his wife, Macbeth destroys himself due to his lust for power. He should have avoided all the provocations. He should have avoided the evil forces. Being weak in will power and strong in physical strength is the dilemma of Macbeth. In case of Hamlet, we notice an extraordinary dangerous and risky environment. He is free to choose at least from the two possibilities. He could have ignored the ghost of his father. He could have kept silence over the murder of his father. The great plays of Shakespeare accept human freedom, human choice, responsibility and consequences as an outcome of it. Macbeth made a wrong choice (from the point of view of Universal Morality) and destroyed himself while Hamlet made a right choice and died as a worrier.

Recommendations

The great literature of the World is not only for entertainment. It is to understand life, to understand the other people and to understand our freedom and responsibility.

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