
Hamlet's Fear of Freedom: An 'Existential' Attitude

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Abstract

This article investigates the reason(s) for what has polemically come to be termed as Hamlet's procrastination in the light of existential doctrine of Sartre and explain how Hamlet's crippling fears of : (a) having to resolve and,(b) then actualize the decision embroil him in the existential dilemma of futilely evading the responsibility only to realize, albeit at the heavy price of losing what he calls 'the eternal jewel' i.e., his own life, that it is the very essence and condition of our being and cannot be escaped. As Sartre claimed that even in not making a decision, a man takes an alternative decision i.e. of not performing the act, and is subsequently caught up in the clutches of responsibility again. This article analyzes in the theoretical backdrop of existential theory, using the descriptive-cum-analytical method, the notion of 'fear of freedom' and asserts that Hamlet had been the victim of this existential dilemma of not making the final decision, in order to avoid the burden of responsibility.

Keywords: Shakespeare; Hamlet; Sartre; existentialism, determinism, being-in-itself, being-for-itself

INTRODUCTION

Hamlet being the central figure of the play (Shakespeare,1602) has been assigned just one task, that of taking revenge of his father's murder but he remains unsuccessful till the end;

the reason being his inability to take the right decision at the right time. Explorations of Hamlet's character from an unending array of theoretical and philosophical perspectives have given rise to multifarious descriptions of one of the most puzzling characters of the world literature. In the presence of an overwhelming body of critical literature devoted to Hamlet's character, what motivated the authors to undertake this research was the awareness of lack of existentialist studies on Hamlet. Whilst there has been from philosophical to lively debates on the question of the nature of procrastination of Hamlet's character, specifically existential perspectives of this Shakespearean drama have relatively recently emerged following the publication of Sartre's works (Flynn, 2011). The scarcity of existentialist studies on Shakespeare can be explained from the relatively limited amount of scholarship available on the subject in sharp contrast to feminist, cultural or political studies. Moreover, the fact that most of the existentialist theoretical work was done in German and French and their quality English translations appeared later and those too in little amount, accounts for the comparatively few studies on Shakespeare and existentialism internationally. The current article, responding to this gap in the existentialist scholarship in Shakespearean studies, attempts to suggest that existentialist perspective of Shakespearean drama and the existentialist dilemma of Hamlet's character can be uncovered by taking Sartre's notions as a focal point.

As the relationship between Hamlet's decision of not taking the decision timely and the poetics of existence is weak or poorly conceived because of the underdevelopment of the field, the authors suggest to reconceptualize Hamlet's act of decision-making in the light of existentialist assumptions on what is entailed in the act of making a decision and its actualization. In existentialist paradigm, the very act of making a decision involves the act of 'selection' among varying available alternatives. During this process, one is preoccupied with many complexities. The nature of complexities depends on the nature of the personality one possesses. When it comes to Hamlet, we observe that he follows the customary phrase 'haste makes waste' when he is asked by the ghost of his father to avenge his murder. In his first soliloquy, we find him meditating upon the indecent haste with which his widowed mother has remarried. He remarks that even a beast 'would have mourned longer' (Shakespeare, 1602: 1:2, 155). To him, his mother's hasty act is inhuman in nature and is a reflection of her weakness. With sweeping patriarchal generalization, he denounces the decision of his mother's hasty marriage ascribing her act as the innate weakness of woman.

Frailty thy name is woman (Shakespeare, 1602: 1:2, 150)

He remains obsessed with the feeling of despair and anguish and this depression does not let him take the decision of avenging his father's murder. Caught between having to make a morally legitimate and personally satisfying decision, he suffers from the fear of taking a free decision, as he had already disapproved his mother's 'hasty' decision.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The twentieth-century movement of existentialism is celebrated as a human-friendly school of thought. Sartre when propounded the theory of existentialism, chose the notion of human existence as a base on which he erected the building of a philosophical thought which celebrated man's freedom to choose. This philosophy aims at finding self and the meaning of life through free will, choice, and personal responsibility. Existentialists believe that people keep on searching out who and what they are throughout their lives. As they make their choices based on their own outlook on life which is purely subjective in nature, therefore these personal choices become exclusive without any objective truth from the outside.

Existentialism as a philosophical movement developed in the post world war era. Death and disaster introduced by world wars and twentieth-century catastrophic events generated deep-rooted pessimism among masses and the subsequent disillusionment raised many questions primarily targeting human existence. Existentialism is a philosophical study and analysis of existence. It is an attempt to [en] counter the deterministic world view which pronounces human beings as on the mercy of natural forces while ignoring the freedom of will, choice and personal responsibility.

Key themes of existentialism are directly related to human existence providing a deep analysis of human being's psychological as well as social aspects. These aspects cannot be avoided during the whole course of existence. The phenomena of anxiety, uncertainty, guilt, isolation, meaninglessness, sense of responsibility and absurdity accompany human beings throughout their lives. Out of all these aspects *anxiety* occupies the central status as it is always associated with uncertainty, guilt, isolation, and meaninglessness and thus is a part and parcel of one's life. According to existentialists, human existence is a wholly absurd phenomenon. Lavine(1985)quotes Blaise Pascal 'when I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity, before and after, the little I fill, and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of space of which I am ignorant, and which knows me not, I am frightened and am astonished being here rather than there, why now rather than then.'

Sartre (1946: 3) remarks that once thrown in the world, man is responsible for his every deed. It is he who gives meaning to his life. Sartre, as an existentialist, believes in the supremacy of individual consciousness. His slogan 'existence precedes essence' celebrates human being as a conscious subject who first exists and then actualizes his/her essence by taking free decisions in life. Sartre's polemical work (Sartre, 1943) deals with the phenomenon of being: 'being-in-itself' and 'being-for-itself'. The former refers to the objects other than being human; tables, chairs, and trees etc. are included in this category. This state of being makes being-in-itself a predetermined entity. While the latter, being-for-itself, on the other hand, refers to human beings and is not predetermined. According to Sartre, man defines himself later in the course of existence. His theory maintains that

as human beings do not have predetermined essence, therefore, one is forced to formulate it out of nothingness. As they perceive the world out of nothingness, they have no other option than to act freely (Sartre, 1943).

Hamlet and the Phenomenon of Existence

The whole debate that revolves around the character of Hamlet and his indecisive nature is, in fact, the problem of exercising the freedom that is presupposed by the audience or readers. He is often accused of procrastination with its fatal consequences. In accordance with the tradition of Shakespearean tragic heroes, Hamlet is a well-known and honorable figure of high rank in the political life of Denmark at that time. Being an heir apparent to the throne, he is supposed to exercise his powers freely but he could not do so.

The tragedy of Hamlet has been a source of inspiration for countless readers and critics around the world in all ages to provide them an impetus to analyze it in the light of psychological and philosophical theories. Highly emotional in tone, the character of Hamlet is open to several interpretations. To examine the situation of Hamlet from existential viewpoint can be another plausible option to find out the reason for his procrastination.

The whole drama is replete with speeches delivered by Hamlet containing existential dilemma. Hamlet, as a university student, had been obsessed with the faculty of reasoning. Right after the death of his father, we find him grappling with the issue of taking revenge but he is unable to decide till the end of the play whether or not to take revenge. His procrastination seems to be the result of his inner state of mind rather than of external circumstances. Critics ascribe it to his contemplative nature that he could not take revenge. Sartre maintains that human beings try to evade freedom just to avoid the sense of responsibility and the subsequent anguish. They assume that they have no freedom of choice (Thomas, 2013). This state of mind is named by Sartre as 'bad faith'. Hamlet consciously or unconsciously seems to be subjected to this 'bad faith'. Unable to make a determined and focused decision, he is anguished, getting consumed in a state of anxiety, and worried over the moral consequences of his would-be-action and the fact that people judge others from their one objectionable act resulting in loss of respect and honor. Sartre claims that an individual or being-for-itself acknowledges his own existence only when he sees himself being perceived by another being-for-itself. In this way, he can formulate his identity. The gaze of the *other* objectifies him and treats him as a *type* or anticipated essence rather than individual consciousness. Hamlet seems to be the victim of this *objectification* when confronted with the gaze of the *other* (Sartre, 1943). He is fearful that this world would judge a man by his one defect and not by his virtues, which could be many.

*Being Nature's livery or Fortune's star,
His virtue else be they as pure as grace,
As infinite as man may undergo,
Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault.*

(Shakespeare, 1602: 1:4, 35-39)

Shakespearean drama is not solely concerned with the exhibition of human experiences but is also a study of life steeped in spiritual flavor. He believes in making elaborate attempts to get meaning out of life. The question that arises about the feigned madness of Hamlet can be addressed by wearing 'existential' lens. If Hamlet had been portrayed as a truly mad man, his character could hardly have conveyed meaning to a sane person as an insane person is exempted from the burden of responsibility, so an antic disposition suits him best in order to avoid the burden of responsibility which otherwise he cannot manage to wear off.

Eliot (1921) popularized the term 'objective correlative'. Taking up the question of Hamlet's soliloquies which evoke serious questions about the nature of existence and its relation to 'existential narcissism' (Abeyta, 2017), that is, the ability of human beings to transform their life by taking decisions, Eliot advertently or inadvertently, avoids confronting the question of Hamlet's existential dilemma. He, rather, seeks to find the answer to the questions related to the emotive and artistic function of Shakespearean art. In his essay, he refers to the concept that the only way to express emotion through art is to find 'a set of objects, a situation, or a chain of events, that when read or performed, evokes a specific sensory experience in the audience' (Eliot, 1950). This sensory experience is meant to help the reader/audience understand the mental or emotional state of a character.

With a strong penchant to deprecate any literature that renders subjective emotions directly, without relating them artistically to some symbolic objective reality, he denounces Shakespearean art in Hamlet without considering the other reality that these soliloquies provide an insight into the deeply troubled soul of a person laying bare his existential malaise. Shakespeare, as a playwright, is far ahead of his age. His art and themes are diverse and engaging enough to be interpreted in light of the newly emerging theories. As ingenious critics have done very interesting studies of Shakespeare from a variety of theoretical viewpoints and found the seeds of colonization in *Tempest*, a play (Shakespeare, 1610) written well before colonization started, in the characters of Caliban and Prospero. *Hamlet*, similarly, when reading from an existential theoretical perspective, can yield not only rewarding interpretation of the play but also contribute to augmenting the existentialist tradition in literature. The juxtaposition of Eliot and Sartre's

contradictory notions about the role of subjectivity in making choices in life reveals how the inability to make a single-minded decision is most often the corollary of the fear of fixing responsibility. Sartre maintained that personal choices become unique without the necessity of objective truth from outside. These personal choices require the courage to accept the after effects of those acts performed by free individuals. Eliot's criticism of objective correlative, when analyzed in the light of this claim by Sartre, loses its significance. Because, firstly, Hamlet's madness is feigned and secondly, even if we suppose that it was not feigned or crafted, one can ascribe it to his internal state of being. He was subjected to anguish and despair. He was "thrown into the world", where there was no way out but to take a decision (Thomas, 2013). Consciously or unconsciously, he realized that whether he decides to kill the king or not, the sole responsibility will certainly fall on his shoulders. Hamlet did not want to avoid the act of revenge; he rather avoided the decision of taking revenge. His act of killing Polonius mistakenly is a proof that, on the spur of the moment, he can go for any action but to take a firm decision, with all the pros and cons of the situation in mind, is something he dreads because he cannot bear the burden of the resulting responsibility.

Existentialistic ideas came out of a time in society when there was a deep sense of despair following the Great Depression (McElvaine, 1993) and World War II. Hamlet had been suffering from the same dilemma of the meaninglessness of life, faced by the man of the post-war era, though for him the crippling onus of meaninglessness of life emanated from his inability to take the decisive stride. All existentialists basically agree that human life is in no way complete and satisfying because of the sufferings and losses that occur, due to the lack of power and control one has over one's life. Even though they do agree that life is not optimally satisfying, nonetheless, it has meaning. Existentialism is the search and journey to find true self and true personal meaning in life.

Our minds are so powerful and intuitive that our lives are driven by different undercurrents, without even our being fully aware of those. Hamlet is so overwhelmed by the thought of finding the real meaning of life that he is in a state of stasis. His character is over-occupied with the thoughts of prevalent corruption in his surroundings. But he expresses his inability to cure the sufferings. When Hamlet compares his emotional state with an actor playing a part in 'Mouse Trap', he says:

O what a rogue and peasant slave am I (Shakespeare, 1602: 2:2, 577)

He grieves over the fact that while a mere actor is able to realize altogether imaginary grief so vividly, he himself is weak-spirited, irresolute and contemptible. Sartre (1946) opines that when an individual says 'that's just the way I am', he will be involved in the act of deceiving his self. Every individual, a being-for-itself has consciousness and self-consciousness, but he or she is devoid of a predetermined essence. During a course of life, human consciousness and self-consciousness can be changed by the person himself.

Whenever people tell themselves that they are unchangeable or that their social position determines their self, they are deceiving themselves. The act of self-actualization is a complicated process in Sartre's system of thought. Recognition of external realities and the subsequent reconstitution of one's subjective position through interacting with the external world make the process of self-actualization complete. Instead of developing an interactive approach with the facticity, Hamlet seems to be reluctant to pass through this process of self-actualization. He has taken for granted his identity in depressed and stifling circumstances.

Hamlet in the backdrop of the existential philosophy of life is a victim of 'existential angst'. This is a form of depression that arises from the experience of a sense of responsibility. Sartre clears his point with the help of an example of a person who is standing on the edge of a cliff and is scared of his position that there is no support at his back and that he can always choose to stand still or throw himself off (Sartre, 1946). Here comes the critical juncture when the choice of freedom takes birth but at the same time, this freedom of making decision brings fear of the burden of responsibility with it.

If a character is a destiny in Shakespearean tragedy, then according to Sartre's philosophy of existence, a tragic hero's formulation of self shows the way. Hamlet has failed in actuating his self and is oscillating between 'to be or not to be'. At one moment he is ready to take revenge without any second thought about it:

Haste me to know't that I with wings as swift

As meditation or the thoughts of love

May sweep to my revenge.

(Shakespeare, 1602: 1:5, 35-37)

While at another he laments:

The time is out of joint O cursed spite,

That I was born to set it right

(Shakespeare, 1602: 1:5, 210-211)

Hamlet's Attitude towards Death and 'Existential Anxiety'

Hamlet's relationship with death is also of mixed emotions. At the beginning of the play, he is not afraid of the ghost and death; he is ready to go anywhere with the specter.

Why, what should be the fear? (Shakespeare, 1602: 1:4, 72)

And for my soul, what can it do that,

Being a thing immortal as itself?

(Shakespeare, 1602: 1:4, 64-75)

However, towards the middle of the play, he begins to have second thoughts. 'To be or not to be' is essentially about the fear of death and the unknown that preclude him to decide in favor of one over the other. Then in the end, while he dies, he seems to willfully accept that fear.

Hamlet could not bear the burden of the fact that his mother had remarried right after the death of his father. He wanted to commit suicide but could not bring himself to that decision. Instead of designing a plan for taking revenge, Hamlet pretended to be a lunatic person and devised a scheme to catch the king and reveal his crime through 'Mouse Trap' (which is a false play). His plan is fabricated on very subtle grounds as no substantial proof of his father's murder could be expected out of it. The success of this plan rests upon the facial expressions of the king while he watched the false play. If the king could show full grip on his expressions, the whole scheme would be doomed to failure. After revisiting the whole situation, our belief is strengthened that he did not avoid avenging his father under the influence of external circumstances rather it was the existential dilemma which kept him in a state of flux and he could not move forward to avenge his father. Hamlet's state of being can be well analyzed in light of Sartre's philosophy of existence. Using Sartrean terminology, he was anguished and despaired, victimized by the gaze of the *other*. He was in 'bad faith', finding himself unable to take a free decision. His internal state of being is expressed time and again during the course of the play.

As the play opens, we find him in black, mourning over his father's death while the king and queen are trying to console him to bring him out of his shock and make him accept the eternal reality of death. But his morbidity seems to be incurable. He claims that his internal state cannot be judged from his outward appearance.

This not alone my inky, cloak, good mother,

Not customary suit of solemn black

Nor windy suspiration of forc'd breath,

No, nor the dejected haviour of the visage,

Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,

That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,

*For they are actions that a man might play;
But I have that within which passes show,
These but the trappings and the suits of woe*

(Shakespeare, 1602: 1:2, 80-89)

Existence has its own prerequisites. Besides the biological, chemical and psychological aspects, it also includes some metaphysical boundaries. One who 'exists', is bound to exercise the freedom to choose and bear the burden of its responsibility, according to Sartre. Death is also inherent in the phenomenon of existence. One who lives has to die one day. Hamlet's attitude towards death shows that he is not ready to accept the reality of death and is reluctant to face it. He is a victim of existential anxiety. This anxiety brings terror with it and a person in its clutches does not know where it came from. Anxiety is the result of unpredictability about the future; nothingness haunts human beings and leaves them miserable.

Hamlet's Connection to Determinism

Hamlet's conduct, it seems, is much in line with the deterministic school of thought (Rose 2009). He holds the strong belief that some inborn deficiency 'vicious mole of nature' develops in the shape of the character and destroys the faculty of reason. His deterministic worldview establishes a gap between his thoughts and the existential philosophy of life. Sartre maintains that man is pure existence. To him, a man's existence cannot be taken to be equivalent to the existence of a tree. The point of departure between 'being-in-itself' and 'being-for-itself' is that the former cannot decide or choose, whereas the latter is in a position of making a free decision and thus formulate his/her essence. Hamlet takes the notion of free will as a mere false show:

we fools of nature

So horridly to shake our disposition

With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls

(Shakespeare, 1602: 1:4, 59-61)

Human beings in spite of their entire daring attitude towards life cannot evade the lurking fear behind many of their acts. According to Sartre, fear is not present in the act rather in its consequences. Individuals know very well that to exercise free will means to take the right decision as well as take responsibility for that act. The basic difference between a leader and a follower is that the former has the courage to take responsibility for his decisions whereas the latter is passive so far as the act of taking responsibility is concerned.

CONCLUSION

Hamlet's procrastination in the play is the result of his victimization by the notion of existence. Being frantically caught in the mire of existential trauma that divests him of the fundamental human faculty of taking action, though ironically embroils him in the freedom of exercising faculty of reason, he remains buried in the swamp of conflicting thoughts and satisfies himself by escapist reasoning that he ought not to do the act unless it is fully rationally proven and is justified on all human grounds. As this state of inbetweenness is fraught with existential questions, he strives to find the answers to the question of life itself, putting aside the immediate question of revenge. His assassination in the duel, though not before the other ghost-nominated culprits are stabbed or poisoned to death, sums the existential quandary that the meaning of life lies in resolving and executing decisions at whatever cost they come.

It is a common, however, unconscious practice that one makes his/her decisions under the illusion of the 'doctrine of determinism' (Rose, 2009). There have been many versions of deterministic theories in the history of philosophy, arising from diverse motives and considerations; and called ethical, psychological, logical, theological and physical determinism. Hamlet seems to be subjected to almost all deterministic theories. Hamlet's emotions are not adequately supported by the storyline and the other characters around. Therefore, all attempts to identify the reasons for his procrastination, aimed at the assertion of the phenomenon of 'objective truth', seem to be inconclusive. Sartre's proposed dichotomy between 'being' and 'nothingness' makes it possible to find the source of one's subjective feelings within being/self rather than searching them out in the objective world. 'Being' is the result of a journey from nothingness to becoming. 'Man is free because he is not himself but presence to himself' (Tymieniecka, 1998). A being-for-itself is technically bound to be free. Freedom 'forces human-reality *to make* itself instead *to be*' (Tymieniecka, 1998). Hamlet's position becomes clear when analyzed through Sartre's conceptual pair of being and nothing.

Sartre's moral philosophy states that ethical concerns are dependent on a human being's conscience. According to him, freedom is the total sum of one's motives and causes behind one's actions. Man has the ability to organize these well within the sphere of the available freedom. (Sartre 1943) He states with sorrow that man is preoccupied with the idea of 'completion' to gain a sense of fulfillment. His strategy after assumed fulfillment is to escape all further quests. Consciously, he believes, has the capability to conceptualize possibility. But the existential phenomenon of 'nothingness' is a difficult situation to handle because each step taken to formulate one's essence demands complete responsibility for its consequences (Sartre, 1946). This is what happens with Hamlet as he, in order to avoid the burden of responsibility of a murder, keeps on delaying it. He cannot comprehend that while avoiding one decision, he is taking another which is the avoidance of murder. He blames nobody but himself for his procrastination, thus takes responsibility for his cowardly behavior unconsciously and subsequently, loses his life.

*Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
 And thus the native hue of resolution
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought
 And enterprises of great pitch and moment
 With this regard their currents turn away
 And lose the name of action*

(Shakespeare, 1602: 3:1, 91-96)

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