

ISSN : 2347-503X

# Research Chronicler

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal



**Vol II Issue VI : September 2014**

**Editor-In-Chief**

**Prof. K. N. Shelke**

[www.research-chronicler.com](http://www.research-chronicler.com)

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A Peer-Reviewed Refereed and Indexed International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

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**Hamlet Extended: Studying Christopher Nolan's Leonard Shelby and Dom Cobb in the light of the text *Hamlet*****Amar Singh**

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Supervisor: **Prof. Anita Singh****Abstract**

Shakespearean texts are like a fair. As we walk through them, we witness characters that can shrink ages into one and one into ages. The follies of the protagonists of the three major Shakespearean tragedies' *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *Othello* are the ones that can relate to the mankind of every age, but the folly of *Hamlet* is the one with which postmodern man can find itself akin to; that is, Hamlet as the victim of indecision.

Hamlet as a character is counted among the most complex characters of dramatic stage in terms of personality and behaviour. Various facets behind Hamlet's characters are still unravelled mysteries, and one knows not what new enigma will emerge from the new reading. Same goes with protagonists of Nolan's movies, especially, *Memento* and *Inception*. The more you interact with Leonard Shelby or Dom Cobb the more you get deeper into the web of riddles.

Leonard Shelby and Dom Cobb stand synonymous to the postmodern man and there can be established a sharp comparison between these two characters and Hamlet, such as, indecision, nostalgia, split personality, wrath, identity crisis and so on. The modest attempt of this paper will be to explore Hamlet in the light of Nolan's texts and how Shakespeare inspires Christopher Nolan consciously or unconsciously.

**Key Words:** *Hamlet*, Christopher Nolan, *Memento*, *Inception*, postmodern man, nostalgia, split personality, indecision, identity crisis

Watching Christopher Nolan's movies always comes as an unusual experience for the cinema goers. Unusual in the manner, he not only dissects the personality of his characters but the experience carries to the audience as well, in short, he unmakes them. The unreliability of his narrators at times points fingers at the reliability of his tales too. Nonetheless, if watched closely, a certain sense of pattern hovers around his cinema, especially with *Following* (1998), *Memento* (2000) and *Inception* (2010). The pattern that runs around these movies moulds like this: the protagonist lost his identity in *Following*, is in nostalgia about

his past in *Memento* distorting facts and manipulating reality and then comes in *Inception* where he has made several copies of himself and is hunting for real *him* in his archetypes. The structure very much follows Baudrillard's theory of Hyperrealism and the "idea" that works behind these movies is the idea of identity, that is, how an 'Unknown Citizen' approaches himself not in so perfect system. The unknown citizen of Auden was perfect in giving no chance to the system to question his personae; nonetheless, same cannot be said of his system. Nolan is very much interested in

approaching the unsung ones not from the “Bureau of Statistics” but from the unknown ones themselves that how they see themselves into this system and the answer we get is convoluted one as there is no simple *I* for them:

“Here’s the truth: People, even regular people, are never just any one person with one set of attributes...We are all at the mercy of the limbic system, clouds of electricity drifting through the brain. Everyman is broken into twenty-four-hour fractions, and then again within those twenty-four hours.” (“Memento Mori”)

However, if we watch Nolan’s obsession with a different angle, that is, his fascination with the unreliable narrators, doesn’t this avid passion of his brings his protagonists closer to the greatest unreliable narrator of all, that is, Hamlet. One cannot deny that Shakespeare haunts each and everyone consciously or unconsciously, so it doesn’t look exaggerated that Nolan too feels his stamp. Nonetheless, from all his tragic masterpieces the personae of Hamlet comes as the one which Nolan chooses to experiment with time and again on celluloid. An interesting comparison which the readers have always made is in between the characters of Hamlet and Batman. An article on the website of *The Guardian* aptly remarks that “Batman is the icon for our times, Shakespearian in his ability to withstand multiple reinterpretation. . .the same way that any given Shakespeare text is remodelled, refurbished and redesigned for one generation or another, so too has been Batman.” Among the four phases of the Batman cinema, it is the fourth phase; that is, Chris Nolan’s version of Batman who

has the Shakespearean spell embedded within making him “the Hamlet of our times.” Nevertheless, leaving aside Batman, studying Chris Nolan’s other cinematic texts also make an interesting impression when read under the light of *Hamlet*, especially *Memento* and *Inception*. If Shakespeare were in our times, he certainly would have been fascinated to see the different interpretation of the postmodern Hamlets in the form of Leonard Shelby and Dom Cobb.

#### Leonard Shelby: Hamlet Continues...

“So the question is not “to be or not to be,” because you aren’t. The question is whether you want to do something about it. Whether revenge matters to you.”

- Jonathan Nolan (“Memento Mori”)

When comparing, one may ask, how can *Memento* appear to have an affinity with *Hamlet*? In structure and treatment, they are radically different. The only subject that links them together is the dominance of revenge-motif in both cases. One seeks to avenge the murder of his father, the other of his wife. However, the resemblance does not rest there. Chris Nolan’s portrayal of Leonard Shelby definitely comes as a continuance of the personae of Hamlet in the postmodern world. Going deeply through these works, revenge appears to be a shallow motif, a pretext for their existence.

Inspired from the short story “Memento Mori,” a Latin phrase meaning ‘remember your mortality’, *Memento* jiggles us with the relative concept of time. Time consumes everything, even the passion for revenge, as “nothing ‘gainst Time’s scythe can make defence” (Sonnet 12). Hamlet also finds himself at the mercy of time that

absorbs his zeal for revenge. Time and again, Hamlet muses over the futility of life (“O that this too solid flesh would melt”) and contemplates for suicide (“To be, or not to be, that is the question”) though he abandons this idea because of the unknown evils of the afterlife and damnation (“makes us bear those ills we have/ Than fly to others that we know not of?”). Having lost everything he finds solace in vengeance, which being a “pigeon-liver’d” he makes excuses for the delay to put it into action. Now, what if time lost its ability to affect Hamlet? What would then be the course of his action? The answer comes in the form of Leonard Shelby, whom time fails to steal his nerve. However, his anterograde amnesia in the movie is as doubtful as the madness of Hamlet; whether they feigned it on purpose or are literally suffering through the condition?

One important thing to notice in the play is that Claudius never confesses his guilt to Hamlet. Hamlet never hears his confession (“O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven”) on the first place as his entry is at the very last of the confession. The play-within-play, the Mousetrap, which is played on the instruction of Hamlet, does not show a brother poisoning the King but the nephew. To quote Lysander Kemp:

Hamlet remarks Claudius, in words heavy with meaning, “This is one Lucianus, nephew to the king.” Not brother, but nephew. Hamlet is nephew to Claudius; the nephew murders the player-king; therefore, Hamlet means to murder King Claudius. And although Claudius is a brave man, this open and crazy threat, following upon the many examples of what he earlier called Hamlet’s “turbulent and dangerous lunacy,” unsettles him so much that

he bolts off the stage. The prince is now sure and elated; he is nonetheless mistaken.

The play-within-play scene by Hamlet can be seen as the re-enactment of the events that supposedly took place during the murder of the King Hamlet with slight tamper to convince himself of the fact which even may not be true. In the movie *Memento*, we find Leonard Shelby in the same situation where he emulates the events with a prostitute that has occurred during the rape and murder of his wife. Now, if he is really suffering from anterograde amnesia then this means that though he cannot make new memories but he can remember the old ones that have happened before the accident. Then, why does he motivate himself to manipulate the past? One of the hypotheses can be the guilt of not being able to save his wife in time (if supposedly the break-in took place) and resultantly, he cheats himself by fabricating his memories to hide his guilt. William G. Little comments on this condition of Leonard:

One of the marks trauma can leave on an individual is post-traumatic stress disorder, a condition whose most striking feature is a compulsion to repeat the trauma, to re-create it through hallucinations, flashbacks, and dreams. This seemingly illogical impulse to relive the experience may be understood as a desperate attempt to compensate for the fact that the victim is not able to make sense of the experience when it occurs. The inability is due to severe disruption in the victim’s perception of time.

Thus, Leonard can be seen trying obsessively in the whole movie to make up for something that has overwhelmed him, a desire made manifest through repeated attempts to redress a supposed wrong and

to re-dress himself in various textures and texts (clothes, tattoos, personas, stories). Leonard confronts this reality when Teddy in the climax tells him about how he lies:

You tell everybody about Sammy!  
Everybody who will listen!  
Remember Sammy Jankis?  
Remember Sammy Jankis? Great  
story. Gets better every time you tell  
it. So you lie to yourself to be happy.  
There's nothing wrong with  
that...you tell yourself over and over  
again, conditioning yourself to  
remember, learning through  
repetition.

What is the outcome of this enlightenment? Leonard again manoeuvres reality and kills Teddy as another John G. Just like the name of the motel (Discount Inn) he stays in, Leonard has discounted his memories. Nolan for this purpose as seems has discounted too in the title from *Memento Mori* to *Memento* as in memories because this is all is left to Leonard whom he can rewrite as per his choice to survive. Revenge becomes the only tool by which Hamlet and Shelby can survive. The moment Hamlet avenges the wrong done with him and his father, he is dead. But this is not the case with Shelby as his task is never over. With every killing, he starts afresh his hunt for the next John G and the story continues.

### **Dom Cobb: Hamlet Diversified**

The reasons behind the delay to avenge the death of his father by Hamlet has always excited and agitated the scholars, and still no definite resolution is conferred upon. The Persona of Hamlet is clouded by several other archetypes, the dominating of which is the Shadow; that is, Claudius. The suppressed desires of Hamlet are manifested through his uncle. He is a character of action, and gives little thought to his morality of his behaviour. It may

even suffice the opinions of the scholars who believe that there is the hint for incest within Hamlet. Now, Hamlet hesitates to kill Claudius because he feels the guilt that somewhere in his heart, he wants to be Claudius. Taking clue from the other side, in *Inception* Dom Cobb is unable to get rid of Mal because he wants to get consumed with her. Mal is all that he desires for though ultimately in the process he gets rid of her in limbo; that is, in the deepest of his unconscious. Hamlet also overcomes his fragility when he meets the Self, that is, Fortinbras. After that he overcomes his Hero (Laertes) and Shadow archetypes. Among the several other reasons, saving his mother from the damnation also becomes one of the chief causes of delay. A C Bradley on this point exclaims that Hamlet's "chief desire is not by any means to ensure his mother's silent acquiescence in his design of revenge; it is to save her soul." The inaction of Hamlet is caused because the archetypal figures of the great mother and anima are never realized for him, thus, becomes the cause for his troubled psyche.

When audience moves from Leonard Shelby to Dom Cobb, they find that Nolan's protagonist has finally divided himself into several copies. The postmodern Hamlet is now diversified than ever. One of the affinities that exist in between Dom Cobb and Hamlet is, for the former you cannot be sure when he is dreaming and when he is not, for the later, when he is feigning madness or has actually gone mad. Nonetheless, believing that the whole movie takes place in dream (the dream rule clearly shows that after being dead on one level you will wake up on the level above, but Dom and Mal are shown waking up directly in reality after

being dead in limbo which certainly is not possible), we find Dom Cobb divided into several projections of his who are dexterously trying to ensure that Cobb wakes up. Mal as the Shadow, Arthur as Hero, Eames as Trickster, Saito as the Father archetype, Robert Fischer Jr. as Child archetype, Adrienne as the Anima, Miles as the Wise Old man and Yusuf as the Self who represents the conscious and unconscious world within oneself.

The anagnorisis of Hamlet after confronting the vulgar realities of life makes him disillusioned about his purpose in life. Rather than believing on his purpose, he starts enacting the roles which he feels are required to do by a man in his position. We never come to know what kind of relation Hamlet holds with his father. The ghost of his father appeals to Hamlet that he must seek his revenge, “if thou didst ever thy dear father love.” The statement produces doubts that Hamlet ever shared happy relations with his father. Even when Queen asks him for a change of mood, saying, “cast thy nighted colour off.” She asks him why death “seems so particular” to him, and he answers,

Seems, madam? Nay it is.

...

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.

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The statement is ambiguous than it appears on the first sight. Millicent Bell indicates on this note that, “Hamlet is not saying that he has put on a false appearance to cover a true self. He does not deny the message of his appearance, for it declares his grief. Yet the way he looks and behaves constitutes *only* signs after all, “actions that a man might play” as on the stage, a collection of gestures established by tradition for a role and easily enacted by the accomplished actor.” On several other occasions in the play Hamlet frequently contemplates on enactment of his roles. It even creates dilemma whether revenge was his first motif or not. The cause of his disillusionment comes from the shattered concepts of relationship. That is why; Hamlet does not open himself even to Ophelia, his love interest.

Now, the disillusionment of the postmodern man, personified in the form of Dom Cobb, goes to the extent that he makes dreams his reality rather than facing the grossness of the reality itself. There he believes that one day he will be united with his children, the ones that he has always ‘dreamt of’ to be united with. The tragedy of Hamlet and Dom Cobb is that they do not want to confront the facts of ‘real life’ rather are searching for some alternate reality. In the process, one becomes the victim of excessive brooding and the other is confined to his unconscious world.

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