

“Hamlet, Gertrude, Conflict, Action and Plot in “Hamlet.”**Bhupendra Kumar N. Dhimar***Research Scholar, Pacific University, Udaipur, (Rajasthan) India***Abstract**

Hamlet and Gertrude are the two most thought provoking characters of Shakespeare's most focused tragedy, "Hamlet." A deep dive is required to bring out the hidden aspects of both the characters. In my opinion Gertrude's character needs careful study to judge her personality, especially her motherhood. Conflict is always a key element in a drama. In "Hamlet" for both the characters, selected for study, conflict is unavoidable and it remains with them throughout the drama. They face inner as well as outer conflict and there is fatal conflict in between them too.

Key Words: Character, Conflict, Love, Tragedy, Shakespeare, Aristotle, Ghost, Greece, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Action, Plot, Mother, Faithful, Faithless, Murder, Prayer and madness

Introduction

There is a difference in the concept of tragedy of the ancient Greek dramatists, especially Sophocles, and the concept of tragedy of Shakespeare. In this article the emphasis is on Shakespeare's concept of tragedy. The conflict between Hamlet and his mother is a key aspect of the tragedy. Hamlet and many critics of "Hamlet" have misjudged the noblest character, Gertrude.

Aristotle and Tragedy

The roots of tragedy can be found in the ancient Greek tragedy. During the span of 300 years—6th century B.C. to the 4th century B.C. the drama, especially tragedy, developed and flourished in Greece. Due to great contribution to this field by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, this particular Greek period is known as a classical period in the history of world literature. During this very period Greek witnessed the rise of three great genius—Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

Among these three geniuses the contribution of Plato and Aristotle is extremely important keeping in mind literary criticism. Plato's 'Republic' and Aristotle's 'Poetics' are the two most important critical treatise. In this 'Poetics' Aristotle has disclosed his scholarly views on several features of literature, especially tragedy. Defining tragedy he says—

“Tragedy, then is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.”

(R.A. Scott-James. “The Making of Literature” 2001. Allied Publishers Limited. Page-61.)

In this definition of tragedy there are several literary terms that require detailed explanation. But I'll concentrate on specific parts only. The detailed study of the works of **William Shakespeare** (1564 to 1616) shows that he never invented plots of his plays. He relied on the stories and historical incidents available to him. But the way in which he has constructed his plots is worthy to be studied attentively. His international reputation as a dramatist largely rests on five great tragedies written by him—'Julius Caesar', 'King Lear', 'Othello', 'Macbeth' and 'Hamlet'. In all he has written 36 plays and many sonnets addressed to the dark lady and Mr. W.H.

Conflict, Action and Plot

"In every drama there is bound to be some sort of tension or struggle. The delineation of the characters is determined by the fact that a dramatic conflict of some kind has to be represented and by the relation in which several antagonistic forces stand in the way of the plot as a whole."

(Minakshi L. Dalal. "Conflict in Sanskrit Drama." 1973. Somaiya N. Delhi. Page No 08.)

Aristotle has said that tragedy is an imitation of an action and not of narrative (which is one of the chief qualities of epic). Action (something being done/acted on the stage, during its performance) is a key feature in a drama, because something should happen, develop and should be resulted in a concrete way. A drama should be complete and of a certain magnitude. Here, 'complete' means good beginning, good middle and good end.

Now the question may be this-what do we mean by the adjective 'good?' Good beginning is that where the readers or the audience does not need further clarification regarding the background and it leads to the middle of the plot, logically and convincingly. Good middle is that where the readers find smooth development of action and where the incidents follow each other in a harmonious manner to form the organic whole. Good 'end' is that, in case of a tragic drama, where we witness the tragic downfall of either the hero or the heroine or both, due to 'hamartia', arousing the feelings of pity and fear resulting in to the catharsis of those feelings.

Conflict: If plot is the soul of a tragedy then conflict is the heart of the drama. And so conflict is always there in a drama because-

"The function of plot is to give action a form that helps us understand Elements of the drama in relation to one another.....Plots depend on CONFLICT between characters".

(Lee A. Jacobus. "The Bedford Introduction to Drama". 1989. Bedford Books. Page 19.)

The structure of the Shakespearean tragedy has its own typical design. As we know his plays are always divided into acts and acts into scenes. The same was the structure design of the antic tragedians and ancient Roman dramatist, Seneca, who was one of the influencers of Shakespeare. Of course, there are different numbers of acts. In a Shakespearean tragedy we come across five acts. (May be more acts as it is in the play, 'King Lear') The 1st act is an opening act, the 2nd is a rising act, the 3rd is a climax act,

the 4th is an anticlimax or a falling act and the last, the 5th act is an act of denouement.

This movement of the action of the play is largely due to either internal conflict or outer conflict or the both. The play 'Hamlet' is replete with different types of conflict and this very conflict is a cause of the development of action. The appearance of the apparition marks the beginning of conflict. Horatio is unable to judge the appearance of the ghost of the deceased king of Denmark, senior Hamlet. He asks the ghost,

“What are thou that usurp'st this time of night together with that fair and war like form in which majesty of buried Denmark did sometimes march?

(Act 1 scene 1 lines 46 to 49)

Horatio's speech also reveals the conflict between Norway and Denmark but that is not a major thematic issue of the drama. But it prepares the background of the internal conflict of prince Hamlet that is going to take place soon and that is also the major thread of the theme of the drama. The arrival of ghost on the stage not only arouses the curiosity of the audience but it also indicates terrific conflict that lies somewhere. And it also pushes the action. The dialogues that alternatively takes place between Hamlet and her mother-aunt, Gertrude and between Hamlet and his uncle, Claudius who has usurped the throne and has got married with Gertrude, discloses the outer and inner conflict of the protagonist of the play, prince Hamlet. He is unable to understand his mother's behavior; this creates tumults in his mind. He

soliloquizes in the following words that reveal his internal conflict too.

“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!-“

(Act 1 scene 2 lines 43 to 46.)

In this scene we see further development of action and plot. Readers realize that prince Hamlet's father has been assassinated and his mother has got married with his uncle, Claudius, who is now the new king of Denmark. This is the base of the plot of the play, 'Hamlet'. Hamlet is now sandwiched between outer and inner conflict which is the major cause of majority of the action of the play. This conflict has created many problems in the mind of the protagonist.-1- Who is responsible for all these incidents? -2- Why his mother has become his aunt now? -3- Why his mother could not resist the situation for more than one month? -4- Whether his father's death was natural? If it is not a natural death than what is truth? -5- How would he be able to find out pros and cons? His mind is overflowing with this kind of suspicious problems. It is in this mental stage of Hamlet that Horatio informs him about what they have experienced during the two previous nights when they were on their duties as night watchmen. Horatio says-

“In the dead waste and middle of the night, been thus encounter'd. A figure like your father, armed at point exactly, cap-a-pe, appears before them, and with solemn march goes slow and stately by them.”

(Act 1 scene 2 lines 197 to 201.)

This information doubles the conflict of Hamlet. It is time, for him, to take action, but miles to go before he sleeps.

The third scene of the 1st act introduces three important characters-Polonius, Laertes and Ophelia. We come across some general opinions of Shakespeare through these characters. Laertes says to Ophelia about Hamlet's love for her as

“A violet in the youth of primary nature,
Forward not permanent, sweet not lasting,
The perfume and suppliance of a minute;
No more.”

(Act 1 scene 3 lines 7 to 10)

Some general advices to Laertes by Polonius are worthy to be quoted.

1 - “Look thou character. Give thy thoughts no tongue many unproportion'd thought his act. Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar.”

(Act 1 scene 3 lines 59 to 61)

2- “Neither a borrower nor a lender be; for loan oft loses both itself and friend, and borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.”

(Act 1 scene 3 lines 75 to 77)

Once again the action moves ahead in the 4th and 5th scenes of the 1st act. Hamlet meets his father's apparition who informs him that-

“The serpent that did sting thy father's life now wears his crown.”

(Act 1 scene 5 lines 39, 40)

On one side his father's ghost has helped him directly by informing him that his uncle is the culprit but has also confused him by almost ordering him—

“But, howsoever thou pursuest this act, taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive against thy mother aught; leave her to heaven.”

(Act 1 scene 5 lines 84 to 86)

The above quoted lines are extremely contributory to judge the character of Gertrude, Hamlet's mother. Hamlet's conflict, both internal and outer, is now almost unbearably acute. He wraps himself with lunacy, one of the most discussed issues in many of Shakespeare's plays. For Gertrude it is not difficult to find out the cause of Hamlet's lunacy. She says,

“I doubt it is no other but the main, his father's death and our o'erhasty marriage.”

(Act 2 scene 2 lines 57, 58)

Through this wrapper of lunacy Hamlet seems to trying to find out strong cause for his probable strong action. Polonius smells method in Hamlet's madness. He says,

“Though this be madness yet there is method in't-will you walk out of the air, my lord?”

(Act 2 scene 2 lines 201, 202)

Act 2, according to general practice of Shakespeare, is a rising act but the action, in this act doesn't move quickly. The whole act is devoted to psychological game of Hamlet who decides to arrange 'a play within the play'. Hamlet asks the players

“Dost thou hear me, old friend; can you play ‘The Murder of Gonzalo’?”

(Act 2 scene 2 lines 510)

In the third act Hamlet’s conflict is at climax. He is unable to decide the way of his action because he is a scholar and scholars think too much and many times too less action. The action has slowed down considerably because of Hamlet’s hesitancy. In that play within the play he trapped Claudius, who is disturbed to see the murder because the modus operandi is identical to what he had applied while murdering his elder brother, the ex-king of Denmark, the senior Hamlet. Prince Hamlet soliloquizes,

“To be, or not to be- that is the question: whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune or to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them?”

(Act 3 scene 1 lines 57 to 61)

Now for the king the situation becomes clear and the conflict between Hamlet and Claudius is apparent and so the king decides to get rid of the lunatic Hamlet. He orders his mercenaries in the following way— “I like him not; nor stands it safe with us to let his madness range. Therefore prepare you; I your commission will forthwith dispatch, and he to England shall along with you.”

Reading between the lines of the above quotation suggests that the king may have ordered something fatal. Hamlet’s ability to take action is always challenged by the situation. When he gets a chance to settle the issue by assassinating the culprit, he avoids

doing so, the scholar he is! He does not want to send his uncle- father to heaven. He speaks,

“Now might I do it pat, now ‘a is praying; and now I’ll do’t-and so he goes t heaven, and so am I revenged. That would be scann’d; a villain kills my father; and for that, I, his sole son, do this same villain send to heaven.”

(Act 3 scene 3 lines 73 to 78)

Hamlet does not want to send a culprit like Claudius to heaven and as a result, though there was a chance for him to put an end to the conflict, he avoids to do so. In the 4th scene of the same act Hamlet verbally whips his mother and to this whipping she reacts according to her real identity and character that has remained hidden hitherto. She exclaims,

“Ay me, what act, hat roars so loud and thunders in the index?”

(Act 3 scene 4 lines 52, 53)

When Hamlet carries on his verbal attack on his mother Gertrude it becomes unbearable to her and she says,

“O, speak no more!

These words like daggers enter in my ears: no more sweet Hamlet.”

(Act 3 scene 4 lines 95 to 97)

Now the conflict functions as an engine to action and development of the plot. The 4th act is about conflict between Laertes and Hamlet who has returned safely from the conspiracy of Claudius. Laertes was shocked with the death of his father and sister and when he comes to know about Hamlet’s

responsibility for these death he becomes furious on Hamlet and prepares himself to take revenge. Claudius skillfully excites Laertes against Hamlet. A duel is decided between the two. Laertes, with the help of the king, is prepared with a poisoned sword. This conflict stimulates the action and develops the plot which is moving towards the denouement.

In the 1st scene of the final act we can see the genuine motherly feelings of Gertrude when Hamlet behaves little rudely with Laertes. At this juncture, smelling problems over the life of Hamlet Gertrude requests the king,

“For love of God, forbear him.”

(Act 5 scene 1 lines 260)

This six words line is overloaded with a mother's feelings for her only son. The king has prepared a cup of poison ready on the table if he comes out of the duel alive. Gertrude is worried about her son. She says,

“He's fat, and scant of breath.

Here, Hamlet, take my napkin, rub thy brows.

The Queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet.”

(Act 5 scene 2 lines 273 to275)

Can anyone be deaf and dumb and blind to the emotions of Gertrude? She even does not bother about her own death when she drinks the poisoned cup after all she has done her duties without uttering anything. Does she possess any liberty to speak aloud? She dies. Hamlet and Laertes die due to exchange of swords. Prior to that Hamlet stabs Claudius and compels him to drink the remaining liquid from the poisoned cup. Claudius dies.

After all it is a real tragedy. Fortinbras arrives and promises peace. The conflict and action subside.

One Big Question

Is Gertrude a disloyal, shameless and selfish woman?

It apparently seems like so that Gertrude is a disloyal, shameless and selfish woman. I, after profound thought, have come to a conclusion that if loyalty, morality and unselfishness are not to be found in the character of Gertrude then where are they to be found? It must not have been difficult for Gertrude to come to a conclusion that if Claudius, the then brother in law of hers, could murder her husband, the then king, then it would be a cake walk for Claudius to murder her son, Hamlet. One requires to read between the lines prior to give value judgment about the character of Gertrude. Good judgment requires the best thinking process. She has silently sacrificed the real pleasure of domestic life for the sake of the safety of her son, Hamlet. What appears is not always true and what is true may not be apparent.

My Opinion

‘Faithfulness Thy Name Is Mother’

If in this world we try to find out the most appreciated (sometimes hypocritically) and the most satirized, when it represents the back and black side, word it is ‘Mother’. Gertrude has very skillfully opted for her marriage with Claudius. This was the only practically possible alternative left for her. How shameful to read a comment like ‘semi barbarian’ regarding the action and deed of someone. Someone who does not know

anything about real 'civilization' uses a term like 'semi barbarian'. To prove Gertrude as a faithful mother, many of the above quotes are sufficient. HATS OFF TO GERTRUDE, THE MOTHER.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude the article by praising Shakespeare for composing such a fantastic drama like, "Hamlet." Hamlet is

unquestionably one of the great characters portrayed by the playwright. But Gertrude's character is also a great female character portrayed by the dramatist. How difficult it is to judge a character? Unless we see the world as seen by that particular character and with the same undisclosed and unspoken gesture, we are very likely to commit a heavy blunder. A critic's work is to judge quietly, impartially and with a deep insight.

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