

SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGIC VISION IN HAMLET'S SOLILOQUIES.

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MH Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham in a well-known guide reference of a critical terminology have rightly defined soliloquy as “act to talking to oneself, whether silently or aloud” and they have explained it as a suitable ‘convention’ through which the dramatists, particularly the dramatists of Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, have used the device to convey ‘information about a character’s motif and a state of mind’ or for purposes of ‘exposition’, and sometimes to ‘prepare the audience for a particular response and judgment.’¹As regards Shakespeare, he has used the device to reveal the mind (mental conflicts and motifs) of his complex character such as Macbeth, Othello, Hamlet, Lady Macbeth and Iago etc.

Soliloquy is an innovative technique and dramatic convention of Shakespeare. It is important to mention that drama is meant for performance. It is not intended for private reading. Therefore, Soliloquy becomes an integral part and a significant stylistic device for the explanation of a complex mind and his course of action like that of Hamlet.

Indeed, in Shakespeare’s tragedy a complex character reveals his mind for the audience through the Soliloquy. Thus, suspense is maintained.

Nevertheless, chorus was introduced in Greek dramas as an interpretation of the incidents or characters. It is because of the unavailability of the modern audio-visual technique that it was resorted to in the Greek drama and even in the initial stages of Elizabethan drama. As Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides used the technique of chorus in their tragedies for the explanation of the characters as well as Prophecies, so Shakespeare unlocks the motifs and psychology of his complicated characters and their mental conflicts through soliloquies. Indeed, soliloquy is a technique of expectation as well as a technique of surprise.²

A.C. Bradley, the renowned critic, in his convincing explanation highlights Shakespeare’s purpose of using soliloquy in his drama. Bradley says:

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“Shakespeare wrote primarily for the theatre and not for students, and therefore, great weight should be attached to the immediate impressions made by his works. And so it seems at least possible that the explanation of Hamlet’s silence may be that Shakespeare, having already very difficult task to perform in the soliloquies that of showing the state of mind which caused matter which would not only add to the complexity of the subject but might, from its ‘sentimental’ interest... “³

Besides the actions of the play, the seven long soliloquies illustrate the mind and motif of Hamlet. They give Hamlet sublimity and comprehensive understanding of human life and nature. In these soliloquies, Shakespeare has endowed Hamlet with all great gifts of heart and mind. Indeed, Hamlet’s soliloquies are gems of Shakespeare- literature as they are atonce remarkable expositions of contradictions in human nature and sources of perennial paradoxes in human existence.

Goethe’s estimate of Hamlet’s character seems appropriate when he says, “He was a prince, a born prince... a beautiful, pure, and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which makes the hero, sinks beneath a burden which it can neither bear nor throw off; every duty is holy to him, - not the impossible in itself, but the impossible to him.”⁴

Goethe’s interpretation of Hamlet’s character is considered as an exaggeration and a flattery by some carping critics and they hesitate to consider Hamlet as a perfect work of Shakespeare. According to them, Hamlet is an incomplete, absurd, mysterious, whimsical as well as an irresolute personality and his conflicting ideas make the play absurd, intractable and unintelligible. However, much as critics may scoff at the intellectual interest of the play, nevertheless, these sweeping assertions definitely degrade the character of Hamlet and misinterpret the ultimate message of Shakespeare conveyed in the soliloquies. Indeed, the metamorphosis of Hamlet from his initial vacillation and reluctance in the openingsoliloquyto his passionate resolution in the last soliloquy has been adroitly presented by Shakespeare. In fact, various aspects of Hamlet’s reproaches viz. his profound melancholy, weariness of life and longing for death are captured marvelously through the device of soliloquy. For example, in the soliloquy which appears before the appearance of the spirit of Hamlet’s father, the disillusionment, lassitude and apathy towards life of Hamlet are executed brilliantly:

“O God, God,

How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable

Seem to me all the uses of this world!

Fie on’t, ah fie, ‘tis an unweeded garden

That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature

Possess it merely.”⁵

Hamlet’s speculative genius as well as imaginative power and morbid state of mind are presented effectively in the aforesaid lines. Hamlet’s meditation transcends the personal into universal. What he says is applicable to all mankind, especially when he provides a generalized view of human miseries.

It is important to mention that though some critics have tried to find fault with Hamlet’s response uttered in the term of soliloquy, the fact remains that Hamlet is a young, inexperienced, adolescent who is suddenly confronted with an existential dilemma. In simple terms, he has to cope with the power of loyalty and the moral dilemma of coping with his mother who has committed a kind of incest in marrying his uncle Claudius in indecent hurry. Within an hour of receiving the charge from the spirit of his father, Hamlet relapses into that weariness of life and longing for death which is the immediate cause of his procrastination. In the soliloquy of Hamlet in Act III, Sc. I, the theme of weariness and longing for death recurs which is considered as unparalleled passage of Shakespeare’s artistic creation. Hamlet procrastinates because he is suffering from excessive grief and profound melancholy.

In the soliloquy one of those violent oscillations of mood typical of the profound melancholic individual is evident. In his restraint, there is intellectual skepticism and sincerity that are commendable. Hamlet’s enormous intellectual power is conveyed in his contemplations:

“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.”⁶

Indeed, this soliloquy is one of the finest dramatic monologues in world literature. It is important to remember that Hamlet expresses his thoughts quite contradictory to those words which he pronounced earlier. In the first soliloquy, Hamlet showed himself to be ‘restrained by his knowledge that

“The Everlasting had not fixed His canon ‘gainst self- slaughter” [Act I, Sc II] but in the later soliloquy [Act III, Sc I] there is no illustration of Christian doctrine. Hamlet effectively emphasizes that oblivion is preferable if death brings oblivion;

“To die to sleep:

To sleep perchance to dream, ay there’s the rub,

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come

When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,

Must give us pause”- [Act III, Sc I]

The lines cited above reflect Hamlet’s death-obsession as an escape from various strains and streams of life. It is also suggested as an end from all worries and disappointments which a moral or speculative person finds difficult to avoid in one’s life. Not only this, the aforesaid lines also indicate Hamlet’s Christian connection and belief in mortality. Hamlet is assertive by nature and his assertiveness is explicitly explained in these aphoristic lines;

“Thus conscience does make cowards of us all

And thus the native hue of resolution

Is sickled o’er with the pale cast of thought,...”⁷

Indeed, it is the central utterance in the play, for it reveals

The civilized and Christian doctrine which compel Hamlet

For his unwillingness to take revenge.

Shakespeare incorporated spiritual elements in Hamlet. With profound realization he advocates that man’s desire is infinite and the grace of divine is equally infinite. Indeed, Shakespeare was not a hedonist who felt that life is meant to be enjoyed in the frills or fretted over trifles. Nevertheless, the ultimate goal of life is renunciation which cannot be achieved without self-discipline, self-knowledge or self-realization discarding all materialistic values and earthly pleasures and temptations. As Hamlet proclaims,

“What is a man?

If his chief good and market of his time

Be but to sleep and feed a beast, no more
 Sure he that made us with such large discourse
 Looking before and after, gave us not
 That capability and god-like reason
 To Fust in us unus'd.”⁸

Prof. Debidas Chatterjee, an eminent Shakespeare- scholar in his brilliant rendering “In Quest of Beauty” proclaims that Shakespeare’s tragedies are not unlike the sublime peaks of the Himalayas from whose tops storm-clouds hurl down thunderbolts, and where the only other sound which breaks the eternal silence of the mountains is the roar of avalanches. The statement of Prof. Chatterjee is more eminently applicable to Hamlet than Shakespeare’s other tragedies. Indeed, there is tremendous vital energy in Hamlet. Hamlet’s life is a baffling problem, an inscrutable mystery. The powers of evil wage a perpetual war against him and ultimately he is defeated. Nevertheless, he has wrestled with destiny; he has fought well. There is no denying the fact that Shakespeare’s tragic hero Hamlet exhibits imperishable grandeur and “all the nobility and sweetness of his nature.”⁹

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