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SHAKESPEARE AND EXISTENTIALISM

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Abstract:

Shakespeare and Existentialism is always unique and enthusiastic in literature. For Shakespeare, human existence is contentious and problematic. But his plays force us to question what it means to exist as a human being in the world, and this is why so many modern existentialist thinkers have found his work philosophically advanced. Shakespeare has exposed fundamental questions about the nature of human subjectivity. His plays repeatedly ask: what does it mean to have a relationship with our self? What faculty of human mind makes conscious self-reflection and self-differentiation possible? Shakespeare's response closely resembles what moderns call an existentialist answer to chaos and absurdity. This paper provides a glimpse into the existentialist thought and surveys the influence of existentialism in Shakespeare's *Hamlet and King Lear*. It also suggests that Shakespeare and modern existentialist thinkers share a deep interest in the creative fusion of fiction and philosophy.

Keywords: Existentialism, Hamlet, King Lear, Shakespeare, nothingness, subjectivity.

Introduction

Existentialism does not appear as a single philosophical system. It is more an attitude of life, a general vision - existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre is known to have stated that existentialism was never invented, it has always existed as the ultimate foundation. Upon that light, why not seek the foundations from the work of the forefather of all dramatists?

Shakespeare and existentialist thoughts are focused mainly in human being's life in a meaningful and lovable manner. They bond on the philosophical thought of human being in this world. Shakespeare sees life in the perspectives of other's insight. He can express love, passion, friendship, fear, ambition etc., through his different zones of characters as a mirror of the society at all times. In Shakespearean tragedy, the idea that human beings have is an intimate, inward self-

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experience that broadens into a wider consideration of ethics and politics of human existence. Shakespeare is not only interested in what human beings are, he is also concerned with how they live and interact with one another. His plays do not establish ethical boundaries in a prescriptive or didactic way, but they imply that ethical limits and feelings of inwardness are connected.

Exploring Existentialism

According to Blaise Pascal, 'We don't receive wisdom, we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us'. Existentialism is a philosophical movement that views human existence, having a set of underlying themes and characteristics, such as anxiety, dread, freedom, awareness of death, and consciousness of existence. But if existentialism is the philosophy that makes life possible, we may ask why we need a philosophy. According to existentialists, we want to live a full and authentic human life, a rewarding and fulfilling life that embraces human dignity. When we find that the universe is not going to cooperate, when we discover that the stories we express ourselves in an attempt to force it to have meaning have ceased to work, we feel like being strangers in the world. This historical circumstance is the one that existentialists saw/ see themselves. We can see in this pandemic situation, how much this world become chaos, confusion, fear of

unseen virus and fear to tackle the situation. During this period, people have begun to feel disconnected from the traditional authority that had helped them make sense of the world and of their lives. Existentialism is also the study of what it means for something, as opposed to nothing, to exist at all.

Shakespeare as an Existentialist Playwright

Shakespeare as a humanitarian dramatist implies, that as human beings, we have a delicate and an unstable relationship with our selves. We can try to be true to ourselves and live a more authentic life; we can also deceive ourselves and try to evade our existential responsibilities. Shakespeare's drama call for a fresh, informed reading of the inward experience of trauma and self-estrangement his tragic protagonists. The philosophical reward of viewing some of Shakespearean tragedies through the lens of existentialist literature and philosophy is an enhanced appreciation of an existential energy that pulses through his tragedies and ensures their continuing appeal. Shakespeare's plays *Hamlet and King Lear* have a tremendous influence on the development of his existentialist thoughts, ideas, and imaginations. This article explores how existentialism has influenced in Shakespeare's works.

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Critical Evaluation of Shakespearean Existentialism

In 1959, Walter Kaufmann wrote a book entitled '*From Shakespeare to Existentialism: An Original Study*' where his study compromised by a general understanding of existentialism, which he regards as "a timeless sensibility that can be discerned here and there in the past" (Kaufmann, 1956, p.12). He points out that Shakespeare "knew the view that man is thrown into the world, abandoned to a life that ends in death; but he also knew self-sufficiency. He had the strength to face reality without excuses and illusions and did not even seek comfort in the faith in immortality" (Kaufmann, 1980, p.3).

Northrop Frye, in *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy*, argues that existentialist ideas lie at the heart of Shakespeare's tragic vision. He also remarks that the conceptions that existential thinkers have tried to struggle with, care, dread, nausea, absurdity, authenticity and the like, are all relevant to the theory of tragedy. Tragedy is also existential in a broader sense that the experience of the tragedy cannot be moralized within any conceptual world view (Fry, 1967, p.4).

In a redeploing of Nietzsche's dialectic of the Apollonian and Dionysian intensities of human life, Dollimore sees human beings as conflicted by their desire for both civilized order and transgressive

action. He celebrates the power of desire to produce the shattering of the self into a vulnerable, receptive authenticity.

To read Shakespeare through the image of existentialism, we must heed Palfrey's advice: "If we want to traverse such cross-cultural turf, we need to do so tenderly, with due attention both to shifting terrain and our own steps upon it" (Palfrey, 2004, pp.96-111).

This paper exposes Shakespeare's play and existentialism together in order to reveal the existential intensities that exist at the heart of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *King Lear*.

Existentialist Attitude

According to Charles I. Glicksberg, "The Existentialist novelist is the philosophical Hamlet of our age, suffering from spells of nihilistic madness, metaphysical nausea, and ontological dolour" (Glicksberg, 1997.p.39).

Hamlet displays 'existentialism attitude' throughout the play. In his first soliloquy of Act I he contemplates the absurdity of the world,

*"How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of
this world!"(1.2.136-137)*

According to Nietzsche, Hamlet gains an 'insight into the horrific truth' (Nietzsche, 2008, p.46) which reveals that the world is

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out of joint. Hamlet's corrosive lucidity allows him to see through hypocrisy, insincerity and scheming ways of other people, but he does not experience a Schopenhauerian epiphany which shows him the way things really are. Hamlet is obsessed with the way things appear to him and with the way his consciousness attributes inner meaning to the world.

The human condition is the scrutiny of art, Prince Hamlet notes the purpose of art is to hold the mirror against nature. King Lear is a masterful inquiry into the human condition. King Lear is confronted with existence in its barest sense and is forced to adapt to that existence. His adaptation to the absurd provides an invaluable insight for all into the universal problem of existence. Lear is forced into an existential progression that will be traced with the phenomenon of consciousness; the result of this progression is seen ironically in that Lear finds satisfaction in despair. For Shakespeare it is the individual who "brings[s] himself into unity, to make himself a Being, to act authentically toward self-recognition and acceptance of Self as part of a community and unity" (Holly, p. 172). The philosophy of Shakespeare's play, and particularly in *King Lear*, however, is often at odds with the prevailing philosophical beliefs of the time. Naturalism and humanism were the dominant approaches towards the human experience.

Existential Creation of Self

As many critics have observed that the existential richness of the play, *Hamlet* is created by Hamlet's intense awareness of baffling, contradictory and volatile nature of his own subjectivity. We can assess the dimension of Hamlet's subjectivity by reading the play in the light of existentialist theories of consciousness. When Horatio arrives to inform Hamlet of numerous sightings of his father's ghost, Hamlet strangely pre-empts the conversation:

Ham. My father, methinks I see my father.

Hor. Where, my lord?

Ham. In my mind's eye, Horatio. (I.ii.183-5)

For the first four acts of the play, Hamlet agonizes over the nature of selfhood before he comes to the realization that his self is not really a self but 'a kind of fighting' within consciousness. It is the uneasy, agitated and ultimately futile attempt of consciousness to stabilize itself.

In Lear's universe, daughters placate the strange whims of their fathers, and Cordelia, of all, should love him more. Taylor observes, "To Lear, his image of himself is that of a king and father who is wise and just and his image of a family is that of children, who because they are children, cater to his personal pleasures. The division of his kingdom and the disinheritance of a daughter who will not flatter him are beyond reproach" (Taylor, p. 509). Cordelia's inability to play into Lear's reality threatens to disorient the

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order of things for Lear. His subsequent rejection of Cordelia is his way of maintaining order, subconsciously. Self-deception is key to the tragedy of Lear, and here Sartre's concept of "bad faith" is most evident. Bad faith is defined as a lie to oneself within the limits of one's own single consciousness. Sartre argues, that "as a being compelled to decide the meaning of being... most of the time we flee anguish in bad faith" (Sartre, p. 104).

Goneril: I do see how full of changes his age is. The observation we have made of it hath not been little. He always loved our sister most, and with what poor judgment he hath now cast her off appears too grossly.

Regan: 'Tis the infirmity of his age. Yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself. (1.1.296-302)

Alienation and Disappointment

'To be, or not to be - that is the question' (III.i.55): Hamlet's contemplation of the difference between being and non-being is one of the most existentially intense moments of the play. But Shakespeare's famous line is more existentially sophisticated than it appears on the surface. As Shakespeare's tragic heroes show, an apprehension of nothingness at the heart of being can give rise to a

considerable existential anxiety, but it can also be the source of great existential strength. Hamlet consigns a part of himself to his companions. He stretches the distance between his socially molded identity and his inwardly experienced subjectivity in order to open up nothingness that exists at the heart of his being. Paradoxically, Hamlet must become distanced from himself in order to fully realize how fragile and vulnerable selfhood really is. He reveals a duality of human consciousness: consciousness can only grasp itself by becoming distinct from itself. Hamlet is divided from himself in a way that reveals that he is naught. And it is not just Hamlet who is self-divided.

The point of departure of Lear into the unknown of existence is seen when he plunges himself into the harshness and relentlessness of nature. While immersed in the storm, Lear has been reduced to the bare essentials of man, he has lost those that he perceived as loving, and despite being accompanied by the Fool and Kent, Lear is more alone than he has ever been. The daughters whom he thought loved him abandoned him and have taken his kingdom. The daughter who truly loved him was banished by his irrationality; Lear is alone. Lear's self-deception has finally caught up with him to the detriment of the perceived natural order. Lear defines this condition for Gloucester towards the end of their journey:

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We came crying hither.
Thou know'st the first time that we smell
the air
We wail and cry.
When we are born, we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools.

Meaning of Existence

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare suggests that in order to understand freedom, we must confront the realities of death and human finitude. From the outset of the play, Hamlet contemplates the meaning of suicide. His father's unexpected death and his mother's swift marriage have led him to think about self-slaughter. Death is never far from his mind. It infiltrates his language and imagery. In his soliloquy beginning 'To be or not to be', in which he meditates on the desirability and the fear of death, Hamlet suggests that reflection is the adversary of suicide:

To be, or not to be – that is the question;
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

Hamlet comes to realize that he exists in a crudely basic sense of the word: as a material being, he has a fundamental and irreducible corporeality. But he also understands that he exists in another way: his consciousness allows him to go beyond the givens of his existence. This space between what existentialists call facticity and transcendence or between

essence and existence is where the possibility of freedom resides. we must take responsibility for our existence, accept what the world throws at us and try to respond in the most authentic way we can. Freedom and necessity intensify each other in the denouement of the play, *Hamlet*. Under the mounting pressure of his situation, Hamlet understands the existential immensity of his freedom to commit himself authentically to his situation.

Lear himself is the greatest example of existentialism, he "started inauthentic and became later, authentic". In a philosophy that at its heart, is "full self-responsibility for the individual", the discovering of such is no better examined than through the character of Lear. Existence is an absurd task that plagues Lear, and as he comes to the realization that Knight notes he plunges into a sense of forlornness; he realizes that any justice he tries to impose on the universe is a hopeless task because of the universe's absurdity. This symbolizes his first step into his existential progression.

"Then let fall/ your horrible pleasures.
I stand here your slave" (III, ii, 18-19).

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Lear knows that the absurd universe will act harshly with no conception of justice. He is a slave to his existence and a fact of existence is absurdity. The forlornness Lear experiences is the natural existential reaction to an absurd universe. However, the cycle is rapidly dynamic and Lear must now enter the next stage of his progression. The human condition is a bare, harsh, and lonely existence, which Lear brilliantly illustrates. Existence for Lear is similar to that of a great oak tree, at one point filled with life; however, the human condition will not allow that oak to escape existence forever. It is only a matter of time before the leaves fall off and nothing remains but the skeleton of a tree once filled with ripeness. The skeleton is now open to the harsh cold winds of existence:

“In the twentieth century, feelings of alienation and absurdity have arisen that tend to shift the focus to King Lear. All virtuous or evil actions, all acceptances or rejections of religious or political ideology seem equally absurd”

This existence that confronts Lear is absurd and beyond rational thought and none can escape it.

Authenticity

Hamlet knows that he is surrounded by ‘in-authentic’ people. He takes an immediate dislike to Claudius’ messenger Osric, referring to him as a ‘water-fly’

(V.ii.69) and a ‘lapwing’ (V.ii.165). The imagery of creatures that hover above the water’s surface aptly describes his superficial character. Osric is a man whom ‘the drossy age dotes on’ (V.ii.169), says Hamlet, because he plays ‘the tune of the time’ (V.ii.169-70). Hamlet is extremely cautious of existence, aware of the ease with which people can become caught up in their everyday goals and ambitions. He is also weary of the power of what he calls general censure. It worries him to think that a man’s character may be corrupted and compromised by common opinion. Hamlet’s mind begins to contemplate the wider issue at stake: the way a man’s character can be reduced to a single, ‘particular fault’. Implicitly, he recognizes that human beings are complicated things made up of both faults and virtues.

For Hamlet, personal authenticity is paramount. He privileges and protects his unique sense of self. By adhering to his father’s dictum and ‘setting things right’ in the latter’s sense, Hamlet would not be acting on his own terms in his own way, and therefore, would be as in-authentic and hypocritical as those around him. Instead, Hamlet has to find his own authentic way to act and exist. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare is aware of the complexity of the issue of individual authenticity. He is conscious of the interplay between authenticity and in-authenticity. Authenticity, for existentialists, involves recognition of the

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unavoidably inauthentic quality of life, awareness that men are all drawn into the world and cannot disassociate themselves from it. Hamlet becomes the person he is by defining himself in the heat of action; he engages in the process of self-becoming.

Lear became conscious of the absurdity of the storm and naturally slips into angst. The absurd will confront him again, something so absurd that he finally abandons all hope and his ego will develop further when hope is abandoned; he no longer is in angst, for hope has been abandoned. The final stage of Lear's existential progression and the next logical step of the acceptance of an absurd universe is that of despair.

*“Why should a dog, a horse,
a rat, have life,
and thou no breath at
all?” (V, iii 308-310)*

Lear despairs; life is despair when confronted with the absurd. Life passes and goes, it matters not who it comes to and who it leaves. Cordelia's death is grossly trivialized by comparing the value of her life to the value of the life of a dog. This is the ultimate absurdity and Lear realizes this, and despairs. In this despair he is finally free of all hope, the hope that held him in angst, and in that freedom he undoubtedly finds satisfaction.

Conclusion

For Lear, and indeed for Shakespeare, the only path to self-knowledge, or authentic being, is through suffering. “O matter and impertinency mixed! Reason in madness!” I hope this article explored deeply existentialism in Shakespeare. I took only two piece of his cake which provides us the entire essence of existentialism in him. At present situation we try to live in this world with lot of chaos and confusions regarding COVID'19. Every human soul in this world tries to console others for their loss and they console themselves. Shakespeare is an existential hero who kindles the inner thoughts of human being at all times.

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