

Hamlet and Macbeth: A Psychoanalytical Reading

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Abstract—The theatrical performances and plays are often considered to be an effectual on the stage for the supernatural, natural, soliloquies and different other forms of literary terms and concepts. They evoke emotion not only in the mind of the characters of the play but they also evoke emotion in minds of the audience. Shakespeare plays arouse the intensity of emotion which advocates universal themes such fear, anger, hatred, jealousy, greed etc. Shakespeare uses the aspects of psychology in the mind of the characters to show how a real person would react in real life by appealing to the unconscious and hidden thought. This paper aims to focus on William Shakespeare's plays *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* through the lens of Freudian psychoanalytical perspective. This study focuses on the dark side of human characters which is repressed from the external world.

Keywords—Psychology, Sigmund Freud, Repression, Procrastination, Murder, Miseries.

1. Introduction

Psychoanalysis is a form of therapy which cures mental disorder. It can be cured through investigating the interaction of conscious and unconscious elements in the mind, so that the repressed feelings like fear, anger, hatred and conflicts are brought out into the conscious mind of a person rather keeping inside unconsciously. Thus, this theory in literature is used as a form of literary criticism in interpreting a work or certain characters of work. Freud interprets the characters from *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, he analyzed the psychology of the characters to show how a human mind works in certain situation. In order to analyze the psyche of human mind he divided human mind into three different stages which includes- 'Id', 'Ego' and 'Superego'. In psychological theory we study the psychology of human characters of internal thoughts which a person hides or covers from the external world outside. Thus, the theory concentrates how the mind, instinct and sexuality of a person works in his unconscious mind which becomes a defense mechanism.

This paper is confined to the imaginative ideas created in Sigmund Freud's "Translation of Dreams", which incorporates the duality of Oedipus complex which is intertwined in the play *Hamlet*. Hamlet's procrastination to avenge his father's murderer is advocated through the rivalry or opposition towards his Uncle Claudius who is now his father. Hamlet becomes a victim Of Oedipus complex due to his instant desire to kill Claudius. From the lens of Freudian perspective Hamlet demonstrates the internal mental condition. Moreover, Freud presents the personality of human as incorporation of three parts

that is – 'Id', 'Ego' and 'Superego' which are observed in the play *Macbeth*. Freud claims that Id is the conscious part of the mind that contains dangerous thought processes, 'Superego' works as a controller of the mind and 'Ego' contains an bridge between the wants of the 'Id' and the 'superego'.

A. Sigmund Freud

The famous neurologist Sigmund Freud founded the psychoanalytical theory to study or to bring out the hidden thoughts and feelings so to free the sufferings of an individual from the distorted emotion. Freud's critical observation of psychoanalysis can be trace in his most celebrated essay "Psychopathic Characters on the Stage", where he observes the psychology of certain characters as presented in drama from the Greek tragedy all the way to his own time which includes most of the plays of William Shakespeare. In order to analyse the psychology of human mind he incorporates five Psychosexual Stages of Development of Human, which are as follows-

- I. *Oral Stage*: This stage range from 0-1 years of a child. In this stage a child entirely depends upon his/her mother or caretaker. Here a child's interaction basically occurs through the mouth, as mouth of a child is very much significant for eating, the child puts all things into its mouth to acquire pleasure by biting, sucking and breastfeeding. Freud claims that oral fixation may result in problems with drinking, eating, smoking or even nail-biting under stress in later part of a child's life.
- II. *Anal Stage*: This stage range from 1-3 years of a child's life. In this stage a child becomes fully aware of the fact that they are person in their own rights and now their wish may bring them in a conflict with the demands of the outside world. Freud claims that if parents give too much freedom to a child in this stage then later that child becomes an 'Anal Expulsive person' who is more careless and unorganised which is called 'Anal Retentive Personality'. Here the 'Ego' gradually develops.
- III. *Phallic Stage*: This stage range from 3-6 years of a child's life. In this stage a child comes to know about the opposite sexes as a result it develops conflict between rivalry, jealousy and fear which in a way gives to form the Oedipus complex and the Electro complex. A child's libido or desires centres upon their genital organs. Oedipus complex is one of

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Freud's most controversial ideas and Freud used this complex in analysing the character of Hamlet.

- IV. *Latency Stage*: This stage ranges from 6-12 years of a child's life. This is the learning and developing stage of a child where he/she adopts moral lessons and values. Freud believed that most sexual impulses are repressed during this stage and sexual energy can be transmitted towards school works, friendships as well as hobbies. The energy of a child is focussed in acquiring new skill, new knowledge and other playful activities.
- V. *Genital Stage*: This is the last stage of human being and it ranges from 12 years - life time or till his/her death. In other words this stage ranging from puberty to adult stage. The sexual pleasure of an adult is directed to heterosexual desire unlike self-pleasure which occurs during the phallic stage. It is a time of adolescent sexual environment where an adult attracts towards opposite sex. According to Freud the ego and superego fully develops in this stage and mostly the adults are able to balance their basic urges against the need to conform to the demands of reality and social norms as well.

Freud used the term 'libido' which is associated with sexual desires as a result it arouses erotic attachments like hatred, fear, anger, aggression etc. Later Freudian psychoanalysts derive 'libido' in an individual from Greek mythology, thus calls Eros is opposite to Thanatos. The word 'Eros' in Greek means love and the word 'Thanatos' in Greek means death. In other words the Eros which is the instinct of love is opposite to Thanatos which is the instinct of death. Moreover, in classical Freudian theory the term 'libido' has mainly three stages such as- the oral stage, the anal stage and the phallic stage.

2. Stages of Human Mind

Sigmund Freud divided human mind into three parts. He used the iceberg metaphor to illustrate the three parts of human mind or psyche. Human mind can be analysed and studied through these three structural personalities of a mind which are 'Id', 'Ego' and 'Superego'. These structures of human mind work together to create a complex human behaviour. William Shakespeare's portrayals of complex human characters in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*.

A. Id

It is derived from pleasure principle and is an unconscious part of the mind which comprises of primitive behaviours, instant needs and satisfaction. If these are not fulfilled immediately then it may result to tension or anxiety. According to Freud 'Id' is the source of all psychological energy which makes primary component of personality. It is the only component of personality which is present from the birth itself.

B. Ego

It is the component of personality that is responsible for dealing with the reality. It functions in the conscious, preconscious and unconscious part of the mind. It operates based on the reality principle which seeks to satisfy the desires

of the reality and socially appropriate ways of 'Id'. In this context Freud compared 'Id' to a horse and 'Ego' to a horse rider. The horse provides the motion and power whereas the rider gives guidance, instruction and direction. The rider gives the horse the direction to where the rider wants to go, hence without a rider a horse cannot wander its destination.

C. Superego

It provides guidelines for making judgements. It holds internalized moral standards, discipline, principles and ideals which a person acquires from parents as well as from society. Superego tries to civilize an individual's behaviour. It is presented in the conscious, preconscious and unconscious part of the mind.

3. Repression

Freud's psychoanalytical theory is linked with the idea of repression which may occur when a thought, memory and feeling becomes too painful for an individual to express. As such an individual represses or pushes his/her feeling unconsciously. It may sometimes affect one's behaviour. According to Freud much of the development of human psyche is repressed as a defence mechanism to avoid painful feelings which an individual is going through.

A. Freud on Shakespeare

Freud's analysis on William Shakespeare is prevalent in almost all his works. His contribution towards the psychoanalytical study is observed when he was awarded with the Goethe Prize on August 28, 1930 in Frankfurt-am-Main. Freud often treated a literary work as a portrayal of reality and attempts to advocate the psychology of the characters portrayed. He started reading Shakespeare's works when he was only eight years old. Freud's view and opinions on Shakespeare's works paved the way for Shakespeare's critics who are very much interested in the human psyche. Shakespeare is considered as the master in observing the psychological symptoms of a person's mind. In his plays we see most of the characters possessing some sort of psychological disorder where repression coexists in many of his characters. This paper primarily focuses on the characters of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*.

4. Oedipus Complexion in Hamlet

Freud first made discussion of Hamlet in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). Freud and his followers claimed that Hamlet was suffering from Oedipus complex. This complex is achieved when a child becomes a rival towards his father in seeking love from his mother. The term 'libido' is associated with this complex which is associated with the phallic stage in psychosexual development of human which arouses sexual desires of a child towards his mother in creating a parallel rivalry towards his father. According to Freud male infant conceives to displace his father and becomes sexual partner of his mother. Probably for this reason Hamlet was so angry with his mother and also now that she is married to his uncle Claudius he could no longer form an intimate relationship with

his mother Gertrude though his father (old Hamlet) is dead now. The psychological complexion as Freud advocate is extracted from *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. However, Freud argues that in *Oedipus Rex* the wish is acted whereas in *Hamlet*, Oedipus complexion is repressed desire. Claudius in murdering the old Hamlet and marrying Gertrude becomes the projection of Hamlet's own repressed desires. After the death of his father Claudius is now his stepfather, so Hamlet directs his own death wish against him without repression. In other word Claudius becomes the outward portrayal of 'Id' which Hamlet would punish through punishing himself for his illicit feelings towards his mother. In the essay "Psychopathic Characters on the Stage" Freud claims that the play is classic example of projecting a psychopathological character through the character of Hamlet and states that Hamlet is not a psychopath but becomes one in the course of the play. Freud discussed the psyche of Hamlet personality based on the three parts of human mind which includes- 'Id', 'Ego' and 'Superego'.

A. *Id*

We see Hamlet's Id when he encounters with his father's ghost for the first time appears in Act I, Scene I of the play. The ghost reveals that Claudius killed him while he was asleep. The ghost wanted Hamlet to take avenger to Claudius who is his murderer. On hearing this truth from his father he tries to seek revenge for his father. However, Hamlet discovered Claudius as the real murderer through his expression at the end of the play and thus planned to take revenge in the course of the play. The id again dominates Hamlet when he tries to test Claudius by organizing a play. This would help Hamlet to know the response of Claudius after watching the play that whether he is the real murderer or not. According to the plan he wants to challenge Claudius to engage in a sword fighting with Laertes who wants to eliminate Hamlet because he considers Hamlet as responsible for the death of his father Polonius and sister Ophelia. However, Polonius died because Hamlet stabbed him whom he thought as Claudius, whereas Ophelia died because she was depressed after the death of his father.

B. *Superego*

Hamlet's Superego arises when he wanted to prove what his father (the ghost) has said about Claudius that whether Claudius is the real murderer of his father or not. Hamlet who is projected as an intellectual personality knows that ghost is not real. According to him the ghost may pretend to be his father's and may tell a lie in framing Claudius who is his uncle as the murderer of his father. The superego of Hamlet again arises when he started planning to test Claudius who is suspected as the murderer of his father. At the same time he wanted to leave Ophelia who was his beloved as he didn't want Ophelia to know that he was pretending to be mad. However, Hamlet realizes that pretending to be mad is not good and that being a liar is strictly forbidden. He realizes that he should show good manner and values to the society because he is a prince and has a good knowledge and moral sense.

C. *Ego*

Hamlet's ego occurs when he discovered the fact that

Claudius is the real murderer of his father. Even after discovering the fact that Claudius is the murderer Hamlet is still hesitated whether he should take revenge or not as Claudius is his uncle and now he has become his mother's husband. By killing Claudius he doesn't want his mother to be sad. But he still continues to maintain his plan to take revenge. Moreover, when Hamlet tries to reveal her mother Gertrude about the fact that Claudius is the murderer of his father, he stabs Polonius thinking that he was Claudius.

5. Hamlet's Procrastination

Hamlet's procrastination is visible all through the play. There are various reasons and interpretation of Hamlet's procrastination, one of the reasons is that in his subconscious mind he doesn't want to kill Claudius who killed his father whom he really hated in his childhood days. Now that his father is dead he is reliving his childhood days of Oedipus complexion. Another reason for his delaying of killing Claudius is that he is unconsciously identifying himself with Claudius even though in his conscious mind he wants to avenge his father's death. Whatever the reason is, it is evident that Hamlet procrastination in killing Claudius is his tragic flaw and resulted a large number of deaths including his mother Gertrude, Polonius, Laertes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and even himself. In the beginning of the play it was Horatio who had to speak to the ghost as-

*If thou art privy to thy country's fate,
Which, happily, foreknowing may avoid,
O, speak!
Or if thou hast uphoarded in thy life
Extorted treasure in the womb of earth,
For which, they say, you spirits oft walk in death,
Speak of it: stay, and speak (Hamlet, Act I, Scene II. p 2)*

However, Hamlet is not sure who the ghost really was. By following his religious beliefs he may have easily interpreted the ghosts as being an evil spirit. His religious belief is again visible when he fears the result of killing Claudius which is observed in the prayer seen –

*Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;
And now I'll do't. And so he goes to heaven;
And so am I revenged. That would be scann'd:
A villain send
To heaven. (Hamlet, Act III, Scene III. P. 96)*

Thus, Hamlet's procrastination ultimately led to the death of major characters in the play. Had Hamlet took his father's avenger in killing Claudius at the beginning of the play then the play would have been nonexistent. At the end of the play Hamlet realized the delay of his revenge and thus killed Claudius. But this revenge is not revenge at all, it is the last tragic mistake of lifeless indecisiveness.

A. *Freud on Macbeth*

Freud observed the psychological disorder in *Macbeth*, in his

essay "Those Wrecked by Success". After *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* is his favourite among the list of his ten most magnificent works of world literature. In this particular essay he suggests that "it is not at all unusual for the ego to tolerate a wish as harmless so long as it exists in phantasy alone and seems remote from fulfilment, whereas the ego will defend itself hotly against such a wish as soon as it approaches fulfilment and threatens to become a reality" (Those Wrecked by Success, 317-318). Freud argues that the forces of conscience may restrict a person to gain the long cherished for advantage from his wish fulfilment. For example, he considers Lady Macbeth possessing such forces who collapses on reaching success to fulfill her dreams

William Shakespeare presented Lady Macbeth as a unique character in the play *Macbeth*, her character can interpret in various perspectives. Shakespeare makes her character different from the ordinary human nature to show the inner and hidden desires of human. Her character is made with discrimination and cruel who maintains her dominant nature over Macbeth in the very first act of the play. But her character is projected as having qualities of human nature in the next acts, where she introduces herself by unmasking to show the natural desire of human as-

*Alack, I am afraid they have awaked
And 'tis not done.
The attempt and not the deed
Confounds us. Hark! I laid their daggers ready
He could not miss 'em. Had he not resembled
My father as he slept, I had done 't. (Macbeth, Act II, Scene II, pp. 9-14)*

Lady Macbeth is not one-sided character rather she possesses both good and bad qualities. She is presented a ruthless and dominant character throughout the play who gives no attention to her conscience. In the course of the play, she turns herself towards her nature. We get to know her feeling of remorse for what she has done under her mask, which can be traceable in the following lines-

*Wash your hands, put on your nightgown; look not so
Pale. I tell you yet again, banquo's buried; he
Cannot come out one's grave. (Macbeth, Act V, Scene I. pp. 54-56)*

*To bed, to bed! There's knocking at the gate:
Come, come, come, give me your hand. What's
Done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed. (Macbeth,
Act V, Scene I. Pg. 58-60)*

Whereas Shakespeare presents the eponymous character Macbeth in the play is a favourable and respected personality who has a secure home and loving wife. The superego of Macbeth is his dreams, fantasises and fears. In the course of the play Macbeth along with his wife Lady Macbeth recognizes their own irrational activities. Macbeth experience the false effect of prophecy by the three witches who distorted his understanding in viewing the reality where witches prophecy

urges him to murder the king. The darkness overshadows his character when he plans to murder the king Duncan. According to Freud, Macbeth possesses "Id" which is the dark side of a human mind. The "Id" of Macbeth causes him to do criminal and evil action as he says-

O; full of scorpions is my mind. (Macbeth, Act III, Scene II. p 41)

Though Macbeth's "Id" is made of greed and ambition yet his conscience is filled with fear and loyalty. Thus, he is afraid to kill the king Duncan but his greed and ambition urges him to kill the king. He is stuck between ambition and conscience which is very much visible in the following lines by Macbeth-

*I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which overleaps itself.
And falls on the other (Macbeth, Act I, Scene VII. pp 25-28)*

6. Macbeth's Miseries

Macbeth's miseries have turned him into a tragic character. Soon after the death of his wife Lady Macbeth, he transforms into a dignified person as a warrior, and this dignity of him was existed in him before meeting the three witches, thus Macbeth possesses the two selves. The first one of his self remains in darks and comes out at the time when Macbeth is prepared for death. And the second one moves towards the path of heroism and reaches at the climax with the death of himself in the hands of Macduff. Macbeth possesses tragic flaw and hamartia of ambition which urges him to commit evil actions and enter into the darkness before murdering the king Duncan which shows the conflict in his minds which is observed in the following soliloquies in the play-

*Is this dagger, which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch
Thee:-
I have thee not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling, as to sight? Or art thou bed
A dagger of the mind, a false creation, proceeding from the
heat-oppressed brain?
I see thee yet, in form as palpable
As this which now I draw. (Macbeth, Act II, Scene I. pp 47-48)*

Macbeth is totally aware of his darkness in the mind to achieve his criminal desire. This darkness aided him to conceal his ambitious soul. When the king Duncan claims that his sons Malcom to be the prince of Cumberland, Macbeth found it could be an obstacle for him to seat in the throne. So Macbeth started to think of killing Duncan and his son Malcom. However after the death of Lady Macbeth, he gradually understands his evil sin and he realized that he is left with nothing and that no event could put him into the position of holding a dignity. This misery and sorrow in his soliloquies as he says-

*To-morrow, to-morrow, and to-morrow,
 Creeps in his petty pace from day to day;
 To the last syllable of record time;
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death, out, out brief candle!
 Life's but a walking shadow; a peer player,
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage.
 And then is heard no more: it is a tale
 Today by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing. (Macbeth, Act V, Scene V. pp. 19-28)*

7. Conclusion

Freud observes psychological disorder in the major characters of Shakespeare's plays *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* where the protagonists' guilt and punishment are so pronounced that the ego of the protagonists are strong enough to be independent of the superego. Freud's view of erotic and aggressive instincts suggests a mixture of erotic qualities even in destructive processes. Although psychoanalysis is limited in employing

other approaches, but Freud has studied Shakespeare's plays and introduced various new complexities for understanding the major characters of the play. Freud's analysis of Oedipus complex with Hamlet's procrastination in killing Claudius and his remarks on Macbeth's miseries and Lady Macbeth's double personality has provided to dive deep into the psychology of the major characters of Shakespeare's plays.

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