Hamlet: An Interpretation in the Light of Indian Idea of Kingship

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Hamlet is considered to be "the 'Mona Lisa' of Literature" (Eliot 47) mainly because "[critical] minds often find in Hamlet a vicarious existence of their own artistic realization" (Eliot 45) which gives it an enigmatic touch of Mona Lisa's smile. T. S. Eliot judges it as "an artistic failure" for lacking "an objective correlative" and being "full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art" (45-49). But contrary to Eliot's observation the play has attracted a great deal of critical attention. The critics have variously answered several vexing issues regarding structure, character, theme and action of the play but an all encompassing and acceptable interpretation is still elusive. A number of critics from Coleridge to Bloom have subjected the play to their critical faculty and tried to explore the crux of the tragedy. Most of them believe that tragedy occurs because Hamlet "delays action till action is of no use" (Coleridge 87). The critical speculations for a viable cause of Hamlet's delay have given birth to an unending discourse. According to S.T. Coleridge, "in <u>Hamlet</u> [Shakespeare] seems to have wished to exemplify the moral necessity of a due balance between our attention to the objects of our senses and, our meditation on the working of our minds, -- an equilibrium between the real and the imaginary worlds. In Hamlet this balance is disturbed...." And because of this imbalance "he vacillates from sensibility, and procrastinates from thought, and loses the power of action in the energy of resolve" (86). Thus, Coleridge finds Hamlet an intellectual man incapable of acting because of his habit-of-contemplation. Friedrich Nietzsche also finds Hamlet in the Dionysian ecstasy, a state in which he glimpses beyond reality into "the essence of things" that mars the

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There are other critics too who have made speculations for a genuine cause for Hamlet's procrastination. For Freud, "Shakespeare's <u>Hamlet</u>, is rooted in the same soil as Oedipus Rex." He says, "the play is based upon Hamlet's hesitation in accomplishing the task of revenge assigned to him; the text does not give the cause or the motive of this hesitation, nor have the manifold attempts at interpretation succeeded in doing so.... Hamlet is able to do anything but take vengeance upon the man who did away with his father and has taken his father's place with his mother - the man who shows him in realization the repressed desires of his own childhood. The loathing which should have driven him to revenge is thus replaced by self-reproach, by conscious scruples, which tell him that he himself is no better than the murderer whom he is required to punish" (121). David Leverenz finds Hamlet "the most frustrating of Shakespeare's plays precisely because it is the one most specifically about frustration" (137). He further writes: "Hamlet delays revenging his father's death because his real struggle is to restore his mother's validation of his feelings, though "whore" is the only word available to him for his heartsick disgust" (137). Scholars from other continents than Europe and America too have made some brilliant explanations regarding the cause of Hamlet's delay. Like B. D. Sharma finds "the real cause of delay ... in the relations of Claudius and Hamlet" (17). He writes: "the real cause of delay in the execution of revenge is the fact that there exists a father-son relationship between Claudius and Hamlet and Hamlet, being a son, instinctively likes his father Claudius not to be killed, and so delays the execution of revenge until it becomes inevitable for him to kill Claudius." (17)

If Coleridge and Nietzsche and other many more critics explore the cause in Hamlet's inner and imaginary world one finds a shift in Maynard Mack's critique of the play that makes a delicate balance between imaginary and real. For him, since Hamlet's world consists of mystery and problematic reality which he finds himself unable to accept. In this world he is unable to act because "the act requires of him, though retributive justice, is one that necessarily involves the doer in the general guilt." (57) But Helen Gardner suggests more outer and worldly causes than the inner ones when she writes that "the tragedy of Hamlet ... does not lie in the unfitness of the hero for his task or in some fatal flaw. The tragedy lies in

nature of the world which is exposed to the hero's contemplation and in his responsibility to the world in which he finds himself" (69-70).

Though, a large number of critics have been engaged in the exploration of the cause of delay yet some of them have also made comments regarding the theme of the play. As for Eliot "Hamlet is a play dealing with the effect of a mother's guilt upon her son" (46), for Philip Edwards "it devotes itself to the whole issue of the legitimacy of violence and the responsibility of the individual in perusing justice, finding in the revenge convention an extraordinary rich source of conflicts to exhibit an illuminating the many faces of violence and redress" (39). And according to Harold Bloom, "Hamlet is scarcely the revenge tragedy that it only pretends to be. It is the theatre of the world, like <u>Divine Comedy</u> or <u>Paradise Lost</u> or <u>Faust</u>, or <u>Ulysses</u>, or <u>In Search of Lost Time</u>. (<u>Invention</u> 383). He again states "the triumphal Hamlet is cosmological drama of man's fate, and masks its essential drive as revenge" (Invention 405). In the view of Rossiter the central moral theme of the play is "to bring the 'native hue of resolution' to bear on life, and to make the deeper findings of 'pale thought' effective in the world of living men, the thinker must come down to the world" (185). And for Kim "Hamlet deserves the title of 'tragedy of moral idealism'. The most tragic and most affecting thing in the world is the ruin of high soul. This is the theme of <u>Hamlet</u>" (12). A.C. Bradley considers the play to be a story of a single man i.e. the protagonist, who procrastinates because of melancholia caused by his father's murder and his mother's overhasty marriage but eventually brings the final catastrophe. The above survey makes it evident that the critics have mainly focused their attention to a particular character to study the cause of delay or the source of tragedy. However, Gardner's (see supra) critique of the play certainly paves the way to look for some worldly reasons that help to bring the final catastrophe of the play. Caroline Spurgeon too echoes this belief when she says that the problem in Hamlet is not a problem of will and reason "of a mind too philosophical or a nature temperamentally unfitted to act quickly, nor even a problem of an individual at all. Rather it is a condition for which the individual himself is apparently not responsible" (Mack 54). Therefore, contrary to the Bradley's idea i.e. "the centre of tragedy may be said with

other characters who do not rise to the expectations and qualifications of the particular post that they are holding. Therefore, by applying the Indian idea of kingship one may arrive at a possible cause of tragedy in the play.

I

The Indian idea of kingship gives a vivid description about a king's status, category, virtues, education, appointment, duties and assistants. According to it a king has to please and protect the people (Shukranitisara 1.11; Shantiparva 57.11)¹. He is regarded divine but he is not given the right of kingship as was the case in Europe. The Indian conception of the power of a king is unlike the divine right of Stuarts, the divinely ordained duty to afford protection of his subjects. Instead, it is said that all being stay in order (dharma) and order resides in king, hence, only he, who protects order in the best manner, is the lord of the earth (Shantiparva 59. 125 & 89. 10; Shukranitisara 1. 57-62). Indian polity makes three categories of kings viz. Divine (Satvika), Passionate (Rajasika), and Demonic (Tamasika) based on the inherent nature of 'sata', 'raja', and 'tama'. It is firmly stated that only the kings of the first category are divine kings (Shukranitisara 1. 21-26; Shantiparva 90. 4). Moreover, the doctrine of king's accountability to God alone is completely alien to Indian sensibility. In India a king does not enjoy an absolute authority. He is governed by the divine law of order (dharma) (Shantiparva 32. 2-9; Kautilya I, ii).

The polity also provides a catalogue of external (*Bahirang*) and internal (*Antarang*) virtues essential for a king. As per the external qualities a king has to be of noble birth, physically and mentally fit, good looking, firm and skillful in selection of assistants (Shukranitisara 2. 11-14). As per the internal qualities he should have the qualities of inviting nature viz. gratefulness, magnanimity, discipline and resolution; the qualities of intellect and intuition viz. intelligence, curiosity, expertness in discovering the weak points of adversaries, attention, assimilation, memory, discernment, discretion and passion for truth; the qualities of enthusiasm viz. courage, energy, heroism, pride, promptitude and skill; and the qualities of self-restraint viz. wisdom, prudence, self-control, justice and freedom from passion,

ii). Moreover, it is very emphatically stated that avarice is the root cause of evils. Therefore, a king should not be avaricious (Manusmriti 7. 49).

In Indian tradition princes are taught philosophy (*anvikshiki*), history and tradition (*trayi*), economics (*varta*) and administrative and military sciences (*dandniti*) by the learned and the noble scholars and, thereafter, are trained by the honest and the efficient officials (Kautilya III, i). On completion of their education and training one of them, generally the elder son of the king is appointed as the crown prince to help the king in administration. He becomes the successive king on resignation or death of the king (Kautilya III, vi; Shukranitisara 1. 185). In absence of any issue from the king a suitable candidate is appointed on the post. But in every case the candidate should be fit for the post and must possess the aforesaid kingly graces (Kautilya III, vi; Shukranitisara 1. 86-87).

Indians believe that king's duties (rajdharma), both personal as well as public, protect the rest and thus are vital for the stability of the society (Shantiparva 68). His personal duties include all sorts of renunciation, initiation, learning and self protection. He has to shun ten evils of sensuality (kama) viz. hunting, gambling, sleeping in day, speaking ill of others, sexual indulgence, spirituous, dancing, music, illness, and liquor; and eight evils of wrath (krodha) viz. back-biting, criminal violence, hatred, envy, jealousy, wasteful expenditure, reprimand, and reproach (Manusmriti 7. 44-49). He should be efficient and enterprising (Shukranitisara 1. 137-47 & 3. 57; Kautilya III, iii). He should take lessons and counsel from the aged and learned people (Shantiparva 57. 20; Manusmriti 7. 39). He should be cautious about self-protection. He should keep his wives, relatives, friends, counselors, and dependents under control with all means (Shukranitisara 1.150). He should not place much faith in others and with the help of spies should know their hearts. He should check the usurpation of the authority and must be respected by the people (Manusmriti 7. 62-65; Kautilya III, iv & v; Shukranitisara 3. 62 & 64. 7-9). His public duties are collective incarnation of protection and welfare of the people (Shantiparva 56. 45-46). He should protect and promote the material interest of the people, regulate the social-cum-moral order of the society, and punish the ill doers (Kautilya I, ii & VIII). He should make good relations

Shantiparva 69. 23-24 & 103). He has to ensure that taxation should be just and collected money should be invested in public welfare (Manusmriti 7. 128-36; Shukranitisara 4. 2-10). It is believed that if this task of preservation and maintenance of order is accomplished the result is the advent of Golden age (Shantiparva 69. 75-105).

Though a king enjoys all the authorities of the state yet it is also believed that this heavy responsibility cannot be discharged by him single handedly. Thus he should select his ministers to get help in administration and check the misuse of the authority (Manusmriti 7. 54-61; Shukranitisara 2. 1-4). It is said that a person who achieves celebrity, who observes all restraints, who never feels jealous to others, who never does any evil act, who is never overcome by lust or fear or covetousness or wrath, who never abandons righteousness, who is clever in translation of business, and who is possessed of wise and weighty speech, should be the foremost of ministers. Persons well born and possessed of good behavior, who are liberal and never indulge in bragging, who are brave, respectable, learned and full of resources, should be appointed subordinate ministers in charge of different departments (Manusmriti 7. 54; Shantiparva 83. 2-20). But covetous men should not be appointed to any affair (Manusmriti 7. 124; Shukranitisara 2. 5-8).

II

In this section of the paper, a study of King Hamlet, King Claudius, Hamlet, Young Fortinbras, Polonius, Gertrude and Ophelia is to be attempted. They will be judged in the light of Indian idea of kingship to arrive at a conclusion about the play. Though the King Hamlet is described by Hamlet as the "royal Dane" (I, iv, 45) and by Horatio as the "goodly king" (I, ii, 186) yet he does not deserve the title. He has been described in contradictory terms in the play. He is known as the "valiant Hamlet" (I, i, 87) but "was stolen of life, of crown, of queen" (I, v, 75). Subjecting him to Indian idea of kingship it is found that he lacked in personal duties for he had to ensure his own protection. He had to keep his own wife, relatives, friends, assistants, and dependents in control with all means. He had to know the orientations of his surrounding persons and check the usurpation of the throne. But he was

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The single and peculiar life is bound

With all the strength and armour of the mind

To keep itself from noyance; but much more

The spirit upon whose weal depends the rests

The lives of many. The cess of majesty

Dies not alone, but like a gulf doth draw

What's near it with it. It is a massy wheel

Fixed on the summit of the highest mount,

To whose huge spokes the thousand lesser things

Are mortis'd and adjoin'd, which when it falls.

Each small annexment, petty consequence,

Attends the boist'rous ruin. Never alone

Did the king sigh, but with a general groan. (III, iii, 11-23)²

Moreover, contrary to the righteous victory he made an avaricious victory over the Norway and created a perpetual threat for his state. Due to his weakness in personal affairs, passion for war, avarice and lack of foresight he is doomed to death and has contributed in making the world a dungeon and Denmark a prison. He only "seems to give the world assurance of a man" (III, iv, 62) but actually he is not that assurance.

G. Wilson Knight describes King Claudius as an efficient and kindly administrator. He is good in monitoring the state council, foresighted and quick in decisions, and careful about inter-state affairs. He writes, "Claudius is not drawn as wholly evil – far from it. We see the government of Denmark working smoothly. Claudius shows every sign of being an excellent diplomatist and king" (36). But this figure of Claudius is turned upside down by his villainy. Actually, he is "a murderer and a villain, ... a vice of kings, /A cutpurse of the empire and rule" (III, iv, 96-99). A. P. Rossiter writes: "he is highly efficient king – a king of smiles like Bolingbroke, a 'vile politician' – with all the strength that comes from concentration on a narrow pragmatic aim" (184). He is a three-fold sinner who has committed regicide, fratricide and married his brother's widow. At every stage of life he has been a poisoner and plotter. First, he kills his brother by poisoning him and usurps the throne and

If he be now return'd,

As checking at his voyage, and that he means

No more to undertake it, I will work him

To an exploit, now ripe in my device,

Under the which he shall not choose but fall. (IV, vii, 61-65)

On assessing his character in the light of Indian idea of kingship he is found lacking in the qualities of self-restraint. He is not a man of wisdom, prudence, self-control and justice. Rather, he is a slave of passion, instability, greed, arrogance, indolence, inconsistency, impatience, and cruelty. Unlike an ideal king he is enslaved by the evils of sensuality viz. incest, dancing, music and liquor; as well as by the evils of wrath viz. back-biting, criminal violence, hatred, envy, jealousy and wasteful expenditure. He himself confesses:

O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven;

It hath the primal eldest curse upon't--

A brother's murder.

...I am still possess'd

Of those effects for which I did the murder--

My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen. (III, iv, 36-55)

He is too mean to pray with a pure heart; "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below./ Words without thoughts never to heaven go" (III,iv,97-98). As a person he is too mean to be a king and does not deserve the post. He tries to discipline others while he has not disciplined himself. So Linda Woodbridge is right in saying that "tragic disaster is brought on not only by flawed hero(s) like... Hamlet ... but also by villain(s) like Claudius in Hamlet..." (213).

Hamlet, the prince, has often been described as the noblest and most complex character ever created by Shakespeare and he deserves the complement. For Harold Bloom, "consciousness is his salient characteristics; he is the most aware and knowing figure ever conceived" (Invention 404), he is "a charismatic-of-charismatics" (Invention 384). At another place he states that "we know the ethos of disinterestedness only because we know Hamlet" (Viva 3). According to Indian idea of kingship he has the qualities of a courtier, a soldier, and a scholar. He dares to speak even to a ghost, can flight and defeat the opposition in an

here/ And to the manner born, it is a custom/ More honour'd in the breach than the observance" (I, iv, 14-16). Moreover, in the entire play he is the only person who possesses the rarest but most vital kingly grace, i.e. a sense of moral responsibility. Contrary to others only he realizes the responsibility that is expected to him as the head of the state, as Laertes states, that:

His greatness weigh'd, his will is not his own.

For he himself is subject to his birth:

He may not, as unvalued persons do,

Crave for himself, for on his choice depends

The sanity and health of this whole state;

And therefore must his choice be circumscrib'd

Unto the voice and yielding of that body

Whereof he is the head. (I, iii, 17-24)

It is only he who perceives that "The time is out of joint ... [and he] was born to set it right" (I, v, 196-97). But this "indifferent honest" (III, i, 122) Hamlet is a participant of the others sin and due to his moral and filial obligations is bound to suffer and bring disaster on the state. He is found puzzled with the spiritual bankruptcy of the humankind: "give me that man/ That is not passion's slave" (III, ii, 72-73), and irritated with the duplicity of human behavior: "One may smile, and smile, and be a villain" (I, v, 108). He finds the world "an unweeded garden/That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature" (I, ii, 135-36). This ingenuity of the world has opened him to "craven scruple" (IV, iv, 40) that has entangled him in the situation of "To be, or not to be" (III, i, 56). He has become an object to show the fatal consequences of the failure of kingship in a state. He cries "how unworthy a thing you make of me" (III, ii, 366-67). He is noble in reason, infinite in faculties, admirable in form and moving, an angel in action, a god in apprehension and worthy to be a king but due to the flaws of both the kings that was and that is in power is destined to the quintessence of dust. According to Kim, who interprets "Hamlet by the Eastern cardinal virtue mainly according to Confucius' ancient thought" (8), "Hamlet opposes immoral conduct; he opposes the unrighteous and impurity of Claudius, the king of 'most unnatural murder' and of

all his nobility and moral sensibility, because of a villain on the throne, he is deprived of any hope to get justice through proper channel and by committing murder is bound to be "ov'rthrown... quite, quite, down" (III, i, 151-55).

The description of the next character, Young Fortinbras, shows that he is an enthusiastic, valorous, skilled and foresighted worrier. Unlike Hamlet, he:

...a delicate and tender prince,

Whose spirit, with divine ambition puff'd,

Makes mouths at the invisible event.

Exposing what is mortal and unsure

To all that fortune, death and danger dare,

Even for an eggshell. (IV, iv, 48-53)

He, like Octavius Caesur in Antony and Cleopatra, overshadows, though physically absent for the most part, the whole play. He makes an excellent leap towards the kingship. In the beginning he is preparing to attack Denmark. Very skillfully he has employed troops on the frontiers of Denmark but he is still open to the counsel from his old uncle and on his advice makes peace-treaty and gets benefits from it. Due to these kingly virtues he carves a niche in the heart of the noble Hamlet and is elected by him as the next king of Denmark. According to Indian idea of kingship he is, in comparison to King Hamlet and King Claudius, a fit candidate to be a king. He is good and efficient in kingly duties of protection and maintenance of the state and has other kingly virtues of inviting nature, of intellect and intuition, and of enthusiasm. But he shares weakness of being passionate in war with King Hamlet:

Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats

Will not debate the question of this straw!

This is th'impostume of much wealth and peace,

That inward breaks, and shows no cause without

Why the man dies. (IV, v, 25-29)

Thirty years ago King Hamlet had made an avaricious victory over Fortinbras's father whose

In the king's assistants the chief minister Polonius is a "faithful and honorable" (II, ii, 130) "good old man" (IV, i, 12). He is very dear to the country. Though he is a straightforward man, yet he is too old to deal with state affairs. Because of his age he is skeptical about everything and several times is found busy with spying in a foolish manner. Though it seems that the country is his first priority but in reality he has more allegiance to the king than to the state. All over the play he is found totally busy with domestic affairs rather than the stately ones. Certainly he is good for nothing as he himself accepts that he is unable to discuss the policy matters:

...I do think – or else this brain of mine Hunts not the trial of policy so sure As it hath us'd to do. (II, ii, 46-48)

According to Indian idea of kingship Polonius is old enough to be retired. As per the *varnashram* system a person has to retire from his professional and public life to seek spiritual development. But Polonius is still serving. He is too ripe to weed out the contamination from the country. As a minister, due to his inefficiency, he is unable to cure the diseased Denmark and with his helplessness helps the disaster.

Both the female characters in the play viz. the Queen Gertrude and Ophelia, too lack in intellect and resolution. They are prone to temptations and, like puppets, are directed by others. By their frailty, instead of checking disaster, they strengthen it. While on the one hand Gertrude's foolishness gives a passage to Claudius's villainy, on the other hand Ophelia's indifference contaminates Hamlet's mind against women's love. They both unknowingly make Hamlet scrupulous about the reality of human behavior and toil to make world a hell. Collectively these near and dear ones of the kings' do not provide any remedy that is expected of them.

After making a detailed study of the characters of the play in the light of Indian idea of kingship, it may be concluded that the tragedy in the play takes place because of the failure of kings in performing their kingly duties. They behave more as individuals and less as kings. As a king. King Hamlet had to ensure his own safety but his carelessness facilitated Claudius

Hamlet is asked to revenge by the ghost. They have created a situation in which Hamlet is entangled and brings the disaster on himself and others. In Indian idea of kingship, a king is expected to be the paragon of virtues for the rest of the society. He had to ensure an atmosphere for the people to survive without being amoral or immoral. But, contrary to it, both these kings have ensnared Hamlet to be a murderer. Besides, Polonius and Queen Gertrude, because of their ignorance, worsen the situation. A categorization of the kings and would-be-kings of the play may further illustrate the point. According to Indian idea of kingship King Claudius, in spite of his claims to divinity (IV, v, 123-25), is a demonic king. His activities are devilish and he is a "vile king" (IV, v, 115). King Hamlet and Young Fortinbras, though the latter is better than the former, are passionate kings because both of them have deep love for war. While the "most royal" (V, ii, 405) Hamlet with his nobility possesses the qualities of divine king. Looking at the categories it becomes clearer that the most avaricious Claudius is the prime cause of the tragedy in the play while King Hamlet, Polonius, and Queen Gertrude are also responsible for enhancing it. Therefore, after studying the play in this perspective it becomes evident that the final catastrophe of the play is only the epicenter, and the focus of the tragedy lies in the incompetence of the kings in discharging their responsibilities as kings.

References and Notes:

- 1. The original Sanskrit version with Hindi translation of the Indian canonical texts has been used. However, only the ideas translated into English by the authors of the paper, have been incorporated in the text of the paper.
- 2. All citations of <u>Hamlet</u> are from <u>Arden Shakespeare Complete Works</u>, Eds. Richard Proudfoot et *al*.

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