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Power and madness in *Hamlet*: A Foucauldian evaluation

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ABSTRACT

For the Western consciousness, madness has always welled up simultaneously at multiple points, forming a constellation that slowly shifts from one form to another, its face perhaps hiding an enigmatic truth. Meaning here is always fractured. William Shakespeare is renowned for his capacity to manufacture imagination and a great master of his use of psychological studies in the portrayals of insanity. In general, his artwork shows a keen knowledge of human nature. He has a thorough understanding of the human psyche, personality, and actions. Shakespeare's protagonist Hamlet assimilates madness in the most obstinate wisdom. This wisdom may be thin, but it reigns supreme. It presupposes and requires a perpetual doubling of the consciousness of madness, which disappears beneath the surface of madness, only to reappear again on the other side. The paper is an attempt to explore the mindscape of Prince Hamlet using the theoretical base of Michel Foucault's discourse on madness and the formation of power dichotomy. The paper also envisions a Lacanian regeneration of desire, sexuality, and narrative hegemony.

1. Introduction

It was a typical belief in the medieval Renaissance that order requires a small, easily manageable society with a legitimate leader at its top as the representative of God. Shakespeare frequently examines the ways in which kings and other powerful individuals abuse their positions, but he also shows how strong men conspire to gain power, most often the throne, through unlawful means. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, despite being created before post-colonial times, has a post-colonial vibe due to the interaction between Claudius and Hamlet and the ongoing doubts about legitimate and imperial power. The political aspect of the play focuses on hegemonic power abuse, injustice, and conspiracy, all of which are significant aspects of post-colonialism. In *Hamlet*, power often takes the form of either positional authority (such as being a king) or leadership. The drama is structured on the idea of having control over one another. Hamlet is shown as a victim of imperial abuse and violations, which deprives him of

his proper position within his society. Hamlet is deprived of his rightful position as King by Claudius, who represents an imperial authority.

Shakespeare deliberately placed his hero on the verge of sanity and insanity because, despite Hamlet's behavior's tendency towards insanity, it is only the anomaly of intense melancholy and cynicism. Hamlet has gone through all phases of purposelessness, sadness, and disdain. But the most common dilemma in *Hamlet* is, "Was Hamlet really mad, or did he merely assume madness?" Some scholars believe that Hamlet is really mad, whereas certain other critics believe that Hamlet is only pretending to be mad because of the truth he has to be unveiled and the injustice he faced. Before the play begins, Hamlet is clearly a sensitive and idealistic young man, a scholar, a philosopher, and a poet.

Hamlet acts normal when he chooses to and in the presence of those with whom it is safe to do so. Totaro (2010) says that "in every single instance in which Hamlet's madness is manifested, he has good reason for assuming that madness: while, on the other hand, whenever there was no need to hoodwink anyone, his thought, language, and action, bear no resemblance to unsoundness of intellect" regarding Hamlet's madness Polonius commented that: "Though this be madness, yet there is a method in it."

It can be said that there is a well-maintained balance and hidden intention behind Hamlet's madness. The madness is a shield for Hamlet. His pretended madness allows him to do and say the things that he could not have spoken in his sane state. And this madness enables him to utter such naked truth and unveil the bureaucratic imperialist facts. Madness is a power and freedom of speech for Hamlet. Foucault (1972, 2001) showed how madness, the body, life, death, and human beings progressively have become objects of observation and scientific discourses. These discourses aim to reveal a truth but instead create and control the objects they claim to know. The social world is organized and normalized in specific ways through discursive practices (Foucault, 1972).

Foucault (2001) asserts that the persons or ideas that we cannot grasp in our day-to-day sense, the ideas that are foreign to us, and the words that are strictly forbidden and forsaken in our so-called civilized world can be decreed as lunatic or madness. In a word, the thing that we cannot accept is madness.

When Hamlet castigates his mother for her frailty and her wickedness, Gertrude's conscience is awakened. Hamlet could speak and express the sanely forbidden actions and words in his insanity. Foucault says that the capitalist machine or the imperialism or the nation or the authority declares these elements 'mad' and ostracizes them and advertises them as taboo because these elements have enough strength and vigor to overthrow the existing superstructure. T.S. Eliot argues that the "madness" of Hamlet sustains in Shakespeare's hand. Foucault renders power visible in everyday life and institutions and introduces issues of materiality. He examines how the material shapes communication and knowledge practices in political ways, as shown by the example of architecture and sites, such as prison cells. In Hamlet, madness is the ultimate power for him to fight against the political injustice he faced, and could speak anything, and do anything, could insult anybody in order to relieve the pressure on his mind. Hamlet's insanity is the consciousness that triggers the greater truth.

The ideas of power and the potential for that power to corrupt are what tie together the many subjects that The Renaissance *Hamlet* addresses, including love, wisdom, and wealth, whether it comes from the writings of Shakespeare, Hesse, Poe, or Kesey, when we discuss lunacy in literature, we are always probing a mental condition that goes beyond what is usual, typical, expected, and polite (Shefar, 2014). By definition, madness or insanity is a serious and possibly hazardous mental condition that causes rule-breaking, status-quo threats, and overall worry and unrest in those who possess it. It is essential to keep in mind how people perceived the crazies in Shakespeare's day in order to examine how madness is handled in his works of writing. 'The Great Chain of Being', which the Elizabethans held to, formed a hierarchical order from God down to the incomprehensible rocks, plants, and animals. It was believed that an imbalance of the four humors—melancholic, phlegmatic, choleric, and sanguine—caused madness (Nee, 2005).

It has been argued that insanity is a disease of urban civilization. Although this is probably not always the case, there is a lot of truth to it. This viewpoint is now held by two psychoanalysts, Michel Foucault and R.D. Laing. From the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century, the age of reason, when there is a change from the humanist experience of madness to our own experience, M. Foucault's Madness and Civilization provides a historical account of madness (Foucault, 1965).

Of course, the craziness also frees people who are affected by society's constraints and enables them to act morally rather than normally. When Hamlet is insane, he performs best because he believes that's the only way he can effectively reveal the duplicity of his uncle. Establishing that madness is frequently a contested and politicized term is the first step in developing a course around the idea of insanity. It doesn't necessarily come from sterile, detached science but rather from political fabrication. According to Foucault, "it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together," (Foucault, 1972). Moreover, Foucault recognizes individuals as moral agents, responsible for their individual behavior and able to find satisfaction in constraining situations through ethics, technologies, and care of the self. He 'focuses on a more active, individual subjectivity, less imprisoned in and less constructed through scientific discourse and power relations, more geared to self-knowledge supporting work of self on the self' (Willcocks, 2004). The key concept is insanity, and both parties are using it to create a control sphere over the other in *Hamlet*. Again, Foucault is helpful in explaining the complex nature of discourses.

Madness, or mental instability, is opposed to reason and mental training in Hamlet, as well as moral behavior, decent citizenship, and even religious observance. Earlier in the play, Hamlet's uncle sets up the binary oppositions for insanity, establishing a linguistic and political reality that both of these men must employ for political ends. Foucault reminds us, that discourse not only transmits and produces power; it reinforces it and also undermines and exposes it diversely (Storey, 2021).

Politically speaking, if Hamlet had been corrupted by power like his uncle, he would not commit suicide. For Hamlet, insanity is a sign that leads to undermining his uncle's power, as he takes control of the language and uses it for his own advantage. Lacan emphasises the discursive use of language, especially metaphorically and metonymically, as the "unconscious" is constructed (Grigg, 2009).

The idea of power was a concept that prevailed much in Foucault's philosophy. He observed it as very much related to freedom, authority, subjection, and resistance. He viewed power as an interrelational reaction between human beings. One person would have the capacity to influence another. To influence their thinking and behavior, they choose friends, fellows, and various formulated relations (Patton, 2005). A very significant feature of exercising power is that those in a position of power and authority try to develop an intellectual justification for exercising that power. Another important issue is that the flow of power is not always linear. Power finds every possible way to be released. So, the deconstructive idea is closely interrelated with the dissemination of power. The present paper investigates some characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* from deconstruction theory and Michel Foucault's signature concept of madness and power operation. Foucault has also pointed out that the exercise of power could seriously endanger the actions of others. It appears to be almost a characteristic feature of human beings that they wish to exercise at least some degree of autonomy.

The madness portrayed in *Hamlet* can be analyzed from different perspectives: madness in very personal sphere that happened in the case of young Hamlet and his beloved Ophelia, and madness in the state and political affairs. Shakespeare declares that "The time is out of joint!" The whole play covers this idea where the plot construction starts with the very unnatural and uncanny appearance of the dead King. It is an insane time Shakespeare portrays throughout the play. Claudius Hamlet's lustful uncle murders the King and weds the Queen; the dead King appears in his attire, the mournful condition of Ophelia and Hamlet's overall disguise show respective insanity in different layers. Every character in the play somehow is related to the mainstream authoritative system, and everyone has his/her own way of expressing insanity in *Hamlet* (McKnight, 2020). The insanities of the characters are projected according to their social and economic standings. The insanity of the King is not being questioned; any of the characters is not questioning the ecological abnormalities, but the insanity of Hamlet that perforates the King and his system is rigorously questioned throughout the play. Foucault, in his discourse on 'Excavation of knowledge' asserts that the authority tends to always look for the subversive elements in the ruling system that has potential to revolt against the ongoing process and guard them vehemently. The authority in power then tries to mark them as something vulnerable and unhygienic. They call him 'mad' or 'out of mind'. Social scientist Eric P. Levy notes that a careful study on the character and features of these mads can bring out some deeper understanding and even reflect hidden truth (Levy, 2008). So before analyzing whether certain characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are mad or not, one must look at not only the behaviors that appear to be mad but also the source of the madness. Madness can be a veil over the face of sanity.

The paper attempts to explore those characters on the basis of Michel Foucault's theory and observation of power and madness. It also focuses on the Lacan's theory of the unconscious and gratification of desire with the help of Derrida's deconstruction theory.

2.   Method

Research methodology refers to the systematic process of planning, conducting, and analyzing research studies in order to answer specific research questions or test hypotheses. It includes the principles, procedures, techniques used to collect and analyze data, and the ethical considerations that

must be considered during the research process. In this respect, the current research's topic matches that of a qualitative method. Since it is a literary piece, it does not have any certain or calculative outputs or hypotheses, concerning more on process rather than outcome or product (Putra, 2019). For establishing the topic and related arguments, study materials for this research have been collected from similar works by the other scholars. Most often, some required books and discourses have been consulted from the internet. Besides paraphrasing, summarizing, and embedded quotations have been used in this research, which enabled the researchers to come to a thoughtful and evocative conclusion. Finally, the research invites further scholarship in the field.

3.   Discussion

The nineteenth-century historical shift was not limited to psychoanalysts; as psychoanalysts turned to literature, literary theorists turned to psychology. For the first century and a half after its debut, commentaries on *Hamlet* tended to be limited to its plot, its morals, the quality of its speeches, and the effect on audiences. However, beginning in the late 1700s, interest turned to what was often termed as "the problem of *Hamlet,*" the problem being Hamlet's delay in taking his revenge. Through the 1800s and into the beginning of the 1900s, *Hamlet*'s commentary made a drastic change, from the critical emphasis on plot that dominated pre-1750s, to an emphasis on *Hamlet*'s character, to an emphasis on Hamlet's mind. Although a Foucauldian critique of education is useful in raising previously neglected issues of knowledge, power, and contestation, and thereby in problematizing intellectual traditions, this type of critique also has its limits. In the eighteenth century, the orthodoxy of correctness, especially around sanity and insanity, was becoming increasingly codified and increasingly seditious. This is the same advent of the disciplinary society that Foucault described. While Foucault goes into some explanation of this in *History of Madness* in the Classical Age and *The Birth of the Clinic* (2002), it is most clearly explained in *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Foucault points to three instruments for enforcing disciplinary power: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination. In creating a character like Hamlet who deals with luminal space, Shakespeare had two choices: to create a fool or to create a genius mad. Hamlet does not run mad as the other characters are led to believe, and he purposely collapses the distinction between reason and madness in order to win the sympathy of an allegedly "sensitive and mature" (Knight, 2020).

Hamlet occupies a unique niche of being a hero who subverts and plays with multiple psychic boundaries. In *Hamlet*, audiences inadvertently find a place to explore themselves in a world of increasing, encroaching, and invisible madness. This is the Hamlet that we see at the beginning of the play and generally throughout the first three acts. But a change surely occurs, and many critics have noticed it. In the fifth act, Bradley (2016) observes "a slight thinning of the dark cloud of melancholy." He thinks this may be part of a new sense of power after he dispatches Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but mainly, it is a "kind of religious resignation." According to O. J. Campbell (1951), Shakespeare "does not leave his audience with the view of Hamlet as a slave to a kind of mental malady. Hamlet's madness to Gertrude and Polonius was result of two different assumptions. Gertrude thinks the father's death had brought Hamlet's unstable personality; Polonius assumes that Hamlet's love for Ophelia led him to defect as Polonius says, "Or rather say, the cause of this defect." But the truth is Hamlet perhaps was never mad, he rather adopted madness as a mask that covers his contem-

plations; also, it is a disguise that makes him alienated from his society and people. In fact, Hamlet feigns madness to buy time to plot revenge against his father's killer, though it is far from clear in Shakespeare's play (Hunt, 2007). In the fifth scene of Act I, Hamlet says, "How strange or odd some I bear myself." He is telling Horatio that he plans to behave like a crazy person so that he has the freedom to determine if Claudius is responsible for his father's death. Acting like a madman would make him appear as less of a threat, drawing attention away from his investigation. As a mad person, no one really gave importance to his actions of day-to-day life, and he got the freedom to freely go against the King. A normal person could not dare to do such things or even think about it. A "soul" inhabits him and brings him to existence, which is itself a factor in the mastery that power exercises over the body. The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy (Hunt, 2007). Shakespearean theatre had been devised as a type of heterotopias, one of those "different spaces" preserved within society, the purpose of which, in Foucault's (1998) definition, was precisely to defy such inquisition by suspending judgment under the sign of an indefinite erasure.

Hamlet is a play within a play. Hamlet is a self-aware hero who attempts to skirt around the conventions of a revenge tragedy by casting himself as a clown. His madness gives him the ultimate power to expose the imposters to having the perfect image in society. The madness was reflected in the language used in *Hamlet* by Shakespeare. The main protagonist uses madness as a trick to reveal the truth. He puts an antic disposition in order to free his repressed anger and reveal his father's murder. In this way, his pretended insanity is a weapon, a mask to obtain his uncle's confession, which causes uncertainty in the reader. The use of language helps the reader to realize if Hamlet is faking or not as it changes from prose to heavy-weighted metaphors in the soliloquies. His own uncle and mother's conspiracy against his father to get the throne is disclosed by the insanity Hamlet maintained sanely throughout the drama. And so, Hamlet is an archetype of clown in the majority of the play until he finally accepts his role as a hero and enacts his revenge.

4.   Conclusion

Drawing inspiration from Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* (1965) to investigate *Hamlet*, this paper has essayed to demonstrate that madness has always been relegated to the margins of society. Most literary scholars and psychoanalysts' opinions are that Hamlet's madness is afflicted by "sore distraction" that he occasionally suffers hysteria and mania. Still, as a tragic hero, he becomes sane enough to be responsible for his actions. This does not, however, rule out the temporary presence of disabling grief and melancholia, the most poignant qualities in his early soliloquies. It has also been argued that the well-worn and oft-told madness motif can spill over into the field of revenge and power, which owes its genesis to *Hamlet*, and can be adopted by socially unwelcome people. Hamlet is liberated from social constraints on how he communicates with others around him, including his superiors and subordinates, as he starts to behave insane (Woermann, 2012). Without the mask of lunacy, Hamlet would not be able to express his complicated sentiments for the two women in his life, Ophelia and his mother. Hamlet ultimately gets to exact revenge for his father's murder in the duel that results from his pretended madness by the play's end. Thus Foucault's investigation into madness and methodical shift of power dynamics invites modern scholars for further intellectual outpourings.

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