



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET* AND TOM STOPPARD'S *ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD*

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims at throwing light over and comparing various important aspects of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* are modifications and adaptations of the originals. Yet both have attained an eternal value within their respective time-frames. As we know, both the plays consist of plots borrowed from other sources, yet the treatment and handling is much original, and conspicuously signatorial of the respective playwrights. Both the plays attained high esteem in their own times and make a highly interesting reading for those genuinely interested in literature. If Shakespeare's play is intense, and of the classic order, Stoppard's play is full of wit and vivacity, and can well be called a contemporary classic. Both the plays, though set in a totally different setting and ethos are a literal treat for the literary palate.

KEY WORDS – Sources, plot construction, thematic concerns, technique, style, diction

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INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare (1564-1616) as we all know, is the father of English drama. He has as many as 37 plays to his credit. In his life-span of 52 years, he tried his hand at almost all kinds of plays—comedies, tragedies, historical plays, romantic plays. Though he did not win much acclaim during his lifetime, we in the twenty first century, still remember him with fond reverence. His universal appeal has not been matched by any of his rivals till date.

Tom Stoppard was born in Czechoslovakia in 1937. He began his career as a newspaper reporter and a theatre critic, and eventually became a playwright. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are*

Dead remains his most famous play ever. "The play is unique in giving life to two minor, almost negligible, characters in *Hamlet*...who wait in the wings to be called for brief moments only to be forgotten by the audience the next moment." (- A.D. Choudhary, *Contemporary British Drama*). In the very beginning it is made clear by Stoppard that the action of his play takes place within and around the action of *Hamlet*. If *Hamlet* revolves around the fate of Denmark and of course that of Prince Hamlet, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* revolves around the fate of these two minor characters from Shakespeare's tragic masterpiece *Hamlet*. The whole worldview changes in Stoppard's play. He shows us the picture from the point of view of these two

characters who chisel their own death, procrastinating over making a meaningful choice. Stoppard's play in fact is an inverse of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The backdrop is the same though, the centre spotlight is now on these two school-fellows of Prince Hamlet. The audience of Stoppard's play is supposed to be concerned about the travails of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Both the plays are tragedies of sort, but whereas *Hamlet* is a conventional tragedy, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is an absurdist tragedy where the title makes it obvious that the titular twin characters have a bleak, rather dark future and from the moment of the beginning of the play, they are heading towards their death.

Let us now compare the various aspects of these two plays and critically analyse how they are similar or different to each other.

Sources

Both *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* are modifications and adaptations of the originals. Yet both have attained an eternal value within their respective time-frames. *Hamlet* was written in the Elizabethan-Jacobean period in 1601. The plot is largely borrowed from a Danish writer Saxo Grammaticus. Saxo wrote the legend of Amleth which appeared in the *Saga of Danish Kings*. Shakespeare changed the names of the characters and dealt away with the crudities of form and structure. Shakespeare weaved his own indelible magic into Saxo's plotline and gave *Hamlet* its uniqueness. In Saxo's legend of Amleth the protagonist Amleth kills the king and ascends the throne as the lawful heir. Shakespeare however, changed the ending of the *Hamlet* and converted it into a tragedy—on the lines of conventional Greek tragedy, where the tragic hero, born of noble origin, suffers misfortune due to his tragic flaw or error of judgement.

On the other hand, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a subtle, modern rendition of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Stoppard has retained the original story of *Hamlet* and even some dialogues are same where we witness the intersecting scenes of both plays. He has also maintained strict adherence to Shakespeare's names of characters. In fact, Stoppard has placed Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in

contemporary setting where we all experience lack of purpose and quest for identity. Ros and Guil, like all inhabitants of the modern world, are insignificant beings thrown-into-being; picked up by Stoppard just like that from the Elizabethan age and dropped *dead* in the modern age. They were dead nearly four hundred years ago, but there is a whole lot of hullabaloo about why they die. They have been caged by Stoppard purposely, themselves without purpose—trapped in the post-modern world, having no charge of their lives, no practical will of their own, bereft of the ability to make meaningful choices. In Shakespeare, *Hamlet* feigned madness and procrastinated, owing to his own will and rationalization of circumstances around him before taking his decision. Stoppard's play is also reminiscent of Beckett's hopeless despair depicted through the endless ordeal of the two tramps from *Waiting for Godot*. But the sufferings of Ros and Guil definitely have an end, a sad end though. Vladimir and Estragon find themselves lost in the circular time labyrinth but our Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are wading through fixed, linear time and have very little hope for escape/redemption. If in *Hamlet*, "old order changeth and gives place to the new"—in Stoppard the whole order is chaotic and topsy-turvy. We can also find some likeness to Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. Here also the protagonist is confused and desolate fellow, lacking a personality of his own. Also, he is in a perpetual dilemma, inadvertently procrastinating over his decision about whether or not to pursue a woman. Prufrock however exists in a realistic world but Ros and Guil essentially exist in the world of the playwright. They have no control over their fate and actions, and their choices are practically nil. Even the audience is time and again reminded that they are watching a play.

Opening Scene

Shakespeare of course has always achieved near perfection in his opening scenes. They are well formulated and dramatized. In *Hamlet* also we get a fair idea of the events that have already occurred. The play opens at the time of midnight at Elsinore. It is the time of change of duty of the castle guards. Just then the Ghost of the deceased king appears on the scene and we are acquainted with King Hamlet's

unexpected death and the fact that Hamlet has not succeeded his father. The aura of mystery shrouding this "murder most foul" pervades the opening scene and intrigues the audience. We also come to know that it is a critical time in the country of Denmark as there is also danger of attack from Norway. The audience also gets some cues about the events to follow. The leading characters are introduced in the conversation of minor characters. In Act I scene ii the audience comes face to face with the titular hero, the protagonist Hamlet, his mother, Queen Gertrude, and the usurper of the throne of Denmark, the conniving Claudius.

Stoppard's play however begins in a featureless landscape, a totally modernist setting. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two characters from the Elizabethan period who are busy flipping coins in which each time it comes up to be *heads* and Ros wins over Guil over and over again, eventually putting over a hundred coins in his kitty. This unusual pattern of consecutive heads defies the law of chance and probability and points at the randomness prevalent in the modern world and subsequent occurrence of highly improbable events. The opening scene also emphasizes the close connection between real life and the life of theatrical performance. The audience is clear that they are being shown what the playwright wants to show them.

Plot Construction

Shakespeare has weaved the plot of Hamlet with considerable skill. Though the plot seems to be pretty improbable in the beginning, yet it sustains the unity of action throughout and consists of three uniform movements. The first movement exposes the murderer and lays the foundation for the revenge to be taken. The clever introduction of the supernatural elements, the apparition of the Ghost of the murdered King incites Hamlet to take revenge on his father's behalf. In the second movement, we come to know the personality of the protagonist that is Hamlet. His dilemma, his indecisiveness, his feigned madness in order to find out the truth, his deliberate or inadvertent procrastination constitutes the middle of the play. Hamlet waxes and wanes over his decision to kill Claudius and avenge the wrongdoings towards his father. In the third and

final movement, the action comes to an end with the death of almost all the important characters except Horatio and Fortinbras. In a Shakespearean tragedy, there is not much poetic justice. Chance plays an important role in the life of Hamlet. There are twenty scenes in all in the play. Each one is constructed with a masterly stroke. There is thematic coherence and structural unity in the plot. The play-within-the-play as well as the subplots in the play, all contribute to the overall unity of the play *Hamlet*.

Stoppard's play however begins with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in a world where the laws of chance and time are absent. They have no memories of their past and they have been assigned the task of figuring out the real motives of Hamlet and ultimately killing him, by Claudius, the present King of Denmark. Stoppard has retained most of the action of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. But Stoppard's play has existentialist overtones and it can be called as an absurdist tragedy where the protagonists are totally lost. They have no inkling about the purpose of their existence and they are puppets/tools in the hands of someone else who is further a puppet/tool in the hands of the playwright:

Player: You don't understand the humiliation of it – to be tricked out of the single assumption which makes our existence viable – that somebody is watching... (-Stoppard, Act II)

Thematic Concerns

The first and the foremost theme is that of *revenge*. Claudius has killed Hamlet's father and married Gertrude, his mother and this is a reason enough to send Hamlet on a journey of revenge. The play begins immediately after the death of Hamlet's father. Hamlet suspects foul play at the end of his uncle Claudius but he is a man of remarkable qualities. He is a brave, noble-hearted, keen observer. But in spite of all these noble qualities, he suffers from *lack of decisiveness* and this becomes his tragic flaw, triggering his downfall. This problem of *delay* is also the second theme of the play. This procrastination at the end of Hamlet leads to his death eventually. Thinking too precisely on the event, is one reason for Hamlet's delay. He broods unnecessarily over each and every action and

incident and is lost among his own thoughts. Hamlet is a brave and noble warrior. He does not fear death. But due to his dilemma, his irresolution, he transforms from a man of action to a man of no action. He is shocked by his mother's hasty marriage to Claudius and the burden of the Ghost further weakens him. At one point, he even wishes not to have been born at all:

Hamlet: The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right.

(- Shakespeare, Act I sc v)

Hamlet's world is a world of good and evil and Hamlet's error is his initial refusal to be involved in this world and life. His major question is:

Hamlet: To be, or not to be, that is the question:

Whether it is nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous
fortune,

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles

(-Shakespeare, Act III, sc i)

This unnecessary deferring of revenge by Hamlet brings about his own tragedy. However in the final act, he reconciles with his problems. He comes to terms with life as well as death at the same time. But by now the effect of the delay, the procrastination on the part of Hamlet has become inevitable. Had he nipped the evil Claudius in the bud, he would have eluded his own death. Still, Hamlet manages to realize his mistake finally and stabs Claudius, thus fulfilling his duty towards his late father and the Kingdom of Denmark, at the cost of his own life. But *Hamlet* is not just a play about a lingering protagonist. It is a story about the destruction of two families driven towards their doom by Providence. If "there is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow, there surely must be a special Providence in the fall of character".

On the other hand, Stoppard's play has a totally modern setting in which the themes are also modern. The first theme of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is *futility of purpose*. The play highlights the fundamental mystery of the world. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are a baffled lot from the very beginning. They have no idea about their

past; they are just waiting for instructions, and like Vladimir and Estragon, the two tramps in *Waiting for Godot*, are just whiling away their time, using varied strategies like the coin-game, playing at questions etc.

Ros: What are you playing at?

Guil: Words, words. They're all we have to go on.

(- Stoppard, Act I)

The role of fate and chance, which has always been important in Shakespearean plays has reached high improbability in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Ros and Guil are two insignificant people who cannot make any choices themselves; they are practically transported from one scene to another by Stoppard, having no life of their own.

Guil: ...At least we are presented with alternatives.

Ros: Well as from now-

Guil: - But not choice.

(-Stoppard, Act I)

They do have alternatives before them but they cannot choose. They have no power to choose; their reigns are in the hands of Stoppard who has planted them in the modern age. They are fed up of waiting for further instructions all the time. The danger of this passivity eventually leads to their death. By failing to make a significant choice at the proper time, they eventually accept their ill-fated end. Another theme is *art versus reality*. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* also emphasizes the close connection between life and stage. Infact, Stoppard has magnified beyond limits Shakespeare's core philosophy that *all the world's a stage* where we all are mere actors. Stoppard turns it into a glaring reality where he makes it more than obvious that life is a stage actually, where if we do not take the reigns in our own hands, someone else is going to control it. *Death* is another motif in Stoppard's play that runs right from the title of the play upto its end. The characters chosen by Stoppard for his play are already dead in Hamlet. We only relive their trials and tribulations during their complex and baffling journey of life. By choosing not to show us the physical death of Ros and Guil, Stoppard has euphemized their sad end, simultaneously reinforcing the point that he as playwright has the

power to control the world of his work. But then there is no control of man over the world created by God. The Player says that “there is a design at work in all art.” Guildensterne comments:

No one gets up after death—there is no applause—There is only
silence and some second-hand clothes
and that’s— death- (-Stoppard, Act III)

In *Hamlet*, we find a world of God, a world which manifests the workings of good and evil, Heaven and Hell. He has choices, meaning and purpose in life but in Stoppard’s world man languishes in pain in the wake of his dark future. He has no purpose in life, no meaning for his existence. All efforts are seemingly futile; death is the ultimate truth and that’s about all.

Characterization

In Shakespeare, Hamlet is the protagonist. He along with all the other important characters like Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Laertes, Ophelia and Horatio have been carved life-size by Shakespeare. Hamlet has all the qualities of a Greek tragic hero—noble by birth, scholar, warrior. Ophelia says about Hamlet in Act III sc i—“O What a noble mind!” Even Ros and Guil comment that Hamlet is “noble in reason...infinite in faculties”. Hamlet is a God-fearing man, a profound thinker. He thinks too much before action and therein lies his tragic flaw, which eventually brings about his downfall and causes him the misfortune of a lifetime. In Act V he finally comes to the conclusion that it was past time he took action against Claudius:

Hamlet: To quit him with this arm? And is’t not to be damned

To let this canker of our nature come in further evil?

(- Shakespeare, Act V)

Hamlet’s confusion about his identity is also a reason for delay in dawning of the sense of duty upon his mind. In Act V sc I he confides to Horatio and Marcellus that he would put his “antic disposition” on from now on. Polonius concedes that “though this be madness, yet there is method in’t”. Even Claudius surmised that “there is something in his soul over which his melancholy sits on brood.” Other than Hamlet, Shakespeare’s play involves a whole bevy of characters, the personality

of each of which has been adroitly carved out by him. Claudius is a “bloody, bawdy villain remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain.” There are two important women characters in the play—Hamlet’s mother Gertrude and his beloved Ophelia. Both of them do not possess as much integrity and strength of character as possessed by Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* or Cordelia in *King Lear* or Desdemona in *Othello*. Moreover, Hamlet feels betrayed by both of them. Soon after the death of King Hamlet, when Hamlet is still mourning his father’s death, Gertrude marries Claudius and loses respect in Hamlet’s eyes. Moreover, Hamlet is also influenced by what the Ghost says to him about Gertrude. He calls her “an incestuous and adulterate beast” who married his uncle, even before “those shoes were old with which she followed her father’s body. As a result, Hamlet starts hating all womankind and even looks towards Ophelia in the same light. Even Ophelia is too soft and tender to assert her amorous loyalty towards Hamlet. She meekly carries out the instructions of her father Polonius and plays the part of a decoy against her lover. Subsequently, Hamlet reveals his contempt against Ophelia in the nunnery scene. He hurts Ophelia because he feels that she has betrayed him just like his mother had betrayed his father.

Hamlet: I say we will have no more marriage. Those that are married already— all but one—shall live; the rest shall keep as they are.

(Shakespeare, Act III sc I)

Stoppard’s main focus is obviously on the twin titular characters Rosencrantz and Guildensterne. The play begins with them, hovers around them and ends by signaling their off stage death. However significant they maybe *for* the play, they are most insignificant *in* the play. Just like Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* lead a purposeless life caught in circular time, Ros and Guil wait for clear instructions from Claudius till they find themselves trapped into death and eventually resign towards their inevitable death. In this way, they are representative of the whole humankind. Other characters in the play often mistake them for each other and at times even they mistake themselves for

one another. At many times the two seem to be the flip sides of the self-same coin, repeating each other's statements and gestures. While Rosencrantz exudes positivity and offers practical solutions for problems, Guildenstern is the philosophical, contemplating type, always apprehensive of things to come. He tries to arrive at theories and explanations for all their problems. He tries to reason and rationalize their current situation which only leads to his frustration.

Guil: We got his symptoms, didn't we?

Ros: Half of what he said meant something else, and the other half didn't mean anything at all.

(-Stoppard, Act II)

Another important character is The Player, whose presence in the play every time gives a new impetus to the play and propels its action forward. The Player is a complex character, endowed with an aura of mystery about him. He seems to know more than any other character and is confident about his thoughts and actions. He strongly believes that things happen the way they do because someone definitely has a charge of them, like an author controls his work of art. Then there is Hamlet whom Stoppard has rendered a minor character in the play. Nevertheless he still remains the pivot around which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's life is centered, and again it is he who is instrumental in pushing them towards their death. There are practically no women characters in the play except Gertrude and Ophelia whom Stoppard has copied and pasted from *Hamlet*.

Technique, Style and Diction

Shakespeare's inimitable style is of course unmatched by any dramatist. The seven soliloquies assigned to Hamlet still ring in our ears after four centuries of the writing of the play. They represent the intricate workings of the mind of every human being. It is highly commendable of Tom Stoppard to dare touch a play by Shakespeare and mould it in a clever way to depict the pathetic human condition in the post-modernist era. Shakespeare used blank verse for *Hamlet*. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a conventional tragedy on the lines of classic Greek drama. Blank verse is most suitable for a tragedy like *Hamlet*. It consists of an exposition wherein all the

major characters are introduced, rising action that involves various stages of Hamlet's indecisiveness, finally leading up to climax and then the falling action depicting the anagnorisis and peripeteia with Hamlet discovering the truth and eventually deciding to kill Claudius before succumbing to death himself.

Stoppard however, has penned down his drama in the truly absurdist tradition using a colloquial tone, fragmented speech and scanty dialogue. The passages borrowed from *Hamlet* however remain in their original form. The play is replete with a variety of figurative devices such as oxymorons, puns—

Ros: Consistency is all I ask

Guil: Give us this day our daily mask.

(-Stoppard, Act I)

and clichés etc. to bring out the black humour resident at the heart of the play. We also find rhetorical questions, Biblical references and witty repartee. Stoppard also makes use of abundant stage directions, music and lighting and even frequent blackouts to control his world of art. He has parodied Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Eliot's *Prufrock* etc. to capture the existential dilemma of the post-war generation. In Act III we witness gaps and breakdown in communication as the end is drawing near. If Shakespeare's *Hamlet* arouses pity and fear amongst the audience, leading to catharsis through emotional involvement, Stoppard's play maintains an aesthetic distance that serves to hinder emotional involvement and manages to elicit intellectual response from the audience. Here Stoppard becomes different from Beckett which seems evident on the surface with the play's mood, characters, dialogues, pauses and silences. In fact he comes close to Pirandello here, talking about the truth concerning man, actors and characters. If Shakespeare's play is intense, and of the classic order, Stoppard's play is full of wit and vivacity, and can well be called a contemporary classic.

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