

The Impact of Existentialism in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Md. Amir Hossain

Senior Lecturer, Department of English
IBAIS University, Uttara, Dhaka-1230, Bangladesh.
amir.hossain.16578@gmail.com

Abstract-*This article attempts to treat Shakespeare as existentialism's prolific precursor, as a writer who focuses on existentialist ideas in his own distinctive theatrical and poetic terms long before they were fully developed in the philosophical and literary terms of the 20th century. The plays of Shakespeare and existentialist philosophy are equally fascinated by issues such as authenticity and in-authenticity, freedom of thought, being and nothingness, authenticity, freedom, and self-becoming. In recent years, Shakespearean criticism has shied away from these fundamental existentialist concerns as reflected in his play, Hamlet, preferring to investigate the historical and cultural conditioning of human subjectivity. It aims to provide a sketch of existentialist thought and survey the influence of existentialism on readings of Shakespeare's Hamlet. It also suggests that Shakespeare and modern existentialist philosophers and thinkers share a deep interest in the creative fusion of fiction and philosophy as the most faithful means of articulating the existentialist immediacy of experience and the philosophical quandaries. My attempt is to offer the critical viewpoints of Shakespearean critics, scholars, and some well-reputed existentialist philosophers and thinkers with a view to signifying existentialist readings of Shakespeare's Hamlet.*

Keywords-*Authenticity and In-authenticity; Being and Nothingness; Existentialism; Freedom of Thought; Hamlet and Shakespeare.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare and existentialists share a philosophical bond: both are linked by how human beings live in the world; how they experience themselves; how they interact with and respond to other people. Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies are full of existentially painful and intense moments. Shakespeare shows his interest in complicated existential issues through highlighting characters that experience themselves as divided, damaged, and even dissolved. In Shakespearean tragedy, the idea that human beings have an intimate, inward self-experience broadens into a wider consideration of ethics and politics of human existence. Shakespeare is not only interested in what human beings are but also concerned with how they live and interact with one another. His plays do not establish ethical boundaries in a prescriptive or didactic way, but they imply that ethical limits and feelings of inwardness are connected. Before investing existential ideas that were emerging in Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*, I shall first provide an overview of the main ideas and arguments of existentialism. This article will explore how existentialism has influenced Shakespearean criticism and argue that in the recent years, Shakespearean critics have begun to renew existentialism as a critical discourse. This will pave the way for a full investigation of Shakespeare's existentialism. However, in the study, I have discussed existentialism, Shakespeare as an existentialist dramatist along with the critical evaluation, existentialism in *Hamlet*, being and nothingness, authenticity and in-authenticity, and Hamlet's freedom of thought with a gradual

development. This submission also focuses on the critical comments of several numbers of Shakespearean critics, scholars, and some prominent existentialist philosophers and thinkers with a view to universalizing existentialist readings of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

2. EXPLORING EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism is the philosophy that makes life feasible. When we understand what it means we are well on our way to understanding what existentialism is all about and what the existentialists saw themselves while experiencing about philosophical matters. But if existentialism is the philosophy that makes life possible, we may ask why we need a philosophy for that. According to existentialists, we want to live a full and authentic human life, a rewarding and fulfilling life that embraces human dignity. To understand why, it may help to consider that many philosophies come about as responses to a problem. Necessity is the mother of invention. On a very general level, the problem that the existentialists were concerned with was the problem of meaning. Human beings crave for meaning as well as an orderly universe. When we find that the universe is not going to cooperate, when we discover that the stories we express ourselves in an attempt to force it to have meaning have ceased to work, we feel like becoming of strangers in the world. As the scientific and Industrial Revolutions came to a head in the 19th century, and society became increasingly secularized, the traditional social order underwent radical change within a very short time. During this period, people

began to feel disconnected from the traditional authority that had helped them make sense of the world and of their lives. Consequently, people may not literally commit suicide, but a kind of spiritual death — a spiritual suicide becomes a very real danger. It occurs when people give up resignation and surrender in the face of what they see as the pointlessness of their existence. Existentialism is the philosophy that recognizes a problem and attempts to identify it. It is the philosophy that makes an authentically human life possible in a meaningless and absurd world.

3. SHAKESPEARE AS AN EXISTENTIALIST DRAMATIST

Before looking at how existentialism can be used to produce fresh readings of Shakespeare, it is important to establish how existentialism has influenced readings and critical studies of Shakespeare in the past. Shakespeare compels his characters to unveil their identity, their socially constructed self, from their being, their internal relationship with their immediate and intuitive sense of self. Shakespeare has exposed fundamental questions about the nature of human subjectivity. Shakespeare implies that, as human beings, we have a delicate and an unstable relationship with ourselves. We can try to be true to ourselves and live a more authentic life; we can also deceive ourselves and try to evade our existential responsibilities. For Shakespeare, human existence is contentious and problematic. But his plays force us to question what it means to exist as a human being in the world, and this is why so many modern existentialist thinkers have found his work philosophically advanced.

For a philosophically inquisitive dramatist like Shakespeare, basic epistemological and ethical questions are the building blocks of a famous play, like *Hamlet*. In Shakespearean tragedy, the idea that human beings have an intimate, inward self-experience broadens into a wider consideration of ethics and politics of human existence. Shakespeare's play calls for a fresh, informed reading of the inward experience of trauma and self-estrangement of his tragic protagonists. The philosophical reward of viewing some of his tragedies through the lens of existentialist literature and philosophy is an enhanced appreciation of an existential energy that pulses through his tragedies and ensures their continuing appeal. Although reading Shakespeare as an existentialist intensity in his tragedy is its primary purpose, this paper is also conscious of the fact that Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet* has a tremendous influence on the development of his existentialist thoughts, ideas, and imaginations. Shakespeare's power to provoke an invigorating, confrontation with the questions of self-understanding is a privileged point of reference in existentialism, and it furnishes a warrant for a critical engagement with both Shakespearean play and existentialist philosophy.

In 1959, Walter Kaufmann wrote a book on *From Shakespeare to Existentialism: An Original Study* where his study is compromised by a general understanding of

existentialism, which he regards as “a timeless sensibility that can be discerned here and there in the past” (Kaufmann, 1956, p.12). He identifies two principal existentialist aspects of Shakespeare's play: the existentialist construction of character, and the existentialist world view that there are no metaphysical reasons that explain human existence. He points out that Shakespeare “knew the view that man is thrown into the world, abandoned to a life that ends in death; but he also knew self-sufficiency. He had the strength to face reality without excuses and illusions and did not even seek comfort in the faith in immortality” (Kaufmann, 1980, p.3). Rather than showing the powerful existential intensities at the core of Shakespearean play, Kaufmann makes vague, pop-existentialist remarks to disprove Christian interpretations of the plays. Hazel Barnes observes how Kaufmann singles out in Shakespeare's work “the self-contained, self-sufficient man, one who lives and dies for himself and who helps humanity only by making himself a monument of moral perfection” (Barnes, 1959, p.91). Kaufmann suggests that Shakespeare is an existentialist dramatist because he is Nietzsche's great precursor. To read Shakespeare through the image of existentialism, we must heed Palfrey's advice: “If we want to traverse such cross-cultural turf, we need to do so tenderly, with due attention both to shifting terrain and our own steps upon it” (Palfrey, 2004, p.111). This paper provides Shakespeare's play and existentialism together in order to reveal the existential intensities that exist at the heart of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In a dialectical move, it may be possible to read existentialism back through the lens of Shakespeare in order to show some of the shortcomings of existentialist thought and imagination. Shakespeare is more existentially attuned than existentialists themselves.

4. EXISTENTIALISING HAMLET

According to Charles I. Glicksberg, “the Existentialist novelist is the philosophical Hamlet of our age, suffering from spells of nihilistic madness, metaphysical nausea and ontological colour.” (Glicksberg, 1997, p.39) Christine Gomez also argues that Hamlet can “be seen as an anticipation of the existential hero” because he is “an individual who reflects on human existence and his own predicament in the universe and becomes aware of his alienation from the human condition” (Gomez, 1983, p.27). Such assessments of Hamlet and existentialism as synonymous reduce and simplify both the powerful philosophical insights of existentialism and Hamlet's confrontation with complex existential issues and problems. These kinds of existential assessments echo Nietzsche's problematic reading of *Hamlet*. According to Nietzsche, Hamlet gains an “insight into the horrific truth” (Nietzsche, 2008, p.46) which reveals that the world is out of joint. Hamlet's corrosive lucidity allows him to see through hypocrisy, insincerity and scheming ways of other people, but he does not experience a

Schopenhauerian epiphany which shows him the way things really are. Hamlet is obsessed with the way things appear to him and with the way his consciousness attributes inner meaning to the world.

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

Ham. My father, methinks I see my father.

Hor. Where, my lord?

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

Horatio and the audience have already seen the ghost of Hamlet's father, and for a brief moment, Horatio is startled to think it has returned. When Hamlet explains that he sees his father in his 'mind's eye', there is a disconcerting interplay between being and nothingness. Hamlet is presented as a perceiving subject trying to reconcile the powers of his consciousness with the surrounding world. His apprehensions of the world are always mediated by the phenomenological standpoint his mind's eye. Shakespeare is very particular about the importance of a phenomenological impulse. 'A mote it is to trouble the mind's eye' (I.i.111), says Horatio as he explains how the supernatural presence of the ghost disturbs and perplexes human judgment. Hamlet's use of the same phrase echoes Horatio's notion of irritated consciousness and draws attention to the way his 'mind's eye' structures the world.

Hamlet experiences himself as an individual whose sense of self is shaped by his immediate apprehensions of the world. But he also recognizes that his consciousness imparts a meaning to the world, and this is what allows him to have a degree of power over his own existence. Shakespeare affords Hamlet this phenomenological space in order to dramatize the dialectical exchange between a self that is devoted by the world, and a self which is an actively mystic force, strives to make the world its own.

5. HAMLET'S FREEDOM OF THOUGHT

We have seen that Hamlet is deeply concerned with two broadly existential issues: consciousness and authenticity. Shakespeare's explorations of these philosophically rich ideas play a vital part in generating the energy and intensity of the play. Hamlet's anxiety about consciousness and authenticity is created by his contemplation of another existential dilemma. In fact, the problem of action engenders a series of connected existential dilemma. He realizes that he is compelled to choose; he cannot choose. There is no escaping freedom even the decision not to act is a self-defining choice. By acknowledging the importance of action, he shows the existential stakes and the audience that the freedom to act or not act is an inescapable part of being human.

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

To be, or not to be – that is the question;

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles

And by opposing end them; to die: to sleep –

No more, and by a sleep to say we end. (III.i.55-60)

Hamlet no longer wants to endure the traumatic whips and scorns of time. The world he sees is painfully pointless, and this is what entices him to contemplate suicide. Hamlet's regret over the role thinking takes in our life offers a more painful insight into human condition. Hamlet's inward quest works as a kind of grinning skull that mocks human achievement and ability. Far from being a hymn to self-consciousness, Hamlet's soliloquy expresses profound misgivings about the process of thought and imagination.

In the graveyard scene, Hamlet literally comes face to face with death. The anxiety produced by such a vivid apprehension of death manifests itself physically. Hamlet's physical nausea is the symptom of a consciousness. Hamlet comes to realize that he exists in a crudely basic sense of the word: as a material being, he has a fundamental and irreducible corporeality. But he also understands that he exists in another way: his consciousness allows him to go beyond the givens of his existence. This space between what existentialists call facticity and transcendence or between essence and existence is where the possibility of freedom resides. As Hamlet comes to terms with the practical constraints of his situation, he finds that he is released to act. Hamlet consciously decides to throw himself back into the fray: he chooses to act on his terms. Man is free because he is not himself but presence to himself. The being which is what it is can not be free. Freedom is precisely the nothingness which is made-to-beat the heart of man and which forces human-reality to make itself instead of to be.

6. BEING AND NOTHINGNESS

The investigations into the socially constructed nature of being, many new historicist and cultural materialist critics have concluded that Hamlet's self is literally 'a thing / Of nothing' (IV.ii.26-8). A gap, a vacant space, a lack, an emptiness, a void, a nothingness - these terms have become synonymous with Hamlet's being in particular and Shakespearean being in general. Francis Barker gets closer to the nub of the matter in *The Tremulous Private Body* when he writes: 'At the centre of

Hamlet, in the interior of his mystery, there is, in short, nothing. A lack of subjectivity or a lack at the heart of subjectivity' (Barker, 1989, p.37). 'A lack at the heart of subjectivity' does not preclude an inner relation to one's self: it is, in fact, a necessary part of consciousness that makes subjective reflection possible. Following Husserl, existentialists such as Sartre insist that consciousness cannot be reduced to a solid, definite essence, and quality. It is not a substantive entity; it is nothingness. 'Nothingness', writes Sartre, 'lies coiled in the heart of being like a worm' (Sartre, 2003, p.45). In order for human beings to question being at all, they must have an ability to negate or 'nihilate' things around them. This power of negation, claims Sartre, refers us back to a more basic, foundational nothingness that can be seen to haunt being. Nothingness is not an abstract notion, nor does it exist outside of being: "Nothingness must be given at the heart of Being, in order for us to be able to apprehend particular types of realities which we have called *négativités*" (Sartre, 2003, p.46). *Négativité* is the word Sartre gives to human activities and judgments that involve negativity, such as experiences involving absence, interrogation, variation and destruction. Consciousness creates itself by negating aspects of the world it comes into contact with. It demarcates being by differentiating what it is from what it is not. David Sherman explains that consciousness does not contain the ego or any other substance that causes it to be determined by the laws of nature, but is rather characterized by intentionality... it is 'nothing,' or, to be more precise, a 'nothingness' that perpetually transcends itself. And, in the process of transcending itself, consciousness is a 'nihilitating nothingness' that gives rise to 'négativités.' In other words, this 'nothingness' is active (Sherman, 2007, p.112).

Like Sartre, Shakespeare is interested in negating effect of human absence. Shakespeare offers a complicated notion of ontological nothingness than Sartre because in *Hamlet*, the supernatural presence or non-presence of the ghost dramatically heightens and intensifies the suggestion that nothingness and being are inextricably linked. The play begins with Barnardo's call 'Who's there?' and Francisco's response 'Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself' (I.i.i-2), which focus an audience's attention on the relationship between being and nothingness. But when Barnardo asks: 'Say, what, is Horatio there?', and Horatio replies: 'A piece of him' (I.i.18), the neat distinction between being and non-being is instantly compromised. Horatio is so cold that he is not entirely present, and this foreshadows the ontological liminality of the ghost. When asked 'has this thing appeared again tonight?', Barnardo replies: 'I have seen nothing' (I.i.20-1). Of course, Barnardo means that he has not seen the ghost or anything unusual. The notion of 'seeing nothing' implies the prior expectation of 'seeing something', and treats 'nothing' as if it were visible. From the moment the play begins, the stage is filled with the palpable absence of the ghost.

But when the party encounters the spectral figure of Hamlet's father, its presence does not produce a plenitude

of being because the imprint of the ghost's absence remains. Ewan Fernie observes that 'Shakespeare's ghost is in being but also beyond the spectral hovers between being and nothingness as embodied spirit. It is a question not of "to be" and "not to be", then, but of being-in-between' (Fernie, 2005, p.193). This in-betweenness not only refers to the ghost's spiritual liminality: it also exemplifies 'our own "lack-in-being"', writes Fernie, and so, Hamlet comes face to face with the ghastriness of his own self. By placing a supernatural entity on the stage, Shakespeare shows how being is literally haunted by non-being. The first critic to be struck by Shakespeare's uncanny pre-figuration of an existentialist theory of being as nothingness was A. D. Nuttall. In *Shakespeare the Thinker*, he writes:

The basic notion of a walking negation that seeks a more substantial identity through role-playing is obviously close to Jean-Paul Sartre's Existentialism, as set out in *L'Être et le néant*. This is a chronologically scandalous thing to say, but I claim similarity only, not influence. Shakespeare has probably read Seneca and has certainly not read Sartre. But Hamlet is more like Sartre's man than he is like Seneca's (Nuttall, 2007, p.199).

Nuttall is astonished to find such a precise understanding of human self as being or nothingness in a piece of play written over three hundred years before the development of existentialist philosophy.

'To be, or not to be - that is the question' (III.i.55): Hamlet's contemplation of the difference between being and nothingness is one of the most existentially intense moments of the play. But Shakespeare's famous line is more existentially sophisticated than it appears on the surface. Douglas Bruster deconstructs Hamlet's soliloquy in order to reveal the verbal ambiguity and multiple contradictions that arise from the simple opposition of being and not being. He argues that a balanced alternative, this famous phrase could be read as combining as well as separating its items. Shakespeare's play thus poses a richer philosophical question: 'Is being all that different from not being? Can we be more certain about one than the other?' (Bruster, 2007, p.52) The idea that nothingness is secreted at the heart of being strikes a chord with existentialist theories of consciousness. Sartre argues that consciousness does not have by itself any sufficiency of being as an absolute being.

Shakespeare points out that human beings are literally things 'Of nothing' (IV.ii.25). At the close of Shakespeare's great tragedies, there is a sense that being/ nothing is acceptable and preferable to identifying oneself with a formal social identity. As Shakespeare's tragic heroes show an apprehension of nothingness at the heart of being can give rise to a considerable existential anxiety, but it can also be the source of great existential strength. The idea that consciousness is a nothingness that establishes its existence in the world is an important philosophical premise for a great deal of subsequent existential thought. Shakespeare is interested in the relationship between consciousness and self, thought and

subjectivity. Part of the energy and excitement of *Hamlet* is generated by Shakespeare's dramatization of the movements of consciousness. Shakespeare draws attention to existential nature of human thought. His mind wanders in different directions and surprises itself with the connections it makes and the conclusions it draws. His consciousness has an intuitive, impulsive quality about it which gives an impression that his self, like his thoughts, springs into being and changes from moment to moment. Hamlet's mind never stays still and whose sense of self remains vulnerable to the ebb and flow of consciousness.

Hamlet is one of the most self-aware and self-questioning characters in the whole of Shakespeare's canon. Hamlet thinks of his self as condensed vapor than as any kind of hardened substance. He sees the boundaries of the self as permeable and fluid. Andy Mousley writes: "Rather than acting as sources of identification, human nature and human existence becomes the site for Hamlet of uncertainties and questions. He is exposed to a variety of beliefs and behaviours, each with its own assumptions about what it is to be a human, but as a disengaged, disenchanted skeptic he remains at a critical distance from them" (Mousley, 2007, p.33). But Hamlet also distances himself from himself in order to investigate how his consciousness and self-consciousness function. He is fascinated by experiences of self-forgetting and self-estrangement. After his furious confrontation with Laertes in the graveyard, he speaks of his so-called 'madness' as if it were another self:

Was't Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet.
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away
And then he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
Then Hamlet does it not; Hamlet denies it.
Who does it then? His madness. (V.ii.211-15)

The audience is aware that Hamlet's self distancing is partially intentional. His madness is designed as a conscious act of self-estrangement. But the erratic, disjointed nature of Hamlet's antic disposition speech, the excessive repetition of doubtful phrases, and the unusual choice of words and grammar suggest that he is overwhelmed with passion. His strange, eccentric behavior is not entirely a sham: it hovers between authenticity and in-authenticity. Hamlet consigns a part of himself to his companions. He stretches the distance between his socially molded identity and his inwardly experienced being in order to open up nothingness that exists at the heart of his being. Paradoxically, Hamlet must become distanced from himself in order to fully realize how fragile and vulnerable selfhood really is. He reveals a duality of human consciousness: consciousness can grasp itself by becoming distinct from itself. He is divided from himself in a way that reveals that he is naught. And it is not just Hamlet who is self-divided.

In *Shakespeare and the Reason*, Terence Hawkes notes that ideas about intellect, reason and mental faculties of human mind undergo considerable revision during the Renaissance. He says that the old view conceives of mind as a unity whose faculties is interdependent and move in

complementary directions to perform a single function which is ratio. The Renaissance view is of a divided mind whose faculties are opposed to each other because they move in directions which are mutually contradictory. In existentialist thought, nothingness exists at the heart of being; consciousness is engaged in a never-ending process of self-creation. The existentialists argue that human beings find themselves in a perpetual state of existential restlessness. For the first four acts of the play, Hamlet agonizes over the nature of being before he comes to the realization that his self is not really a self but 'a kind of fighting' within consciousness. It is the uneasy, agitated and ultimately futile attempt of consciousness to stabilize itself. By exploring existentialist ideas about nothingness and consciousness, we can begin to see why Hamlet's being is inaccessible for both himself and an audience. We begin to appreciate that Hamlet's endless, unremitting pursuit of self, his existential quest for his own unique being is the life-force of the play. Grady writes:

In short, what makes *Hamlet* suitable for our own decentred age is its insight into the constituting fissures and fictions of the tossing life raft of subjectivity to which Hamlet clings, for Hamlet is a humanist of the Montaignean sort – one who sees into the shifting, uncertain, contradictory, and unstable qualities of the self, not a humanist of the Rousseauistic school which makes of the self a fixed, essential source of unproblematic values and perceptions (Grady, 2002, p.261).

Hamlet's humanism like Montaigne's resonates with existentialist humanism because it presents man not as a source of ultimate value, but as a being constantly involved in the process of self-becoming. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare shows a deep interest in the structures and workings of human consciousness. We have also seen how the idea of nothingness has a philosophical specificity that is akin to the existentialist theories of being. But Shakespeare establishes Hamlet's self-relation and his exploration of human being through opening up questions of authenticity, integrity and truthfulness to oneself. Hamlet negotiates his sense of self, and it involves investigating modes of authenticity and in-authenticity. Through Hamlet, Shakespeare asks: what exactly does it mean to be 'authentic', and what are the ethical implications of personal authenticity? How can we determine firstly, which impulses are authentic, and secondly, whether or not we are being authentic if we act upon them?

7. AUTHENTICITY AND IN-AUTHENTICITY

Hamlet knows that he is surrounded by 'in-authentic' people. He takes an immediate dislike to Claudius' messenger Osric, referring to him as a 'water-fly' (V.ii.69) and a 'lapwing' (V.ii.165). The imagery of creatures that hover above the water's surface aptly describes his superficial character. Osric is a man whom 'the drossy age dotes on' (V.ii.169), says Hamlet, because

he plays 'the tune of the time' (V.ii.169-70). Two hundred years later. 'The present age', writes Kierkegaard, 'is essentially a sensible, reflecting age, devoid of passion, flaring up in superficial, short-lived enthusiasm and prudentially relaxing in indolence' (Kierkegaard, 2000, p.252). Both Hamlet and Kierkegaard see their worlds as existentially bankrupt. Hamlet is infuriated by the in-authentic ways of others. Hamlet is cautious of existence, aware of the ease with which people can become caught up in their everyday goals and ambitions. He is also weary of the power of what he calls general censure. It worries him to think that a man's character may be corrupted and compromised by common opinion.

Hamlet uses an image of over-risen bread when he criticizes Osric for having 'a kind of yeasty collection' (V.ii.170-1) of habits and manners to suggest that socially acceptable behavior is frothy and artificial. He condemns the customary wedding revelries that result in Denmark being 'traded and taxed' (I.iv.18) by other nations. Hamlet's mind begins to contemplate the wider issue at stake: the way a man's character can be reduced to a single, 'particular fault'. Implicitly, he recognizes that human beings are complicated things made up of both faults and virtues. The thought that public opinion can rob an individual of his existential complexity troubles Hamlet a great deal. Hamlet knows that the audience may judge him for his 'particular fault' his reluctance to act. He is also aware that his sense of self is derived from the opinions of others. Hamlet is skeptical about what he sees as a degrading customs and general opinions of society. He finds it difficult to avenge his father's murder because this action has been prescribed for him rather than authentically chosen.

Hamlet appears to be suggesting that custom is a devilish monster who ruins human sensitivity but it can engender more virtuous human actions if individuals choose to conform to it on their own terms. An individual can commit to an act and take responsibility for it even if that act has been ordered or directed by someone or something else. For Hamlet, personal authenticity is paramount. He privileges and protects his unique sense of self. By adhering to his father's dictum and 'setting things right' in the latter's sense, Hamlet would not be acting on his own terms in his own way, and therefore, would be as in-authentic and hypocritical as those around him. Instead, Hamlet has to find his own authentic way to act and exist. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare is aware of the complexity of the issue of individual authenticity. He is conscious of the interplay between authenticity and in-authenticity.

Paradoxically, human beings do not act in their own authentic, individual way when they assert a kind of individuality because they are conforming to the practices of society; they think that they are acting for themselves when they replicate desires and normative ideals prescribed by others. In short, they are not conscious of their own in-authenticity. Hamlet is interested in the way the world discloses itself to his consciousness. McGinn observes that Hamlet's "despair seems to be existential, not

occasional, a matter of how he looks at the world rather than what the world throws specifically at him" (McGinn, 2006, p.44). Hamlet apprehends that the world around him in a distinctive way gives an impression that he is more authentically self-aware than other characters in the play. Holbrook writes: "We don't think Hamlet is inferior to Fortinbras, the energetic future leader of Denmark. We know there are types of worldly success that constitute existential failure. Hamlet refuses to become like Kierkegaard's 'the others' or Heidegger's 'the they'" (Holbrook, 2010, p.50). Hamlet recognizes that the distinction between authenticity and in-authenticity is not easy to determine, even inwardly. Hamlet challenges certain notions of authenticity while affirming others. Mousley suggests: "A role for Hamlet is a possible self, or possibly even an anti-self masquerading as a self, but it is never merely a role" (Mousley, 2007, p.38).

Mousley notes that, for Hamlet, "theatrical language is a signifier of both authenticity and in-authenticity: the player's imitation of heroic passion is an in-authentic simulation of authentic passion" (p.38). The blurring of these states in the theatre makes it harder for Hamlet to determine what constitutes an authentic course of action. We can also trace the dialectic of authenticity at work when Hamlet confronts Laertes in the graveyard. René Girard argues that Laertes provides a mimetic model for Hamlet: "He is trying to be a normal man himself; he is aping the well-adjusted personality of Laertes, a man who can draw his sword when he should and who can jump into his sister's grave when he should without looking like an idiot" (Girard, 1991, p.279). For Girard, Hamlet's language during the scene reveals the importance of mimetic rivalry.

As sons of murdered fathers seeking revenge, Laertes and Hamlet should be identical doubles. But the closer Hamlet gets to Laertes, the more different and distinct he seems. In the graveyard, it is as if Hamlet tries out another role, mimicking the in-authenticity of Laertes in order to discard it for a more authentic way of being. His hyperbolic outburst, like his self-demonstrations and feigned madness, lingers in the existential no-man's-land between authenticity and in-authenticity. Hamlet is perplexed by his inability to act in accordance with the orders of his father's ghost. His dilemma over action is an existential problem.

Most existentialists concur that a large portion of human existence is lived in-authentically or in bad faith. Human beings find self-truth difficult, perhaps even impossible. Authenticity, for existentialists, involves recognition of the unavoidably inauthentic quality of life, awareness that men are all drawn into the world and cannot disassociate themselves from it. Hamlet becomes the person he is by defining himself in the heat of action; he engages in the process of self-becoming. Fernie suggests that Shakespeare's play improvises a new ontology of being-in-action, and that gives the play its distinct existential intensity. The nothingness within

consciousness allows Hamlet to transcend the givens of his situation and accept responsibility for his own life.

8. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have explored at length the existential nature of Hamlet's being. As an agent of self-differentiation, Hamlet is constantly aware of his capacity to reconfigure his sense of self. The existential intensity of Hamlet's character, his confrontation with powerful questions about what it means to exist as a human being, elicits pity and empathy from an audience. In this respect, the play, *Hamlet* functions as a terrifying reminder of our own existential fragility and vulnerability. This is what Hazlitt earns when he remarks that the speeches and sayings of Hamlet are 'as real as our own thoughts. Their reality is in the reader's mind. It is we who are Hamlet' (Girard, 1991, p.115). Harold Bloom also makes a similar point when he insists that "We need to assert ourselves and read Shakespeare as strenuously as we can, while knowing that his plays will read us more energetically still. They read us definitively" (Bloom, 1999, p. 20). Shakespeare's interest in existential concerns is a fundamental aspect of his continuing appeal. His plays have something to say about the experience of being human, and we have something to learn from such existential explorations.

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Author Biography

Mr. Amir Hossain is holding the degree of M. Phil in English literature from department of English of Jahangirnagar University, and is a senior lecturer in the department of English at IBAIS University, Uttara, and Dhaka-1230. He used to teach English literature & language at America Bangladesh University, BGIFT-Institute of Fashion & Technology, Gazipur, S.M. Mozzammel Haque Business Management College, Baikal College, and Bangladesh Open University (SSC & HSC program). His literary theory based area study includes- feminism, formalism, psychoanalysis theory, modernism, and postmodernism, deconstruction, cultural studies, colonialism, post-colonialism, oriental, aestheticism, gender studies, African criticism, structuralism and post structuralism. Moreover, he has also studied on drama, poetry, novel, African literature, post-colonial literature,

story, treatise, essays and so on. He has written 30 numbers of articles and participated in national and international conferences in Bangladesh. Among them, 25 numbers of articles have been published in national & international scholarly journals. He is a reviewer and editor of 27 numbers of nation and international scholarly journals (online and printed version) and an editor of a book, *Knowledge on Idioms: An Iranian Context*.

Moreover, he has recently a written and edited Test Papers of English for the students of SSC level published by Captain Publishers. He is now writing a book on English Grammar for the students of HSC level in accordance with new syllabus-2015, and is teaching in the departments of English, BBA, MBA, LL.B, EEE, CSE, and Economics at IBAIS University. He also tries to contribute to English literature, language and Social Sciences.