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Judging Human Condition: Illustrations and Exposition from Hamlet and Justice

by
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Every time, when a wrong is attempted, human emotions are betrayed. There may be several reasons, both good and bad, for attempting something wrong either by an individual or a group or by a system, and they affect each in turn. The effect in terms of material loss is often recovered with the passage of time but the effect, in terms of psychological balancing act of an individual or a group or a system, is often of a devastating nature, where under sometimes, not only one or two or say a few, but many lives come at stake. There may be umpteen number of select propositions, to read and understand the various wrongs that are crucial in motivating human emotions, and so human condition. Certain works of literature provide very effective methods in judging human condition, and suggest measures to improve upon it.

There exists a rich store house of such exemplary texts in English literature. For the purpose of limiting this agenda, and emerging relevant issues, that correspond to the case in point, I have chosen two very popular and celebrated English classics; *Hamlet-The Prince of Denmark*¹, popularly known as William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and the other - *Justice* by John Galsworthy.

The contribution of *Hamlet* and *Justice* to the literary mind-sphere is unparalleled as far as the development of English literature in the early phase of seventeenth century and the stabilizing phase of twentieth century is concerned. The purpose of going for this specificity lies in the kind of genre these works belong to. Both of these plays are tragedies. Tragedy is a genre that represents the world in miniature. It is very close to life, and the justification, here, comes up from its major elements that constitute it. It would be appropriate to refer Aristotle's *Poetics* in understanding the ingredients of drama as tragedy. Aristotle infers that, "tragedy, then, is an



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imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its *katharsis*² of such emotions.... Every Tragedy, therefore, must have six parts, which parts determine its quality—namely, Plot, Characters, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Melody"³.

As readers and audience, when we attempt to read/watch a tragedy, technically and ideally, we emerge as purged readers and refined audience. The plot in both of these plays portrays human life in closet, abounds in diversified human emotions and related conditions like love and treachery, crime and punishment, wealth and status, justice and injustice, and a very pertinent theme of life and death. Although these plays add up to the common patterns of life yet they appear larger than life in their form and manner of portrayal. These are the recurrent themes that, often, are put up on the agenda sheet in different expressions of human activities, responsible for elevating and devastating human condition. Therefore, a comparative study of the two select classics under discussion provides some very important facts that make our

experiences richer in bringing about many facets in the criticism of life.

When we analyze the plot of *Hamlet*⁴, we find that it begins with Prince Hamlet's mourning his father's death on the one hand, and his mother Queen Gertrude's remarriage to Claudius, simultaneously, on the other hand. The ghost of Hamlet's father, who is referred as Senior Hamlet, appears before him, and tells him the story narrating how Claudius (Hamlet's uncle and Senior Hamlet's brother) has poisoned him. Hamlet, therefore, after feeling acute pain, trauma and agony, pledges to take revenge. In order to expose the wrong doers he broods over a galaxy of thoughts flashing into his mind, and arranges an old play⁵ whose story has a parallel to that of Claudius' plan of poisoning his father through his wife Gertrude, and later his intention of usurping the throne of Denmark by getting married to Queen Gertrude, the late King's wife. Irrespective of the good intent of Hamlet, and a *sui generis* pattern of fact finding, Hamlet's behaviour is considered mad, especially when he kills the eavesdropping Polonius, the court chamberlain, by thrusting his sword through a curtain. Polonius's son Laertes returns to Denmark to avenge his father's death. Polonius's daughter Ophelia loves the Prince but his brutal behaviour drives



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her to madness. Ophelia dies by drowning. A duel takes place that finally ends with the death of Gertrude, Laertes, Claudius, and Hamlet. The plot carries a reflection of major themes like indecision, seeking revenge and retribution, deception, ambition, betrayal, wickedness, love, justice, loyalty and fate etc.

If we look at John Galsworthy's plays, we find that these works deal with social problems, concerned with the natural aspects of life. Galsworthy's representative play *Justice*⁶ keeps Falder in centre. Falder is a weak-willed person, who, in good intention, forges a cheque to help Ruth Honeywill, a lady harassed by her drunkard husband. Fortunately/unfortunately, he is caught for this forgery, brought to the court of law, and is imprisoned for three years in solitary confinement. It sees justice being done. Here comes the interpretation of literature that speaks the language of human emotions. Galsworthy as a playwright seldom agrees with this system of imparting justice. He talks about the 'injustice' done to Falder. In his view point, Falder has tried to rescue Ruth Honeywill with an intention to help her out from her odd situation which had made her life suffocating. He says that from a humanitarian point of view, Falder was right on his part in that the decision was partial from the 'blind' rigid side of law showing inhuman nature. The play shows the flaw in the legal system, and its rigidity in treating the prisoners inside jails in an inhuman way, and that no follow up is done to rehabilitate the discharged prisoners, which, in turn, alienates them from society, rather brands them as criminals. However, crime of any nature is never acceptable, nor is that of Falder. He was given a cheque for encashment. Since, Falder tampered with the figured amount, and thus misappropriated the account, it is therefore, he had to pay the penalty, in fact, enormously multiple in magnitude. In jail, he was treated inhumanly in solitary confinement. The play shows how some of the prisoners start behaving like animals. Coming out of the jail, he was treated as an outcast. Through the pages of the play, we find William Falder being reabsorbed conditionally in the firm, and also in the society, but the shadow of the law concerned was in constant pursuit, and that caused his doom. So, when the keepers of justice serve little in rectification, and worsen the state of the individual, his crime shows microscopic through the microscope of the so called "justice". Falder is, finally, relieved of his crime at the Almighty's door, when he dies out of his fear of punishment in the system of justice concerned.



I. JUDGING HUMAN CONDITION: A LEGAL DISCOURSE ON *WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET V. JOHN GALSWORTHY'S JUSTICE*

The following presents a categorical illustration of facts from the two texts in question.

1. In case of *Hamlet*, a wrong/crime took place:
 - i. When Gertrude betrays the king (Senior Hamlet or the Ghost) using potion in his ears, and killed him.
 - ii. Hamlet's uncle Claudius intrigued the plot, found grossly involved in the entire conspiracy in killing Senior Hamlet

Whereas in case of *Justice*, wrong/crime took place:

- i. When William Falder forged (altered) a cheque of nine pounds into ninety pounds.
 - ii. William Falder altered the counterfoil.
 - iii. When William Falder forged a reference of an address to getting a job.
 - iv. Betrayed his employers-James How and Walter How.
2. In *Hamlet*, crime emerged out of Gertrude's love for Claudius, and Claudius' love for wealth and Gertrude (Claudius wanted to usurp the throne of Denmark); perhaps his love for Gertrude emerged out of his love for wealth. Whereas, in *Justice*, Crime/wrong act emerged out of William Falder's infatuation for Ruth Honeywill (He has been sympathetic to a morally and physically devastated woman with her two children, and his urge to help her out in order to improve upon her condition; and also due to forging the address of reference for his survival (managing bread and butter).
 3. 'Intention' for doing the act in case of *Hamlet* as stated above was bad, whereas in case of *Justice*, the 'Intention' for doing the act was constantly good.
 4. Outcome/Consequences as read and seen in *Hamlet*: Death (Death of Gertrude, Death of Claudius, Death of Polonius i.e., all the major characters, including the death of the hero i.e. the Junior Hamlet, who became the victim of his own judgment, whereas the outcome/consequences in case of *Justice*, is also the death of a poor/individual/death of a victim of justice —justice delivered under the prevailing legal system.



5. Delivery of judgment in case of *Hamlet* stays on, self framed or proclaimed set of rules/guidelines (by Junior Hamlet) to bring upon the criticism of life, whereas in case of *Justice*, the delivery of judgment stays on a set of procedures —the existing laws, the interpretation of the judge, and the jury who find things apt in passing the order so.
6. Tools and techniques used for bringing justice in the *Hamlet* were, the play within play for the revelation of truth, through repentance, remorse, reformation, rehabilitation and confessions of criminals, whereas in the context of *Justice*,

tools and techniques used for bringing justice were the circumstantial evidences, cross examination of the witnesses, and the confessions of the criminals concerned.

7. If we look at the rights of victim, we find that the Senior Hamlet is seeking defence through his son junior Hamlet, whereas in the play *Justice*, William Falder, the protagonist, is seeking defence through his defence lawyer Hector Frome.
8. As part of plea taken by junior Hamlet, he was going for Justice, to be done on the pattern of revenge i.e., "Eye for an eye", whereas in *Justice* the plea is that Justice to be done on the humanitarian ground, the defence lawyer pleads the case of William Falder on humanitarian ground, i.e., "Mercy Plea".
9. Fate of Judgment, as analyzed in *Hamlet* and *Justice*, is a complete Human loss i.e., the death of Junior Hamlet and the death of William Falder.
10. Effect on Masses/readers/audience: Pity and Fear² for the hero (Junior Hamlet), and Pity and Fear for the unheroic hero, William Falder.
11. *Hamartia*⁸ lies in Junior Hamlet's self complacency and over confidence that allowed him in lacking and judging the fate of his own framed rules for punishing the wrongdoers. In case of *Justice*, *Hamartia* lies in William Falder's (a young person of 23 years) act of falling prey to the looks of a beautiful woman. He lacked in understanding the fate of his own wrong acts and their effects in turn.
12. If we analyze women's condition in *Hamlet*, we find the fair sex as a tool in the hands of men. For instance, Gertrude as a puppet in the hands of Hamlet's uncle Claudius, and Ophelia, mostly, guided by her brother Laertes, and her father Polonius.

In both of these classics the playwrights concerned strongly put up an appeal to audience and readers that we must not hurt others, as hurting



others decide our own fate as is illustrated through the fate of Gertrude and the fate of Claudius etc. They not only devastated themselves, and the King, but the entire human condition in the state of Denmark comes under its impact. The state of Denmark, in that situation, is shown looking for a new king, who is 'yet to be born!' Similarly in the case of *Justice*, we observe how a wrong act of William Falder brings disgrace to the reputation of the law firm, and devastate his own condition.

Some of the passages in both of these classics stand monumental in judging human condition and related emotions. Select passages² are given below, for instance:

Frailty, thy name is woman!—/A little month; or ere those shoes were old/With which she followed my poor father's body/Like Niobe, all tears;—why she, even she, —/O God! a beast that wants discourse of reason,.../She married:— O, most wicked speed, to post/With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!/It is not, nor it cannot come to good;/But break my heart,—for I must hold my tongue. (*Hamlet*, Act I, Sc. ii)

And,

Oh, this is hire and salary, not revenge./He took my father grossly, full of bread,/With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May./And how his audit stands who knows save heaven?/But in our circumstance and course of thought/'Tis heavy with him. And am I then revenged. (*Hamlet*, Act I, Sc. ii)

In the two passages presented above, heartbroken Hamlet is moving towards partial insanity: he is betrayed: and has become a weak-willed character:temporal and

incestuous love has shown to be pervading the earth of Denmark; the theme of marriage; revenge etc. out of the relationships between Mother and Son, Father and Mother, Father and Son, Uncle and Son, Uncle and Mother, relationships between brothers; and the corresponding roles in establishing "the" human condition has been well adjudged.

Similarly in the following passage, a list of instructions and advice to Laertes from Polonius is just like any other emotional father who cares for his son, and asks to adopt some typical attitude towards the growing importance of appearance at a new place, and the ways of the world, in



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miniature, is presented to the audience and readers; "Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment. Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy, But not express'd in fancy; rich, not gaudy: For the apparel oft proclaims the man;... Neither a borrower nor a lender be: For loan oft loses both itself and friend; (*Hamlet*, Act I, Sc. iii)",

Crime speaks of itself, in the language here, the theme of murder and cheating have been suddenly realized, and the readers could feel that all unnatural habitat result to make up for rotten condition of mankind. "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark. (Act I, Sc. iv)...foul deeds will rise, Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes. (Act I. Sc. ii)...Murder most foul, as in the best it is; But this most foul, strange and unnatural (*Hamlet*, Act I, Sc. V)".

How one grave wrong is immensely stormy to devastate the beauty of nature and mankind is well contemplated by Hamlet when he repeatedly says that a grave wrong committed results in a destructive condition that paralyzes man's creativity and reason. The following lines from the play stand testimony: "I have of late,—but wherefore I know not,—lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire,—why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?" (*Hamlet*, Act I Sc. ii)

The idea of suicide and death; the difficulty of knowing the truth in a spiritually ambiguous universe, and the connection between thought and action; the logical intellect, which works furiously to find a solution to one's misery, religion and philosophical inquiry resulting in equally frustrating human condition etc., speak very forcefully in the following lines from the *Hamlet*:

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 the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation



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Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep; To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the

rub; For in that sleep of death what dreams may come When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, Must give us pause...The pangs of despised love, the law's delay, The insolence of office and the spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes,...

The undiscover'd country from whose bourn No traveller returns, puzzles the will And makes us rather bear those ills we have Than fly to others that we know not of? Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;...

And lose the name of action (*Hamlet*, Act III Sc. i)

Inner conflict; Realization; Duty to self and State (of Denmark); Hamlet's decision to avenge his father's death before the final "revenge", happens in the tragedy when he becomes the victim of his own judgment. It reverberates when he makes such expressions, "Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave, That I, the son of a dear father murdered, prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell, Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words And fall a-cursing like very drab, A stallion! Fie Upon't, foh!" (*Hamlet*, Act II, Sc. ii)...And in, "The time is out of joint; O cursed spite, That ever I was to set it right! (*Hamlet*, Act I, Sc. v)".

With reference to the study in question, meaningful interpretation of behavioural patterns of life through Galsworthy's *Justice* makes some of its expressions, and passages unforgettable, to illustrate; when James How speaks to Walter How that money matters result in foul deeds, and the wrong actions are the manifestation of criminally inclined people, and accordingly the related circumstances are conditioned. To cite from the text¹⁰, "A man doesn't succumb like that in a moment, if he's a clean mind and habits. He's rotten; got the eye's of a man who can't keep his hands off when there's money about" (*Justice*, Act I)... "One wrong is no excuse for another, and those who are never likely to be faced by such a situation possibly have the right to hold up their hand-as to that I prefer to say nothing (*Justice*, Act II)".

Mr. Cleaver, the Counsel for the Crown, makes up for an expression in response to Mr. Frome's arguments. (Mr Frome is the defence lawyer for William Falder who is convicted of forgery), and the impossibility



of calling back an arrow that is shot, can only be a matter of deep regret, for such a crime makes up a man's condition miserable, for the rest of his life, becomes an important passage that poses the problem of justice in our society, "the rest has followed, as death follows a stab to the heart or water drops if you hold up a jug to empty it. Believe me gentlemen, there I nothing more tragic in life than the utter impossibility of changing what you have done. (*Justice*, Act II)". Social codes, rules of behaviour, laws, legal systems, and punishments are there to structuralize society. In fact, there is an urge for sympathetic treatment, perhaps of a medicinal nature after a careful examination and diagnosis corresponding to the nature and type of ailment that diseased the human condition to act so. In this case, It is relevant to quote certain expressions from the play *Justice*:

Justice is a machine that, when someone has once given it the starting push, rolls on of itself... But is a man to be lost because he is bred and born with a weak character? Gentlemen, men like the prisoner are destroyed daily under our law for want of that human insight which sees them as they are, patients and not criminals. If the prisoner be found guilty and treated as though they were a criminal type, he will, as all experience shows, in all probability become one. (*Justice Act II*) Because the judge is a protector and agent of the existing legal system who asserts

that the institution of law is a noble one, he seeks to protect the good; to protect the society. The judge is the spokesman... in the contemporary judicial system which has a set up of a well defined procedure where he cannot carry his personal opinions, and views to judge human emotions and related condition.

In the Act II of Justice the interpretation is strengthened as, "The law is what it is-a majestic edifice, sheltering all of us, each stone of which rests on another... Is he to become a member of the luckless crews that man those dark, ill-starred ships called prisons? Is that to be his voyage-from which so few return?" (*Justice*, Act II)

Else, a situation of aimlessness and hopelessness may be observed resulting in pity and fear as is the case with William Falder when he says, "I seem to struggling against a thing that's all round me. I can't explain it; it's as if I was in a net; as fast as I cut it here, it grows up there (*Justice* Act IV)". And ultimately a devastated human condition, well embellished in the words of Cokeson, the Senior Clerk of the law firm where Falder worked, perhaps the mouthpiece of Galsworthy, "He's not breathing...No one'll touch him now! Never again! He's safe with gentle Jesus!" (*Justice* Act IV)



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Salman Rushdie's lines seem quite apt in this context, when he says, "Literature is the one place in any society where, within the secrecy of our own heads, we can hear voices talking about everything in every possible way"¹¹. Connecting it to Chinua Achebe's statement, "Once you allow yourself to identify with the people in a story, then you might begin to see yourself in that story even if on the surface it's far removed from your situation. This is what I try to tell my students: this is one great thing that literature can do -- it can make us identify with situations and people far away. If it does that, it's a miracle"¹².

Both of the plays in question prove immensely revolutionary and ideological works, and provide an assortment of human actions in judging the human condition so.

II. CONCLUSION

Out of the above discussion the researcher puts the following submissions:

1. Judging Human Condition, its emotion(s) and activities in different form or forms of human expressions invoke acculturation of human mind. Perhaps literature and its manner of reception is one of the best modes for this purpose.
2. Our experiences are altered out of the experiences of others.
3. Literature inspires, elevates, motivates and asserts human conditions.
4. Literature serves as a rich tool of communication, and the best part of it lies in creating free choices for human being. They transcend the geographical boundaries without any visa and passport, without any laws that would bind human expressions in judging human condition at different places, not only on the earth but also the entire universe, to match with a popular Hindi adage- *Jahan na pahuche Ravi, wahan pahuche Kavi*, i.e. the litterateurs have an access even to the unexplored spheres of human faculties.

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¹ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE. HAMLET: THE PRINCE OF DENMARK.(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) (1602).

² Purgation/purification of emotions. This is traditionally acknowledged as the aim of tragedy.

- ³ Aristotle. POETICS. Trans. S.H. Butcher (Nov. 7, 2015), <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.1.1.html#200>.
- ⁴ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE. HAMLET: THE PRINCE OF DENMARK. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) (1602).
- ⁵ This is popularly known as the play within the play in HAMLET.
- ⁶ JOHN GALSWORTHY. JUSTICE: (Delhi: Surjeet Publications, 2007) (1910).
- ⁷ Pity and fear are the feelings that are evoked by tragedy, according to Aristotle.
- ⁸ Tragic Flaw. Any flaw on the part of the tragic hero that leads to the tragedy.
- ⁹ All the passages cited towards the illustration of the case in point refer to the previously mentioned edition of Shakespeare's HAMLET.
- ¹⁰ All the passages cited herein refer to the previously mentioned edition of Galsworthy's JUSTICE.
- ¹¹ SALMAN RUSHDIE, IS NOTHING SACRED? (LONDON:GRANTA, 1990).
- ¹² CHINUA ACHEBE. THE ATLANTIC ONLINE. (August 2, 2000) (Oct. 2, 2016). <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2000/08/an-african-voice/306020/>.

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