



Why I Won't Play Hamlet Ever Again a one-act play by Sandeep Bhatnagar

Scene: *A one-bedroom-hall apartment with all the paraphernalia of middle class life visible: wooden furniture, a battered TV set, pots and pans near a kitchen sink. A middle-aged man appears to be looking for a book. He finds it and proceeds towards an old armchair. He is around 50, balding, with spectacles perched on his nose. As he sits down, we notice that he is reading The Complete Works of William Shakespeare. He starts as if he has heard a knock on the door. The entire speech is a soliloquy, spoken as if another person is present but we see no one.*

MAN: Come in..... Oh it's you. Come in. What brings you here? This (*indicates the book in his hand*)? I'm just re-reading *my* Shakespeare. Yes, indeed, it's still my Shakespeare. After all, what else would a poor accountant know. I haven't the benefits of your kind education, have I? Oxford ... No, no, not that. Let me remember, ah yes, Pennsylvania ... No? Well, then Columbia? Sorry, I said I'm sorry, didn't I? You still haven't learned to take a joke.

(Shuffles about, searching for something)

Would you like some tea? No? So what have you been up to? Directing a new play? I thought so. For you plays have to be enacted; you can't recreate them in your mind. The best playhouse is not the Experimental or Prithvi, it's here (*taps his head*).

So what's the play about? What *Hamlet!* Again! Sure brings back old memories. Who's playing the enigmatic prince? WHAT! Are you out of your mind? I'm not touching that play. And besides, you have already seen me interpret it, so why do you need me. All right, all right, I'm not going to start re-opening old wounds; but you yourself had said that you didn't wish to see me again. That you could do any play without my help. Yes, I know I was rude but then watching you pick my brains over every scene and hogging all the credit later ... Ok, ok, I'll stop but tell me why come to me now. You are well established and have all the name you need. What could you possibly want from an old *bhaiya* like me? Yes, that's what you called me. Never mind, who told me. "An old foggy and an uncouth *bhaiya* to boot, who would be better off leaving Shakespeare to his betters." Those were your very words. What betters *you?* ... Of course I'm bitter, what else did you expect when you replaced me with a younger, more energetic man...What was the term you used...Yes, someone

with a "fresh" outlook. Well, he most certainly was fresh...and from what I hear, so were you. What the hell are you getting so agitated about? Want to know who told me? The same people whom you so trustingly share confidences with...Let me tell you, you may have studied or what's that ever so Brit. term you use-- "read" literature. "I read literature at Oxford." (*mimics*)

You may have a degree in literature but you couldn't block a single scene. Not dramatically. No, definitely not. Unless, of course, you've got yourself yet another Mohan Prakash.

All right, all right, tell me about your proposal. But don't give me all that gaff about it benefiting me. The only person who benefits is you.

(A long pause as he appears to listen)

A foreign trip, a festival of Shakespeare in translation in Edinburgh. My, my, are you ambitious. So you want this poor, uncouth *bhaiya* to help you translate and adapt Hamlet, so that you can take your troupe to UK and swank around as the savior of the English language in India, keeping it's syntax pure for your colonial masters. You can never change.

There are so many translations around; you could easily pick up one. Sorry, sorry, I was forgetting you can't even read Hindi properly. But then why are you doing *Hamlet* in Hindi, do it in German? Forgotten all your *Deutsche, mein Herr. Achtung!* All right, keep your shirt on. Yes, I have been drinking, like I always do--with my *own* money. Just a mere statement. No veiled insinuations, as if there could be un-veiled insinuations. Call you self an English major...Never mind what I said. I'll help you but I will most definitely not *play* the part. You know very well what it does to me. Besides, just look at me: do I look like a bewildered stripling? Bewildered maybe but a stripling never. Ok, let me think it over. I'll call you in a day or two.

(He flops into his chair, broods for a while, and then abruptly gets up)

Why should I play Hamlet again. For me and most of my generation Hamlet is the archetypal Indian male: passionate, dithering, insecure, an enemy to himself, a bully, a coward, a victim, gratefully repressed, arrogant repressor, psychotic, schizophrenic--a number of selves operating at once. One merely needs to introduce a Hamlet-like character into a play (the films do it all the time) for the audience to seek immediate identification with the diverse aspects of his varied personae. I for one always find myself being drawn into Hamlet's prevailing mode of expression--that is, depression. Manic depression. A sense of deep, enveloping despair that makes me sink deeper and deeper...

So why did I agree to do the play and why do I read it so often? Well, in the

beginning I used to experience catharsis, a kind of cleansing of emotions, after which I'd experience an enormous sense of relief. But now it's becoming more and more difficult to achieve this kind of a release. Once the mood catches me, it grips me like a fever. One thing leads to another and soon you have a full-blown fit of depression.

No I'm normally not depressive; in fact, I'm an unabashed optimist. I'm able to bear the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune like the best of us. Unlike the pensive Prince of Denmark, I'm a positivist in terms of philosophy: the reason for the world's existence is not a matter of doubt but affirmation:

"The righteous man rejoices in this world, he rejoices in the next; he rejoices in both. He rejoices and becomes delighted seeing the purity of his own actions." (From The Dhammapada, translated by S. Radhakrishnan)

I accept the cycle of cycle of birth and death, eternal renewal with the hope of ultimate release.

I believe in action. For me action is far more important than speculation or thought. I believe in expressing my self through deeds rather than words. Why should I think when I can act? You could say I'm the very antithesis of Hamlet (Though if you say that you'll be wrong, for Hamlet is the antithesis of himself). Who am I fooling? I am not an unabashed optimist or an unabashed anything. I'm every bit as fragmented as Shakespeare's hero, every bit a Nowhere Man--if anything more so. It's just that I don't get into fits of depression if keep of plays like this. Once I start entering the part of Hamlet, I metamorphose into an illogical creature unable to control my composite parts, unable to differentiate between good and evil. I begin to negate all that is positive in myself. Nothing is of any real consequence, since good and evil are the same: ends and not the means matter and even they don't matter, if one accepts that all matter is only created for ultimate destruction. Why act, why express one self when words are all we have. It's okay to express a character like Hamlet in a printed text; but if you try to internalize him, all hell breaks loose.

I only read the manic prince now, mainly after *The Tempest* or *The Merchant of Venice*...you now something feel-good that would act as a foil for the passions aroused by the antics of the mercurial prince.

What I'm trying to explain is just how dangerous it is to take *Hamlet*--or any play, for that matter--too seriously. Let us suppose that a rational analysis of Hamlet's malady is possible. After his father's death, Hamlet returns to Denmark, where he learns of possible foul play, palace intrigues being the order of the day in medieval Europe. However, since he suffers from the malaise of academia, he is incapable of raising an army to avenge his slain father. What we need here is a man of action not a ditherer. Nevertheless, Hamlet feels he needs to must make sure beyond all possible shadow of a doubt that a villainous deed has

been committed. One day, he hears of a ghost roaming the castle battlements (under the conditions, it is possible that this is the product of the collective imaginings of the guards). Hamlet, full of remorse at not having avenged his father's death, is deranged. He feels that the ghost speaks to him. What probably happens is that Hamlet's personality has begun to split or come apart. On one side, is the clear headed, rational student; on the other, the merciless, avenging son. So, we now have two Hamlets. It is also possible that unknown to Hamlet, it was he who was roaming the battlements in the guise of his father's ghost.

Around this time, another factor, a most powerful one for a son, comes into play. He is outraged at what he perceives as his mother's lack of modesty in marrying his uncle even before his father had been properly laid to rest. Probably an incestuous liaison in his eyes. This, given the ancient taboos against incest, is a most devastating emotion, one that the grieving Hamlet can not suppress. So, another persona comes loose. We have now three conflicting emotions in the irresolute prince, each of which refuses to reconcile with the others. Linked with incest is a hatred of women or misogyny, which leads him to repel Ophelia. In short, yet another self has entered the conflict.

His avenging self goads Hamlet to counter palace intrigue with a scheming, callous, Machiavellian manipulation of power to achieve his ends. This aspect of the schizophrenic prince soon starts to dominate his person; to the extent that he loses all sense of good and evil. At the same time, Hamlet the connoisseur of Art is still very much alive, which leads him to philosophize in his justly famous soliloquies and to use drama to draw out the guilty conscience of his uncle. Art has been subjugated by politics and serves its purpose. After the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia, Hamlet is plagued by a stricken conscience. This is a major change in him, for now the death wish has entered him. By now, he has so many conflicting personalities that he is no longer in control. The persona, which surfaces in response to a particular stimulus, takes over, until either he is emotionally drained or the stimulus subsides.

What in another case would have been a simple case of murder and revenge turns into a veritable battlefield of clashing personae. Remember that Hamlet had few, other than Horatio, whom he could trust. He has no emotional support, whatsoever. He was fighting a losing battle on all fronts. And since he had been visited by the death wish, he was destined to die. He himself wills his destruction, if not at the hands of Laertes, some other means would have invented themselves.

(A long pause)

Hamlet the character subsides once the curtain falls or you finish reading the last scene. But what about the various Hamlets the reader or viewer creates within himself. Where do they go?

(Another significant pause)

Some divine playwright is not directing my destiny. My life has not been written out in neat scenes that will not burst open with an excess of emotional turbulence. No blank verse regulates the rhythms of my speech, transforming my traumas into poetry beautiful to behold. I can't flip back to the first page once I've meet my end.

Viewers may achieve catharsis on watching me perform but what about me? No, I must retain whatever hold on sanity I have managed to retain. Let my conflicting selves be subjugated by my ego, my idea of *who* I am. My identity. I exist. *I insist* I exist. And I wish to continue to exist. So, I will not, ever, play Hamlet again. ▶

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