HAMLET AND HIS PROBLEMS – A SUMMARY

Published in 1919, *Hamlet and His Problems* may be considered an example of “destructive criticism” in the sense that it challenges the age-old established critical perspectives on a work of art. Eliot puts forward his contention that much of the critical has been devoted to analysing the character of Hamlet, rather than analysing the play, which should be the primary business of the critics. He cites the example of two great minds, Goethe and Coleridge, who also who were not immune to this kind of fallacy and who have substituted “their own Hamlet for Shakespeare’s”. Eliot alleges that instead of studying it as a “work of art”, they have imposed their personalities on Shakespeare’s Hamlet and “made of Hamlet a Werther” and “of Hamlet a Coleridge” respectively. Eliot, on the other hand, praises J.M. Robertson and Stoll, who, according to him, tried to shift the critical focus of Hamlet to a right direction by pointing out the genesis of Shakespeare’s play from his predecessors: “*Hamlet* is a stratification, that it represents the efforts of a series of men, each making what he could out of the work of his predecessors.” According to Eliot, the presence of anomalies and much of the crude elements of the play can be attributed to this fact.

In order to establish his contentions, Eliot goes on to examine the play from a historical perspective. He cites the example of Kyd’s *Hamlet Play* and *Spanish Tragedy* and tries to establish the fact that just as Kyd’s Shakespeare’s play was also made in the tradition of Elizabethan revenge tragedies and was expected to serve the dramatic purpose of this genre. In this Eliot argues that the revenge-motives in the earlier plays are dramatically justified, but
in the case of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* there is a failure in establishing the motive of the character. Eliot thinks,

‘...there is a motive which is more important than that of revenge, and which explicitly "blunts" the latter; the delay in revenge is unexplained on grounds of necessity or expediency; and the effect of the "madness" is not to lull but to arouse the king's suspicion.’

According to him, Shakespeare made certain changes with the play of Thomas Kyd, but those changes are far from being convincing. Eliot gives some other evidences to establish that Shakespeare adapted his story from Kyd’s lost play. He strong defends Robertson’s view that

‘Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, so far as it is Shakespeare's, is a play dealing with the effect of a mother's guilt upon her son, and that Shakespeare was unable to impose this motive successfully upon the "intractable" material of the old play.’

Then Eliot goes on to pronounce his notorious judgement on the play: “far from being Shakespeare's masterpiece, the play is most certainly an artistic failure.” For, according to him, Shakespeare failed to make proper arrangement of incidents and impose a dramatic order. He points out that the play is the longest and there are superfluous and inconsistent scenes with the versification being variable. Not only this, Eliot presents his assumption that the play must have been written during a period of intense emotional crisis. Even he relates it to another great production art, Mona Lisa and calls the play "Mona Lisa" of literature, thereby creating another controversy.

According to Eliot that the failure of the drama lies not simply with the adaptation, plot construction and versification, but more importantly with the motive of the drama, which Robertson called “the feeling of a son towards a guilty mother”. Eliot thinks that Shakespeare could not handle the "guilt of a mother" so effectively as he “handled the suspicion of Othello, the infatuation of Antony, or the pride of Coriolanus”. Eliot attributes the failure to Shakespeare’s inability to all-pervasive emotion, found in the sonnets, and argues that *Hamlet* contains certain mysterious elements, which “the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art.”

Finally Eliot comes to use a term which would draw the attention of the critical community very soon and goes on to put forward a solution through this. He says that,
‘The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"... a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion.’

He cites the example Macbeth and Othello and tries to show how Shakespeare made use of this successfully, which is, according to him, precisely not the case in Hamlet. Shakespeare could not project any external elements which would fitfully reflect his inner world and could not present external events or elements which would justify his terrible mental anguish. According to Eliot, Hamlet’s case is that of over-reaction. For, “Hamlet is up against the difficulty that his disgust is occasioned by his mother, but that his mother is not an adequate equivalent for it; his disgust envelops and exceeds her.” (Eliot thinks that “Hamlet's bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings is a prolongation of the

Finally Eliot takes up the case of Hamlet’s Madness and tries to refute conventional view by arguing that Hamlet’s madness “is less than madness and more than feigned”. That is to say, he is neither fully mad nor is always feigning. He tries to establish the second case by pointing out his levity, puns and repetitions of phrase, which point towards a mental disorder. In fine, Eliot assigns the genesis of the drama to an unknown state of mind of the creator and hopes for explorations on the part of the critics to solve “an insoluble puzzle”.

OBJECTIVE CORRELATIVE

The phrase ‘Objective Correlative’, which was first used by one Washington Alston, has proved to be one of the most sensational of Eliot’s adventures in critical jargon. Precisely, it means a verbal equivalent for an emotion; to quote from Eliot himself, “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion”. Prufrock, Tiresias, Gerontion and Sweeney, in his poems, reveal a dextrous application of his concept. Dante and Lucretius have presented us with the emotional and sensory equivalents for their philosophical systems which they constructed with a rich measure of spiritual conviction. It is interesting to note that Pablo Neruda, while trying to express his sense of disgust, found as “objective correlative” in the account of a cup of tea at the bottom of which lay a number of false teeth. The “objective correlative” signifies a translation of emotive suggestiveness and judged from this standpoint, the formulation of the phrase does not amount to the discovery of an original artist practice. Eliot, along with T.E Hulme and Ezra Pound, derived this concept from the aesthetics of French “symbolism”. “Poetry”, wrote in 1918, “is a sort of
inspired mathematics, which gives us equations, not for abstract figures, triangles, spheres, and the like, but equations for the human emotions”.

Eliot has called Shakespeare’s Hamlet an ‘artist failure’ for he finds no deft use of ‘objective correlative’ in the play. The motivation between the external circumstances and the internal emotion has not been adequate and, consequently, Hamlet is dominated by emotion which is ‘in excess of the facts as they appear’. Eliot’s, we understand, has failed to comprehend the problem of a sensitive and introspective young man who is evil in flesh and blood. To wreak vengeance on Claudius is only a part of Hamlet’s problem and even his sex- nausea is not the whole of it. He cannot rush heading into action, because the problem with which he is confronted is to reconcile the basic contradictions of human life. It is this problem which paralyses his will and obstructs his action, although he is, ready, to avenge the desperate private wrong which rankles in his mind. Eliot seems to have ignored what every sensible individual feels, soon or late, in his or her life. Dr. Jekyll is true, but equally true is Mr. Hyde, and since together they constitute the network of eternal humanity, it is both healthy and judicious to affirm all manner of experience, even if they have conflicting frontiers. Hamlet is unmade, for he is incapable of affirming in its entirety. He fails to achieve a totality of vision which integrates both good and ill into a single perspective. He observes multiple beauties in the created universe, but he also gets to experience it as “a pestilent congregation of vapours” and the sense of discrepancy between the ideal and the actual completely bears him down in no time.