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PERPLEXITY OF ONE'S SUBJECTIVITY IN ITS RELATION TO BLOCKED DESIRE
A LACANIAN PSYCHOANALYTIC CASE STUDY OF PRINCE HAMLET

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ABSTRACT

: In the light of psychoanalysis, especially Freudian, Hamlet's hesitation to avenge his father's death mostly conceived through Hamlet's unwanted repressed Oedipal desire to his mother, a repression rooted in the mother's unforeseen marriage (at least in the eyes of the prince) to Claudius. Jacques Lacan does not restrict Hamlet's predicament merely to an awful case of Oedipal repression. Rather, to Lacan , the problem must be followed in the perplexity occurring in the process of his subjectification and his blocked desire. As Lacan puts, Shakespeare's play dramatizes a painful (con)fusion of responding to Hamlet's own desires and his entanglement within the maze of desire of the Other. The present study attempts to figure out the leading cause of this chaos resulting in Hamlet's traumatic confrontation with his own self as much as concerned to his relations with the Other , either it is named mother or Ophelia. Put it another way , Hamlet's irredeemable suspension to act /avenge is nurtured by his disability to separate his desires (and so give constancy to his individual phantasies) from the restrictive desire of the (m)Other. It is the very fixation within the Other's phantasy /desire(a drive presented by Hamlet's insistence on taking the place of Claudius, whom in Hamlet's eyes seen as the first and most wanting desire of his mother) that prevents Hamlet to constitute his phantasies and to identify his subjectivity in respect to the Other rather than just assimilating and so diminishing his subject to the Other. The second same confusion that would be traced in this exploration goes to Hamlet's failure in his love, loving Ophelia. Given the princess as objet a / object cause of desire in Lacanian terminology, we witness the further Hamlet alienates himself from her , the more & more he loses the pivotal imaginary relations his subjectivity needs to keep

with the source of his desire _Ophelia. A failure that ultimately ends in the stagnation of his subjectification and makes of him a melancholic figure. The remedial solution happens to him in the final scene when and where he is badly wounded; a physical injury having its therapeutic function on his psyche to help him reestablish his position as a free subject.

INTRODUCTION

Exploring William Shakespeare's plays under the light of psychoanalysis bears advantage, since through character analysis the unconscious aspect of the utterance would be revealed. Mostly, psychoanalysts center on the matter of identity and its formation through their exploration of the characters. They claim that constructionism provides the analyst with the understanding of oneself, others and reality, a fact which is apparently pictured in the case study of Shakespeare's network of plays in general, and in particular, in the present study on *Hamlet*. Concerning Hamlet's personality and his responses to his subjectivity, testing the psychological approach seems essential. To do the important, the present study is to take benefit of Jacques Lacan's dynamic and complex theories. It intends to offer a comprehensive approach that helps the reader to examine how psychological responses are decisive in the process of identity construction of a man and particularly of prince Hamlet.

Jacque Lacan (1927-81) is a French psychoanalyst, and one of the interpreters of Freudian psychoanalytic approach. Largely, he focuses on Freud's deep structures, infant sexuality and human subject. Lacanian psychoanalysis seeks to dismantle the imaginary sense of completeness and to remove illusions of self-mastery through mirror stage. Central to the notion of human subject, in Lacan's point of view, is the idea of the unconscious which is structured as language and governs all aspects of his existence. Bressler asserts that "Unlike Freud who pictures the unconscious as chaotic, unstructured, hidden desires and suppressed wishes, Lacan asserts that the unconscious is structured, like the structure of a language" (2002, p. 152).

In Lacan's view, the concept of 'self'/ subject is basically built on an image, or the *Other*. Put it differently, the idea of self, in its structure, is related to the notion of the Other with which the self wants to merge. In definition of the Other, it is said to be a structural position in the symbolic order. Entering the symbolic order requires by itself the submission of man/subject to the rules of language, the Law of the father, in Lacan's term. Habib states:

Lacan suggests that the movement of the mirror phase is from the child's actual insufficiency through its anticipation of its entry into the

symbolic order to the child's assumption of the protection of a unified identity, however is alienating: it is fictive, a specialized protection into unity of a child's actually temporally discrete self. (1988, p. 592)
In the following, interconnection and interaction of these terms would be much more delineated along with the constitutive role of the symbolic order in construction of Lacanian subject.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATION

For Lacan, subjectivity is parallel to man's true existence and selfhood developed in the course of language acquisition, and it is a process of achieving and expressing that selfhood. As mentioned above, the concepts of subjectivity and otherness are interwoven with one another. The ego, which is formed by the process of differentiation, and initially experienced in the mirror stage, is to be suppressed by the subject as he enters the real world. By denying both the traditional humanist conception of the self and ego as the privileged mode of human existence, Lacan considers subject as a linguistic product produced by the symbolic order; a phenomenon that functions within the signifying chain of language. As such, and facing the hollowness of all signifiers, Lacanian subject is diminished to the state of being just a signifier of another signifier. Homer explains the transiency of subject's authority as "it emerges only fleetingly through a specific moment in time" (2005, p.75). Paul Verhaeghe formulates the process in this way:

The subject, confronted with the enigma of the desire of the Other, tries to verbalize this desire and thus constitutes itself by identifying with the signifiers in the field of the Other, without ever succeeding in filling the gap between subject and Other. Hence the continuous movement from signifier to signifier, in which the subject alternately appears and disappears. (1998, p. 168)

In other words, Lacanian subject is that primary psychic construction constructed by the individual's shocking adherence to the symbolic order. Drawing on Lacan, if the Real is the scope of undifferentiated consciousness, and if the field of imaginary is that of the ego, the symbolic is the coexistent with and constitutive of the subject. The other point with respect to the subject is that it has no subject matter. As Dylan Evans states, "it is a *bona fide* signifier whose matter is the irretrievable loss of a sense of wholeness. [...] the subject is an effect of language" (1996, p. 196) which is not signifiable, that is, "no signifier can signify the subject" (p. 187). As such, the subject is just an effect of the symbolic chain, but never restricted to any fixed content.

Unlike Freud who defines the unconscious as (an) other which in its turn is the unchangeable realm of human desire, Lacan argues that the unconscious is simply the "discourse of the Other" (1977, p. 305). Lacan (1977) makes a

distinction between the two different cases of the other, the little other and the big Other. Sean Homer elaborates on the difference as:

The lower case 'other' always refers to the imaginary others, they give us the sense of being complete whole beings. We create these others as whole, unified or coherent egos, and as reflections of ourselves they give us the sense of being complete whole being. The big Other is the symbolic order, it is that absolute otherness that we cannot assimilate to our subjectivity. It is the foreign language that we are born into and must learn to speak if we are to articulate our own desire. (2005, p. 70)

Homer's words clarify the significance of the big Other in the formation process of subjectivity and its interconnectedness with the concept of the *desire*. From the vantage point of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the notion of *lack* and *desire* are interrelated and supplementary each one to the other one; it means, understanding the concept of *lack* is bound to comprehension of *desire*. In his exploration of the concept of desire, Lacan differentiates it from *need*. While needs can be satisfied, human desires always stand beyond gratification, and proves being something of broader sense and much abstract. He describes it "the essence of man" (1979, p. 275). It has its roots at the depth of our being and is essentially related to *Lack*. In "The Signification of Phallus", in *Ecrits* Lacan states:

Desire is neither need, demand, nor drive. Desire is that want-of-being that remains beyond the satisfaction of any demand; it is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting. (1977, p. 287)

As Homer quotes Lacan, "desire and the unconscious are founded through the recognition of fundamental lack: the absence of the phallus" (2005, p. 72). Desire, in this sense, is always the recognition of 'the thing' which is absent in the subject and the Other. Put it differently, it is through the Other that the subject recognizes its position in the symbolic order. The subject receives its symbolic mandate from the Other, since the subject's desire is essentially based on that of the Other. Bruce Fink puts it:

In the child's attempt to grasp what remains essentially indecipherable in the Other's desire—what Lacan calls the X, the variable, or better the unknown—the child's own desire is founded; the Other's desire begins to function as the cause of the child's desire. (1995, p. 59)

The last point goes to the significance of the *phallus*. In contrast to Freud's conception of the term, to be seen as to have it or not have it in case of girls or to be afraid of losing it, being cut off, concerning boys, for Lacan phallus just functions as a signifier, signifying a lack and sexual difference. It is considered, Homer reports, "a particularly privileged signifier because it inaugurates the process of signification itself" (2005, p. 54).

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

To begin with Hamlet's hesitation to act and take revenge upon his uncle needs to review the function and the effect of mourning. Drawing from Freud's analysis, the work of mourning helps the libido to withdraw from the missed loved one. According to his assertion, the withdrawal process needs time and occurs gradually, and, meantime, Freud (*Mourning and Melancholia*, 1984) states, "the existence of the lost object (person) is physically prolonged" (p. 253), and so the subject has sufficient time to grieve for the death of his desiring person, as the

lost object. When the mourning gets complete, then the subject is able to direct his/her desire elsewhere. "Lacan", states Elizabeth Wright, "uses *Hamlet* as an allegory both of blocked desire and the act of mourning which unlocks it" (1999, p. 77). What happens to Hamlet, Homer puts, is that "he is unable fully to mourn his dead father because his mother prematurely married his uncle and replaced the *symbolic* father" (2005, p. 78). Hamlet's predicament, accordingly, is that the lost object/his father is too immaturely replaced by his mother before he could get rid of it, through mourning and directing his desire toward the other object. To Lacan, the lost object means phallus, so put it differently, before being able to mourn the loss of the phallus that in itself inaugurates the chain of his desires, Hamlet has to face the traumatic marriage of the mother.

In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud believes that when the possibility of mourning is blocked, it changes into melancholia. What distinguishes mourning from melancholia is that unlike the fact of mourning in which "the world has become poor and empty in melancholia it is ego itself" (1984, p. 254). In melancholia, the mourning turns back to the self and the subject narcissistically identifies itself with the lost object, so the impact of mourning would be on the subject and its fixation in time. Accordingly, the present idea explains one of the reasons causing Hamlet's doubt to act against Claudius. The point is that the sudden and unexpected marriage of his mother has left so much annihilating impact on Hamlet's psyche that makes him abject so much so that all his actions and reactions seem to him quite in vain, and what he does do is just move around and yield to his mourning. The other reason at work, with respect to Hamlet's hesitation and with regard to the role of Claudius, is the matter of phallus.

As mentioned above, phallus is first and foremost a signifier, a privileged signifier that triggers the course of signification. The Oedipus complex, in Lacan's term, means the end of identification with imaginary phallus, the one that the child considers as a need if he wishes to turn to the object of the mother's desire; it is the recognition of the fact that phallus is a signifier but

never being there in the first place. What is more, Homer observes, “it is through intervention of the Name-of-the-Father that the imaginary unity between child and mother is broken” (2005, p. 55). The Name-of-the-Father must not be confused with the actual father. As a symbolic function it just gets into the imaginary world of the child and destroys the illusory dyadic relationship of the mother and the child. So the outcome of Oedipus complex for the child is the matter of substitution; that is, the child learns to substitute one signifier, the desire of the mother,

for another, the Name-of-the-Father. The act of substitution of signifiers inaugurates the process of signification and identifies the child as a subject of lack into the symbolic order. Homer adds “it is through the Name-of-the-Father that the phallus is installed as the central organizing signifier of the unconscious” (2005, p. 56).

Hamlet's case is that he cannot undertake the process of substitution; either willingly or reluctantly, he postpones the exchange and the formation of any new desire except yearning for the desire of the mother. He still insists on reconstructing the imaginary phallus and misinterprets it as the original lost object to be retrievable rather than to conceive it as an object that does not exist. Hamlet's persistence in regaining his imaginary dyad with his mother prevents him living the process of signification and creating his subjectivity then. His deep-seated anger with Claudius manifests his impotency as a subject to face himself as a lack. As Rose puts it, “by breaking the illusory union the phallus represents a moment of division [that “lack-in-being”] which re-enacts the fundamental splitting of the subject itself” (1996, p. 63). It clarifies why most of the time Hamlet sounds angry in his words, and why his anger up until the end remains latent.

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,

Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!

Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd

His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!

How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable

Seem to me all the uses of this world!

...let me not think on't; 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 discouragement of reason

Would have mourned longer!

(W. Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, 1991, pp. 657-658)

To elaborate the latency of his anger that hinders the actuation of his decision for revenge needs to back to the identification of the child with *Odipal father* and its difference from the *primal father*. In brief, the Odipal father is that one who prohibits the child's incestuous drives, passes the law, and subdues the child to the law, while the primal father perceives not to be the subject of law. In Freud's myth of origins, Homer recalls, "the primal father is a figure of absolute power; the father aggregates to himself the women and wealth of the primal horde by expelling his sons and rivals" (2005, p. 59). The hallmark of this tyrannical father is that he never subjects himself to the law; he is the reverse side of the law (p. 59). In *Hamlet*, the uncle, Claudius takes the role of the primal father and his dead father/the ghost pictures the Odipal father. One part of Hamlet's predicament, especially at the time of decision, is to be torn between the two levels of superego, the law and the anti-law. Apparently Hamlet's self-identification with *the fathers* involves ambiguity for the prince since he is required simultaneously to identify himself with authority, the law and the illicit desire transgressing and undermining the law. This traumatic confrontation with such irrecoverable ambiguity is confusing for Hamlet in so far as he decides, at least for a while, to subordinate himself to the authority and to regulate his desires by showing a lip service to Claudius's comment on him, that is, to accept his madness and to follow the king's command to sail to England, and in one sense, to forget his fury for a while through a period of latency.

Lacan considers two movements in the constitution of 'subject': The first is related to the process of alienation through language, which is an unavoidable and untranscendable consequence of the formation of ego; it designates the subject's determination by the signifier. As Soler puts "alienation is destiny" (1995, p. 49), that is, there is no escape from

language and entering a position in the symbolic order. Separation of desire is the second movement. It takes place within the compass of desire and signifies a process whereby the child finds itself quite differentiated from the (m)Other. Certainly, the Other here is not the Other of alienation, it is a lacking Other, a barred one. Homer remarks that "Separation involves the coincidence of two lacks: the lack in the subject and the Other, and it is the interaction between these two lacks that determines the constitution of the subject" (2005, p. 73).

Back to Hamlet and his subject constitution, it is arguable that his narcissistic drives toward his mother associate with the imaginary phase and that dyadic relation once he had with his mother. Despite knowing that the mother is not so much dependent on him as he is, that, at

least, a part of her desire is directed toward some other points, like passion, joys, etc. (as represented by her immature and unexpected marriage to Claudius), and that he is not the limelight of her attention, Hamlet is not able to let go of that illusory, mirror-like unity and step into a constitutional process of separation. Although Hamlet is alienated, after the traumatic intervention of his mother's marriage, from the infantile unity once he felt with the (m)Other, he suffices just to accuse her of treason and sexuality and through constant despair and mourning avoids pondering the core of the (m)Other's desire to differentiate himself from it.

Since prince Hamlet has no choice of his own demand, something quite different and separated from that of his mother, no possibility of change is found with him through the course of events except lingering over the act of revenge and passively and melancholically speaking of his pessimism. Reading desire as the manifestation of something which lacks both in the subject and the Other, no separation happens to Hamlet since he never formulates the question: What am I in the Other? Therefore, in continuation of his relation with the (m)Other no differentiation occurs; no choice is made, on part of Hamlet, to determine his fleeting future. Instead of following his continuous process of subjectification–alienation and separation—to complete the circulation of turning to a subject of lack, to be free from the engulfment of the (m)Other, he decides to stay within a stable moment in time.

Hamlet's prolonged stability and fixation in time can be understood in the absence of his recognition by others; as he withdraws himself from constant, active relation with others, especially his mistress, his identity is left unrecognized. Kristin Campbell puts it in this way:

The social fiction produces the subject's relation to itself and its others, and so enables the subject to think of itself as a self and a distinct from, or the same as, its others. As an I, the subject experiences itself as a unified self that possesses identity. The production of the subject generates not only its relation to itself, but also its relation to other subjects. (2004, p. 118)

Any analysis of Hamlet's relation with his beloved Ophelia, in the light of Lacanian psychoanalysis, is bound to the meaning and function of the interchangeable terms: 'the Thing' and *Objet Petit a*. If, in Freudian psychoanalysis, the elemental element of the unconscious is repression, for Lacan, Homer states, without repression the unconscious would never be formed.

But what exactly is it that is repressed? In this regard, quoted in Homer's *Lacan*, Lacan argues that "there is always a core of the Real that is missing from the symbolic and all other representations, images and signifiers are no more than attempts to fill this gap"; he calls this repressed thing "the Thing" (2005, p. 84). For him, 'the Thing' is beyond signification, something unknowable in itself, something that escapes symbolization and indivisible from the Real; it is an object that must be constantly reformed. After "the seminar of 1959-60" the concept of 'the Thing' was replaced by the objet petite a/ the object cause of desire.

Assuming the love that goes between prince Hamlet and Ophelia as courtly love, which is originally experienced between aristocratic lovers wherein no physical fulfillment is feasible, we encounter with its symbolic aspect. Lacan speaks of it as a "poetic exercise, a way of playing with a number of conventional, idealizing themes, which couldn't have any real concrete equivalent" (1992, p. 148). Despite being unreal/ fictional, these symbolic codes of love, Lacan adds, are constitutive in the formation "contemporary of man's sentimental attachments" (1992, p.148). For certain, the most significant of all these symbols is 'the lady' an idealized identity having no real equivalent. As it is explained in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* "Book III" the object involved, the feminine object is introduced oddly enough through the door of privation or of inaccessibility. Whatever the social position of him/her, who functions in the role, the inaccessibility of the object is posited as a point of departure (p. 149).

In this reading, Lady Ophelia, turns to be the *objet a*, or in its case study she is expected to be that impossible object cause of desire that inaugurates the movement of desire in Hamlet to constitute his subject. Within the context of their love Ophelia is to act as a mirror upon which the lover, Hamlet, is to project his idealized images and fantasies. The Lady of courtly love, Žižek argues, in *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, “functions as a kind of black hole in reality, as a limit whose Beyond is inaccessible” (1994, p. 91). Put it another way, Ophelia/ the Lady in its symbolic function serves as a traumatic Otherness that associates with ‘the Thing’/ the Real. The other considerable point with respect to Hamlet's love, loving Ophelia, is the inherent running passivity, a quality which is shared with the relationship of Hamlet and the queen Gertrude/ the (m)Other, that finally makes a failed interaction between Hamlet as the subject and Ophelia as the object (of desire). The leading cause of the confusion running through Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia is that he is estranged from the lady/his objet a, an experience that decomposes his insubstantial fanciful relation with his mistress. Since Hamlet does not conceive Ophelia as no-

thing, that entity which only becomes something through ceaseless desires, he cannot perpetuate and deepen his love with Ophelia, and instead, consumes his whole being with the rejection of his love/the idealized absolute otherness in Ophelia. As a result, he entraps himself within her.

Hamlet If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry:

Be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not scape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery, go, farewell. Or, if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool;

for, wise men know well enough what monsters we make of them. To a nunnery, go, and quickly, too. Farewell.

Ophelia O heavenly powers, restore him! (W. Shakespeare Complete Works, 1991, p. 670)

On the other hand, Hamlet's suspension in loving or hating Ophelia is traceable in his impotence to fantasize the Lady in his imagination. Conceiving fantasy as a structure whereon the subjects organize their desire, fantasy works as something to support desire. Accordingly, Laplarch and Pontalis assert that “fantasy is not the object of the desire but its

setting" (1986, p. 26). Fantasy presents itself in auto-eroticism, and is the hallucinatory gratification of the desire. The space of fantasy, writes Žižek, "functions as an empty surface, as a kind of screen for the projection of desires" (Looking Awry 1992, p. 8). As such, Hamlet's dilemma in *love* as an opening to his ultimate subjectivity is based on his misconception of the Lady. To Hamlet, Ophelia must be an actualized ideal object that once and for all grants him the pleasure of satisfaction derived from completion, while the pleasure we take from fantasy is not derived from the attainment of the aim/object. What Hamlet does do in his malfunctioning interaction with the Lady is to transfix her as an attainable object commensurable to all his needs and demands rather than to fantasize her, and in this way, learn how to desire and be constituted as a desiring subject.

CONCLUSION

The tragic case of Hamlet's destiny, especially his tragic death at the end of the play is due to his immaturity and unreadiness to meet the 'traumatic events' in his life, events like his

mother's marriage to King Claudius and his banished love with Ophelia. Defining psychological trauma as an event that leaves upsetting impression on the people involved in, it mostly appears when external stimulus meets the subject's inability to comprehend and overcome the related agitations, and usually the outcome of this confrontation would be a psychological scar in the subject's unconscious.

The idea of trauma, in addition, implicitly signifies a particular stoppage within the process of signification, it means, it blocks the course of symbolization and fixes the subject in the primary stage of development. What Lacan adds to the Freudian meaning of trauma is, Homer (2005) elaborates, "that trauma is the Real in so far as it remains unsymbolizable and is a permanent dislocation at the very heart of the subject" (p. 84); the term, in Lacanian terminology, overlaps *Jouissance* which simply put, means feeling joy in pain.

Hamlet's inability to recognize and comprehend the nature of the traumatic intrusion of the Real, which is reflected in his sudden confrontation with the desire of the (m)Other /the radical otherness of Ophelia as the manifestation of the Real makes of him a melancholic psyche who suffers from a painful case of narcotic narcissism, a long lasting suspension and doubt that has blocked his way toward a vital interaction with his people. To be cured, his suffering soul needs a therapy, and that is to change his tune and revise his perception of his symbolic role, to break with his static to indulge in a

dynamic indeterminate role through the chain of signification. Hamlet's sterility is that he cannot choose between his own desire and the desire of the Other. It is not Hamlet's desire for his mother that inhibits him from action, but his entrapment in his mother's desire. What troubles him as a subject is that he confuses his desire and that he finds his desire not as constituted in relation to the Other, but in assimilation with the Other.

To revive his position as a desiring subject and to get rid of the psychological stagnation resulted in his hesitation, he must be wounded; symbolically, he must injure himself to reconstitute his desire and redefine his approach toward the Real. Instead of being in pain with the inaccessible Real reflected in the play in the unreachable figure of the mother and unachievable love for Ophelia, the prince needs to reconcile to these traumatic experiences. The fact is that the driving force in life is the loss of object of desire, and it is the perpetuity of unachievable *Jouissance* that makes desire continually seek satisfaction.

The dramatic death of Hamlet's objects of desire, Ophelia and (m)Other, that happens at the end of the play when he himself is mortally wounded, provides Hamlet the chance to figure out his position as a subject, as it is read and understood in Lacanian psychoanalysis, since his objects of desires are dead now, so once again they are turned to that ultimate unattainable object/ *Jouissance*. If by means of fantasy men build up their social reality as a reaction to the Real / *Jouissance*, now out of the sudden unwanted death of his loved ones, Hamlet learns to reconcile himself to his psychological dissatisfaction and yearns for his objects of desire in an everlasting rupture with them. A revelation which helps the prince to face death in peace and with honor though catastrophically late.

Hamlet As thou'rt a man,

Give me the cup. Let go. By heaven, I'll

ha't. O god, Horatio, what a wounded

name, Things standing thus unknown, shall

live behind me!

If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,

Absent thee from felicity a while,

And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain

To tell my story.

Horatio Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,

And flights of angels sing thee to rest— (W. Shakespeare,

Complete Works, 1991, pp. 687-688)

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