

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 5, May 2019

www.ijellh.com

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The Recurrent Yayati Complex in the Characters of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Abstract

The following paper attempts to explore the three characters of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: The Ghost of Hamlet's father, Claudius and Polonius, the three paternal figures and analyse the cause of their behavioural complexities using a widely popular myth of Indian classic "Yayati". Often regarded as the Reverse Oedipus complex by critics, Yayati went on to sacrifice the life of his own son. The aforementioned characters in the play show this particular complexity in their tendency to enforce their will on their offspring or directly plotting the murder of the son as is the case with Hamlet. Additionally, the article also tries to establish the lesser regarded fact that the maternal/female figure becomes the scapegoat in the encounter between son and father which leaves the paper for further exploration from a different approach.

Keywords: Yayati Complex, Hamlet, Claudius, Ghost, Polonius, tragedy, Psychoanalysis

Shakespeare has been primary focus for scholars of literature and critics of almost all schools, be it theory of Authorship, New Criticism, Post Structuralism or New Historicism. Perhaps it is due to the complexity of the characters in his plays and diverse nature of the flaws and qualities they possess that different criticism and theories have been deployed to radicalise justification about the actions these characters perform. One of the most popular

opinion about a particular character which has been in discussion for quite some time and where the most eminent critics partook in sharing views is Hamlet. The chief reason that Hamlet enjoys exponentially more attention than any other Tragic heroes created by Shakespeare is his saturation of actions and the consequences it has on the plot. Shakespeare has always given sufficient reasons and hints to his audience about the hamartia of his central or supporting figures. Whether it is the madness of Lady Macbeth fuelled by repentance, lack of judgement of character of Othello and Brutus or Autocracy of Caesar; they all share Shakespeare's clear perception and control over the figures. However, the portrayal of almost every character in his lengthiest play, *Hamlet* shatters the organic unity of this control.

The greatest muddle with this particular play is that Shakespeare himself was not aware of the problems he was creating. His sanity of mind becomes more questionable with the progress of every scene. At the same time, some of the soliloquies he delivers and the comments that he delivers on the art of acting in Act III, Scene 2 of the play contradicts with his mental state:

“Suit the action to the world and the world to the action...the essence of acting is to hold the mirror up to nature”

Now, this amiss had previously been answered by the Psychoanalytic critics with reference to Hamlet's first soliloquy *“Frailty thy name is women!”* as a repressed Oedipal complex. Hamlet, as he gives justifications for his motif of revenge to the audience appears close to Hieronimo of *The Spanish Tragedy* who, like Hamlet had the motif of avenging his son's killer. But at the same time he is also disgusted by the “whoring” of his mother. Gertrude's remarriage to Hamlet's own uncle, Claudius overpowers his reason and his lack of emotional intelligence causes the inception of his irresolution, disgust, mistrust, confusions in the play and deaths of a number of “innocent” characters. Freudian critics stand firm with the belief that Hamlet's sexual feeling for his mother sparkles the hatred for Claudius and his

choice of insults for Gertrude give sufficient support. However, this sole perception about the ultimate downfall of the state of Denmark can be quintessentially altered if we put the sole exasperation and bitterness of Hamlet's mind aside for a moment and start focusing on the other male characters, especially Claudius and Polonius.

"Let not the royal bed of Denmark be a couch for luxury and damned incest" this is what the Ghost tells Hamlet. Luxury, pomp, avarice for power and betrayal of Paternal figures let loose in *Hamlet*, shrouded behind the chaos Hamlet causes. The warning of the Ghost of the late King Hamlet sets a chain of murders in motion. Had there been no supernatural occurrences in the play, Hamlet would have probably become a fine King once Claudius passed the mantle. But the vengeful nature of the father of Hamlet runs adamant even if it means to drive the son into frenzy and at the cost of his (Prince Hamlet's) life force. Yayati is regarded as the "reverse Oedipus" and the portrayal of this mythological figure in popular cultures have opened up new dimensions for a deconstructive study of texts. It is a popular misconception shared by many of the European readers that Indian Classical Criticism is only restricted to dramaturgy, Dhvani and Rasa and therefore lack sufficient devices to interpret modern or some of the European classical art forms. Girish Karnad's mastery of ancient mythos of Hinduism has not only fruited a semi fictional Mahabharata universe and the parable of Religion, but also provided the world with a touchstone.

Yayati first portrayed in the Ninth Chapter of *Bhagavata Purana* is a mythological king and supposed ancestor of the Kurus who was charged of adultery, and cursed by the *guru* of demons and his father-in-law, Shukracharya. The liaison of Yayati with Sharmishtha, daughter of a Demon King and Devayani, the daughter of Shukracharya begets him a prematurely old age as a result of the curse. To remove this curse and get his vitality back, Yayati had to coerce one of his sons to sacrifice his youth. Just as Oedipus became the slayer of his father and hereby became the King of Thebes himself, Yayati took the vitality of Puru,

the youngest of his sons to enjoy a thousand years of lust and sensual pleasures. Thus, this parable has inspired the coinage of the term “Yayati Complex” by Devdutta Pattanaik in his article *Myth Theory* where the paternal figure eliminates the child to survive himself.

In *Hamlet*, both the paternal figures of Hamlet: the ghost of his father and his own uncle who, by marrying his mother becomes his foster father causes torment for him in extreme ways. The ghost’s hysteric urge for retaliation brings Hamlet to the verge of self-destruction. It is often overlooked that the ghost’s primary motif was not to provide a better future for his son and his subjects by cleansing Denmark of its enemies but to extort revenge by any means necessary:

GHOST: “Revenge his foul and most unnatural murther”

HAMLET: “Murther?”

GHOST: “Murther most foul, as in the best it is;

But this most foul, strange and unnatural.” (Act I, Scene 5, line 761-763)

Thus, it is apparent from the manner the ghost speaks that he repeatedly wants to remind Hamlet that he must do the deeds of the ghost. It is also worth noting the supernatural machinery Shakespeare employs in his plays is bound to lead the hero to his demise, just as the Witches in *Macbeth* erratically causes the hero to behave impulsively and ultimate death, the same can also be said about the Ghost. The following lines establish the fact that revenge must be served, even though it would kill hamlet in the process by psychologically alienating him from reason:

MARCELLUS: “We have sworn, my lord, already.”

HAMLET: “Indeed, upon my sword, indeed.”

GHOST: (Cries Under stage) “Swear!”

HAMLET: “Ha, ha, boy! Sayst thou so?

Art thou there, truepenny?

Come on, you hear this

fellow in the cellarage

Consent to swear”

HORATIO: “Propose the oath, my lord”

HAMLET: “Never to speak of this that

You have seen

Swear by my sword!”

GHOST (beneath): “Swear!”

Thus the ghost ravishes the sanity of Hamlet and drives him to his catastrophe after making sure Claudius is being murdered and this is how the ghost of his own paternal figure shows Yayati complex by murdering his own son in a psychological way.

The next character that can be charged with the same flaw is Claudius, the brother of the late king whom he murdered to snatch the throne for himself and married his wife. Although Hamlet never properly approved of the marriage of his widowed mother with his own uncle, he never actually expressed his blatant hatred for Claudius until the ghost showed up and revealed his (Claudius’s) betrayal. Therefore, it is highly arguable whether Hamlet actually suffered from any Oedipus complex to eliminate his uncle. On the other hand, the actions of Claudius give firm evidence that he always wanted to sacrifice his nephew and foster child, Hamlet to secure the throne of Denmark and Gertrude for himself. To have a closer look at Hamlet he hires Rosencrantz and Guildenstern *being of so young days brought up with him*. Now, though it is clear that he hires these two gentlemen to enquire about Hamlet’s sudden change in behaviour, whether it is Claudius’s own fear of getting revealed of his brother’s murder or his genuine concern and care for his nephew is questionable. If it is safe to assume that Hamlet suffered from psychosexual complexities, then these lines also prove that Claudius also had a hidden agenda blanketed by his choice of words:

CLAUDIUS: "to draw him on to pleasures and to Gather.

So much as from occasion you may glean.

Whether ought to us unknown." (Act II, Scene 2, Lines 15-17)

It seems Claudius wants Hamlet to be deceived by pompousness and thereby pacify his better judgements, resolution and abilities to act out in general. It is similar to Yayati who in exchange for his Son, Puru's youth, wanted to make him legatee of his fortunes. The design of keeping Hamlet off the real power has previously been envisioned by King Claudius as he tenaciously employed the two acquaintances of Hamlet on whom Claudius thought, Hamlet would be suspecting the least and therefore they could spy and brainwash him on his behest. Things start getting a little more obvious after the accidental and at the same time extremely controversial death of Polonius in act III, Scene 4 as we get to see the devious and cunning plotting of Claudius as he dispatches Laertes, the son of Polonius to exact revenge in the name of "damage control" against Hamlet:

LAERTES:

I'm lost in it, my lord. But let him come.

It warms the very sickness in my heart

That I shall live and tell him to his teeth,

"Thus diddest thou".

CLAUDIUS:

If it be so, Laertes—

As how should it be so? How otherwise? —

Will you be ruled by me?

LAERTES:

Ay, my lord—

So you will not o'errule me to a peace.

CLAUDIUS:

To thine own peace. If he be now returned,

As checking at his voyage, and that he means

No more to undertake it, I will work him

To an exploit, now ripe in my devise,

Under the which he shall not choose but fall.

And for his death no wind of blame shall breathe, (Act IV, Scene 7)

Therefore, by this time it becomes overtly clear that there was some serious foul play going through the underbelly. Claudius poisons the mind of Laertes by further telling him Hamlet has always been jealous of his prowess with sword and seduced him to use a sharpened blade instead of a dull fencing sword and as a backup plan, Claudius also proposes if Hamlet somehow succeeds in defeating Laertes, he will be offered a poisoned Goblet that will eventually kill him:

CLAUDIUS:

We'll make a solemn wager on your cunning. —

I ha 't! When in your motion you are hot and dry,

As make your bouts more violent to that end,

And that he calls for drink, I'll have prepared him

A chalice for the nonce, whereon but sipping,

If he by chance escape your venom'd stuck, (Act IV, Scene 7)

Like a King convinces his pawns to do the dirty deeds for him, Claudius repeatedly coaxes Laertes into killing Hamlet because he wants to keep his hands clean of bloodshed and remain untraceable of any crimes. Had Claudius any clear conscience and not overpowered by Yayati complex, he could have disposed of Hamlet publicly for the murder of Polonius by enforcing proper law of the state and bringing the murderer to justice instead

of offering him the poisoned chalice which, as a matter of fact, accidentally kills Gertrude. Her death subsequently becomes the final nail in coffin and Hamlet loses the last hope of his life, leading him to stab Claudius to death and thereby bringing demise for an entire Empire.

In Kanrad's *Yayati*, the character of Chitrlekha is incorporated as a spokesperson who questions the selfish act of Yayati. She is the wife of Puru who objects the notion that the young will cease to exist and the old will keep existing by feeding on the young. She suggests Yayati that she married Puru for his potency for procreation; now if Puru's youth is exchanged with Yayati's senility, Yayati must take over that role. Shortly she commits suicide that forces Yayati to admit his mistakes and give the youth back to Puru. Thus, it is also worth noticing how the Yayati complex of the paternal figure not only dismantles the child, but also the supporting female figure in the process. In Hamlet's case, Gertrude becomes the accidental casualty of nepoticide and as for Yayati, he leads Chitrlekha to her doom. This leads to the last person on the list who can also be charged of the same and this is Polonius, the father of Laertes and Ophelia. Polonius is a pompous, power hungry fool who is often charged by critics as guilty of devising the plot of committing regicide along with Claudius. However, he also is driven by his own Yayati complex. As Jacques Lacan has proposed in his concept of "mirror stage" that a child is alienated from his own image and gets closer to the person he envies the most, that is the father figure, Laertes also falls into this category who spent his whole life following his father's coattails and on the other hand, Polonius kept telling his son what to do throughout his life, robbing him of his self-image and self-assertion. Polonius has always wanted to feed on vitality of power and grandeur and through the course of the play it is evident he does not let his children have free will.

POLONIUS: "Give thy thoughts no tongue, Nor any unproportion'd thought his act. Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar. Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,

Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel; But do not dull thy palm with entertainment Of each new-hatch'd, unfledged comrade. Beware...” (Act I, Scene 3)

This is what he advises his son, Laertes which stands as a grand irony judging the fact that throughout his life, how Polonius has manipulated his son. This can be further illustrated by taking direct reference from Act II, Scene 1 of the play where Polonius dispatches Reynaldo to spy on Laertes just because he does not trust his own son.

In act III, Scene 2 of the play Claudius and Polonius spy on Hamlet for a possible explanation of his madness where Polonius tries to establish the fact that the madness is caused by Hamlet's jilted love for his daughter, Ophelia, which on a surface level sounds comic, judging the stupidity of the explanation at the given context. However, another possible explanation for such a comment is Polonius's own shrewdness who wants to marry his daughter off with Hamlet with or without her consent to be acknowledged as a man of property and Royal Status and if Hamlet was a little bit of mad he could easily pull the strings. The self-centred Yayati like nature of Polonius is evident from his lack of care to his children's opinions and life decisions. In Act I, Scene 3, when Ophelia confesses her love for Hamlet to Polonius, he said: *“Affection? Pooh, you speak like a green girl*

Unsifted in such perilous circumstance.

Do you believe his tenders, as you call them?” (Lines 101-103)

But as soon he sees the opportunity to grasp power, he is prepared to use Ophelia as a sacrificial lamb. How he treats both his children radiate his psychoanalytical complexity of character and this is highly identical to that of Yayati. As discussed earlier, another female character dies as a result of her paternal figure's obsession for power and pomp, culminated with the suicide of Ophelia.

To conclude this paper, I can say if the Freudian notion of Oedipal complexity can be taken into account for validation of Hamlet's madness then using the same psychoanalytical strings, those above mentioned characters can be categorised as "Yayatis" in Shakespearian literature. Till date, Hamlet has been one of the most controversial characters among his creations and generic explanations have given away multitudes of research opportunities. Even so, many unknowns are yet to be discovered in the geography of his plays just like the ones discussed in this paper that have genuine scopes left to apply not only through Western literary critique as in Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest*, but Indian classical criticism too.

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