Chapter II

HAMLET

(MOUSETRAP SCENE)
From the very beginning, Danish body politic is marked by metaphysical as well as political disorder. When interpreted in terms of religious and theological beliefs, this kind of disorder is but inevitable because the 'crime past' is no ordinary crime rather a crime against the highest authority i.e. the king. Hence, the opening of the play “in the dead waste and middle of the night”, and incidents like the presence of an armoured ghost, “daily cast of brazen cannon”, “strict and most observant watch”, are not a “prologue to the omen coming on” rather; these are suggestive of the violated order and transgressed law. Along with this social and metaphysical disorder, Danish body politic is marked, from the very beginning, by political disorder as well. Horatio reports the political disorder imposed by Fortinbras in the following lines:

But to recover of us by strong hand
And terms compulsatory those foresaid lands
So by his father lost. And this, I take it,
Is the main motive of our preparations,
(I.i, 105-08)

This impending political crisis, inevitably, gives birth to the social crisis, which is again reported by Horatio:

And this, I take it,
Is the main motive of our preparations,
The source of our watch, and the chief head
Of this post-haste and rummage in the land.
(I.i, 107-110)

According to Ribner, “Hamlet opens, like Romeo and Juliet, not with a view of the hero, but with an impression of the evil into which he is to come. ... It is reflected in the coldness and gloom of the castle
battlements; the rottenness in the state of Denmark is given imaginative expression in Francisco’s “‘tis bitter cold/ And I am sick at heart”(I.i, 9-10). We are made ready for the appearance of the ghost, an unnatural phenomenon which reflects the perversion of God’s harmonious order which it will be Hamlet’s mission to restore to harmony... The feeling of ancient evil, insidious and all-corrupting is established in the first scene of the play”. 1

The regicide, though it is reported only in act I, scene v, has already reversed the harmonious pattern of Danish commonwealth and of this created universe. In the Elizabethan age, duty to king was as good as duty to God; therefore Claudius’ sin is not only against a brother or a king rather against God itself. According to the contemporary beliefs, king held the highest position in the hierarchy of rational souls. Hence by cutting the king off his “life, of crown, of queen”, Claudius has taken the highest degree away, consequently evil is everywhere in Danish body politic. Under the sway of his “wicked wit” Claudius lets go what Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in their reflections on “the cess of majesty” remind us

The cess of majesty
Dies not alone, but like a gulf doth draw
What’s near it with it.

(III.iii, 15-17)

By diverging from the normative path, Claudius has disturbed the harmony of Danish social order. Hence his late realization too is in vain.

O,my offence is rank,it smells to heaven;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon’t–
A brother’s murder.

(III, iii, 36-38)
Claudius is no more “the paragon of animals”; rather his bestial instincts have transformed him into an animal.

The reversed social order is conspicuous from the very beginning. The opening of the play “In the dead waste and middle of the night” aptly corresponds to Claudius’ “bloody and unnatural deeds”. It equally symbolizes the all-pervasive evil, which has enveloped Danish social order and which ultimately corresponds to the universal evil due to ‘Adam’s fall’. As far as Claudius’ redemption is concerned, it is never beyond his reach, but the truth is that in his irrationality he has reversed the natural pattern of Elsinore.

As long as his crime is not disclosed, Claudius appears to be a loving stepfather in his concern for Hamlet, and particularly in his announcement:

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for let the world lake note
You are the most immediate to our throne,
And with no less nobility of love
Than that which dearest father bears his son
Do I impart toward you.
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(I.ii, 108-112)

Similar views are echoed by Jay L. Halio in his article: “Claudius seems to be a considerate stepfather as well as the efficient ruler of the kingdom, aided and abetted by similarly minded courtiers.” His political efficiency is brought forth, in his court address and in Fortinbras’ enterprise, which he successfully curbs as reported by Voltemand:
which he, in brief, obeys,
Receives rebuke from Norway, and, in fine,
Makes vow before his uncle never more
To give th’ assay of arms against your Majesty:

(Il.ii, 68-71)

Claudius is, unlike Macbeth, a passive character and it appears that he initially does not bear any ill will against Hamlet nevertheless his image of a wise, efficient king and considerate stepfather ‘falls to pieces’ when the “most foul, strange and unnatural crime” is disclosed. The revelation by Hamlet’s “father’s spirit” uncovers his appearance of sanctity and brings forth his serpent like nature:

’Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,
A serpent stung me – so the whole ear of Denmark
Is by a forged process of my death
Rankly abus’d – but know, thou noble youth,
The serpent that did sting they father’s life
Now wears his crown.

(I.v, 35-40)

This ‘macabre tale’ by the ghost exposes Claudius and reveals his unnatural deed. The animal imagery used by the ghost reveals the level to which Claudius has fallen. His act is as bad as that of Satan.

If Elsinore is marked by political and social crisis from the beginning, it is but natural due to the unnatural reversal of order. Besides this social and political crisis, the “rotten”, “unweeded” disturbed state of Danish body politic is suggested by the presence of the “portentous figure”, assuming Hamlet’s ‘noble father’s person’. Claudius’ crime is against a king and “A king” so writes Ribner, “was not like other men. He derived his power, according to Tudor theory, because he was God’s agent on earth, designated by God through the legitimacy of his lineal descent”.³ Hence, despite the favourable
projection of Claudius, at the outset, "the play does, however as it progresses increase dramatically our sense of Claudius’ unfitness."

Claudius’ gains are Hamlet’s losses. Claudius’ “purpos’d evil” might have fulfilled his ambition, given him the crown and queen, but it has shattered Hamlet’s ideal world. According to critics Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong’d. This “incestuous, murd’rous, damned Dane” not only usurps king Hamlet’s divine right, but also, unnaturally deprives Hamlet of his ‘hereditary succession’. This deprivation is symptomatic of the reversed order, of discord, which is essential due to the gross violation of the divine law. Though “at the outset he tries to be conciliatory to Hamlet, despite the prince’s obvious dislike of him”\(^5\), the truth is that, irrespective of the critical controversies, Claudius has “popp’d in between th’ election and my hopes”. Dover Wilson, Hanigmann and Stabler may debate whether Claudius is a usurper or not, for Hamlet he is a:

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\begin{align*}
\text{A murderer and a villain,} \\
\text{A slave that is not twentieth part the tithe} \\
\text{Of your precedent lord, a vice of kings,} \\
\text{A cutpurse of the empire and the rule,} \\
\text{That from a shelf the precious diadem stole} \\
\text{And put it in his pocket-} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(III.iv, 97-99)

Apparently, Claudius’ claim to the Danish throne is not at all unnatural because in the Elizabethan age “succession by a king’s brother rather than his son was permitted by the system of an elective monarchy which Denmark in fact had.”\(^6\) Besides this “the succession of a brother is paralleled within the play in Norway.”\(^7\) Nevertheless, Claudius has
succeeded to the throne only by using unfair means, which otherwise belongs to Hamlet whom Ophelia defines in following term.

The courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s eye, tongue, sword,
Th’ expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
(III.i, 153-55)

According to the theological perspective, Claudius’ succession is as unnatural as his fratricidal act. The moral pattern of Danish body politic has truly been reversed because, instead of a “Jove”, “a very very pajock” rules the throne and instead of an eligible son, a brother succeeds the crown. Evil in Danish body politic is everywhere, first of all due to the original sin and then due to Claudius’ “leperous distilment” which has disturbed and contaminated the Danish order.

This contamination is exemplified further in Claudius’ undisputed succession. “Since the whole court appears to go along with Claudius’s marriage as well as his claim to the throne the whole court is implicated in his sin.” Similar views about the court are expressed by Harold Jenkins: “His father has been succeeded by his uncle, to whom the fickle public have transferred allegiance and the Queen her wifely embraces.”

Claudius’ undisputed succession is but an example of complete moral dissolution from the bottom to the top:

Nor have we herein barr’d
Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone
With this affair along. For all, our thanks.
(I.ii, 14-16)

Ironically, if Claudius has reversed the moral pattern, Gertrude is no less a sinner. Her ‘incestuous marriage’ to Claudius not only reverses the law of the Book of Common Prayer which prohibited marriage to
husband's brother, she defies her previous marital vows as well. She is responsible for Hamlet's tainted vision of womanhood and is behind his famous utterance: "Frailty thy name is woman". Hamlet, from the outset, is "convinced that his mother and Claudius have sinned deeply by getting married" and "he sees his mother's incestuous marriage as the source of his own defilement." Hence he chides the queen:

You can not call it love; for at your age
The heyday in blood is tame, it's humble,
And waits upon the judgment, and what judgement
Would step from this to this
(III.iv, 68-71)

According to Harold Jenkins: "The incestuous nature of the marriage is made clear to the audience from the first."

Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,
Th' imperial jointress to this warlike state,
Have we,
(I.ii, 8-10)

Everyone in Danish body politic is busy in violating moral, social or political order. Gertrude, instead of weeping like Niobe, makes her marital vows "As false as dicers' oath". According to Hamlet her unreasonable act has transformed "sweet religion" into a "rhapsody of words". Instead of mourning like, Hecuba, she advises her son to shed his "inky cloak".

Good Hamlet, Cast thy nighted colour off,
And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.
(I.ii, 68-69)

Except a few, everyone, including the king and the queen, is busy in violating the laws of Nature; the commonwealth is marked with
carousing instead of mourning. With this total dissolution of social order, chaos is all pervasive and in it innocents are suffering and some such like Hamlet, wish to escape from this:

O that this too too sullied 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!
(I.ii, 129-132)

Claudius’ unnatural deed has truly turned Danish body politic into a prison, where everyone is his “passion’s slave”. Everyone is busy in betraying God through his unnatural deeds. Their irrational acts are defeating the very purpose of their existence. Traditionally man is recognized superior to animals, but due to unreasonable acts, almost everyone in Denmark has fallen lower than animal itself.

The ideal world of Hamlet has been shattered, by the irrational deeds, to such an extant that for him the sub-lunary region is no more than a “sterile promontory,” and everything seems to him, “but a foul and pestilent con-/gregation of vapours”. Even the glory of heaven seems insignificant. The harmonious world of the thoughtful, meditative man has been reversed and to make his situation worse, he tragically turns out to be a man with a deed to do who for the most of the time fails to do it. A man, who finds himself unable to cope up with the all-pervasive evil, is asked to avenge his father’s murder.

Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.
(I.v, 25)

Commenting on the nature of his task, the editor of the Arden edition writes thus: “Hamlet’s task, when placed in the widest moral
context, is not simply to kill his father’s killer but by doing so to rid the world by satyr and restore it to Hyperion.”

Though Hamlet willingly accepts the task but what is more problematic is that he fails to execute his father’s commandment. Hamlet immediately, after Ghost’s departure, says:

I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live

(I.v, 99-102)

But instead of throwing immediate challenge to Claudius, he prefers to “put on an antic disposition”. Despite his resolution to avenge his father he shadows himself under the calm, though restless, which to Laertes is:

That drop of blood that’s calm proclaims me bastard,
Cries cuckold to my father,

(IV.v, 116-117)

Undoubtedly, Hamlet is not rash and impetuous like Fortinbras and Laertes, which is implicit in the following speech:

And prais’d be rashness for it: let us know
Our indiscretion sometime serves us well
When our deep plots do pall;

(V.ii, 6-8)

Hamlet’s reluctance to act has been subjected to numerous critical approaches. What is it that accounts for Hamlet’s inaction despite having so many instances e.g. Fortinbras and the players who provoke him again and again? Why does he fail despite so many resolutions and constant chidings from within? Why does he fail to execute his father’s command despite having “the motive and the cue for passion”? 

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Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing-no, not for a king,
(II.ii, 561-64)

Why, despite having resolutions and will he keeps on suspending the ghost’s commands? Why, despite having so many occasions, which spur his “dull revenge”, he cannot say like Laertes:

To this point I stand,
That both the worlds I give to negligence,
Let come what comes only I’ll be reveng’d
Most thoroughly for my father.
(IV.v, 133-136)

Various critical approaches account for various solutions. From a Freudian point of view, his Oedipus complex prohibits him from avenging his father. Whereas according to some critics, his Protestant intellect doubts and interrogates the task assigned to him. According to critics he is the symbol of the emergent man, hence he is reluctant due to his distrust in the ghost and the code of revenge, which he again and again interrogates. His doubts, which are Protestant in nature, restrain him, and trap him in between his filial obligation and the archaic values, which he rejects from the very corner.

For E.M.W. Tillyard, Hamlet’s reluctance is due to the conflict between his wit and will. In his discourse on the Elizabethan theological and philosophical beliefs, Tillyard states: “It may not be an accident that of the heroes in Shakespeare’s four tragic masterpiece two, Othello and Lear are defective in understanding and two, Hamlet and Macbeth in will.” This implies that his reason prevents Hamlet from becoming a passion or will’s slave, which is imperfect. Undoubtedly Hamlet is a man of reason, so informs his philosophical soliloquies: his critical
discourses and comments on characters and their actions foregrounds his knowledge of human dual nature and of sin. Whether it is his reflection on human nature:

What piece of work is a man,  
how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form  
and moving how express and admirable, in action  
how like an angel,

(I.ii, 303-305)

Or his criticism of his mother’s ‘incestuous marriage’, this all brings forth his intellectual bent of mind and immense consciousness:

O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason  
Would have mourn’d longer- married with my uncle,  
My father’s brother-but no more like my father

(I.ii, 150-152)

Undoubtedly he is forced by the paternal obligation to take revenge but in the words of Tillyard he is not willing enough to act. His reason or what critics call inwardness due to protestant ideology refuses to surrender to the bestial passion. His skeptical reason prevents him from avenging his father. Unlike Macbeth, Hamlet refuses to yield to passions and listens to his reason.

Irving Ribner too echoes Tillyard’s view. Ribner bases his analysis on the Christian humanistic framework the age and elaborates all that is implicit in Tillyard’s statement. Tillyard is apt, when he calls Hamlet defective in will. But Ribner and a few other writers who analyze Hamlet in Christian framework elaborate what he does not discourse upon. Implicit in Ribner’s analysis is that though Hamlet is a man of intellect, nonetheless his intellect is one of divided comprehensiveness instead of a perfect comprehension. He is not
willing because of his disbelief in the ghost, in the code of revenge, in archaic values. He also fails to understand the "ways and purposes" of divinity. Though Hamlet's understanding and his judgement capabilities are capable enough to prevent him from becoming a passion's slave, yet these are not perfect enough to secure redemption and to solve the underlying metaphysical problems. According to the theological and philosophical beliefs, redemption can be achieved either through perfect self-knowledge, which leads to the knowledge of God or through perfect knowledge of divinity itself which again in turn is the knowledge of self.

On the basis of Ribner's critical approaches to *Hamlet*, it can be said that Hamlet's self-knowledge is perfect which prevents him from acting unreasonably but he still needs to learn something more. This prerequisite knowledge can be summed up in the words of Ribner: "At the end of the play Hamlet learns to accept the order of the universe and to become a passive instrument in the hands of a purposive and benevolent God. When he has done so, he can accomplish his mission in spite of his human failings. Like all men he must die, but Hamlet's death, like that of Romeo, is also his victory, for through his encounter with evil he has learned the nature of evil and the means of opposing it. With this knowledge he is ready for salvation."¹⁵ Hamlet's tragic journey can also be termed the journey of an intellectual man towards growth to maturity and towards redemption.

Amidst all sorts of violence and discord at social, moral and civil level, Hamlet is the only person, who is asked to restore the violated order and, ironically, besides innocent Ophelia and Horatio he is the only person who secures redemption. None of the characters, who
violate order by their irrational acts, achieve redemption. Gertrude
definitely realizes her sin when Hamlet shows him the mirror:

O Hamlet, speak no more.
Thou turn’st my eyes into my very soul,
And there I see such black and grain’d spots
As will not leave their tinct.

(III.iv, 88-91)

This honest confession may save her sinned soul, yet she is beyond
redemption.

As far as Claudius is concerned, he too is not beyond redemption,
but under the sway of his “wicked wit”, he again and again diverges
from divine ‘Reason’. He is not willing enough to restore Danish body
politic to its natural harmony by shedding his ambition, crown and
queen. Claudius’ “damn’d and black “soul” remains unpurged despite
his confessions, first of all because his confessions are not honest and
sincere as he himself says:

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below.
Words without thoughts never to heaven go

(III.iii, 97-98)

Secondly, he retains his “offence” despite his knowledge of the
irrationality involved. He fails to seek God’s mercy genuinely. Despite
the agony of the soul, he fails to release himself from his chained
condition. His dilemma is very much like that of Macbeth before the
murder of Duncan. Gertrude might have sinned unknowingly but purges
herself consciously and willingly, whereas Claudius, despite being
conscious of his sin, willingly fails to purge his soul. He keeps on
conspiring against Hamlet instead of giving him, his throne back. Such a
man who again and again diverges from normative path, despite having
moral qualms is beyond redemption. Claudius, ‘the spirits of evil’ itself
is beyond redemption. He learns the evil involved but does not renounce it.

As far as Laertes is concerned he is led by evil into very action that Hamlet has been able to avoid. “His instigator to revenge is indeed the ‘goblin damned’ which Hamlet feared his father’s ghost might be. Laertes lives and dies as ‘fortune’s fool’, unable to control his passion, a rebel against order, and, in contrast to Hamlet, a failure in his cause.” Laertes may have earned a place in heaven because of his honest confessions but he does not realize the evil within.

Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet.  
Mine and my father’s death come not upon thee,  
Nor thine on me.  

(V.ii, 333-336)

As far as Hamlet is concerned, according to Tillyard he is not willing enough because of his comparatively sound understanding but according to Ribner, he is required to learn a few more things. Intellectual queries impede Hamlet’s way towards redemption despite the knowledge of self, which is also redemptive. According to the theological beliefs of the age the ultimate aim of man on this earth was to know and to love God. Accordingly Hamlet’s knowledge of divinity is imperfect; consequently he fails to understand the workings of divinity and curses his destiny. Hence he is beyond redemption despite having the knowledge of human dual nature. His personality is not flawless.

Though Hamlet’s grief over his father’s recent death is natural and is in direct contrast to that of Gertrude’s “o’er-hasty marriage”, the Christian studies view it unnatural and in direct defiance of divinity for
“it implicitly denies the justice of God who has decreed his father’s death...Hamlet’s excessive grief has the exaggeration of all symbol; it represents the state of man with ‘heart unfortified, a mind impatient/ An understanding simple and unschool’d......... This is the low point which from, like Romeo, he must grow to maturity.”¹⁷ According to some such Christian studies, Hamlet, like Lear, lacks certain virtues, which can make him perfect and redeem him.

If his ‘melancholia disposition’ suggests his grief, his free attitude, defies divine pattern as well. Though Hamlet’s inwardness does not mean that he is a skeptic rather it means that he is not always strictly guided by religion. Ironically, Hamlet’s inwardness and Protestant doubts and fears are the only thing that impedes his way despite having “motive and cue for revenge”. His inwardness is the biggest obstacle in his way to redemption. He questions the act of revenge itself, fails to understand its need, fails to understand that the duty imposed upon him is not an act of personal vengeance, rather “the duty of every Christian soul: to combat this evil which distorts God’s harmonious order.”¹⁸

Irrespective of the Christian framework of the play, the play clearly depicts some sort of development in Hamlet’s character. Ultimately, from a man of resolutions and dissolutions, he becomes one who fully affirms his faith in divinity, in His ways, and learns to cope up with all-pervasive evil. Hamlet ultimately grows to maturity. Much more important is that he sheds his stubborn attitude and resolves to eradicate evil out of the sense of natural justice and not personal
vengeance. This time, he resolves to eradicate evil itself instead of Claudius:

Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon-
He that hath kill’d my king and whor’d my mother,
Popp’d in between th’ election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life
And with such coz’nage- is’t not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm?

(V.ii. 63-68)

Nevertheless, Hamlet’s redemption does not lie in his resolution; rather it lies in his realization of divinity, which inspires him to act. The moment Hamlet affirms:

There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will-

(V. ii, 10-11)

He is one with God and hence a redeemed soul. This union is in itself redemptive. This union Hamlet again and again affirms. As long as he considers revenge as a personal vengeance, his Protestant intellect restrained him, but the moment he learns his job, he learns that he is eliminating evil and hence moves ahead to set the order right. He takes revenge out of divine inspiration.

Hamlet’s development and redemption lies in his tragic journey, from a man of extreme self-consciousness into becoming the “scourage and minister”. On his voyage to England, young Hamlet grows to maturity. At a time when he considers himself bound to punishment due to his crime against Polonius, he is miraculously saved. This miraculous escape generates faith to divinity in Hamlet. This faith fills him with a feeling i.e. “readiness is all”. Hamlet no more interrogates the ways and
purposes of divinity or the code of revenge. This sudden development removes all the barriers of mind. Towards the end of his life he is aware and unaffected by internal as well as external evil. As far as the mode of redemption is concerned if his union with God is redemptive, this union takes place only by learning the true nature and the ways of divinity, which Hamlet learns during his tragic journey. He is bestowed with God’s grace, which ultimately helps him in learning the purpose and ways of divinity. His redemption is, in a way different from the rest of three protagonists undertaken in this proposed study, for his redemption comes to him without violating the order or involving in sinful activities. His faith in Divine Providence is redemptive. “This faith Hamlet acquires on his sea voyage, and it is the principal mark of his regeneration.”

To conclude, Hamlet is redeemed. His realization of divinity is implicit in his surrender to the divine will; surrender not out of helplessness rather a reasonable one. This transformation is one from divided comprehensiveness to single comprehension. He is no more the young Hamlet rather a mature one, who wins all praises. He never before affirms his faith in divinity in such terms. As far as his transformation is concerned it is complete and to quote Harold Jenkins: “Revenge still has its ruthlessness, as witness what it dos to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; but reluctance, now that he recognizes and submits to a universal order, is at an end.” Hamlet symbolic of Renaissance questioning and doubt finally surrenders to Divine will and is redeemed through God’s grace.
References:
6. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
19. Ibid.