CHAPTER II

HAMLET THEN, HAMLET NOW

Ros and Guil in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Alvin Theatre, New York, 1967

Hamlet and Ophelia in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, National Theatre Production at the Old Vic Theatre, 1969.
"What do you read my lord?

"Words, words, words". (II. ii. 192-193)

The last decade of the second millennium saw an unmatched "Hamlet" boom. Of all Shakespearean plays, "Hamlet" in particular has enjoyed a startlingly unabated re-emergence into popular prominence. The procrastinating Hamlet has always been a focus of fascination, discussion, analysis and criticism. If you ask a common man what he knows about Shakespeare, he will quite probably reply, "To be or not to be". Succeeding generations of readers and critics have sympathised and empathised with Hamlet. The play is accepted to be the most fitting to the conventional concept of tragedy. "Hamlet" has conditioned generations to formulate a particular perception and attitude towards life. Terence Hawkes comments on this powerful cultural influence of the play:

"Hamlet comes to function as a universal cultural reference point, a piece of social shorthand. Bits of its language embed themselves in everyday speech until it starts to seem like a web of quotations. In the end, it enters our way of life as one of the sources through which that way of life generates meaning. As an aspect of the works of 'Shakespeare', the play helps to shape large categories of
thought, particularly those which inform political and moral
stances, modes and types of relationship, our ideas of how
men and women, fathers and mothers, husbands and wives,
uncles and nephews, sons and daughters ought respectively
to behave and interact. It becomes part of a means of first
formulating and then validating important power
relationships, say between politicians and intellectuals,
soldiers and students, the world of action and that of
contemplation. Perhaps it’s probing of the relationship
between art and social life, role-playing on stage and role-
playing in society, appears so powerfully to offer an
adequate account of important aspects of our own
experience that it ends by constructing them. In other
words, *Hamlet* crucially helps to determine how we perceive
and respond to the world in which we live. (1986, 4)

Thus *Hamlet* has served as a kind of a guide book for a number of
generations. This is the prime reason behind a very large number of
subsequent writers taking recourse to the play to create their own works.
Kate Chedgzoy's comment on this tour to Shakespeare is a crucial one:

One of the reasons so many later writers have felt obliged to
negotiate with their Shakespearean patrimony by way of
Hamlet is precisely because the play offers such an uncanilly accurate revelation of the interwoven psychic and political structures by means of which our culture makes sense of the experience of being beholden to a father figure.

(24)

Modern writers certainly cherish such kind of a relationship to Shakespeare, their literary father, whether they acknowledge it or not.

Like other Shakespearean plays Hamlet too has been a rich site of appropriation. Peter J. Smith's remark throws light on the extent of this appropriation: "The ponderous malcontent clutching a skull or meditating upon 'To be or not to be' has afforded numerous opportunities for comic sketches and advertising campaigns" (3). Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead is only one among the innumerable recreations of Hamlet. This chapter of the present project is pre-eminently an investigation into Stoppard's intention behind the task. It also aims at finding out whether he has in fact triumphed in subverting the ideological framework embedded in the Shakespearean world of Hamlet.

Tom Stoppard was born on 3 July 1937 in Zlin, Czechoslovakia as Tomas Straussler, the second son of Eugene Straussler, a company doctor for Bata Shoe manufacturers. In 1939, just before the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia, Dr. Eugene Straussler was prudently transferred to
Singapore, and he took his family with him. In 1942, when the Japanese invaded Singapore, Martha Straussler and her sons were evacuated to India. Dr. Straussler, remaining behind, was killed. In Darjeeling, young Tomas attended a multi-lingual boarding school, while his mother managed a Bata Shoe shop. In 1945, she married a British Army Major, Kenneth Stoppard, who soon took the family with him to England. That was how Tomas got the name Tom Stoppard. He started his career as a junior general reporter for the *Western Daily Press* of Bristol in 1954. Four years later the *Bristol Evening World* hired him as a reporter, feature writer, and drama critic. In 1960 he became a freelance writer. His first play, *A Walk on the Water*, was produced on British Independent Television in 1963. He is uncontestably a major power in the contemporary theatre in England, America and all over the world. His plays have already secured a place of prominence in university syllabuses on both sides of the Atlantic and in post-colonial countries scattered over the globe. After his initial set back with the play *Enter A Freeman* (1960), Stoppard gained applause and prominence in 1967 under the shadow of Shakespeare. It was in that year that his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* opened in London's National Theatre. The play was an attempt at re(mis)reading *Hamlet*. It was made into a film in 1990, directed by Stoppard himself. What Stoppard did in the play was to project the absurd situation of *Waiting for Godot* on to Shakespeare's most
helpless characters. After the success of the play he wrote quite a good number of plays which one after another gained him reputation. Then in May 1979 he once again made an attempt at re-reading Shakespeare with his *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth* which too was a success. *Night and Day, Dirty Linen and New-Found-Land, If You're Glad I'll be Frank, Jumpers, Travesties* and *Lord Malquist and Mr. Moon* are some of his other famous plays. It was Stoppard who, in collaboration with Mac-Norman, wrote the screen-play for the noted film *Shakespeare in Love*.

Stoppard does not claim to have a philosophy of his own, a compact vision of life, or a set of revolutionary convictions. However, his plays are well known for their perfect structure, with no loose ends. Many of his plays advocate the opinion that the universe lacks a logical pattern. But, despite this, there is a logical pattern in his plays. The argument in this chapter is based on this contradiction in Stoppard's claim about his plays and the actual situation, which is evident to the largest extent in his *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

As Stoppard himself admits, he got the idea for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* from his agent Kenneth Ewing late in 1963. It was a time when Stoppard was facing a severe set back as a writer. Ewing put forward a long cherished idea of his about the role of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet*. He also wondered if it was
King Lear on the throne of England when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were sent to England. The suggestion seemed appealing to Stoppard and he wrote a one-act verse burlesque, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet King Lear*. He himself called it a "Shakespeare Pastiche". Later, King Lear was given up and the action was reset in Elsinore. In “Ambushes”, Stoppard comments about this change:

> What I do remember is that the transition from one play to the other was an attempt to find a solution to a practical problem that if you write a play about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in England, you can't count on people knowing who they are and how they got there. So one tended to act back into the end of *Hamlet* a bit . . . I totally lost interest in England. The interesting thing was them at Elsinore . . . I was not in the least interested in doing any sort of pastiche, for a start, or in doing a criticism of *Hamlet* — that was simply one of the by-products. The chief interest and objective was to exploit a situation which seemed to me to have enormous dramatic and comic potential — of these two guys who in Shakespeare's context don't really know what they're doing. The little they are told is mainly lies, and there's no reason to suppose that they ever find out why they are killed. And probably more in the early 1960s than at any
other time, that would strike a young playwright as being a pretty good thing to explore. (6)

This is a very explicit acceptance on the part of Stoppard that writing a play about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern would be of profit to him. Also he knew very well that they could gain life and prominence only in the context of *Hamlet*. If he had written a play about them at the English court, it could have achieved little success.

The play was opened on April 11, 1967, at the Old Vic Theatre. It was an immediate success beyond the expectations of Stoppard himself, and made him famous overnight. It earned him three prizes: the "Evening Standard" Award for the most promising playwright, the "Plays and Players" Best Play Award and the “John Whiting” Award. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a play about man’s confusion and frustration as he finds no satisfactory answers to any of the mysteries that surround him. He has to accept uncertainty as the normal condition of mankind. He realizes that the only absolute realities are birth and death. For him fate is inscrutable and truth is relative.

The play takes two almost indistinguishable, marginalized characters from *Hamlet* and centralizes them. They have been summoned to Elsinore, but they do not know why. The play begins with the two on the road to Elsinore. They do not even have unique identities of their own.
They pass time talking, flipping coins and playing word games. They find that the law of probability is capricious and arbitrary. Though there are scenes from *Hamlet*, like the player's scene, which indirectly reveal their fate, they never understand what is happening to them. In the last act when they are going to England on board the ship, they come to know that Hamlet has their death warrant with him. But they do not put up even the slightest resistance. They accept their fate as if they would be able to gain a brief moment of identity at least in death. In *Hamlet* the announcement of the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern happens at the end as a “post-script” to the multiple on-stage deaths. There, it is scarcely of any significance to the audience. In Stoppard's play their death is the only relevant fact. Richard Dutton’s opinion about the significance of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern being already dead is a valid one. He says: "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are as dead as two people who never lived can be, since the fact of it is firmly enshrined in the most famous play in the English language. The whole play is an attempt to make sense of that fact, to give it a meaning” (136).

In an interview with Giles Gordon, Stoppard explains the genesis of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and what these two minor characters meant to him:
They chose themselves to a certain extent. I mean that the play *Hamlet* and the characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the only play and the only characters on which you could write my kind of play. They are so much more than merely bit players in another famous play. *Hamlet*, I suppose, is the most famous play in any language, it is part of a sort of common mythology . . . There are certain things which they bring on with them, particularly the fact that they end up dead without really, as far as any textual evidence goes, knowing why. Hamlet's assumption that they were privy to Claudius's plot is entirely gratuitous. As far as their involvement in Shakespeare's text is concerned, they are told very little about what's going on and much of what they are told isn't true. So I see them much more clearly as a couple of bewildered innocents rather than a couple of henchmen, which is the usual way they are depicted in productions of *Hamlet*. (17-20)

This evidently shows that though Stoppard acknowledges his admiration for *Hamlet*, he had the aim of rerighting it. Stoppard's strategy is to exploit the gaps between the folklore status of *Hamlet* as archetypal "Shakespeare-tragedy" and the orthodox academic interpretations of *Hamlet* as an intricately wrought and subtly articulated text which exposes
a complex set of reflections on human actions and motives. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* flatters an uneducated audience into thinking that they know *Hamlet* better than they did by building up a seemingly coherent image of the *Hamlet* world which Stoppard is simultaneously in the process of deconstructing. Through the play Stoppard presents the frustration, hopelessness and indecision of the post-war experience within the limits of the world of *Hamlet*. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern give a parody of that world. Stoppard calls them Ros and Guil, and from here on they will be thus referred to in this dissertation also.

After six years of trial and error, Stoppard became famous with the staging of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. When the play was first staged, spectators and critics alike showered high encomia on Stoppard. Harold Hobson exclaimed:

> If the history of drama is chiefly the history of dramatists — and it is — then the National Theatre's production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* . . . is the most important event in the British professional theatre of the last nine years. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is the best first London-produced play written by a British author since Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* in 1958. (49)
Peter Lewis wrote in the *Daily Mail*: “Within a month of its London opening, productions of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* were being mounted in Paris, Vienna, Berlin, Munich, Stockholm and the Hague; and young Stoppard's play became the first National Theatre production to cross the Atlantic for a production on Broadway" (6). Critics asserted that the play was the most brilliant dramatic debut of the sixties.

The play can be said to be a theatrical parasite feeding on not only *Hamlet* but also Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Luigi Pirandello's *Six characters in Search of an Author*. Shakespeare provides the characters, Pirandello the technique and Beckett the tone with which the play proceeds. Since our present focus is on the intertextuality with Shakespeare, the details of the other influences are not dealt with.

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* invited a lot of negative reviews and comments also. Some critics even accused Stoppard of being a plagiarist and a parasite. The play, however, exposes the theatricality of theatre by making the theatre audience self-conscious about its role. It juxtaposes Shakespearean English with modern colloquial language. Roger Sales, for example, opines that the play "affirms the importance of *Hamlet* by appropriating its cultural sign language, while at the same time denying the importance through the juxtaposition of the Shakespearean
and the contemporary" (18). The *Hamlet* script is the determining factor in the play by Stoppard. The collapse of the law of probability when Ros and Guil toss the coin is accompanied by the summons that they receive to report at Elsinore. They are startled by the coincidence and feel that there is something ominous in the events. They say:

Ros. I am afraid—

Guil. So am I.

Ros. I’m afraid it isn’t your day.

Guil. I’m afraid it is.

The conversation creates a claustrophobic effect and conveys a sense of an impending doom about to engulf the two companions. Joseph Duncan has remarked about their inevitable fate: “The long run of ‘heads’ is a kind of epiphany, revealing an absurdist universe and foreshadowing the unbreakable chain of events in the *Hamlet* pattern which will catch up Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and sweep them along to their deaths” (57).

Since the purpose of Stoppard was to use the central text of the canon of Western literature as a stepping stone, he did not pay attention to the depth of the political dimensions of *Hamlet*. He comments about the play:

The play had no substance beyond its own terms, beyond its apparent situation. It was about two courtiers in a Danish
castle. Two nonentities surrounded by intrigue, given very little information and much of that false. It had nothing to do with the condition of modern man or the decline of metaphysics. One wasn’t thinking, ‘Life is an anteroom in which one has to kill time’. Or I wasn’t at any rate. (50)

Stoppard wanted to amuse a roomful of people. Hence the conversion of the tragedy into comedy. The cumulative effect of Stoppard’s diverse attempts to grant centrality to the peripheral characters is one of the cardinal objects of enquiry here.

Stoppard begins his play by subverting the usual beginning of Renaissance plays. They often begin with minor characters such as servants, soldiers, attendant lords etc., who serve to set the scene and then very soon vanish from the play. Hamlet itself has an opening in the same fashion. Bernardo enters to relieve Francisco of sentryduty on the ramparts at Elsinore:

BARNARDO. Who is there?

FRANCISCO. Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself.

BARNARDO. Long live the King!

FRANCISCO. Barnardo?

BARNARDO. He.
FRANCISCO. You come most carefully upon your hour.

BARNARDO. 'Tis now struck twelve. Get thee to bed, Francisco. (I. i. 1-7)

Unlike Ros and Guil, these two soldiers call each other by their names, revealing their identity. Other bits of information like the presence of a king and the time being midnight are also conveyed. Thus the mood and the atmosphere of the play are evoked at the very outset, and the action is immediately underway. Stoppard’s comedy begins with the two insignificant men, Ros and Guil, but in his play they are the central and most significant characters. It takes a long time before their identities are revealed. They do not convey information, suggest atmosphere, or then make way for more important events. Ros and Guil are forced to improvise their subjects for conversation because they are provided with no information to impart to the waiting audience. They toss a coin and discuss monkeys being thrown up into the air. Thus one can say that Stoppard has challenged the conventional expectancy of the Renaissance theatre audience. But to what effect? The chances are that the spectators of Stoppard’s play are better informed about the events in Hamlet than Ros and Guil, the opening actors on stage. Once they are named, though a bit late, they will surely be identified as the Shakespearean characters and they need not explain anything more. Roger Sales refers to Terence Hawkes’ opinion on this issue:
Terence Hawkes puts it well when he says that in Western cultures any production of *Hamlet* has ‘always already begun’ before the spectators get to the theatre. Nobody, apart from Ros and Guil, comes fresh to the play. This does not mean that everybody in the audience will have read or seen *Hamlet* before, but rather that they will have been exposed to the popular mythology which surrounds the play. (Sales 17)

Thus, even if Stoppard begins the play in a different way, the mood and atmosphere is set by the fact of Ros and Guil being embedded in the *Hamlet* situation. The same happens with non-Western receivers of the play as well. Whenever *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is taught and discussed in a classroom situation, it is *Hamlet* that looms large through it.

The Shakespearean play *Hamlet* has as its central point the appearance of the supernatural element of the Ghost which prompts Hamlet to take upon himself the duty of avenging the murder of his father. Stoppard in his play parodies and questions the role of the supernatural in an ordinary person’s life. In Shakespeare plays, music usually heralds the supernatural and the wonderful. In the beginning of his play Stoppard presents Guil as expecting to have a mystic encounter which will open their eyes to the secret behind things. But his expectations are deflated by
the entrance of a band of down-at-heels actors as Tragedians who are willing to do anything in order to please their audience. They are even prepared to enact some stuff of pornography for an extra payment. This revolts Guil, who expresses the failure of his hope for a supernatural interference. In frustration he says:

GUIL (*shaking with rage and fright*). It could have been — it didn’t have to be obscene. . . . It could have been — a bird out of season, dropping bright-feathered on my shoulder. . . . It could have been a tongueless dwarf standing by the road to point the way. . . . I was prepared. But it’s this, is it? No enigma, no dignity, nothing classical, portentous, only this — a comic pornographer and a rabble of prostitutes. . . . (20)

Instead of a mystic experience, what he gets is a picture of vulgar, down-to-earth reality. Stoppard presents Guil as a representative of mankind seeking an extra-ordinary experience to render meaning to its life and he strongly denies the existence of the same. Stoppard’s parody of the element of Ghost in *Hamlet* is an interesting one. But the lack of an external agency in the fate of human beings is not something that is capable of liberating Stoppard from the navel strings that connect him to Shakespeare. Ros and Guil evidently strut and fret under the reins of the *Hamlet* script, just as much as Hamlet himself is controlled by the orders
of the Ghost. The only difference is that Ros and Guil do not get an apparition of the agency which controls them.

Immediately after the exit of the Tragedians, Stoppard’s play is taken over by the *Hamlet* Script. We see Ophelia describing to her father the strangeness in the behaviour of Hamlet, and very soon Claudius and Gertrude make their appearance. Ros and Guil are present at the court. Till now they have been using modern English for communication. But once at the court they are forced to use the Elizabethan English of the *Hamlet* world and are completely at a loss. Here Stoppard criticizes the Shakespearean English as formal, stilted and artificial in comparison with the simplicity, intimacy and clarity of the modern English. Thus Stoppard conveys the idea that the language of the court and that of the tragedy is something unsuitable for ordinary men. It acts as a restrictive force upon their freedom. Though Stoppard is trying to question the Elizabethan language, what happens in effect is highly unfavourable to the independence of Ros and Guil. Richard A. Andretta comments on this application of language difference in the play: “They [Ros and Guil] have to adapt their actions and expressions to the exigencies and conventions of this highly formalized language. Accordingly, if the *Hamlet* script is their fate, the language of the script is the instrument of this fate” (28). This shows how Stoppard himself is basically restrained by the Hamletian order of things, however much he tries to escape from it.
Stoppard's effort seems to be to disinvest the Elizabethan tragedy's elevated status. Classical tragedy pays attention only to actions which have seriousness and magnitude and which are complete in themselves. Also, it focuses on a protagonist who is on an elevated level in comparison to the ordinary beings. The concentration is upon the crisis in the life of this single individual. The others in the play merely cater to the superiority of the hero. Their emotions, aspirations and vexations have no place in the tragic world. In order to give prominence to Ros and Guil, a change in the genre, ie, from tragedy to comedy, is very essential. The actions of Ros and Guil are not at all serious. But the fact still remains that they have a place for themselves only in the “magnificent” world of *Hamlet*.

The protagonist of the tragedy, his position and personality, are of great significance not only to Shakespeare but also to Stoppard. The inevitable result is the protagonist’s private encounter with destiny, ie, death. But the death is a heroic one, not an inconsequential one. The great tragic heroes are allowed uncommon insights into the mysteries of life and providence. At the same time Shakespeare does not allow Ros and Guil even to have individualities of their own. Commenting on the fate of Ros and Guil in Stoppard's play, Anthony Jenkins says:
One of the pleasures of a game is to pit oneself against a set of rules or conventions. The rule book here is *Hamlet* and every one knows the game except Ros and Guil, for should there be any one in the theatre unfamiliar with Shakespeare's play, Stoppard's title supplies him with the crucial information. Ros and Guil are dead, even before the play begins. (39)

The conversation between them and the player clearly points to the plight of Ros and Guil:

PLAYER. There's a design at work in all art. Surely you know that. Events must play themselves out to an aesthetic, moral and logical conclusion.

GUIL. And what is that, in this case?

PLAYER. It never varies. We aim at the point where every one who is marked for death dies.

GUIL. Marked?

PLAYER. Between "just desserts" and "tragic irony" we are given quite a lot of scope for our particular talent. Generally speaking, things have gone about as far as they can possibly go when things have got about as bad as they reasonably get (*He switches on a smile*).

GUIL. Who decides?
PLAYER. *(Switching off his smile)* Decides? It is written.

Ros and Guil know that they are part of a game. However, they have not read the rule book of *Hamlet* and so are not sure of their future. On the way to Elsinore they meet with a band of players. Once in Elsinore they are in the midst of a number of players. It is very strange that they know how to play, responding to their parts in the Shakespearean dialogue. But they do not know what they are playing.

Shakespeare’s Hamlet is cherished mostly for his soliloquies. As far as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are concerned, even their dialogues are indistinguishable. Wilfred L. Guerin and others elaborate on the insignificance of the speech rendered by the two minor characters:

Easy it is to forget which of the two speaks which lines — indeed easy it is to forget most of their lines altogether. The two are distinctly plot-driven: empty of personality, sycophantic in a snivelling way, eager to curry favour with power even if it means spying on their erstwhile friend. Weakly they admit, without much skill at denial, that they were sent for (I. ii ). Even less successfully they try to play on Hamlet’s metaphorical ‘pipe’, to know his ‘stops’, when they are forced to admit that they could not even handle the
literal musical instrument that Hamlet shows them. (III . ii).

Still later these non-entities meet their destined ‘non-beingness’ as it were, when Hamlet, who can play the pipe so much more efficiently, substitutes their names in the death warrant intended for him. (271)

Stoppard labours to focus on the dialogues of Ros and Guil and thus bestow some prominence on them. Their play with the coin and the consequent ponderings on the law of probability are interesting, and they occupy a considerable part of the play. Yet one must admit that they fail to strike a balance with Hamlet's eloquent emotions. It is true that as a means of devaluing *Hamlet* Stoppard does not allow a space for Hamlet's soliloquy, "To be, or not to be", on stage. He reduces it into a mere one sentence comment: "Hamlet enters upstage and pauses, weighing up the pros and cons of making his quietus" (53). But one can find that even this reduction is possible only because of the extreme familiarity of the soliloquy which is still capable of evoking the entire *Hamlet* situation in its full magnitude in the minds of the spectators.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is centred on Hamlet's viewpoint. The play revolves around the prince of Denmark. Stoppard analyses how the events would appear to someone who is not at the centre but on the
margins, like Ros and Guil. He presents them at the periphery of the action which is totally baffling and incomprehensible to them.

GUIL. (tensed up by this rambling) Do you remember the first thing that happened today?

ROS. (promptly) I woke up, I suppose (Triggered) Oh — I've got it now — that man, a foreigner, he woke us up.

GUIL. A messenger. (He relaxes, sits).

ROS. That's it — pale sky before dawn, a man standing on his saddle to bang on the shutters-shouts-what's all the row about?! Clear off! — But then he called our names. You remember that — this man woke us up.

GUIL. Yes.

ROS. We were sent for.

GUIL. Yes.

ROS. That's why we're here. (14)

It is as if they are suddenly woken up by someone from a dream, and do not know the course of further action. They do not gain any importance even on their death. Their death is in fact a tragedy, but no tragic status is granted to it. In Hamlet, when Hamlet substitutes a forged document saying that the bearers are to be put to sudden death, Horatio says: "So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to it". Hamlet is not moved in the slightest. He says:
Why, man, they did make love to this employment.

They are not near my conscience . . . (V.ii.56-58)

This gives a fair picture of the condition of Ros and Guil in the Shakespeare play. Stoppard's intention to highlight the view point of Ros and Guil turns out to be of very little effect because they do not seem to have an integrity of their own. They are mere puppets in the course of major events, and Stoppard is not able to provide them with any independence. His play, too, portrays them only as the dependents of Hamlet. Their dependence on Hamlet in Stoppard's play is overtly evident in the scene where, finding that Hamlet is missing after the pirate attack, Ros and Guil are in thorough confusion. They cannot think of an existence without Hamlet. Their conversation at this juncture is a pointer to their inability to be centralized.

GUIL. (near tears) Nothing will be resolved without him . . .

PLAYER. There . . .!

GUIL. We need Hamlet for our release! (91)

Here, the Shakespearean idea that they can have an existence only in the backdrop of Hamlet gets proved beyond doubt. The dialogue can even be considered an implicit acceptance on Stoppard's part that his play, too, can have life only in the world of Hamlet.
*Hamlet* is a play about the politics of power and corruption. It announces, "Something is rotten in the State of Denmark". But Stoppard’s avowed aim is to depoliticize *Hamlet*. By parodying the play, he converts a canonical tragedy into a comedy. In fact, Stoppard indulges in a theatrical game within the world of *Hamlet* and twists the gaps and exaggerates the minor characters in the play to subvert the notion that Shakespeare and his masterpiece *Hamlet* are inimitable. Roger Sales comments on Stoppard's attempt this way: "Every playwright probably needs to lay the ghost of *Hamlet*, although putting it this way suggests the enormity of the task. Stoppard makes a comedy out of the tragedy that Shakespeare had said almost everything before him" (67).

The ramifications of Stoppard’s depoliticizing of *Hamlet* requires a thorough analysis. *Hamlet* focuses very subtly on the implications of power, the power struggles within and without Elsinore castle. Politics is the major thematic pattern in the play. Claudius and Hamlet are very consciously aware of power. It is interesting to find that even Rosencrantz and Guildenstern act only so as to prove allegiance to the ones with power. Their sole concern is to please the king, the power that has brought them there, though their fate is to displease in turn the prince who undermines them. Stoppard does nothing to change this pattern. When in Act I Gertrude explains their duty of prying into the conscience of
Hamlet, both of them accept it wholeheartedly resonating their dialogue in *Hamlet*:

ROS. Both your majesties

Might, by the sovereign power you have of us,

Put your dread pleasures more into command

Than to entreaty.

GUIL. We both obey,

And here give up ourselves in the full bent

To lay our service freely at your feet,

To be commanded. (27)

Again, in Act III, when they find out that the letter that they have in their hand is the death warrant of Hamlet, after an initial hesitation Guil says: “[I]t would be presumptuous of us to interfere with the designs of fate or even of kings” (83). It is notable that they do not even have any surety about their friendship with Hamlet. They merely fit into the identity designed for them by the others because they don't have any other.

ROS. . . . We're his friends.

GUIL. How do you know?

ROS. From our young days brought up with him.

GUIL. You've only got their word for it.
Power had such a great effect on the lives of the people in Elizabethan England. Critics like Guerin and others have traced the trajectory of the role of power in courtly life in this way:

For such is power in the world of kings and princes. Nor is it merely a literary construct. England had known the effects of such power off and on for centuries. Whether it was the deposing and later execution of Richard II, or the crimes alleged of Richard III, or the beheading of a Thomas More or of a wife or two, or the much more recent actions in and around the court of Elizabeth: in all these cases, power served policy. Witness especially the fate of the second Earl of Essex whose attempt at rebellion led to his own execution in 1601, and even more especially the execution of Elizabeth's relative, Mary Queen of Scots, who had been imprisoned by Elizabeth for years before Elizabeth signed the death warrant. A generation later, another King, Charles I, would also be beheaded. With historical actions such as these, we can understand why Shakespeare's work incorporates power struggles. (274).
On close reading, one is able to locate a huge amount of disruptive potential in *Hamlet*, which got erased with the successive interpretations.

As an example of the subversive potential of *Hamlet*, let us take the case of Laertes. Laertes questions Hamlet about the murder of Polonious and the death of Ophelia. He is not a king or even a member of the royal family. He is just a member of the aristocracy. Such an ordinary individual could not have challenged Hamlet for murdering his father and for being the cause of the suicide of his sister because Hamlet is the Prince of Denmark, and the power structure does not allow a rebellion on the part of ordinary subjects. The power structure was highly unassailable. But even in such a system Shakespeare made Laertes question Hamlet. This was a highly subversive gesture on his part. It was in fact the product of the renaissance self-fashioning, which emphasized individualism. Even while writing within such a rigidly stratified society, Shakespeare was able to do that. But writers like Stoppard do nothing to elicit this hidden potential of the play. All radical positionings are smoothed over.

The Elizabethan world of power and allegiance was one which forced individuals to fit into the containing subjectivities which the society prescribed for them. The subjectivity allotted to Ros and Guil by Shakespeare as well as Stoppard is one of the insignificance of their
presence. Though Stoppard enlivens them in a modern world, he does not tamper with their lack of presence. Although Shakespearean plays are generally considered non-partisan, they deal with material eminently suited to transformation into political theatre. His tragedies have as their central theme the ways of gaining, wielding and losing power. Wilhelm Hortmann's opinion with reference to the political potential of Shakespearean plays may be of use to us:

However, the conflicts shown are never played out merely on the surface level of intrigue and counter-intrigue. They are always set within a wide moral frame including questions of legitimacy, of right versus might and they never lose sight of the metaphysical dimension of order versus chaos. Furthermore, the many soliloquies and dialogues in which these questions are broached represent not only fully fledged theories of politics but — given a critical political situation in a given country at a given time — constitute a serious attack on the ruling class or system. (212)

In certain political situations some Shakespeare plays need only to be played straight to be politically subversive. For example, Stalin did not allow Soviet audiences to watch Hamlet. In fact, politics can be said to be either explicit or implicit in most Shakespeare plays. It is in the hands of
the director whether or not to realise in performance the political potential of the play. But most of the Shakespeare adaptations concentrate only on celebrating great dramatic poetry and making the audience identify with larger than life characters.

The 1960s and 1970s were times when traditional institutions and figures of authority were dismantled. The avant-garde writers of the time like Brecht felt that it was quite irresponsible on their part to make the theatre provide mere entertainment for the audience. For them, theatre should respond to the pressures of the age rather than deflect the minds of the viewers from urgent concerns by aesthetic diversions. The new generation directors looked at theatre as a radical critique of the ideology that had led to the impasse of the post-war absurdity and inhumanity. They were thoroughly dissatisfied with the order and harmony traditionally regained in the Fifth act of classics.

Stoppard presented his play at a time which was much more politically volatile than the Elizabethan England. The post-war period was one which witnessed power struggles of a greater magnitude. At such a juncture in history, in such a fragmented world, Stoppard could have culled out the subversive potentials of Hamlet and thus made his play politically relevant. Instead, his endeavour is to depoliticize the highly political Shakespearean play. In fact, Stoppard relegates politics to
a secondary status in most of his writings. As he himself has admitted, he is more interested in the metaphysical condition of man rather than the social position.

As part of his attempt to depoliticize Shakespeare’s text, Stoppard omits a number of scenes with powerful political dimensions. In the scenes where the dumb show and *The Murder of Gonzago* are staged, Stoppard represents Ros and Guil as innocent victims of courtly intrigue whereas Shakespeare portrays them as betrayers of, and traitors to, their friendship with Hamlet. Immediately after the dumb show being disrupted, Shakespeare focuses on the implications of Claudius’s exit. Stoppard follows the action in a different way. He concentrates more on the murder of Polonius. Thus he omits altogether the two Shakespearean scenes which show that Ros and Guil are not innocents but somewhat clumsy participants in the intrigue and deception enacted by Claudius. Ros reveals that, despite his relatively late arrival at Elsinore, he is well aware of the political situation there. He asks Hamlet why he is ambitious when he has “the voice of the King himself for your succession in Denmark” (III.ii.349-50). One of the Players interrupts this cross-examination by bringing Hamlet the recorders for which he has sent. He uses Guil’s lack of musical ability to parallel a lack of political subtlety and ability:
. . . You would play upon me. You would seem to know my stops. You would pluck out the heart of my mystery. You would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass. And there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ. Yet cannot you make it speak. 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me. (III.ii. 372-9)

This scene proves beyond doubt that Ros and Guil are knowingly implicated in Claudius’ plot against Hamlet. Again, Shakespeare shows Rosencrantz and Guildenstern being briefed by Claudius about the need to take Hamlet to England. Stoppard omits these details in his play and thus ignores the power politics involved in Hamlet. Shakespeare’s presentation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is an excellent example of the patterns that structure power. Power is like Foucault’s “panopticon”, under the surveillance of which the individual has no freedom but to comply with Power. Stoppard’s gesture of granting illusory agency and volition to his characters presents an absolutely erroneous picture of the Power structure. In a post-war, post-colonial world which was witnessing the dangerous emergence of super powers and neocolonial megalomaniacs this depoliticized version of Power obviously has dangerous ramifications.
*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is written in the absurd style of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. As we know, the world of the absurd play is the world of ludicrous comedy. However, deep within, the absurd play is murky tragedy. The underlying emphasis is on man's predicament as a political victim. Stoppard's attempt to centralize Ros and Guil by positing them in such a world order of the absurd play meets with little success. Shakespeare's construction of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as marginalized characters gets revived once again. Thomas R Whitaker analyses their marginalization:

> From one point of view, our spectatorial protagonists will seem as free as we are: they will struggle to understand their predicament, respond to it sometimes with astonishing verbal resourcefulness, repeatedly break out of the plot of *Hamlet*, manage to rationalise or repress their betrayal of its hero, and finally choose to make no effort to escape their doom. And yet they are obviously marked for death, subject to a fate that is doubly or triply 'written': in *Hamlet*, in Stoppard's own script, and perhaps in the dim cosmic order that includes all human scripts. (39)

Stoppard’s choice of the background of the absurd play does not seem to be a suitable one for the centralization of any oppressed group. Its attitude
towards women is also not a positive one. Women are presented as subjugated, with little potential for liberation. This is elaborated later in this chapter. Possibilities for radical re-visions are not explored. The existing power structure gets reinstated and the play gets co-opted into the hegemonic structure.

Stoppard portrays Ros and Guil as innocent people. They are unaware of what happens around them. It is true that they do not act. But even when they try to act, fate is against them. For example, there is an occasion in the play when, too tired of their situation, Ros tries to act. He walks behind “a female figure" whom he thinks to be the queen, puts his hands over her eyes and shouts, "Guess who?". To his utter frustration, he discovers that the female figure is Alfred only, who acts a woman's role. In the absence of power, however much the boot-licking characters try to make a mark of their own, none of their endeavours will create any significant result. Stoppard could make them important only if he could authorize them with some power and voice.

Ros and Guil are mere pawns or sponges through whom the message of power operates. They are pawns for Claudius first, and then for Hamlet. To quote Guerin et al.:

In the twentieth century the dead, or never-living, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were resuscitated by Tom
Stoppard in a fascinating re-seeing of their existence, or its lack. In Stoppard's version, they are even more obviously two ineffectual pawns, seeking constantly to know who they are, why they are here, where they are going. Whether they ‘are’ at all may be the ultimate question of this modern play. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Stoppard has given the contemporary reader or viewer a play that examines existential questions in the context of a whole world that may have no meaning at all . . . If these two characters were marginalized in *Hamlet*, they are even more so in Stoppard's handling. If Shakespeare marginalized the powerless in his own version of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, Stoppard has marginalized us all in an era when — in the eyes of some — all of us are caught up in forces beyond our control. (275)

Whether it is in Shakespeare's version or Stoppard's, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are no more than what Rosencrantz called a "small annexment", a “petty consequence”, "mere nothings for the ‘merry wheel’ of kings”. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* Ros introduces them to the player:

ROS. My name is Guildenstern, and this is Rosencrantz.
(Guil confers briefly with him).

(Without embarassment) I'm sorry — his name's Guildenstern, and I'm Rosencrantz. (16-17)

One feels that Stoppard is trying to centralize not Ros and Guil but their nothingness. Situations force us to conclude once again that power is capital.

When asked what he is reading, Hamlet says, "Words, words, words", which implicitly projects the possibility of the existence of a coherent world. Fourhundred years after Shakespeare, Stoppard tries to subvert this sense of coherence through an absurd presentation. But the ultimate feeling created is identical to whatever man-centred constructing of subjectivity was there in Hamlet. In spite of the seeming inconsequence of their lives and our sympathy with the pairs’ bewilderment, from a wider angle Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead presumes a coherent world. The Player comments on death: "The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means" (60). Hamlet's death makes sense, unlucky though it is, because it is the logical outcome of the step-by-step progression of the previous action. "There is a design at work in all art" (59), as the Player also says. Tragedy explains death, making it part of a coherent pattern which one rarely perceives in actuality. Hamlet's death, even if undeserved, proceeds in a satisfying way out of a hard-won self-knowledge. Unable to cope emotionally with his father's murder and his
mother's overhasty and incestuous marriage to the murderer, Hamlet has buried himself with elaborate plans to test the ghost's veracity and Claudius' guilt. But by the final act, though Horatio offers him a perfectly reasonable excuse to avoid the duel with Laertes, Hamlet has come to the realization that he must meet the fate that cried out to him when the apparition of his murdered father first appeared. He goes to his death open-eyed, with a new and genuine sense of himself. Stoppard's characters also have an appointment with destiny. They are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and that's enough. But their journey brings them no new knowledge. Though they succumb to their fate, they have no idea why they do so. They are told very little and, finally, are denied any explanation. On one occasion Ros even thinks of putting an end to their passivity and incertitude by confronting Hamlet directly and asking him for explanations. However, when he is about to carry out his resolve, his nerves fail him. In fact, such a confrontation does not occur in the *Hamlet* script, and therefore Ros cannot bring it about. They are more pathetic than the heroic Hamlet, but they are not tragic figures because they cannot meet death on their own terms. The play offers the audience an explanation of their death, ie, they are characters from *Hamlet* and hence already dead.

In a tragedy the hero gets an insight into the nature of reality before his death. The heroic Hamlet, moulded in the stature of a noble courtier,
soldier and scholar, dies a fruitful death. The experience on the boat opens
his eyes into the mystery of things. Richard Dutton aptly comments on the
steady mental growth of Hamlet: “Though in the beginning of Hamlet, he
was a man at odds with himself, moody and impetuous, unsure of himself
or passionately convinced, unable to bring all the parts of his personality
together, now he has a quiet conviction, an ability to see events and his
own part in them with philosophical detachment”. (138) Hamlet’s own
speech is a proof for this. He says, “[W]e defy augury. There is special
providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, it’s not to come, if it be
not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The
readiness is all”. (V. ii. 208-11). For Hamlet, placing himself in the hands
of providence and the powers of his own resolution, there is the glory of a
noble tragic death. The difference between Hamlet and Ros- Guil is that
being a prince and a hero, Hamlet is chosen to perform certain acts and to
bring about a great change in the world in which he lives, whereas Guil
and Ros, being ordinary people, suffer passively the lot of incomprehension, bewilderment and confusion that is assigned to ordinary
humanity. They neither act nor understand what the purpose of destiny or
providence in their regard can be. Hamlet the hero, though he dies, dies
with the satisfaction that he has achieved his purpose of revenge and that
he has ultimately redeemed Denmark from a vicious ruler. Denmark may
look forward to an assured future under Fortinbras with a manly flourish.
But in the case of Ros and Guil nothing comparable to this happens. For them, mutely disappearing into non existence, there is only a vacuum of ignorance and despair. They do not comprehend in the least anything that happens to them or around them even at their death. They haven’t achieved anything. Even to the very end Guildenstern does not deny that an explanation exists, that there is some order and causality for what happens to them. He feels that it is only their inability to see it. He protests against his not being “told” the explanation. In the midst of such a frustration he lashes out at the Player: “If we have a destiny, then so had he — and if this is ours, then that was his — and if there are no explanations for us, then let there be none for him —” (93). Guildenstern projects the fact that everyone has an equal right to know the meaning of things, but only Hamlets are given credit for it.

When Hamlet dies, the spectators have an intense feeling of sorrow and a sense of waste, which does not happen on the death of Ros and Guil in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. The inevitability of their deaths proves, ironically, to be the single surest aspect of their lives, and the only possible explanation they have is the cold and passive inscrutability of the Player’s declaration: “Decides? It is written” (60). Tim Brassel comments: “The fates of Ros and Guil are indeed written, written in *Hamlet*, and that finally is all that needs to be said” (60). The only effective terms of reference for them is the mythology of *Hamlet*. 
This morbid determinism in Stoppard deflates all modes of resistance whereby the individual can counter the curbing machinery of the Establishment. The functioning of the mechanisms for the manufacture of consent remain undisrupted. Alternative and oppositional ideologies are subtly silenced.

*Hamlet* ends with the hope of order being restored with the crowning of Fortinbras. The spectators leave the theatre with the feeling of a good king being reinstated to the throne. In the twentieth century, Stoppard also closes the play with the crowning of Fortinbras. But the audience of his play are much different from the Elizabethan audience who associated the existence of order with rule by a just king. Stoppard seems to ignore the political dimension of the play *Hamlet*, where the focus is on the question of succession to the throne of Denmark. In Denmark there might have been the practice of elective monarchy. But the English audience believed in the son’s inalienable claim to the father’s position. For them Claudius was a usurper. Anxiety about political continuity and the state of the nation was acute at the time when *Hamlet* was staged. Thus it may be argued that the performances of the play had an urgent political dimension, inconceivable for a modern audience formed by a thoroughly frustrated group after the two World Wars. For them the hope of a Fortinbras bringing in order is surely an inflated one. Also, they may not be able to comprehend the anxieties of Hamlet
because they are more like Ros and Guil who are thoroughly disoriented and devoid of any potential for action of any kind. Again, not many critics have paid attention to the fact that Fortinbras is a Norwegian Prince. As far as Denmark is concerned, he is an outsider. In the absence of the Prince of Denmark there would surely have been at least some other noble men of the aristocracy who could have wielded the power and the duty of running the kingdom. But what Shakespeare does is to import a foreigner to purify the rotten state of Denmark. This looks similar to the “civilizing mission” of colonialism, outsiders coming into a country to bring in order there. Shakespeare functions like an apologist for colonialism in *Hamlet*. Neither does Stoppard mention anything to the contrary at the climax of his play. By being silent on this issue, Stoppard fails to exonerate himself of complicity with Shakespeare in the colonial agenda. He could have concluded by presenting a system of governance where ordinary people also have their own fair share of power and an active role to play.

The concluding part of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstem are Dead* is highly contributory to the fact of its being situated in the world of *Hamlet*. After Ros and Guil disappear from the stage, having had a sense of what awaits them, the stage description goes like this:

*Immediatly the whole stage is lit up, revealing, upstage, arranged in the approximate positions last held by the dead TRAGEDIANS, the tableau of court and corpses which is*
The last scene of Hamlet. That is: The KING, QUEEN, LAERTES and HAMLET all dead. HORATIO holds HAMLET. FORTINBRAS is there. (96)

The ambassadors from England announce the death of Ros and Guil. Horatio gives a synopsis of the play, which is a replica of the end of Hamlet. In Hamlet the synopsis places the play in a wider political setting where Hamlet plays the key role. It rationalizes all that happened to Hamlet and thus imposes a pattern upon it. It is quite ironical that a play with its focus on Ros and Guil ends in the same fashion, giving no rationale for their fate. Horatio sums up:

Not from this mouth, had it the ability of life to thank you: He never gave commandment for their death. But since, so jump upon this bloody question, you from Polak Wars, and you from England, are here arrived, give order that these bodies high on a stage be placed to the view; and let me speak to the yet unknowing world how these things came about; so shall you hear of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts, of accidental judgements, casual slaughters, of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause, and, in this upshot, purposes mistook fallen on the inventors’ heads: all this can I truly deliver. (96)

Thus Stoppard seems to imply that the world still remains a coherent one with its own explanations for everything, except for the marginalization of characters like Ros and Guil. There is no one to glorify them or parade
their dead bodies. While watching the play within the play, Guil comments on death:

The fact of it is nothing to do with seeing it happen — it’s not gasps and blood and falling about — that isn’t what makes it death. It’s just a man failing to reappear, that’s all — now you see him, now you don’t — that’s the only thing that’s real: here one minute and gone the next and never coming back — an exit unobtrusive and unannounced . . . (64)

The death of Ros and Guil also turns out to be of a similar kind. Horatio defends Hamlet and ignores Ros and Guil. Their death is mentioned in a one sentence report alone.

Stoppard makes use of the Shakespearean technique of play within the play. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* can be viewed as metatheatre which regards theatre as performance. This is in opposition to the idea of a conventional theatre which is basically illusionistic in nature. The conventional theatre gives the spectators a semblance of reality. By focusing on the metatheatrical aspects, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* points to the performativity of the text. Modern theory conceives of every social role as a performance. Even gender, for it, is a performance which is necessitated by the social scenario. Modern theatre aims at disrupting the “willing suspension of disbelief”. In *Hamlet* what is found is illusionism within illusionism. One must be inquisitive as
to whether Stoppard’s play pays any attention to the performativity of gender and social roles. Or does it rather reconstruct the same patterns with further augmentation? Let us consider the opinion of Whitaker on Stoppard’s play:

As we act or witness *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, we find ourselves mirrored by its protagonists and drawn with them into an action that traps us by its metaphorical implications. Ros and Guil first seem ignorant spectators who are trying to enter an as yet undiscovered play. Engaging the plot of *Hamlet*, they begin to seem bad actors who are trying to understand their roles. When they have almost locked themselves into their destiny they seem to become partial authors of their fate by choosing death. Each step in that ironic progress is a drastic self limitation. As Guildenstern will finally comment, ‘there must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said – no. But somehow we missed it’. And are not we ourselves quite possibly just such characters, following an imperfectly known ‘script’ that gives us only the choice to die? (59)

Ros and Guil share the predicament of the two tramps Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. However, their world cannot be
regarded as an absurd one because the spectators know the outcome of the lives of Ros and Guil. Beckett does not provide any conclusions. Godot may or may not exist. The spectators are as ignorant as Vladimir and Estragon. Ros and Guil are controlled by a realm beyond, the world of *Hamlet*. Unlike Vladimir and Estragon, Ros and Guil do not wait, either in hope or in fear, for something to alter their endless mundane existence. They have only one fear, the fear that their lives have already been disrupted by some force beyond their understanding. They sense that something is happening outside of anything accounted for by materialistic, scientific, or naturalistic law. They never comprehend where they stand in the scheme of things and never discover “how to act”. In Stoppard’s play, the audience who know *Hamlet* know the game Ros and Guil have to play and are assured, as in Shakespeare, that there’s a divinity that shapes our ends. Execution by the British king is waiting for them. The fact that Ros and Guil move by a royal summons gives a kind of sense to their death. When the play begins, the attention of the spectators is caught by the two courtiers spinning their record-breaking succession of coins. It involves a great amount of dramatic potential and is highly tense with impending crisis. Bareham quotes William E. Gruber on the significance of this opening situation:

> The coin which falls ‘heads’ scores of times in succession defines what has been called a ‘boundary situation’; the
technique is notably Shakespearean, reminding one of the tense, foreboding beginnings invoked by the witches of Macbeth, or, of course, by the ghost of Hamlet. Ros and Guil’s playing is not the aimless play of Beckett’s tramps, with which it has been compared, but a play obviously freighted with imminent peril. We are impressed not by the absurdity of their situation, but by its terrible sense; one senses the chilling presence of Hamlet, waiting menacingly in the wings. (86-87)

The story of Ros and Guil need not be considered as one guided by baffling absurdity, but as one already pre-determined.

Ros and Guil know their situation by the close of the second act, while watching the play The Murder of Gonzago, which is a mime of the events of Hamlet. When they watch the play, they get a glimpse of their own personalities on stage. They witness the impending stage deaths of “two smiling accomplices” who are friends, who are “two spies”. To their amazement, Ros and Guil find that the two spies are dressed in coats identical to those worn by themselves. If they wanted, they could have seen through the fate that was awaiting them, which was death at the hands of someone. But they refuse to accept it. Their stubborn resistance to their Shakespearean role is both ludicrous and admirable. They reject
the play as “cheap tricks”, and thus try to reject the unquestioned authority of Shakespeare’s tragedy which has been culturally deployed to serve the great at the expense of the weak. But in refusing to see that they, too, have parts in some kind of play, in insisting that they are spectators rather than agents in the action, Ros and Guil default on the role prescribed for them by tradition.

Stoppard gives them one moment of choice in the play when they are empowered, as it were, not only to resist but to change Shakespeare’s script. But at this moment they choose to reproduce it. Having read the letter addressed to the English king calling for Hamlet’s instant death, they debate whether, out of compassion or human decency, they should show it to him. The discovery of the contents of the letter appears to mean that Ros and Guil are now in a position to control their destinies rather than being controlled by the plot of *Hamlet*. The intuitive Ros even feels like showing it to Hamlet. But the cerebral Guil persists in the idea that they are merely spectators of the action and chooses to avoid entanglement by remaining so. Justifying their inaction he says: "We are little men, we don't know the ins and outs of the matter, there are wheels within wheels, etcetera — it would be presumptuous of us to interfere with the designs of fate or even of kings" (83). Thus they fit into the role of two Elizabethan attendant lords who are denied the capacity to think or act independently. This interpretation tends to see Ros and Guil as being
fundamentally Renaissance stereotypes who remain trapped within the framework of a Renaissance play. By this choice Guil unknowingly reproduces the moral standard of the *Hamlet* text that will be used to write them out of existence. Embracing their Shakespearean role as “little men”, Guil gives up his resistance to their Elizabethan predecessors, defaulting on their prescribed roles. The couple thus repeats Shakespeare's rationale for their deaths and grants hegemony to Shakespeare's play and consents to its power over them. The scene where Ros and Guil learn the contents of Claudius’s death-letter is an invention by Stoppard, by which he makes them far guiltier than they ever were in *Hamlet*, through their silence.

Stoppard’s play was staged in a world which did not seem to make any sense for individuals. The ordinary people were denied any possibility of the existence of any hope or expectation. The world of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern depicts the inability of mankind to understand the forces ultimately in control of their lives and fates. At the same time, it asserts that such forces beyond human control or understanding do exist. The play leads one to recognise that, whether one can comprehend it or not, there is “design at work” in life as well as in art, and there is order and coherence to the cosmos beyond man’s ability to grasp. It is as if Stoppard is in defence of the tragic fate of marginalized characters like Ros and Guil, both in the play world and in the real world. There is no point in worrying over one’s lack of centrality, but it has to be accepted as the will of some overarching
design. This, of course, could not be a solution for the frustration of the post-war audience. Instead of showing them a way out, Stoppard indirectly asks them to dwell deep in their own misery with complacency. Though Ros and Guil keep silence about the content of the letter, unlike the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of the *Hamlet* script, Stoppard presents them as having no complicity with Claudius. In *Hamlet* they are presented as two henchmen. But Stoppard presents them as hapless victims. If one thinks seriously about it, the feeling that emerges is that Shakespeare’s portrayal is a more reasonable one because, if they are complicit with Claudius their fate may have some justice. Stoppard’s Ros and Guil are not sufferers of their own action, but mere scapegoats. Such a representation of modern man can never be a convincing one for the spectators. In Edward Bond’s *Lear* there is an argument that mere preaching is of no use if you can’t put ideas into action. Similar is the case of Stoppard also. What he does is only to make the modern man aware of his pathetic plight, without hinting either at its cause or at a release from it.

Critics of all ages have agreed that Shakespeare has subjugated his minor figures for the sake of the protagonist. He has as well rendered the feminine portion subordinate to the masculine. Women are largely inconsequential in the great tragedies. Gertrude in *Hamlet* is a mere puppet and the pathetic Ophelia, just a shadow; Emilia is just a useful servant and confidante, Desdemona a fitting foil for Othello; Regan and
Goneril are wicked monsters, and Cordelia, though initially bold, is of minor importance in comparison with Lear. Generations of readers and critics have uncontestably accepted this portrayal of minor characters by Shakespeare. Even the appropriators do the same thing. Our social and cultural system is one which constructs male and female members in the age-old moulds of hierarchy. Women, whether they are readers, teachers or scholars, are taught to think like men. They are pressurized to interiorize the male point of view and the male system of values as the normal and legitimate one. In this advanced world every writer must ask why even Shakespeare represents his language anxiety in terms of sexual violation of the woman's body. The poet's struggle with words is evident in the agony of the raped Lucrece. She says in grief and rage:

And that deep torture may be called a hell,

When more is felt than one has power to tell.

(The Rape of Lucrece, lines 1287-8)

Present day critics are ready to accept that woman’s silence is designed by male dominace. It is this same dominance that makes Tereus cut off Philomela’s tongue. He was well aware of the danger that would ensue if Philomela’s voice became public, if she were free to tell her own tale. Once she is deprived of her power of telling her story, his version will be accepted as the “true” one. He imposes silence and imprisonment upon her to protect himself from discovery. The modern male writers also
repeat the same trick when they remain silent on the gender politics within the Shakespearean play. But, as the mythic tale of Philomela shows, one must understand that dominance can only contain, and never successfully destroy, the woman’s voice. WTG’s Lear’s Daughters, which is discussed in the fourth chapter, is an example for such a revelation. A creation like this was inconceivable earlier because the possibility of women having a unique thought was unheard of. Elaine Showalter comments on the situation:

Women are estranged from their own experience and unable to perceive its shape and authenticity . . . they are expected to identify as readers with a masculine experience and perspective, which is presented as the human one . . . Since they have no faith in the validity of their own perceptions and experience, rarely seeing them confirmed in literature or accepted in criticism, can we wonder that women students are so often timid, cautious, and insecure when we exhort them to ‘think for themselves?’ (856 – 57)

Looking at the matter from a woman’s point of view, one might have serious doubts that Stoppard’s Play too, like Shakespeare’s, reinstates the accepted notions in the society. In the post-war period of utter disillusionment and disorder, where powerless individuals were
crushed by the massy wheel of power, Stoppard’s endeavour to centralize the marginal Ros and Guil and to explore their predicament was a relevant one. But even in such a modern period he ignores the politics behind the subjugation of the gender. Gertrude and Ophelia are constructed by him as they were constructed by Shakespeare himself — highly marginalized but at the same time causing a very vicious impact on the male folk of the play.

A brief analysis of the politics of gender relations in *Hamlet* seems relevant here. Befitting the conventional concept, Shakespeare’s Hamlet is disturbed by female sexuality. Hamlet responds in a very extreme and stereotypical way. For him, women are either to be worshipped as angels or else to be denigrated as whores. Ophelia is portrayed as both successively. All the male characters in the play, including her own father and brother, display a similar attitude towards her. Polonius even uses her as a pawn in the trick played to investigate Hamlet’s intentions. In the Elizabethan society a young woman like Ophelia had no option but obey her father without question. The way in which Polonius describes his plan to Claudius gives the audience an impression that he is using Ophelia almost like a prostitute:

> At such a time I’ll loose my daughter to him.

> Be you and I behind an arras then
Mark the encounter. If he love her not,

And be not from his reason fallen thereon,

Let me be no assistant for a state,

But keep a farm and carters. (II. ii. 162-7)

Hamlet overhears this conversation and treats her then onwards as a betrayer.

In *Hamlet*, a particular father is very much the issue, and phobia about the corrupting “seepage” of women into the pure “stock” of the father is everywhere apparent. If patrimony requires the begetting of heirs, Hamlet will not do it. For Hamlet, all children are women’s children and therefore tainted by corruption. His struggle is to free the masculine identity from the contaminated maternal body. Shakespeare’s Ophelia does not seem to have a delineable past. Of the twenty scenes of the play she appears only in five. In Stoppard’s play her marginalisation is even more striking. The patriarchal hierarchy established in *Hamlet* is retained as such by Stoppard. The physical presence of Ophelia in Stoppard’s play is very insignificant, but the very few references to her are enough to evoke the entire sexual politics associated with her in *Hamlet*. Her physical presence on stage happens only twice and that too very scantily.

Ros and Guil enter into the world of Hamlet with Ophelia running onto the stage:
And OPHELIA runs on in some alarm holding up her skirts – followed by HAMLET. OPHELIA has been sewing and she holds the garment. They are both mute. HAMLET, with his doublet all unbraced, no hat upon his head, his stockings fouled, ungartered and down-gyved to his ankle, pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other . . . and with a look so piteous, he takes her by the wrist and holds her hard, then he goes to the length of his arm, and with his other hand over his brow, falls to such perusal of her face as he would draw it . . . At last, with a little shaking of his arm, and thrice his head waving up and down, he raises a sigh so piteous and profound that it does seem to shatter all his bulk and end his being. That done he lets her go, and with his head over his shoulder turned, he goes out backwards without taking his eyes off her . . . she runs off in the opposite direction. (26)

In Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, the stage direction that a woman enters with dishevelled hair indicates that she might either be mad or be the victim of a rape. The stage conventions carry specific messages about femininity and sexuality. Stoppard portrays Ophelia running on to the stage in terror. This, and her holding up the skirts imply something similar to the Elizabethan portrayal of female insanity. Conventionally, there is an undeniable link between female insanity and female sexuality.

Stoppard allows Ophelia only a single utterance, which is quite an insignificant one. This is on her second presence on stage in Act II of the play:
(OPHELIA enters, with prayer book, a religious procession of one).

HAMLET. Nymph, in thy orisons be all my sins remembered.

(At his voice she has stopped for him, he catches her up)

OPHELIA. Good my lord, how does your honour for this many a day?

HAMLET. I humbly thank you — well, well, well. (They disappear talking into the wing). (56)

A comparison between male and female critics in their analysis of Ophelia can throw some light on the manner in which Stoppard has characterised her in his play. The noted feminist critic Elaine Showalter has written an essay on Ophelia, bringing out this contradiction. She begins the essay by referring to Lacan’s treatment of Ophelia:

‘As a sort of come-on, I announced that I would speak today about that piece of bait named Ophelia, and I’ll be as good as my word’. These are the words which begin the psychoanalytic seminar on Hamlet presented in Paris in 1959 by Jacques Lacan. But despite his promising come-on, Lacan was not as good as his word. He goes on for some 41 pages to speak about Hamlet, and when he does mention Ophelia, she is merely what Lacan calls ‘the object
Ophelia— that is the object of Hamlet’s male desire. The etymology of Ophelia, Lacan asserts, is ‘O-phallus’, and her role in the drama can only be to function as the exteriorized figuration of what Lacan predictably and, in view of his own early work with psychotic women, disappointingly suggests is the phallus as transcendental signifier. To play such a part obviously makes Ophelia ‘essential’, as Lacan admits; but only because, in his words, ‘she is linked forever, for centuries, to the figure of Hamlet’. (77)

This points to the attitude of the masculine world towards Ophelia. They know that Ophelia is not fairly portrayed. But they do nothing to attribute an independent identity for her. Showalter says that the “bait-and-switch” game which Lacan employs in his analysis is emblematic of the way Ophelia is deployed in psychiatric and critical texts. One can say that Stoppard too does the same.

For most male critics of Shakespeare, Ophelia is an insignificant minor character in the play. She is noted for her weakness and madness, and mainly for what she tells us about Hamlet. However, the figure of Ophelia occupies a very prominent place in cultural mythology. Showalter explains:
Though she is neglected in criticism, Ophelia is probably the most frequently illustrated and cited of Shakespeare’s heroines. Her visibility as a subject in literature, popular culture, and painting, from Redon who paints her drowning, to Bob Dylan, who places her on Desolation Row, to Cannon Mills, which has named a flowery sheet pattern after her, is in inverse relation to her invisibility in Shakespearean critical texts. Why has she been such a potent and obsessive figure in our cultural mythology? Insofar as Hamlet names Ophelia as ‘woman’ and ‘frailty’, substituting an ideological view of femininity for a personal one, is she indeed representative of Women, and does her madness stand for the oppression of women in society as well as in tragedy?

(78)

Thus one may conclude that the picture of Ophelia as “frail” and “mad” has got a deep-rooted position in the English mind. It is in such a context that Stoppard portrays his Ophelia. Writing in the latter part of the 1960s when women had become enfranchised and feminist movements were already asserting the independence of women, Stoppard could have exploited the possibility of offering a different reading to the character of Ophelia. But the very little references that he makes to her are in the
conventional way, and that is enough to evoke a world of negative attitudes which are already embedded in the cultural mythology.

The role of Ophelia is a rich site for theoretical debates about the cultural links between femininity, female sexuality, insanity and representation. French feminist theory looks at Ophelia as the symbol of “absence” in the patriarchal world. Her suicide itself can be taken as the banishment of the female by the male world. According to Showalter, drowning was conventionally associated with the feminine, with female fluidity, as opposed to masculine aridity. Literature accepts drowning as the truly feminine death. It is presented as a beautiful immersion and submersion in the female element. Water is the profound and organic symbol of the liquid woman whose eyes are so easily drowned in tears, as her body is the repository of blood, amniotic fluid, and milk. The female identity inscribed upon Ophelia by the male folk around her suffocates her and finally kills her, herself not being aware of it. Shakespeare makes her commit suicide out of her madness. Stoppard does not even mention what happens to Ophelia. That is, for him she does not deserve even that much significance. When Stoppard remains silent about Ophelia's fate, that silence is naturally filled by the Shakespearean portrayal of her madness and the consequent suicide. As already noted, a host of female critics have offered a variety of responses to the role and tragic death of Ophelia. They have acted as Ophelia’s Horatio to report to the world her sad story. The
gaps in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, especially in the presentation of Ophelia and Gertrude, provide enough food for feminist discourse. But Stoppard’s Ophelia is a big nought.

Ophelia's life is a tragedy, being betrayed by her father, brother and lover. Everyone uses her: Polonius, to gain favour; Laertes, to belittle Hamlet; Claudius, to spy on Hamlet; and Hamlet again, to express his feigned madness with her as a decoy. But no tragic stature is attributed to her. While Hamlet is troubled with moral choices and alternatives, Ophelia does not have any such perplexities. She has no doubt about "To be, or not to be” because she can act only in one way: as dictated by the patriarchal codes. The feminist critic Lee Edwards feels that it is as if we can imagine Hamlet's story without Ophelia, but, Ophelia literally has no story without Hamlet. Even Laertes, her own brother, calls her a "document in madness". *Rosencrantz and Guidenstern are Dead* contains a fragment from the nunnery scene, but virtually ignores *Hamlet’s* complicated and disturbing representation of sexual politics. The world of male politics entertained by Ros and Guil avoids the presence of women. The alteration that Stoppard has brought about in the play serves only to pour away all the political themes in *Hamlet*.

The inappropriateness of Queen Gertrude's sexual behaviour is one of the major themes of *Hamlet*. Hamlet's melancholy is attributed partly to
this “deviancy” on his mother's part. Hamlet hates his mother and all feminine subjects. He contends with a woman's body, his mother's body. He sees sexuality as evil. This is evident in his revulsion at Claudius, his disgust at his mother, his harsh denial of Ophelia and his own self-loathing at being born out of his mother’s body. Gertrude's body is the contested body, and hers is the female psyche configured and reconfigured by her son, husbands and courtiers. Gertrude as woman is the source of all conflicts in the play, but she herself is apparently not willingly engaged in any of them. Gertrude is a very good example of the objectification of the female body. The spectators of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* have this picture of Gertrude in their mind which they have got from *Hamlet*. In Stoppard, the same subjectivity gets reified. Gertrude in fact is being exploited and the blame is solely on her. Stoppard too blames Gertrude for her misbehaviour. We get this picture from the conversation between Ros and Guil. In Act I of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* Ros and Guil act out the situation behind Hamlet's strange behaviour. Guil acts as Hamlet:

ROS. Let me get it straight. Your father was king. You were his only son. Your father dies. You are of age. Your uncle becomes king.

GUIL. Yes.

ROS. Unorthodox.
GUIL. Undid me.

ROS. Undeniable. Where were you?

GUIL. In Germany.

ROS. Usurpation, then.

GUIL. He slipped in.

ROS. Which reminds me.

GUIL. Well, it would.

ROS. I don't want to be personal.

GUIL. It's common knowledge.

ROS. Your mother's marriage.

GUIL. He slipped in.

(Beat)

ROS. (lugubriously) His body was still warm.

GUIL. So was hers.

ROS. Extraordinary.

GUIL. Indecent.

ROS. Hasty.

GUIL. Suspicious.

ROS. It makes you think.

GUIL. Don't think I haven't thought of it.

ROS. And with her husband's brother.

GUIL. They were close.

ROS. She went to him —

GUIL.—Too close —
ROS.—For comfort.
GUIL. It looks bad.

ROS. It adds up.

GUIL. Incest to adultery.

ROS. Would you go so far?

GUIL. Never.

ROS. To sum up: your father, whom you love, dies, you are his heir, you come back to find that hardly was the corpse cold before his young brother popped on to his throne and into his sheets, thereby offending both legal and natural practice. Now why exactly are you behaving in this extraordinary manner? (37)

The observations made by them are in fact the arguments of the conventional criticism of *Hamlet*. Without making any alteration in it Stoppard presents it through his characters. The sexual politics and power politics in the play are very clear here. Gertrude is presented by Stoppard also as the root cause for the statement, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark".

In *Hamlet*, as Hamlet mentions to the players, he wishes to have a mother like Hecuba, wife of King Priam, who mourns for her children rather than they for her. While accusing Ophelia of cheating him, Hamlet blames all women for making monsters of men. Ophelia is presented as "mad", and Gertrude as a lustful and negligent mother. Such a representation can never be an innocent and value-free one. It stems from
the patriarchal stereotyping of femininity. Ophelia is deprived of freedom of thought and sexuality. All significant decisions in her life have been taken by others — even her love life is at the dictates of others. Only in her madness is she able to give vent to her suppressed sexuality. Stoppard deprives her even of that. The well-known feminist Rebecca Smith has written an essay on Gertrude, "A Heart Cleft in Twain: The Dilemma of Shakespeare's Gertrude", in which she defends Gertrude against false accusations of lasciviousness and cunning. She says that Gertrude must be analysed on the basis of the words she herself speaks — rather than the things said about her by the others. Her contention is that Gertrude is portrayed as a sex object by the Ghost, by Hamlet and by Claudius, the trio of the male combatants. Stoppard also revives the same figuration through the conversation between Ros and Guil. Gertrude's own speech in Stoppard's play does not point to any deviance or perversion on her part. However, as the Player comments in Act Two of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, “Audiences know what to expect, and that is all that they are prepared to believe in” (64). Towards the end of both *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the world of male political power is renewed leaving the problem of the feminine realm unresolved. In effect, Stoppard confirms the patriarchal notion of the impossibility of representing the feminine as something other than madness, incoherence, fluidity or silence.
Whitaker gives a beautiful description of the opening scene of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*:

We are at the Old Vic on an evening in April 1967. As the stage-lights go up, two men dressed as Elizabethan courtiers are tossing coins. The one in a red coat — dark haired and rather lanky — sits by a nearly empty money bag and spins them high in the air. His partner in a blue coat — blonder and stockier — walks about retrieving them and putting them into a nearly full bag. It is 'heads' every time. Soon the one in red says to nobody in particular, 'There is an art to the building of suspense'. A comment on their game, or on this new play? A bit later he gets up, examines the stage while spinning coins over his shoulder, and speculates that the law of averages 'means that if six monkeys were thrown up in the air for long enough, they would land on their — 'Heads', says his partner, picking up a coin. By the time their run of 'heads' has exceeded eighty-five, the increasingly agitated courtier in red has begun also to spin fantastic syllogisms and hypotheses to account for what is happening. (37)

The tossing of the coin can be taken as a very powerful metaphor for the sanctity and unquestionability of the hierarchical order of the society. Everything turns out to be pro-establishment. The power structures
function in an arbitrary way paying no attention to the resistance from the puny individuals. Ros and Guil are stupefied when heads turn up ninety-two times in succession. They fail to find any logic in it.

Ros and Guil do not understand that their fate is that of the tail which fails for ever in making its appearance. They are just an appendage which can be done away with at any time. Hamlet sends them to death without even giving it a second thought. Act I of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* reproduces Gertrude’s comments on Hamlet's attachment with Ros and Guil thus:

He hath much talked of you,

And sure I am, two men there is not living

To whom he more adheres. (27)

But Hamlet does not seem to cherish any such relationships with them. People other than Hamlet try to give them importance as the friends of Hamlet, but Hamlet himself disowns them. Similarly, Stoppard tries to invest them with prominence, but the Shakespearean world has already deprived them of that. Stoppard does not transcend that limitation. Roger Sales is very apt when he writes:

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* turns Shakespeare's play upside down and empties away potentially unpleasant subjects such as political corruption and sexual manipulation. Stoppard is in fact really doing no more than
many Shakespearean commentators and directors did before him . . . He defamiliarizes *Hamlet* in the sense that he inverts, edits and generally plays games with it. This disguises the fact that his parody version still offers a remarkably familiar version of the themes of the play. He may not take Hamlet’s personal problems seriously, but is still suggesting that this is what the play is about. Such interpretations, whether offered reverently or irreverently produce good, clean, uncontroversial productions which are capable of filling the theatres of Europe and elsewhere.

Political Shakespeare invites more divided responses. (84)

Paul Delaney comments on the adaptation by Stoppard: “A realm in which a coin can come up heads 92 times in a row must have some significance beyond the materialistic. But that realm is not random, disordered, chaotic. It is the realm of which Shakespeare is the author and finisher” (35). He continues that Ros and Guil are confronted by a world of mystery, the world of *Hamlet*:

Having had a glimpse of *Hamlet* ‘driving past Elsinore’, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern may never be able to make sense of what they have seen as through a glass darkly. And yet they sense more than they can make sense of. The world of *Hamlet* hovering in its tragic power, majesty and
splendour just beyond Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s comprehension figures the transcendent realm which lies beyond the ability of mortal flesh to verify empirically, though not beyond his power to intuit as a verity. (35)

Arguing about the form of work, Peter J. Rabinowitz demonstrates that “Stoppard simultaneously evokes our sympathy for the hapless Rosencrantz and Guildenstern while eliciting our respect for the larger pattern, the greater order of Shakespeare’s stage” (241). One can say very confidently that Stoppard affirms the world order represented by Shakespeare. As far as Ros and Guil are concerned, the character of Hamlet eludes their gasp, so also do the events of *Hamlet*.

Besides Tom Stoppard, various other writers have appropriated *Hamlet* in their own ways. For example, Herbert Blau’s *Elsinore: An Analytical Scenario* (1981), Nicholas Abraham’s *The Phantom of Hamlet*, Ken Gass’s *Claudius*, Bruce Robinson’s comic film, *Withnail and I* (1985) . . . the list goes on and on. The *Hamlet* industry shows no signs of decline. *Hamlet* still remains to be the most frequently produced play in the theatre and the most commented upon. It is as if the rewritten versions of *Hamlet* invest the play with an added canonicity. As Holderness has insisted, “Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is . . . part of the common currency of our culture and possesses meanings and values which cannot be contained by its existence as a literary text for study, or a theatrical
script” (1987, 2). Hugh Grady’s argument also follows a similar line: “Despite the recent formulation of a postmodern Shakespeare comprising the rejection of canonical greatness, the abandonment of ideas of organic wholeness and the rigorous questioning of established hierarchies of academic discourse, *Hamlet* retains its cultural centrality” (190).

There have been a number of very argumentative theoretical approaches to *Hamlet*. However, in spite of all these counter attempts, in the opinion of Peter J. Smith, “It is the most popular and public of English artifacts, the most canonical text by the most canonical author of world literature, a text which defines even as it is defined by both the theatrical and educational institutions in which it figures so prominently” (4). Thus one may conclude that any discussion on a Shakespearean play, either defensive or subversive, ends up reinstating it more and more deeply at the centre of the canon. While watching *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the audience looks at it constantly referring backward to *Hamlet*. Ros and Guil as well as Ophelia and Gertrude are appreciated as two characters who carry their Shakespearean fate with them. Bareham cites Norman Berlin:

This pinpoints what Stoppard does best: what he can do with Shakespeare’s minor characters to help us realize ‘how remarkable Shakespeare is’. That is, Stoppard helps us to see more clearly not ‘human beings under stress’ but
Shakespeare . . . and as we thread our way through the play
Stoppard must be praised for precisely that function. . . .

(Bareham 109)

In conclusion, though Ros and Guil are given prominence in the
title of Stoppard's play, Hamlet still occupies the centre. Even in the
“new” setting Ros and Guil are as peripheral as in the original. Since their
fate is already pronounced in the beginning itself, the audience in fact
eagerly wait for their encounter with Hamlet. Also, even though Stoppard
is writing in the twentieth century, he remains blind to the politics of
power and gender issues in the play. Despite our admiration for
Stoppard’s mastery in parodying the theatricality of *Hamlet*, we feel a bit
apprehensive that the seeds of this parody are contained within
Shakespeare's own text. The techniques he employs are solidly based on
the games which Shakespeare himself plays. The ideological restrictions
are too much on Stoppard that he too, though unknowingly, enlivens a
world order based on hierarchies and stratifications. The metanarratives
that have excluded or marginalized the experiences and cultures of the
underprivileged are not destabilized. The power structures that established
the Shakespeare canon remain almost intact. Issues of social stratification,
gender politics and power take-over get submerged under the gravity of
personal tragedy and its metaphysics. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are
dead* thus remains to be a reinstatement of the hegemonical hierarchy.