

Symptoms of Clinical Depression in Hamlet: A Study in Mental Malady

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Abstract

The world today is encountering a gigantic problem of mental malady which has taken the present generation into its grip very fast. The modern generation is under the threat of mental illness which ranges from mild to severe mental disturbances in thought or behaviour. There are numerous classified forms of mental illnesses extending from anxiety to schizophrenia. The most common amongst them are anxiety, depression, bipolar, lining up to the serious ones like schizophrenia and other psychoses like hallucinations and delusions. The most common psychological disorder, affecting millions across the world today, is Depression. Hamlet, the great dramatic creation of Shakespeare, was a man of genius but unfortunately had fallen in the cruel hands of 'depression' which ultimately brought ruin in its trail, after extreme paranoia.

Keywords: Depression, Hamlet, Shakespeare.

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) has described Depression as a mood disorder which is characterized by specific symptoms like sadness, loss of interest, anhedonia (loss of pleasure), lack of appetite, feelings of guilt, low-esteem or self-worth, sleep disturbance, fatigue, and lack of concentration. In society the term 'depression' is used to describe various transient and mild conditions of experiencing low moods by people. It is believed by the general folk that it is a condition or temperament which will come and go. But the fact is that depression can be recurrent and long-lasting. It is caused by genetic, environmental and psychological factors. It affects people irrespective of their age, race, ethnicity, gender, resulting in adverse effects on physical health, cognitive function and human relationships. It often starts at adolescent or young adult age. Today, depression is the second leading contributor to the global burden of disease. It is the second most common cause of Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALY). Therefore, it's the need of time to tackle the situation with full knowledge and awareness of this new pandemic.

The great Shakespearean hero, Hamlet, whom I have selected as a case study for my investigation in the present paper, had always been haunting me as an intense peculiar character, who shrouded himself in the mysterious world of doubts, whether he was really mad or feigned madness? Whether this man with antic disposition was a genius struck by depression or an utter failure in worldly terms? "The doctors of the insane have been studious of the state of Hamlet's mind--Doctors Ray, Kellogg, Conolly, Bucknill. They are unanimous in wishing to put Hamlet under judicious medical treatment; but they find it harder than Polonius did to hit upon a definition of madness:

For to define true madness

What is't but to be nothing else but mad?"¹ (2.2.93-94)

There are celebrities, writers, administrators, leaders, scholars and numberless people who have been victims of clinical depression, but were socially respectable and successful. It's high time to understand the need of changing our attitude towards psychological disorders in the twenty-first century which itself is marked with rapid development in the field of knowledge and technology. Today, knowledge is power. Therefore, we should bring awareness in society by disseminating correct knowledge about mental issues. Stress is the by-product of development and the major reason for depression. But development cannot be avoided. It is an essential factor for the quality of life. Development is a good thing and should be the aim of all progressive societies. The accelerated growth in



Vandana Dubey
Associate Professor &
Head,
Dept. of English,
T. D. College, Jaunpur,
U.P., India

society, the spinning life style of urbanization, metropolitanization and the envying competitive feelings amongst us, builds up stress.

Objective of Study

The purpose of my study is twofold. First, to have the right understanding of mental illness like depression, its symptoms--by critically examining the most famous tragic character conceived by the great artist, Shakespeare--Hamlet. The second objective is to transform the mindset and behaviour of people regarding mental maladies. Mental diseases are akin to other physical diseases, therefore, should be treated with love, care, compassion and medication; not as a social stigma or taboo.

Discussion

The Renaissance with Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, demonstrated how fascinating imagination and some of its vagaries were to the thinkers of that day. Folly is so human that it has its roots with poetry and tragedy both. It is revealed as much in the insane asylum as in the writings of Cervantes and Shakespeare. Literature weaves itself around man and human relationships. The contents of literature contain human facts. So, psychology gets chance to intrude literature. Shakespeare was not only a great dramatist and a great poet, but a great psychologist, in the sense that he shaped the most enigmatic character of literature, Hamlet.

A person gets entrapped in mental agitation when one after another he keeps getting emotionally offended by someone or he does not get time and space to console his hurt self. Before he can come out of one mental perturbation, he is assaulted by another grave problem which baffles him so much so that his whole human existence gets shaken. He loses confidence in himself and feels worthless, accompanied by the emotions of hopelessness and failure. In the play *Hamlet*, one of the four major tragedies of Shakespeare, the hero Hamlet is surrounded by sensational situations, newly arisen in the country and his close family, which has discomposed the very existence of his being. Henry Mackenzie, the author of *The Man of Feeling* writes, "We see a man who in other circumstances would have exercised all the moral and social virtues, placed in a situation in which even the amiable qualities of his mind serve but to aggravate his distress and to perplex his conduct."²

It is said of Hamlet's character that it is not only "intricate" but also 'unintelligible'. A. C. Bradley comments on the play, "*Hamlet* appeals powerfully to our sense of mystery of life, but so does every good tragedy; and it does so not because the hero is an enigma to us, but because, having a fair understanding of him, we feel how strange it is that strength and weakness should be so mingled in one soul, and that this soul should be doomed to such misery and apparent failure."³

If we evaluate Hamlet's character without any prejudice, we will soon realize that Prince Hamlet was a genius, a scholar, who had enjoyed a full protected life under the guardianship of his father King Hamlet. He was assigned no responsibility regarding the state and was only devoted to his studies. This shows that he was highly sensitive and imaginative and was securely and peacefully left to his own world of friends and knowledge. In the words of Professor Dowden, "When the play opens, he has reached the age of thirty years. . . and he has received culture of every kind except the culture of active life. During the reign of strong-willed elder Hamlet there was no call to action for his meditative son. He has slipped on into years of full manhood still a haunter of the university, a student of philosophies, an amateur in art, a ponderer on the things of life and death, who has never formed a resolution or executed a deed."⁴

Then comes the reversal of fortune in the life of the Prince of Denmark when suddenly King Hamlet, expires and within a very short time his mother, Gertrude marries his uncle Claudius, whom Hamlet never liked. The queen counsels him saying:

"Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off

.....

Do not forever with thy veiled lids

Seek for thy noble father in the dust."⁵ (1.2. 68-71)

Here we can diagnose the anxiety in Hamlet while dealing with the daily affairs because he is in excessive and persistent state of stress. The apparent reason of his sadness seems to be the death of his father, but actually it is much more added in the form of helplessness, apprehension, repeated negative thoughts and confusion because he has lost faith in his mother. A son child can never imagine his mother getting remarried. Very clearly, we can see the impact of it on a young man's psyche. He himself says in doldrums, "But I have that within that passes show." (1.2.85) His depression is surfacing rapidly. His mind is full of the fumes of rational and irrational thoughts. He can't share his thoughts with anyone that how offended he is feeling by his mother's stained reputation, and his uncle's williness in getting the throne and the most beautiful woman as his wife. A highly sensitive and humane soul is bound to get depressed. Hamlet loses interest in life. He gets indulged in circumstantial, incoherent speech thinking of annihilation:

"O that this too too sallied flesh would melt,

Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,

Or that the Everlasting had not fixed

His canon 'gainst self- slaughter."⁶ (1.2.130)

Hamlet is feeling lonely and is involved in a self-reinforcing loop of negative thinking. Our observation will show that how gradually his mental condition is deteriorating and he has moved quickly into the grip of 'schizophrenia' that tends to strike in late teens and early twenties, a crucial time in man's life when his dreams and aspirations are rising. This formative part of Hamlet's life has been interrupted by schizophrenia, characterized by thoughts or experience that seem out of touch with reality. He has entered into the range of suicidal thoughts. Depression is the principal motivator for suicide in people with schizophrenia. We can see Hamlet pondering over self-slaughter thinking logically all the reasons in his favour—not to live:

"O God, God,

How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable

Seem to me all the uses of this world!

Fie on't, ah, fie, 'tis an unweeded garden

That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature

Possess it merely."⁷ (1.2.130)

Hamlet is emotionally wounded because there is a repetition in his thought against his mother's marrying his uncle after the death of his father who was a 'Hyperion' when compared to Claudius, and Claudius is like a 'satyr'. He is surprised at his mother's behaviour who was loved so much by King Hamlet. Hamlet's belief in womankind is shattered to pieces the impact of which we can see later on in his relationship with, and his attitude towards Ophelia. In despair he exclaims with anger and apathy, frustration and mania, "Frailty, thy name is Woman."⁸ (1.2.146)

Later in the play when Horatio and Marcellus tell Hamlet about the ghost of King Hamlet, Hamlet himself goes to the platform where he meets the ghost of his father. The Ghost divulges the secret of his being murdered by pouring poison in his ears when he was sleeping in the orchard by Claudius, and giving out the false news to the people of the country by Claudius that the King was stung by a serpent. The Ghost pleads Hamlet to "-Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder!" Hamlet, immediately like a responsible adult son wants to sweep to his revenge "as swift as meditation or the thoughts of love." The ghost even cautions Hamlet, not to illtreat his mother and to spare her completely, leaving her to the pricking of her conscience alone. The meeting with the ghost, whether a hallucination or real, suddenly poured additional burden of revenge and murder mystery on the head of Hamlet.

Now we can witness the depression in the form of bipolar disorder, which means mood disorder with two extremes, 'low' that is depression and 'high' that is mania. In depression Hamlet suddenly feels that his sinews have grown instant old. He feels lethargic which will further lead him to suicidal thoughts. Next thought that hits him in this bipolar disorder is that he becomes overly elated, more angry and starts making grand plans impulsively by rapid and frenzied speech:

“Yea, from the table of my memory
 I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,
 All saws of books, all forms, . . .
 And thy commandment all alone shall live
 Within the book and volume of my brain
 Unmixed with baser matter. . . .
 O villain, villain, smiling damned villain,
 My Tables! Meet it is I set it down
 That one may smile and smile and be a villain—”⁹ (1.5. 98-108)

Then gradually many months quietly passed away and it appears as if Hamlet is reluctant to take revenge. But it is not so. His highly educated and reflective mind does not allow him to act rashly .He wants to first confirm the truth told by the Ghost. For this he takes the help of some players who will enact the story told by the ghost in a royal performance and if the king’s face blushes, Hamlet will be convinced of the guilt committed by Claudius. Now, this is the mental condition somewhere between predominantly depressed and predominantly maniac. In between a person is likely to be quiet and well, able to function normally. John Dover Wilson had commented upon this saying that Hamlet wants to play with the king as a cat wants to play with a mouse.

Hamlet is not avoiding revenge. His philosophic bent of mind accounts for the delay. We can see that there is method in his madness, therefore, the king is also afraid of his presence and says that madness in great ones should not pass unnoticed. His famous soliloquy depicts the deep meditation on life, death, conscience and suicide. This soliloquy expresses haunting doubts about life and genuine questions related to the philosophy of life. The genuine questions that have produced great saints and thinkers in the world, with Hamlet simply turns into the disturbed thinking of a depressed man; charged with delusion, racing thoughts, false belief of superiority, paranoia and excess sleepiness:

“To be, or not to be—that is the question;
 Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
 And by opposing end them; to die: to sleep
 No more. . . .

.....
 When he himself might his quietus make
 With a bare bodkin. . . .

.....
 Thus conscience does make cowards—
 And thus the native hue of resolution
 Is sickled o’er with the pale cast of thought,
 And enterprises of great pitch and moment
 With this regards their currents turn awry
 And lose the name of action.”¹⁰ (3.1.54-87)

We can see that there comes a chance when Hamlet finds his uncle praying in loneliness and he thinks of murdering him immediately. But his extremely sensitive and reflective mind stops him from taking rash action, “Now might I do it pat, now he is a-praying”. He tip-toes nearer the King but the very next moment he is seized by a philosophic thought “That would be scanned/ A villain kills my father, and for that I, his sole son, doth the same villain send / To Heaven.” (3.3.73-78)

Bradley very sympathetically thinks of Hamlet when he defends his delay, “I venture to affirm, a man who at any other time and in any other circumstances than those presented would have been perfectly equal to his task; and it is, in fact, the very cruelty of his fate that the crisis of his life comes on him at the one

moment when he cannot meet it, and when his highest gifts, instead of helping him, conspire to paralyse him."¹¹

The bipolar disorder in Hamlet makes him a very dangerous man. He acts instantly. The whole episode of depression along with all other multiple emotions that accompany a depressed man can be seen vividly in the scene when Hamlet goes to meet his mother. His mood is grave, he is composed and firm, well-behaved, not furious at all. But the underlying darkness in his soul and thoughts soon brings instant change in his behaviour. He suddenly becomes violent against his mother and pushes her in the chair. The queen cries for help and then Polonius who was hiding behind the curtain comes for queen's rescue. Hamlet thinks that it is the king and immediately kills him. The queen screams, "O, what a rash and bloody deed is this!" to which he replies sarcastically, "A bloody deed—almost as bad, good mother,/As kill a king and marry with his brother." [3.4.26-27]

Later, he discovers his fault but he is not guilty; he is behaving normally and trying his level best to make his mother's conscience prick which he ultimately succeeds in doing so. He says, "Leave wringing your hand/ Let me wring your heart." [3.4.32-33] When the queen objects to the wagging of his tongue so rudely he tells her the disgraceful thing she had done which has offended the soul of his father and his own, "Such an act,/That blurs the grace and blush of modesty...." [3.4.39-40] and then he continues with a long sermon on morality. The queen in the end stops him from doing so and pleads, "O speak to me no more!/These words like daggers enter in my ears."

Exactly at this juncture, when so many thoughts and actions are going on we can witness the abnormal biochemical imbalance in the brain of Hamlet by his actions. Reading between the lines of the text shows that he is struggling to maintain full control over himself but excessive control fails in the end as it usually happens in depression. Symptoms of hallucination now surges on the surface and Hamlet sees the ghost of his father who has come to remind him of his delay in the revenge, "Do not forget! This visitation is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose." We all know the truth that "Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works." Though this was spoken by the ghost for Hamlet's mother, but here we can see that it is more applicable to Hamlet as well, because he is losing his physical health as indicated by Ophelia earlier, due to depression. The queen believes that Hamlet has gone mad and she exclaims, "This is the very coinage of your brain/ This bodiless creation ecstasy/Is very cunning in." (3.4.135-137)

Any how the meeting of Hamlet and his mother results in being fruitful as both share and understand each other. The mother proclaims, "O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain" to which he spontaneously replies, "O throw away the worse part of it/ And live the purer with the other half." This scene clearly indicates that Hamlet is in post-traumatic stress disorder because since he has known of the murder of his father with additional burden of taking revenge, he has been pondering over different ways to discover solution to the problem. Sometimes he feigns madness, so that he remains unnoticed by the king, and during that time he'll ensure the truth. Sometimes he is hyper ventilating his emotions through his speeches, sometimes he goes in doldrums and sometimes he plans for suicide after long debate within himself.

Hamlet's relationship breaks with Ophelia as he had murdered her father Polonius. He got angry with her because she broke her relation with him and returned all his gifts and letters after her father and brother had counselled her to do so, because their match was inappropriate. Hamlet was the Prince of Denmark whereas Ophelia was simply a maid. Hamlet behaves very rudely with Ophelia and curses her to go to nunnery. This breakup in love had also an adverse effect upon his psyche.

After the murder of Polonius, Hamlet is sent to England by the King's order. Henceforth, he has fallen in love with action, if not in continuity, at least in plan and energy.

Does Hamlet ultimately win over his psychological weakness? His mental imbalance? His emotional disturbances? The great genius and the close observer cum poet of human nature, Shakespeare has left these doubts in silence with an open ending for us readers to understand mental problems and to be aware of

tackling them. As responsible citizens and good human beings we should also contribute in creating a world and society which should be grounded in humanity. People should be more sensitive towards each other's sufferings. They should deal with mental problems in two ways. First, eradicate the stigma that it is carrying around it by treating it with medicines, compassion and psychotherapy along with patience. Secondly, by creating a society which should believe in the principle of fraternity, peace, stability, happiness and in providence—"a moral order which includes man's highest exercise of foresight, energy, and resolution."¹²

In the end of the play, Hamlet's life is spent in a more energetic way with an improved foresight which are the "noblest moments of his existence."¹³ Hamlet saves Horatio by snatching the bowl of poison from his hand and by giving his support in favour of Fortinbras and thus, saves his country. Edward Dowden has beautifully commented upon the new situation. He states "The arrival of Fortinbras contributes also to the restoration of a practical and positive feeling. With none of the rare qualities of the Danish Prince, he excels him in plain grasp of ordinary fact. Shakespeare knows that the success of these men who are limited, definite, positive, will do no dishonour to the failure of the rarer natures, to whom the problem of the living is more embarrassing, and for whom the tests of the world are stricter and more delicate."¹⁴

Conclusion

To conclude, since the time of Descartes, there has been much debate on the topic of mind and body relationship. All theories establish the fact that mind and body respond and influence each other. Therefore, the health of mind and body, both are of utmost importance. Both should be treated with full attention and compassion. Both should be similarly given time for healing, waiting and watching the improvement. It is utter stupidity if even in today's postmodern times, when research and discourses are meant for the betterment of society, keeping individual's happiness in the centre, we do not understand the mental maladies and attach stigma to it and let people suffer and die in loneliness. It is a shame to the developed society, if it shows its callous attitude towards such an important issue which is swallowing up the lives of the people faster than the pandemic.

Hamlet was suffering from severe depression. It is a misfortune that we didn't understand his mental disease. He was not at all weak. Rather his strength is exhibited in dealing with his abnormal situation. Professor Dowden has rightly said, "Yet it has been truly said that only one who feels Hamlet's strength should venture to speak of Hamlet's weakness. That in spite of difficulties without, and inward difficulties, he still clings to his terrible duty."¹⁵ Again, what Dowden had commented upon Shakespeare, is remarkable, "One thing, however, we do know—that the man who wrote the play of Hamlet had obtained a thorough comprehension of Hamlet's malady."¹⁶

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