

EXISTENTIALISM
AND
SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDIES

To describe the singular, concrete and personal experiences of the "invidual", to analyse the problematic and whimsical contents of human life and to pull man out of the maelstrom of his predicaments—these seem to be the dictates of Existentialism. Since, this humanistic philosophy strikes at the discordant notes of the main undercurrents of human life, it appears not much of an impossibility to detect its ramifications spreading to days of the Elizabethan reign and even farther back. For human life—whether that be in the Stone Age, or the Elizabethan Era, or the pitiful pessimism of the world wars or even the modern jet age—has fundamentally the same stock of experience.

Thus, in so far as Existentialism emphasizes the human situation and man's problems in this world, it is also found way back in the works of Shakespeare. But this does not imply that Shakespeare was at all conscious of the fact that he had in him certain existentialist trends. For there is no doubt that there can be more in a work than the author consciously put there.

As a modern movement of the 20th Century, Existentialism germinated in the soils prepared by the aftermaths and jolts of the two great World Wars. It is no doubt true that if material possessions are lost every day and fellow beings killed before one's very eyes, the only worthwhile thing left is one's own existence—an existence that manifests the characteristics of the true existential condition.

Not much less tremulous were the days immediately preceding the production of Shakespeare's great tragedies. In most of his plays Shakespeare silhouetted the inner experiences and the human predicaments of his age—a portrayal that bears the reflection of a time that is "out of joint", of the time

in which the "fair is foul, and foul is fair." The disillusionment of the Catholics and the Puritans, the Plague of 1603, and the Gun Powder plot of 1605 and many other such disturbing experiences formed the background of the age in which Shakespeare wrote.

Although these tumultuous currents did naturally attract the Shakespearean art but his comprehensive genius enabled him to withstand the shackles the contemporary violence put round him. For, we find that his interest lay deep at the bottom of things. He fathomed the depths of human existence and this penetration was in no way repugnant to the existentialist way of thinking. We can easily detect the trends of this freshly discovered philosophy in the works of Shakespeare. But Shakespeare (as all other writers with deep insight) found a truer and more touching expression of his view of life in tragedies. For tragedy may be taken as the plain mirror of our earthly existence, contrasted with the distorted reflections of romance or comedy.

The existentialist main thesis that "Existence precedes essence," puts the whole burden of responsibility on the shoulders of man himself. He carries the load with the blank existence behind him, that is, before asserting his essence he was a mere existing "nothing." Further, he is not merely responsible for his own individuality but is responsible for all men. Likewise the Shakespearean "Dramatis Personae" are "the authors of their own proper woe." The calamities of the tragedies issue mainly from the actions of men themselves. Shakespeare, too, like the Existentialists, shows us the sufferings of individuals and likewise achieve his tragic effect by presenting the individual sufferer as a representative of mankind.

Man is existentially doomed to make the courageous exercise of Choice. Choice, in the existential sense, is always possible but what is not, in the least, possible is "not to choose". Man is bound to choose and burden himself with a responsibility but this responsibility is for "nothing" Hamlet's vacillation on the thought, "To be, or not to be." leaves him in a state that required an act of choice. And the choice that he made burdened him with a trust (in this case, to execute the revenge on his uncle). Macbeth, too, brings misery

and responsibility upon himself by choosing a course of action in the full knowledge what it is against his principles and his better nature. Whatever it is, he chooses, his act of choice loads him with a responsibility—the responsibility under which he feels a shudder and in which lies the real anguish, which comes through the forced play of a meaningless part that nonetheless one must continue to play to the end until death and for no reason at all. This was very true of Hamlet's planned revenge, which though not meaningless in the beginning, did become a senseless and insignificant prosecution, after the constant procrastination, that Hamlet indulged in.

Further, the stress laid by the Existentialists on the "individual" seems to be rather a replica of the same emphasis made by Shakespeare in his tragedies. The "individual", for him, is the centre around whom the plot revolves. ".....the individual is the category through which..... our age, our race and its history must pass.....Man functions as an individual, experiences intense feelings as an individual, dies as individual"! (Realms of Philosophy—W.S. Shikian and M.L. Sahkaian).

The appalling disillusionment of the existentialist man results from failure or the fear that failure will end in death with nothing after that. It is this desperation resulting from the failure of man to make something out of this nothing that constitutes the tragic element in Shakespearean Tragedies. Hamlet fails absolutely, fulfilling, indeed, the task laid on him, but fulfilling it at an appalling and needless cost. Macbeth, too, having attained the materialistic ambition of being a king, failed miserably in securing for himself the inner peace and calm which are essential attributes of happiness.

The existential feelings of loneliness and emptiness originate from people's feeling that they are powerless to do anything effective about the lives they live. Some of Shakespeare's tragic heroes also seem to suffer from the same feeling of loneliness and emptiness. Macbeth's "vaulting ambition" leaves him in a state of tragic isolation, no less than the isolation at heart from which Hamlet suffers when he himself had to plan, assimilate and execute the revenge on his uncle. The isolation and alienation that king Lear suffers

from, is also "too deep for tears," as he numbers out his days in sore autumnal isolation that seems to echo: "I fall upon the thorns of lie! I bleed!".

The existential absurd is born out of the meaninglessness of the modern machine age. The first sign of absurdity, says Camus, is an experience of a void, a hollowness in the soul. The anxiety we feel when we ponder over and question the wearisome routine of life is also an experience of the absurd. Further, the absurd lies neither in the world nor in men, but in the confrontation of the two. And since Absurdity is a truth, we must preserve the absurd by continually confronting the world as it is, because, otherwise, we would be destroying the scale of the absurd. We must not try to escape the absurd or to make a leap away from it.

Experiencing the meaninglessness and the resultant absurdity of his pursuit, Hamlet becomes sensitive to the void, hollowness and wearisome routine life. Such sensations, of the denseness and strangeness of the universe, no doubt, make him prone to the thought of suicide—an act which tends of to escape the phenomenon of absurdity. If Camus had lived in the Shakespearean days or if Hamlet would have come down to be entity in contemporary existential philosophy Camus would certainly have redirected Hamlet's thoughts. Hamlet inclined towards making a true leap and escape from the absurd when he says:—

"O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His cannon 'gainst self-slaughter!....."

Camus believes that this "sickness of life" and even a longing for death defies the absurd. This was, for Camus, not a healthy attitude: man's greatness lies in an attitude of revolt against the absurdity of the world. It does not matter whether you affect a cure or not, but the important thing is to "live with" one's ailments. If life is absurd, why elude it? Types of thought that negate reason and leap into transcendence elude the real problem and Camus calls this attitude a "Philosophical suicide".

Existentially speaking, one of the utmost necessities of the "individuals" life consists in its having an infinite fullness of perfection, while being questionable and full of torment, at the same time. It simultaneously envelopes the authenticity of sorrow and joy, death and birth, evil and good the eternal and the transitory, the worthless and the valuable, the meaningful and the meaningless. Such inexhaustible abundance of polarity was expressed from the Existentialist side, by Rilke. In harmonizing the irreducible opposites he declared that the positive and the negative are identical. Rilke seeks a solution in emphasizing extremes, and stressing the pointed contrasts which, yet fundamentally, represent a unity. He fails to see that a better solution can be secured if the relative validity of the opposites is left intact. Shakespeare had seen the worth of this solution and had perceived both horror and sweetness of life in their constant change, but for from feeling, them to be identical, he presented them in their radical incompatible contrast. This inclination towards radical opposition and contrast has its theological ramifications in Kierkegaard's doctrine of God as the "absolute paradox" before whom fear is also love. The human life mirrored in Shakespearean Tragedies and Existentialism is not merely a spectacle of evil; it is a spectacle of a constant and inevitable relation between good and evil. It is caught, like the heart of Gloucester (in King Lear) "twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief," and often "alack ! too weak, the conflict to support —"

The series of tragic conflicts set ablaze by these incompatible extremes and paradoxes constitutes a rude and halting strife towards the attainment of harmony. It was, in part, the same sort of conflict and confrontation out of which, according to Camus, the absurd is born. The indifference with which the absurd and unreasonable universe meets man's passionate longing for clarity and coherence precipitates a conflict quite akin to that born out of the irreducible opposites of the human life as represented by Shakespeare.

The concept of existential "dread" is quite distinct from ordinary "fear" which is caused by something definite. A large number of critics are puzzled over the fear that Macbeth, too, displays when he hesitates on the brink of action :

"If it were done when 'tis done, then, 'twere well.

It were done quickly.

If we inquire as to the cause of Macbeth's fear, we shall be hard put to find an answer. He, of course does not fear, "fear" "death" or "physical punishment". What then? The answer then is that he fears nothing in particular. His fear is analogous to the existential dread—dread which is an ill-defined threat from nowhere. The fear phrases itself in the unknown-chain of consequences but does not define itself for Macbeth. It is precisely the same fear which prevented Hamlet from killing the king.

Macbeth grows broodier as he steps so far in crime that should he ".....
wade no more,

Returning were as tedious as go o'er :"

But the real tragedy and existential absurdity lies in his discovery of his ambition, almost as soon as it is achieved and his being condemned to carry on and pay over and over again the price for what he knows is worthless.

Thus, we could easily conceive that Shakespearean Tragedy records the basic attitudes that decide the common texture of the life of ordinary man. For, what could be nearer to the "common's heart" than a child's "filial ingratitude" to a father; a husband's jealous guarding of his wife's dealings with other men, a general's "vaulting ambition"; the problem "To be, or not to be". Existentialism, too launches an avalanche of describing analytically the great pressures or tensions of ordinary life, thus strongly emphasizing the affinity between Shakespearean Tragedies and this modern philosophical movement. But there is in this stress, no great emphasis on the exact similarity between the two.

For there are some branches of Existentialism and even some existential feelings of the individual that are quite contrary to what is mirrored in Shakespearean Tragedies. Hamlet's idea of "a divinity that shapes our ends" could easily be drawn as a foil or contrast to Sartre's main thesis "Man is condemned to be free." Existentially speaking, Sartre's statement denies deter-

minism and accepts the position that man is free and is himself responsible for everything he does. Sartre would never accept Halment's position and would absolutely deny the existence of a divinity or any other Absolute Force that could shape our destinies. In "Macbeth", too, "weird sisters" literally imply the "fate sisters" or those who are the ministers of Destiny. And this too would not tally with Sartre's thesis. But inspite of these differential elements we could easily conclude that Shakespeare has such piercing vision into all human nature that we could not, but accept him as a confidant and friend of men of every era. And this makes him an easy prey to our attempts of detecting existential trends in him.