

META-THEATRICAL REFLECTIONS: TOM STOPPARD'S ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD AS A POST- MODERNISTIC REPLAY OF SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET

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ABSTRACT:

*The present study has been made to interpret the concept of meta-theatre as adopted by Stoppard in writing *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* as an attempt to reimagine the play *Hamlet* through the perspective of the minor characters of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*. Through the Post-modernistic lens, the meta-theatrical elements in the play have been analysed with the help of qualitative research methodology. An in-depth analysis and discussion has been made to explore the layers of play within a play and the study has further high-lightened the significance and scope of such studies as a novel method of reincarnation of the classic works through the post-modernistic techniques.*

Key Words: Post-Modernism, Meta- theatrical elements, Play within a play, reincarnatio.

Introduction:

One important aspect of Post Modernistic Literature is the use of Pastiche, being called one of the most significant techniques in the post-modernist toolkit (Malpas, 2005) Stoppard used this technique in his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* as a meta theatrical pastiche to Shakespeare's timeless play *Hamlet*. In this play, Stoppard reimagines and narrates the story from the perspective of two minor characters of *Hamlet* the play; *Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern* who were actually Prince Hamlet's friends and are killed in the play, *Hamlet*. By doing so, Stoppard offers an opportunity to the reader to explore the meta-theatrical and existential perspectives of identity, fate and the philosophy of the relevance of reality. The play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, thus, serves as a homage to Shakespeare's grandeurs as a dramatist, and adds layer, turning the work into pastiche, interplaying with the themes and characters of *Hamlet*, making his play a prominent post-modernistic work.

The subject of the present study, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is the exploration of the play from the perspectives of these persons, who played the minor roles of Prince Hamlet's friends. Their roles in the play were very brief and insignificant. In the play by Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, they become protagonists and explore their existence, the meaning of it, their identities and their roles that intersect with the plot and the tragic events of the play. So the story is same but this time it is seen with and from the perspectives of these minor characters and through this Stoppard exhibits skilful mastery of pastiche and meta theatre. The play gives a fair chance to explore the ideology of identity crisis, the meaning of existence in a tone of absurdity and the quest of identity through the way the characters navigate in the world where the boundaries between the reality and illusion are blurred, creating an existential crisis (Baudlliard 1986) and the philosophies of life, death, existence and fate are questioned in an absurdist manner exploring the intricate layers of these fundamental quests.

Statement of the Problem

Meta-theatre is a modern form of interpretation and re-depiction of the monumental plays where the story is conveyed through the perspective of the characters other than the protagonist; breaking the illusion of reality to engage the audience in a dialogue about the nature of theatricality (Abel, 1963). Over the time, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been interpreted through the character of Hamlet, on the litmus paper of tragedy, the role of hero, his madness and his hamartia i.e. to be or not to be. While the critics and researches have always focused on the character of Hamlet, a meta-theatrical re-writing of such a story works as a stimulus to look through new vistas of the play, from the perspective of the minor characters, calling for their individualistic view of identity and existentialism. This article strives to analyse the reimagining of Hamlet from Hamlet's friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's perspective, setting the spotlight on them.

Research Objectives:

1. To examine and evaluate the post-modernistic techniques in the play through the themes of identity crisis, quest for existentialism and the interplay of time and space questioning the role of fate in the cosmic politics.
2. To explore the meta-theatrical elements as used by Stoppard in the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* to give new dimension to dramaturgy by using the idea of play within a play.
3. To interpret the identity and existence of the main characters within the context of postmodern discourse. Analysis of their roles as minor characters in *Hamlet* deconstructed and reinterpreted in Stoppard's play.

Research Questions:

1. What are the post-modernistic techniques in the play implied by the author through the themes of identity crisis, quest for existentialism and the interplay of time and space questioning the role of fate in the cosmic politics?
2. How has Stoppard used the meta-theatrical elements in the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* to give new dimension to dramaturgy by using the idea of play within a play.
3. How is the identity and existence of the main characters been explored within the context of postmodern discourse?

Literature Review

Meta-theatre is comparatively a new and post-modern concept of re-depiction of plays and theatre. Meta-theatre refers to drama about drama, where the play within the play serves to self-consciously reflect on the nature of theatre itself (Hornby, 1986). In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Stoppard employs meta-theatre extensively to explore themes of identity, existentialism, and the blurred lines between reality and illusion. The play features Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two minor characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, who are placed

in a predicament beyond their understanding, highlighting their lack of identity and helplessness (Stoppard, 1967)

Stoppard's use of meta-drama in the play allows the audience to engage with the characters' existential dilemmas and the absurdity of their situation. By breaking the fourth wall, incorporating elements of the theatre of the Absurd, and emphasizing the characters' awareness of being in a play, Stoppard creates a meta-theatrical experience that challenges traditional theatrical conventions and prompts reflection on the nature of performance, fate, and the human condition (Esslin, 2004; Stoppard, 1967)

The play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, by Luigi Pirandello explores the blurred lines between reality and fiction as six characters interrupt a rehearsal seeking a stage to perform their untold story (Pirandello, 1921). Another work by Stoppard himself, *The Real Inspector Hound* delves into the metafictional realm as two theatre critics become part of the murder mystery they are reviewing. (Stoppard, 1968). In the same way, *Hamletmachine* by Heiner Müller is another postmodern play that deconstructs Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and challenges traditional theatrical conventions through fragmented narratives and meta-theatrical elements (Müller, 1977). *The Bald Soprano* by Eugène Ionesco, an absurdist play uses meta-theatrical techniques to question language, communication, and the conventions of theatre (Ionesco, 1950). *The Dumb Waiter* by Harold Pinter features meta-theatrical elements as two hitmen wait in a basement, engaging in cryptic dialogue that blurs the boundaries between reality and performance (Pinter, 1957).

These works, like *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, employ meta-theatrical devices to challenge audience expectations, explore the nature of performance, and reflect on the complexities of human existence and storytelling.

Theoretical Framework

To conduct a research on the meta-theatrical reflections in the play, the critical theory of post-modernism and the lens of post-modernistic perspectives will be applied. Pastiche and intertextuality are relatively post-modernistic terms hence the lens for conducting research on the meta theatrical reflections and post modernistic traces in the play (Jameson 1991; Hutcheon, 1988).

Since the themes of the play are exploration of identity and existentialism, these are inspected through the narrative and discourse of the play through a deep analysis of the innovative storytelling techniques employed by Stoppard in his adaptation of *Hamlet* in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (Esslin, 2004; Stoppard, 1967).

The navigation and discourse of the characters in further analysed through the post-modernistic lens of hyper-reality and intertextuality tracing the elements of fuzzy boundaries between reality and illusion and the characters' confusion regarding the concept of free-will and fate (Baudrillard, 1981; Leonard, 1984).

Research Methodology:

The present research work has got benefit from the qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research methods allow for an in-depth exploration of the meta-theatrical elements and postmodern themes present in Stoppard's play. The research methodologies applied are; a literary analysis of the play through close reading method uncovering nuances that illuminate its meta-theatrical elements (Smith, 2005). Investigation of the meta-theatrical techniques, postmodern themes of intertextuality, pastiche, absurdism, hyper-reality and identity crisis in the face of existential quest. Numerous dialogues of the characters have been meticulously selected and quoted in the analysis and discussion to highlight the meta-theatrical elements in the play.

Literary Analysis

(a) Post Modernistic Techniques in the Play

"Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead" can be claimed as an epitome of post-modernistic play, defying established concepts of time, space, existentialism, fate and free will. Stoppard has extensively used the post modernistic techniques in his play such as meta-theatrical elements, pastiche, intertextuality, hyper-reality, deconstruction blending these well with the post-modernistic themes such as philosophy of existentialism, quest for identity and role of fate versus free will. Stoppard does this by presenting "two likable but utterly confused characters, engaged in a perpetual struggle to comprehend the complex manoeuvrings that taking place around them as the plot of Hamlet unfolds." (Brassell, 1985)

(i) Meta-theatrical elements, Intertextuality and Pastiche:

The title of the play has been directly borrowed from a line from Shakespeare's Hamlet; along with the main characters of the same names that had enacted minor roles in the actual play; Hamlet. This unconventional narrative of a play where minor characters of centuries old play are reimagined as main and wrapping the plot around themselves further gives the deconstructive element to the play. Stoppard introduces a peculiar character by the name of Player who directly comments and communicates with the audience. This challenges traditional theatrical boundaries and enhances the play's post-modernist nature (Stoppard, 1967; Delaney, 2003). The character of Player bears striking resemblance with Beckett's tramps, and his dialogues' wit is seemingly influenced by Wilde. The main characters such as Hamlet and others from Hamlet the play are also found performing very briefly adding to the touch of intertextuality and pastiche to the play. The play is rich in intertextual references, particularly to Shakespeare's "Hamlet".

Stoppard incorporates scenes and dialogue from "Hamlet" into his play, offering new perspectives on familiar characters and events (Stoppard, 1967; Enoch, 2000).

Stoppard doesn't hesitate even borrowing the dialogues from Hamlet, the play, just to emphasise the intertextuality;

"I'm afraid to think what I have done; look on't again I dare not" (Stoppard, Act 1, Scene 1)

Along with Hamlet, there are references to some other established works of arts too, such as Alice in the Wonderland and even Shakespeare's another; Merchant of Venice in terms of whimsical and illogical acts such as coin flipping and themes of fate and justice.

"We cross our bridges when we come to them and burn them behind us, with nothing to show for our progress except a memory of the smell of smoke, and a presumption that once our eyes watered." (Stoppard, Act II)

Stoppard's blending of various styles and genres, such as existentialism and absurdist comedy, creates a pastiche that underscores the play's postmodernist themes (Stoppard, 1967; Hunter, 1999).

(ii) De-construction of Time and Character's quest for Identity:

With the opening of the play, we find the main characters; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern being in a perpetual habit of flipping the coin which too, just as be prisoner of time and fate, always stands head. The characters have this self-realization of their scripted roles and one of them asserts;

"We're actors-we're the opposite of people!" (Stoppard, Act II)

And

"We could do worse than adopt the system of the English- Shakespeare's men speak better, and more knowledgeably, than Hamlet does." (Stoppard, Act II)

The repetitive cycle of the characters' raising doubtful questions regarding their role and reality provoke the audience to question the concept of reality and illusion and fate and free will. ; - "There must have been a moment at the beginning where we could have said-no. But somehow we missed it." (Stoppard, Act I)

Employing the post-modern techniques as their best, Stoppard reconstructs the philosophy of the role, life, fate and death of the minor characters in a larger play inviting us to wonder our own role in the bigger scheme of the things (Delaney, 2003; Hunter, 1999)

(B) Use of Meta-theatrical Devices and the concept of Inner play

Meta-theatre is relatively a postmodern trend in which a play within a play is created to enhance the relevant philosophy of the play and to maximise the effect of the theatre on the audience as well as the reader. This can be made more emphatic through pastiche and intertextuality as in Stoppard's play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead which refers directly to a line from the Shakespearean classique Hamlet. In Stoppard's play, the nucleus of attention are the characters who were actually minor in Hamlet the play but they assume main role here (Stoppard, 1967; Enoch, 2000). Stoppard has also used the character of player and broke the fourth wall by making the Player direct address and communicate with the audience hence making the play

more realistic and reaching out to the audience/reader that is another post-modernistic element. To bring his play in alignment with the post-modernistic context, Stoppard makes his characters keep questioning their roles, their existence and fate which ultimately falls down upon them resulting in their death after all like the actual play Hamlet (Stoppard, 1967; Delaney, 2003) In the meanwhile, the behaviour of the main characters intrigues the imagination of the audience regarding absurdism that is elementally an aspect of human existence as per post-modernistic context, questioning the value and quality of life that is just as much substantial for a minor character like that of Rosencrantz or Guildenstern or Hamlet the Prince. The play contains recurrent illusions to the Shakespearean Hamlet through narrative and the dialogues of the characters through which Stoppard attempts to challenge the traditional narratives and intrigues the audience/readers to reconsider the established truths (Enoch, 2000; Hunter, 1999).

(C) Quest of Identity, Existentialistic crisis and Submission to fate versus Free Will in the Main Characters

Quest for identity and the purpose of existence has been a recurrent issue dealt with and talked about in the post-modern literature. Stoppard brings forth the same through the narrative and the dialogues of his characters in the play. Right from the beginning, as it constantly keeps alignment with the concept of intertextuality, both the main characters; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are very aware that they are just minor characters in the bigger play (or the bigger scheme of the things i.e. Hamlet the play) so they keep alluding to the characters or even dialogues and situations from the classic play Hamlet. By doing so, they emphatically assert that they are simply following a scripted direction where despite of questioning their relevance and existence, they know they have to meet the decided fate: death in the play (Stoppard, 1967; Hunter, 1999). This comes out to the audience as a thought provoking stimulus questioning the fundamental ideologies of fate and free will. From the very beginning of the play, the audience is given hints of the characters' awareness of their scripted roles. This is exhibited by a very peculiar practice of both the characters of flipping the coin always landing on heads, hinting at the pre-determined fate the characters know they have to follow and act on; ruling out the possibility of chance and free will being submitted to the decided and scripted plan:

"But I'm afraid - well, I feel - we might be - well, in the hands of some giant who just sighs once and once only, over all time" (Stoppard, 1967).

The streak of confusion in the characters regarding their roles in the scripted world grows intenser as the play progresses hence Guildenstern asks:

"Who decides?" (Stoppard, 1967),

Rosencrantz replies, "Decides what?" to which Guildenstern responds, "Everything! From the moment we're thrown into this world, we're fated to take part in this futile pursuit of life." (Stoppard, 1967).

Worse than this is the growing realization on the part of the characters that they are trapped in a repetitive circle where they are bound to just act as scripted up to the complete curtailing of the

concept of the free will putting a large question mark on their existence in the plan of the play they are re-enacting in. This feel is further intensified by the Player, a character who seems to be clearly filled in by the idea of the scripted life the characters are made to enact:

"We're actors! We're the opposite of people!" (Stoppard, 1967).

This acts and blows Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hard as a reality check, as they come to terms with their futile struggles and their lack of control over their actions. In the final scene of the play, The dialogue between the Player and Rosencrantz highlights this realization;

Player: "You're going to die! You die so many times, it's hard to keep track. On your way to England, aren't you?"

Rosencrantz: "We have been and are."

Player: "You accompany the King to England. You escort the body to the embassy."

Guildenstern: "Just doing our duty."

Player: "Your duty is to play the game. Doing anything else would be madness." (Stoppard, 1967).

This scene clearly asserts the characters' submission to their scripted role in the play and to fate in the larger scheme of the things (Delaney, 2003; Enoch, 2000).

Discussion

Stoppard used the element of the meta-theatre or play within a play in his play to question the fundamental philosophies of existentialism, identity, free will and fate. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern keep repeating their dialogues and actions in a perpetual cyclist manner which creates a sense of confusion and uncertainty regarding their life and existence in and out of the play (Delaney, 2003). This theatrical doubling enhances the meta-theatrical elements of the play and contributes to the overall postmodern interpretation of identity and existence. There is continual movement between multiple planes of reality within the play, including the world of the audience, the scripted world of "Hamlet," and the behind-the-scenes world of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Enoch, 2000). Stoppard challenges the traditional narratives by breaking the fourth wall and allowing the character named as the "player" who directly communicates with and addresses the audience. His interactions with the main characters as well as the audience create a relevance between the system of happenings joining the audience with the fate of the main characters who realise how scripted their life and actions are and how bound they are to move in the repetitive cycle of dialogues and moves as per the script of the larger play, "Hamlet" (Hunter, 1999). This element vouchsafes for the meta-theatrical reflections in the play creating the sense of play within a play blurring the lines between reality and illusion. The Player's presence adds layers of complexity to the play's exploration of performance, reality, and identity (Stoppard, 1967). The existential themes are present in the play, such as the characters' existential uncertainty, the exploration of life and death, and the questioning of personal agency. Stoppard's adaptation of Shakespeare's characters reflects a postmodern streak that questions the traditional narratives and explores the absurdity of human existence (Delaney, 2003; Hunter, 1999). Stoppard reimagines the Old Classic Hamlet in the post-modernistic context and gives a fresh insight to the tragedy which being looked at from the perspective of fate and script-bound

characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, becomes a tragedy from the theatre of the absurd, touching upon the fundamental philosophies of fate and free will (Enoch, 2000)

Conclusion

By utilizing the research methodology to analyse and interpret the meta-theatrical composition of Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the research has made an attempt to reveal the individualistic question of identity and existentialism the minor characters of the play *Hamlet* but portrayed as major in the play by Stoppard. The study has aimed to bring out the elements of meta-theatre in the post-modernistic context highlighting concept of play within a play through the elements of pastiche and intertextuality which is apparent by the title itself which is very referential to the play *Hamlet* along with the main characters being drawn from the same play only to look at the life and the philosophy of existence from their perspective (Delaney, 2003; Hunter, 1999). Through a detailed examination of meta-theatrical techniques employed by Stoppard, the study has sought to bring to light the intricate philosophies of free will and fate, existentialism and identity as been dealt with in the play. The play constantly engages the attention and thought system of the audience by raising thought provoking questions regarding the absurdity of human existence and actions in the hands of pre-determined fate and actions. This state of confusion and self-doubt in a mocking manner is a very prominent feature of post-modernistic literature hence the play rightfully qualifies to mirror the disillusioned and hyper realistic post-modern society as depicted within it (Enoch, 2000).

Scope and Significance of the Study

The present study aimed to highlight the reinterpretation of an established classic *Hamlet* from the perspective of two minor characters in the play who happened to be *Hamlet the Prince's* friends and their life and death come along just as a part of the bigger plan (the play) without leaving any impact on the story of the original play. Stoppard puts a very strong emphasis on the post-modern philosophy of identity and existentialism through spot lighting the minor characters of a relatively large and grand narrative that *Hamlet* is (Delaney, 2003). The present research sought to maintain how successfully Stoppard "*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*" qualifies to engage and intrigue the audience and provoke their thoughts regarding fundamental philosophies of fate and free will questioning their own role and part in bigger scheme of the things. Stoppard's play challenges traditional narratives and invites audiences to reconsider established truths through its use of meta-theatrical techniques, intertextuality, and pastiche (Enoch, 2000; Hunter, 1999).

Such research can further pave the way for exploration of like-wise attempt made in reimagining the already established grand narratives in the post-modernistic context.

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