

## Social And Ethical values as Projected in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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### ABSTRACT

This research paper focuses on the importance of social and ethical values in the human civilization. It describes how William Shakespeare portrays the importance of these values in his famous tragedy, *Hamlet*. These values are eternal that determine the destiny of human society ever.

Values are stable and long-lasting beliefs about the important aspects to a person. They become standards by which people control their lives and make their choices. A belief will develop into a value, when the person's commitment to it grows and they see it as important. Human civilisation depends upon these values. Values are different kinds like spiritual values, moral values, ethical values etc. William Shakespeare portrays the values of his period in most of his dramas. One of his tragic-dramas, *Hamlet*, reflects the values of the society through the protagonists Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, Hamlet and Horatio. Claudius kills his own brother, the king of Denmark, treacherously for the sake of the throne and power. He does not follow moral values in his life in order to achieve his selfish motives. Besides, he remarries the wife of his own brother and devises many plots to kill the prince *Hamlet*, the son of his brother. As a result of shattering moral and ethical values, he welcomes the tragic death to many lives in the drama, *Hamlet*.

**(Key Words:** Moral values, ethical values, society, human civilisation, treacherously tragic-drama, Claudius, Gertrude, Horatio and *Hamlet*)

## **Introduction**

William Shakespeare belongs to the age of Queen Elizabeth. He is a versatile genius. He is a poet and dramatist. He gets world reputation with his great tragic-dramas like *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *Othello*. Shakespeare, as a man of intellect, portrays the realistic picture of the European society and its values in his works. He glorifies the importance of moral and ethical values in the society that sustain the human civilization.

## **Marriage**

Marriage is a sacred system in the society. The system of family always depends on the faith and belief in a society but, the values of marriage have been deteriorating since the ancient days. William Shakespeare depicts the immoral values of marriage in his famous tragic-drama, *Hamlet*. The king Claudius has treacherously murdered his own brother for the sake of power and throne and remarries the queen, Gertrude, with whom he has already developed illicit, sexual relations. The prince *Hamlet* wonders how his mother gets remarried soon after the death of her first husband. He recollects the great merits of his late father, who is an excellent king. He compares his father with Hyperion and his mother's present husband, Claudius to Satyr and a great God is to an inferior deity. He feels very sorry for his mother has turned the marriage vows to a mockery. *Hamlet* exhaustively addresses that she is the queen, her husband brother's wife. Here, Shakespeare describes the fidelity of women characters in European countries through the character, Gertrude.

## **Womanhood**

The prince Hamlet deplores the fact of his mother's hasty remarriage, while he is talking to Horatio, his friend. He accuses his mother, Gertrude as "Frailty, thy name is woman" (Act I, Scene II). He recalls the profuse tears, she has shed, at the time of her first husband's death. She has followed his father's dead body to graveyard, but her mourning does not last long. Even a beast, which has no reasoning power, would have mourned longer at the loss of its mate. What kind of man has his mother married now? She has married a man who is an inferior to her husband as King Hamlet is to Hercules. She has got remarried within a month, even before her hypocritical tears have ceased to fall from her eyes. She has remarried with 'the wicked speed'. The Ghost of Hamlet discloses the Prince Hamlet that Gertrude has maintained an adulterous relationship with Claudius, during the life-time of her first husband.

This information further aggravates Hamlet's feelings of depression at the hasty remarriage of his mother.

### **Friendship**

There is clear evidence in the drama that the prince Hamlet has a sense of morality in making friendship with Horatio. Hamlet is a loyal friend and expects his friendship to be loyal in return. Horatio is an example of true friendship to Hamlet. Horatio is the only one person in the play who never betrays Hamlet. Horatio occupies a special place in the heart of Hamlet. Hamlet tells him that his soul has selected him as a favourite. "Since my dear soul is mistress of her choice, and could of men distinguish, her selection hath scaled thee for herself (Act III, scene II, 59-61). Horatio helps Hamlet in crucial times. In Act III, Scene II, Hamlet characterises Horatio as a man of endurance and as a man who is not a slave to passion. He goes on to tell him that he wears him in "his heart's core, in his heart of heart."

### **Gratitude**

Horatio continues to work as an interlocutor to Hamlet even at the time of fencing –match between Laertes and Hamlet. It is Horatio, who suspects the motive behind the fencing match. He suggests help Hamlet withdraw from the match if he too suspects something fishy in it. "If your mind dislikes anything, don't obey it; I will forestall their repair hither, and say you are not fit (Act III, scene II). Their devotion of friendship to each other is such that Hamlet, before his death entrusts Horatio the task of reporting the course of his life accurately after death. Horatio wants to kill himself now, that his bosom friend is dying, but *Hamlet* stops him: "Absent thee from felicity awhile, and in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain .to tell my story." (Act V, Scene II, 329-31)".

Horatio, as a loyal friend, accepts this duty and remains in control of the situation till the end. He attends to the English ambassadors and orders the bodies to be displayed to the public as evidence of what has taken place. The play ends in a triumph for Horatio, the intellectual, who can remain master of his passions, when others give way

### **Personal Ethics**

Throughout the play, Hamlet is overwhelmed by a feeling of revenge, but he does not hesitate to murder his uncle Claudius, due to his fear of making the wrong decision. This evidence shows that Hamlet has a lot of faith in religious morals and beliefs. Hamlet does not believe the

words of the ghost to take revenge upon Claudius. Hamlet, along with Horatio, arranges a 'Mouse trap' to confirm whether Claudius has done any wrong or not. It is clearly shown the guilt of Claudius at the play by Gonzago. Hamlet gets an opportunity to kill Claudius, but he does not want to kill him while he is praying to God. Hamlet has felt if he murders him during the prayer, he will dishonour his father by sending Claudius straight to Heaven. He tells himself that he will wait for an opportunity when the king is "drunk asleep, or in his rage or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed, at gaming, swearing or about some act that has no relish of salvation in it." Hamlet says now,

“... might I do it pat, now he is praying and now I'll don't”. And so he goes to heaven and so on. I revenged that would be scanned. A villain kills my father and for that, his sole son, does this some villain send to heaven (Act III, Scene III, 73-96).

### **Immorality**

Throughout the play *Hamlet*, Claudius shows his immorality by way of his personal activities. He murders his own brother, Hamlet, the King of Denmark, brutally, for the sake of the throne and the power. He has sexual relations with his brother's wife Gertrude “Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast / with witchcraft of wit, with traitorous gifts...wicked wit and gifts that have the power...won to his shameful lust (Act 1, scene V, 42-46)”. Claudius marries Gertrude very quickly after king *Hamlet's* death. But “two month's dead, nay not so much, not two” (Act I, scene II, 138).

Claudius, as a part of his plot against the prince Hamlet, he instigates Laertes to take revenge upon Hamlet for his father's murder. When asked by Claudius how far he is willing to go to kill the prince Hamlet, Laertes exclaims that he would “cut his (Hamlet's) throat in the church.” Laertes is prepared to slay Hamlet in the cold blood within the holy place, the church. Claudius arranges fencing –match between Hamlet and Laertes dipping one of the swords in a deadly poison. He hopes that Laertes will wound Hamlet with his sword. He even gets a cup of poisoned wine ready, so that if the plan of wounding Hamlet with deadly sword fails, he can be poisoned to death with this wine. Unfortunately, the queen, Gertrude drinks the cup of wine, not knowing her husband's evil plan. The queen reveals the prince Hamlet that she has been poisoned by Claudius. Laertes wounds Hamlet and Hamlet wounds Laertes. Finally, Hamlet comes to know about the evil and treacherous plans of the king Claudius. He stabs Claudius with his sword and dies within a few minutes. Then, Laertes dies

following the death of Hamlet. Thus, the immoral and the unethical activities of the king Claudius lead to the tragic death of many lives in the drama *Hamlet*

### **Conclusion**

William Shakespeare's works of art reflect the social and ethical values, that prevail in the contemporary society. He has proved through his works that the people, who do not follow the moral values and social values, have to welcome the tragic end to their lives in this society. Therefore, social and ethical values sustain human civilization, forever. The dramatist's motto is proved here once again, like the death of his other protagonists, Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Antonio in *The Tempest*, the King in *King Lear* and Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*.

According to the philosophy, truth, beauty and goodness are the three eternal values. Means, those who destroy these values, will get destruction. Hence,

*“Dharmo Rakshathi Rakshithaha”*

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