

English Literature and the Shaping of Modern Ethics: A Study of Hamlet

Adnan Mohamed Ahmed Khan¹ and V.N. Sudheer²

^{1,2}Department of English, School of Liberal Studies, CMR University, Bangalore, Karnataka, India

Abstract: William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* occupies a central position in English literature for its sustained engagement with ethical questions that continue to shape modern moral thought. The play examines complex themes such as justice, revenge, power, and individual conscience through the moral and psychological struggles of its protagonist. Hamlet's hesitation between action and inaction, his reflections on truth and responsibility, and his concern with moral consequence reveal ethical dilemmas that remain relevant in contemporary discourse. This study critically analyses how *Hamlet* contributes to the formation of modern ethical understanding by exploring social, familial, political, and religious dimensions of morality within the drama. Shakespeare presents ethics not as fixed absolutes but as contested choices shaped by circumstance, intention, and human limitation. By foregrounding moral conflict and ethical accountability, *Hamlet* emerges as a significant literary text for examining conscience, responsibility, and moral reasoning across historical and modern contexts.

Keywords: Ethics, Justice, Revenge, Moral Dilemmas, Modern Ethical Thought.

INTRODUCTION

“English literature has long functioned as a vital medium for examining ethical questions related to human behaviour, social responsibility, power, and moral choice” (Zamir, T. (Ed.). 2018). Literary texts do not merely reflect the moral values of their historical contexts but actively participate in shaping ethical thought by dramatising conflicts between duty, conscience, justice, and desire. Among English dramatists, William Shakespeare occupies a central position in exploring ethical complexity, as his plays consistently interrogate the moral foundations of individual action and political authority.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* stands out as one of the most profound literary engagements with ethical inquiry. “The play foregrounds the tension between moral obligation and moral restraint, particularly through Hamlet's struggle to reconcile the demand for revenge with his conscience, religious beliefs, and sense of justice” (Belsey, C. 1999). Unlike conventional revenge tragedies, *Hamlet* resists straightforward moral resolution; instead, it presents ethics as a field of uncertainty, deliberation, and consequence. Hamlet's hesitation is not merely a sign of indecision but a reflection of deep ethical reasoning that questions the legitimacy of violence, the corruption of power, and the moral cost of action taken without certainty

“Scholarly criticism has extensively examined *Hamlet* from philosophical, political, psychoanalytic, and theological perspectives” (Belsey, C. 2007). However, there remains scope for a focused ethical reading that situates the play

within discussions of modern moral thought, particularly concerning responsibility, agency, and the conflict between personal conscience and social obligation. This study addresses this gap by analysing how *Hamlet* articulates ethical dilemmas that anticipate modern debates on morality, justice, and human accountability.

“The play explores ethics across multiple domains: social ethics through honour, reputation, and deception; familial ethics through revenge, loyalty, and betrayal; political ethics through corruption, power, and legitimacy; and religious ethics through sin, repentance, and divine judgement.” (Bloom, H. 1998) By presenting characters who repeatedly face morally ambiguous choices, Shakespeare challenges the notion of fixed ethical absolutes and instead portrays morality as contingent upon circumstance, intention, and consequence.

This paper aims to critically examine how *Hamlet* contributes to the shaping of modern ethical understanding by foregrounding moral hesitation, ethical responsibility, and the limits of human judgement. Through close textual analysis and engagement with established Shakespearean scholarship, the study demonstrates that *Hamlet* remains a vital ethical text that continues to inform contemporary discussions of moral reasoning and human conduct. By doing so, the paper reinforces the relevance of Shakespeare's drama not only as a literary masterpiece but also as a sustained exploration of ethical complexity in both historical and modern contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on close textual analysis, drawing on ethical criticism to interpret the play.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ethical Conflict and Moral Hesitation in *Hamlet*

“At the centre of *Hamlet* lies an enduring ethical conflict between the demand for revenge and the dictates of moral restraint. Unlike traditional revenge heroes, Hamlet does not act impulsively; instead, he subjects the act of revenge to intense ethical scrutiny” (Bloom, H. 2003). His hesitation reflects a moral consciousness that questions whether justice can be achieved through violence and whether fulfilling a duty of revenge may itself constitute a moral failure. This ethical tension positions Hamlet as a figure of moral reasoning rather than weakness, illustrating the complexity of ethical decision-making in situations where clear moral guidance is absent.

“Hamlet’s famous soliloquies, particularly his reflections on life, death, and action, reveal an ethical struggle rooted in conscience and responsibility” (Bradley, A. C. 1904). His uncertainty is not merely psychological but ethical, as he seeks certainty about truth, intention, and consequence before committing an irreversible act. Shakespeare thereby presents ethics as a process of deliberation rather than immediate judgement, anticipating modern ethical thought that values moral reasoning over blind adherence to social codes.

Social Ethics: Honour, Deception, and Responsibility

Social ethics in *Hamlet* are shaped by expectations of honour, loyalty, and public reputation. Hamlet is socially obligated to avenge his father’s murder to preserve dynastic honour” (Dy, H. G. 2006), yet he recognises that such an action may perpetuate corruption rather than restore justice. This tension exposes the conflict between socially sanctioned violence and individual moral responsibility.

Deception emerges as a recurring ethical violation within the social sphere. Characters such as Claudius and Polonius manipulate truth to secure power and control, reflecting a moral environment in which ethical compromise becomes normalised. Hamlet’s feigned madness, however, complicates this ethical landscape. While deception is generally portrayed as morally corrosive, Hamlet employs it as a strategic response to a corrupt society, raising

questions about whether unethical means can be justified in the pursuit of ethical ends. Shakespeare does not provide a definitive answer, instead inviting readers to confront the ambiguity inherent in moral judgement.

Familial Ethics: Revenge, Loyalty, and Betrayal

Familial relationships in *Hamlet* serve as a crucial site of ethical tension. Hamlet’s obligation to his father’s memory conflicts with his moral reluctance to commit murder, revealing the ethical complexity of familial loyalty. “Revenge, though framed as a duty, becomes ethically problematic when it threatens to erode personal integrity and moral agency” (Eagleton, T. 1986).

Gertrude’s marriage to Claudius intensifies Hamlet’s ethical turmoil, as he interprets her actions as both a personal betrayal and a moral transgression. Similarly, Polonius’s manipulation of “Ophelia highlights the ethical failure of parental authority when control replaces care” (Frye, N. M. 1957). These familial dynamics underscore Shakespeare’s critique of relationships governed by power rather than moral responsibility, suggesting that ethical failure within the family contributes to broader social and political decay.

Political Ethics: Power, Corruption, and Moral Legitimacy

Political ethics form a central dimension of Shakespeare’s ethical critique in *Hamlet*. “Claudius embodies unethical political authority, having secured power through murder and sustained it through deception” (Frye, R. M. 2014). His rule illustrates how political legitimacy collapses when ethical principles are abandoned, resulting in instability and moral disorder within the state.

Hamlet’s position as prince further complicates the ethical narrative. He is morally bound not only as a son but also as a future ruler responsible for the welfare of Denmark. His hesitation can thus be interpreted as an ethical resistance to the corruption that defines Claudius’s reign. Shakespeare contrasts Claudius’s decisive yet immoral action with Hamlet’s morally reflective delay, suggesting that ethical leadership demands restraint, accountability, and moral clarity rather than mere effectiveness.

Religious Ethics: Sin, Conscience, and Divine Justice

Religious ethics significantly influence “Hamlet’s moral reasoning. His refusal to kill Claudius while

he is praying reflects a deep concern with sin, salvation, and divine judgement” (Garber, M. 2004). Hamlet’s ethical struggle is shaped by the belief that human justice must align with divine morality, even when such alignment delays or complicates action.

The presence of “King Hamlet’s ghost further intensifies religious ambiguity. While the ghost demands revenge,” (Goldstein, D. B. 2013) its supernatural origin raises doubts about whether its command aligns with divine justice or demonic temptation. Hamlet’s ethical caution in responding to the ghost demonstrates “Shakespeare’s engagement with religious uncertainty and moral responsibility, emphasising the danger of acting on incomplete or morally ambiguous authority” (Greenblatt, S. 2001).

Hamlet and the Formation of Modern Ethical Thought

Through its exploration of hesitation, conscience, and moral responsibility, “*Hamlet* anticipates key concerns of modern ethical philosophy” (Kerrigan, J. 1996). The play rejects rigid moral absolutism and instead presents ethics as situational, reflective, and deeply human. Hamlet’s moral struggle foregrounds the importance of intention, consequence, and ethical self-awareness, principles that resonate strongly with contemporary ethical discourse.

“Shakespeare ultimately portrays ethical action as inseparable from moral accountability.” (Knights, L. C. 1933) The tragic outcome of the play underscores the cost of ethical failure at personal, familial, and political levels, reinforcing the idea that moral compromise inevitably leads to destruction. *Hamlet* thus emerges not merely as a tragedy of revenge but as a sustained meditation on ethical responsibility and the limits of human judgement.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that “*Hamlet* functions as a profoundly ethical text that continues to shape modern understanding of moral responsibility, human conscience, and ethical decision-making.” (Lessard, B. 2002) Through Hamlet’s sustained struggle between revenge and restraint, Shakespeare interrogates the moral legitimacy of action taken under conditions of uncertainty, corruption, and emotional turmoil. “The play presents ethics not as a system of fixed rules but as a complex process of deliberation

shaped by intention, circumstance, and consequence” (Shakespeare, W. 2016).

By examining social, familial, political, and religious dimensions of ethics within the drama, this paper has shown how “Shakespeare exposes the fragile foundations of moral authority in a world” (Lewis, R. 2020) marked by deception, betrayal, and abuse of power. Claudius’s unethical pursuit of authority, the moral failures within familial relationships, and the religious anxieties surrounding sin and justice collectively contribute to a vision of ethical disorder that demands critical reflection rather than simple judgement. “Hamlet’s hesitation emerges not as moral weakness but as an ethically informed resistance to acting without moral certainty” (Mousley, A. 2007).

The relevance of “*Hamlet* to modern ethical thought lies in its insistence on moral accountability and its recognition of the limits of human judgement” (Nuttall, A.D. 2007). Shakespeare anticipates contemporary ethical concerns by foregrounding conscience, responsibility, and the consequences of ethical compromise at both personal and political levels. “The tragic resolution of the play underscores the cost of ethical failure and reinforces the necessity of moral reflection in situations” (Taylor, G. 1989) where clear ethical choices are unavailable.

Ultimately, “*Hamlet* remains a vital literary text for engaging with enduring ethical questions that transcend its historical context” (Partovi Tazeh Kand, P. 2013). Its exploration of moral conflict, ethical responsibility, and human limitation continues to inform modern discussions of ethics in literature, philosophy, and social thought. “By situating *Hamlet* within the framework of modern ethical inquiry, this study reaffirms Shakespeare’s lasting contribution to the understanding of morality and human conduct in an ethically complex world” (Watson, R. 2019).

REFERENCES

1. Zamir, T. (Ed.). “Shakespeare's Hamlet: philosophical perspectives.” *Oxford University Press*, (2018).
2. Belsey, C. “Shakespeare and the loss of Eden: The construction of family values in early modern culture.” *Bloomsbury Publishing*, (1999).
3. Belsey, C. “Why Shakespeare?” *London (UK): Palgrave Macmillan* (2007).

4. Bloom, H. "Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human." *New York (NY): Riverhead Books* (1998).
5. Bloom, H. "Hamlet: Poem Unlimited." *New York (NY): Riverhead Books* (2003).
6. Bradley, A. C. "Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth." *London (UK): Macmillan* (1904).
7. Dy, H. G. "Hamlet and the present: notes on the moving aesthetic 'now'." *In: Grady H, Hawkes T, editors. Presentist Shakespeares. London (UK): Routledge* (2006): 153–175.
8. Eagleton, T. "William Shakespeare." *Oxford (UK): Blackwell Publishing* (1986).
9. Frye, N. M. "Anatomy of Criticism." *Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press* (1957).
10. Frye, R. M. "The Renaissance Hamlet: Issues and Responses in 1600." *Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press* (2014).
11. Garber, M. "Shakespeare After All." *New York (NY): Pantheon Books* (2004).
12. Goldstein, D. B. "Eating and Ethics in Shakespeare's England." *Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press* (2013).
13. Greenblatt, S. "Hamlet in Purgatory." *Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press* (2001).
14. Kerrigan, J. "Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon." *Oxford (UK): Oxford University Press* (1996).
15. Knights, L. C. "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?: an essay in the theory and practice of Shakespeare Criticism." (*No Title*) (1933).
16. Lessard, B. "The Mind's I: Moral Agency in Shakespeare's Hamlet." *National Library of Canada= Bibliothèque nationale du Canada, Ottawa, (2002).*
17. Lewis, R. "Hamlet and the Vision of Darkness." *Princeton University Press, (2020).*
18. Mousley, A. "Re-Humanising Shakespeare: Literary Humanism, Wisdom and Modernity." *Edinburgh University Press, (2007).*
19. Nuttall, A.D. "Shakespeare the Thinker." *New Haven (CT): Yale University Press* (2007).
20. Partovi Tazeh Kand, P. "Adaptations of Hamlet in different cultural contexts: Globalisation, postmodernism, and altermodernism." *Diss. University of Huddersfield, (2013).*
21. Shakespeare, W. "Hamlet: Revised Edition." *Bloomsbury Publishing, (2016).*
22. Taylor, G. "Reinventing Shakespeare: a cultural history from the restoration to the present." (*No Title*) (1989).
23. Watson, R. "Shakespeare and the Ethics of War." *Oxford (UK): Oxford University Press* (2019).

Source of support: Nil; Conflict of interest: Nil.

Cite this article as:

Khan, A. M. A. & Sudheer, V. N. "English Literature and the Shaping of Modern Ethics: A Study of Hamlet." *Sarcouncil Journal of Arts and Literature* 5.1 (2026): pp 52-55.