Counter Discourse in Shakespeare's Hamlet

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Abstract

General Background: Counter-discourse serves as a vital mechanism for marginalized and oppressed groups to challenge dominant narratives that often marginalize alternative perspectives. **Specific Background:** The concept of counter-discourse has been explored in various contexts, yet its application to classic literature, such as Shakespeare's "Hamlet," remains underrepresented. **Knowledge Gap:** To date, no comprehensive studies have applied the lens of counter-discourse to "Hamlet" within a postcolonial framework. **Aims:** This study aims to bridge this gap by examining how "Hamlet" can be understood through the concept of counter-discourse, particularly within the realm of postcolonial theory. **Results:** The analysis reveals that Hamlet, as a character, engages in counter-discourse to challenge the dominant narrative represented by Claudius. Motivated by the murder of his father, Hamlet seeks to expose Claudius and invert the power dynamics through strategic counter-speech. **Novelty:** This paper is pioneering in its application of counter-discourse to "Hamlet," offering a novel interpretation that situates the play within postcolonial critique. **Implications:** The findings highlight the potential of classical texts to be reinterpreted through contemporary theoretical frameworks, thereby enriching our understanding of both the texts themselves and the theories applied. This study not only underscores the relevance of counter-discourse in literature but also opens avenues for further research in the intersection of literary analysis and postcolonial studies.

Keywords: counter discourse, shakespeare, hamlet, postcolonialism

Introduction

1. Postcolonialism

As a field of study in literary analysis, postcolonial literary analysis encompasses both a specific subject matter and a theoretical framework (Abrahamsen, 2007). Postcolonial criticism delves into the analysis of literature created by cultures that emerged as a response to the rule of colonialism. The concept of postcolonialism encompasses the categorization of historically colonized populations as those who have experienced political subjugation by another community (Löschigg, 2013). Postcolonialism is highly efficacious in facilitating the recognition of interconnections across various domains of human experience, encompassing the social and political. This approach elucidates the inherent indivisibility of political, social, and intellectual.

The inclination of critics of colonialism to address global concerns and analyze the similarities and differences among different cultures implies that it is the responsibility of individuals within specific populations to cultivate their own critical perspectives on their past, customs, and understanding of their literature (Jazeel, 2019). The ideology commonly known as colonialist discourse, which was closely tied to the language used to express colonialist thinking, was rooted in the colonizers' belief in their own superiority, which they juxtaposed with the colonized. The colonizers perceived themselves as the focal point of the world, while the colonized were relegated to the periphery. The colonizers viewed themselves as the center of the world, while the colonized were relegated to the periphery (Tyson, 2006, pp.417, 420).

Counter-Discourse

Richard Terdiman first used this expression to describe symbolic resistance and its associated theories and practices. He analyzes the methods of achieving authentic transformation in the face of "the capacity of established discourses to ignore or absorb potential acts of subversion." (Terdiman, 1985, p.13) Postcolonial scholars have embraced the aforementioned term to elucidate the intricate manners in which obstacles to a prevailing or entrenched narrative (particularly those originating from the imperial core) are encountered. Theoretical analysis of counter-discourse has focused chiefly on challenging individual topics rather than historical processes and literary movements. This challenge is directed at imperial beliefs that are ingrained, reinforced, and explicitly upheld via texts used in colonialist education systems (Ashcroft et al., 2013, pp.67-68).

Counter-discourse in the context of postcolonialism also brings attention to the challenge of undermining established texts and their inevitably rewriting throughout the entire process of subversion. However, Terdiman's comprehensive approach to this issue is equally applicable in this context since analyzing how these mechanisms function as naturalized controls reveals their inherent variability and susceptibility. Therefore, these issues are not limited to the texts themselves but rather include the whole realm of colonialist communication in which imperial materials, whether they be historical, anthropological, literary, or legal, operate in colonized settings (Ashcroft et al., 2013, p.68).

Counter-discourse aims to modify the primary systems of communication used and give new ideas to the limited ability of traditional discourses to absorb them. The challenge is in maintaining the fundamental assertion of "difference" in the face of potential reinfection caused by the perceived similarity, apparent stability, and inertia of the dominating entity. Reinfection may manifest in many ways, although its outcome remains consistent. It aims to undermine the very act of subversion (Schaffeld, 2019). To fully comprehend the occurrence and repetition of this frustrating reversal, it is most effective to position ourselves, at least temporarily, into the realm of prevailing discourse. Subsequently, the contradiction of opposing it becomes evident. To a certain extent, this viewpoint is shared by all individuals within every culture since we are unavoidably immersed in the operational, communicative and practical systems that support our social life (Terdiman, 1985, pp.13-14).

The concept of "difference" is often overlooked within the prevailing discourse. The majority are in search of a language that can effectively convey it. However, the inherent distinction of this language makes it challenging to acquire (McEwan, 2008). When positioned as alternative perspectives, counter-discourses can contextualize and challenge the authority and stability of a prevailing system of utterances that fails to acknowledge their presence. It is capable of comprehending discourse that is completely unreadable. Therefore, counter-discourses are inherently connected to the power they challenge. It functions as a means of opposing the prevailing opponents (Chen, 2002). However, to believe that they eliminate them would be to let a concentration on disagreement overshadow the fundamental circumstances that shape and give rise to the conflict in the first place (Terdiman, 1985, pp.15, 17).

Counter-Discourse in the Play

This paper uses Hamlet as an example to illuminate the counter-discourse. The character is trying to create a counter-discourse against the dominant discourse represented by Claudius. The abovementioned concept is suitable for application to the play, which the study attempts to achieve (Goron, 2000). Shakespeare remains a highly influential Western playwright whose significance extends beyond language barriers. Critics and reviewers have spent a lot of time talking about Hamlet because of the unique nature of the protagonist and the moral as well as political issues it raises (Johnston, 1994).

The name of Prince Hamlet is a counter-discourse. Although his uncle Claudius killed his father, his father's spirit of seeking revenge is embodied in Prince Hamlet (Ciobanu, 2010). Claudius killed the previous king, but his son still bears the same name, which indicates the existence of a counter-discourse embodied by Prince Hamlet. According to Vasilescu, "the name is a hereditary inheritance passed down from father to son, a distinction that young Hamlet must reinstate by seeking vengeance in the name of the deceased monarch, which entails exposing his uncle Claudius, the murderer" (Vasilescu, 2002).

> Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,
> The imperial jointress to this warlike state,
> Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,--
> With an auspicious and a dropping eye,
> With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,
> In equal scale weighing delight and dole,--
> Taken to wife: nor have we herein barr'd
> Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone (Shakespeare, 1703, p.6).

In the quote above, Claudius is trying to spread his colonial discourse to the kingdom, as he would like to manipulate everyone by showing his sadness at the death of his brother (Arnold, 2019). In addition, he wants to erase this sadness by marrying his brother's wife in order to gain complete control over power (Slemon, 1987). He describes each eye as a different feeling. The first shed tears because of sadness over the killing of his brother, and the second eye brings joy because of the announcement of his marriage to the widow of Hamlet, the betrayed

king. As mentioned before Counter-discourse is inherently connected to the power that challenges. From this point, Hamlet begins to seek to create a counter-discourse that exposes the colonial discourse represented by Claudius.

On the other hand, Hamlet's mother is likewise attempting, in some manner, to enforce a prevailing discourse on her son as follows:

QUEEN GERTRUDE
Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off,
And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.
Do not for ever with thy vailed lids
Seek for thy noble father in the dust:
Thou know'st 'tis common; all that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.
HAMLET
Ay, madam, it is common (Shakespeare, 1703, p.6).

Here, the two collide, their destinations being opposite to each other. Hamlet has significant difficulty surmounting the emotional burden of his separation from his father, but his mother also harbors apprehensions primarily over her position as queen. The queen's unjustified effort to impose Claudius's point of view on her son, whether intentional or accidental, relegates her to the colonialism group (Tiffin, 1989). It seems that Claudius's discourse had crept into her, and she began spreading it as if she were in a new era with a new husband. Hamlet's response to her seems to be a mixture of reproach and sarcasm, as he sees that she is disloyal, and she tries to make him do the same thing. He begins to feel that after his father's death, everything seems to change. Hamlet makes his first appearance, adorned in black attire, symbolising an implicit critique of the recently praised marriage (Wardaningsih, 2020).

Methods

Claudius's relationship with Hamlet is insincere, as it is dominated by deception: "[a] little more than kin, and less than kind" (Shakespeare, 1703, p.47). Both characters feel worried about each other, and each one has his motives. As for Claudius, he sees his nephew as a threat to his new throne, which worries him about his presence in the kingdom, whether in the short or long term. As for Hamlet, the matter is different, as his motivation is to avenge his father's murder, keep his mother away from him, and steal his father's throne, all of which are reasons that make him see his uncle as Satan (Mishra, 2005). This conflict will be intense throughout the play between the two, although the cuff leans towards Claudius at the beginning due to the power he possesses as king.

Results and Discussion

The play also presents a counter-discourse about the concepts of death and life:" [t]o be, or not to be, that is the question" (Shakespeare, 1703, p.47). This counter-discourse challenges

the prevailing view of life and existence. It is preferable to be both absent and present rather than present and absent. The idea is to challenge the prevailing discourse of existence that Claudius represents, as it is, in short, living with the submission of everyone under his command. Hamlet's predicament lies in his excessive contemplation and insufficient action, resulting in a predominance of internal pain over outward ones. Despite the spiritual power of the quote and its motivation that existence in every sense of the word is better than absent existence, Hamlet remains in conflict over creating a counter-discourse against his father's killer.

> HAMLET
> Hear you, sir;
> What is the reason that you use me thus?
> I loved you ever: but it is no matter;
> Let Hercules himself do what he may,
> The cat will mew and dog will have his day.
> Exit (Shakespeare, 1703, p.99).

In the quote above, the counter-discourse appears, as there is a promise that the marginalized will inevitably win (Burney, . His resistance against the prevailing discourse is a priority in Hamlet's life, especially after his father was killed and most of his supporters abandoned him. Hamlet presents a distinct challenge to authority and its discourse. It imparts a message that regardless of the strength or darkness of the oppressor, the marginalized and the weak must receive the light of the sun once again (Thosago, 1998). Hercules here is embodied in the character of Claudius, and as for the marginalized, Hamlet is one of them. This blatant challenge by Hamlet disturbs him extensively throughout the play until his death. He believes that he will win. Hamlet's victory is not victory in the battle, but instead exposing his uncle and his crimes in obtaining the position of king.

> And thy commandment all alone shall live
> Within the book and volume of my brain,
> Unmix'd with baser matter: yes, by heaven!
> O most pernicious woman!
> 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;
> At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark:
> Writing
> So, uncle, there you are. Now to my word;
> It is 'Adieu, adieu! remember me.'
> I have sworn't (Shakespeare, 1703, p.22).

In the lines quoted above, Hamlet learns that his father has been killed. The ghost requests that Hamlet pursue retribution for the demise of the monarch, so motivating Hamlet to initiate a sequence of occurrences culminating in his own death. The exchange of ideas that occurs between the two functions as a trigger for his subsequent actions and offers valuable insights into

the character of Hamlet. After learning that his uncle Claudius is the murderer, he shows apparent hatred in order to avenge his father's blood. The revelation of information by the ghost serves as a catalyst for Hamlet's proactive response to a preexisting state of unease, which has been further intensified. He describes his uncle as a "damned villain" more than once after the truth is revealed to him. Hamlet is the first to discover the falsity of Claudius' discourse, which deceives many. He reveals the conspiracy that was hatched against his father, and the inevitability of its threads reaching him as well (Rizvi, 2007). His hatred increases as he grows, which makes him think often and repeatedly about creating a counter-discourse to combat his uncle and his false discourse. From this point, Hamlet turns into a different person, struggling with himself on the one hand and with his father's killer on the other hand.

> Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;
> And now I'll do't. And so he goes to heaven;
> And so am I revenged. That would be scann'd:
> A villain kills my father; and for that,
> I, his sole son, do this same villain send
> To heaven.
> O, this is hire and salary, not revenge (Shakespeare, 1703, p.64).

At some point in the play, Hamlet has the opportunity to take revenge. Claudius was praying alone, without his guards. He could have taken revenge at this moment, but he did not. Several reasons made him hesitate (Enache, 2020). He knows deep down that killing him while he is praying will make him a martyr. Of course, Hamlet does not want to make his father's killer a martyr (Durmus, 2020). On the contrary, he wants to show Claudius's true nature and to exposing him in front to everyone. It also seems that Hamlet's discourse is different. If he kills Claudius while he is weak, it makes him no different from him. I mentioned earlier that Hamlet wants to create a counter-discourse, and this could be the reason for not killing Claudius at this moment, because the counter-discourse must be opposite to the prevailing discourse (Morales-Díaz, 2002).

Hamlet finds another way to create a counter-discourse by presenting a play in which his uncle is present. "For 'tis the sport to have the engineer. Hoist with his own petard: and 't shall go hard" (Shakespeare, 1703, p.70). During the play that Hamlet presents in the presence of his uncle and mother, Claudius seems to feel that Hamlet knows the truth, and this disturbs and worries him greatly. The story of the play that Hamlet plays in front of the king is similar to what happened between the two brothers, Hamlet, the king, and his brother, Claudius. Hamlet succeeds in creating a counter-discourse against Claudius, who represents the colonial powers. At the end of the play, Claudius is killed, and he dies of poison.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the counter-discourse in the play represented by Hamlet is a response to Claudius' dominant colonial discourse. This is the first study that applies the concept of counter-discourse to Shakespeare's Hamlet. As long as there is good, there is evil, and vice versa.

Despite the apparent difference between the two parties and the preference of Claudius as he owns the kingdom, Hamlet is able to create a counter-discourse. Hamlet faces many challenges. One of these challenges is the murder of his father, in addition to his mother's marriage to his father's killer. The matter did not stop at this point; instead, he lost many people close to him because he could no longer be the heir, and the reason was Claudius's efforts to get rid of him. The turning point in the play is when Hamlet learns that his father has been killed. The ghost requests that Hamlet pursue retribution for the demise of the monarch. Although the two mentioned above die in the end, Hamlet is able to expose his father's killer by creating a counter-discourse at several stages during the play.

Originality Statement

Conflict of Interest Statement

Copyright Statement

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