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## UNIT 5 "THE WORLD AS STAGE" : WIDER PERSPECTIVE

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### 5.0 OBJECTIVES

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The aim of this Unit is to make you look at *Hamlet* from a wider perspective. By the end of this Unit you will be able to see how other cultures respond to *Hamlet* and how it has emerged as a cultural icon and also be able to assess its canonical status.

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### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the first four units we have looked at *Hamlet* with a close-focused eye. We began, in Unit I, with an appreciation of the problems of identifying the text of *Hamlet*: the long gap of four hundred years has surely put us at a disadvantage. We tried to determine the date of the first performance of *Hamlet*, the sources that Shakespeare drew upon to construct the *Hamlet* story, the various versions of the text of the play that have come down to us from various sources. We then went on to appreciate the tools of scholarship and various methodologies such as textual criticism, emendation, historical criticism, new criticism, among others.

In Unit II we attempted to examine the meaning of *Hamlet* in the light of the Elizabethan revenge tradition—a perspective which perhaps brings us closer to seeing *Hamlet* as the Elizabethan audience themselves might have understood and enjoyed the play. We examined ways of determining the meaning of a Shakespearean text, attempted to interpret *Hamlet* as a revenge play, and looked, albeit briefly, into various other interpretations of *Hamlet* that have found favour with scholars as well readers and theatre-goers.

Subsequently, Unit III was devoted to learning how to read *Hamlet* between the lines: the language of Shakespeare, his interest in rhetorical devices and imagery and other related matters. Unit IV focused on *Hamlet*'s soliloquies, the question of

subjectivity in the play as well its general philosophical implications in the context of the early modern literature, and looked at the issues raised by various characters such as Osrice, Claudius and Horatio.

Having looked at *Hamlet* at such close quarters, it is time we withdraw ourselves a little and look at *Hamlet* from a wider perspective, in larger contexts. We can look at *Hamlet* in the context of Shakespeare's work. We can assess its canonical status down the centuries, as well as at the present time. We shall take a look at the raging controversies among the lovers of *Hamlet* and the admirers of *King Lear* for allotting the pinnacle of glory to either play. *Hamlet* has emerged as cultural icon in the twentieth century: it has emerged as a cultural icon not only in the Western world but also elsewhere in the world. It might be interesting to look at how other cultures have responded to the mystery and joy of interacting with *Hamlet*. There are *Hamlet* versions in print, on stage, and screen in which *Hamlet* is re-constructed according to the needs, pressures, and the inner urges of those who have dealt with the play as creators and artists and even as readers and theatre- and cine-goers.

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## 5.2 KING LEAR AND HAMLET

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R. A. Foakes in his 1993 study *Hamlet 'versus' King Lear* demonstrates how an unprecedented shift took place in the canonical status of *Hamlet* between 1955 and 1965. During the decade *Hamlet* was displaced by *King Lear* as the Bard's greatest tragedy. *Lear* was interpreted "not as a redemptive parable but as bleak version of suffering and despair. The mood of the cold war period with its threat of total nuclear devastation found a new topical meaning in lines such as "Is this promis'd end / Or image of that horror?" [*King Lear*, V.iii.264-5]. In the late twentieth century world controlled by old men obsessed with power, *Lear* echoed the thoughts of men more than did the violent musings of the brooding prince. *Lear* surely speaks to us in more ways than one. But *Hamlet* is surely back at its eminent position. *Hamlet* occupies a significant place in the cultural landscapes all over the world.

No wonder *Hamlet* is described as a "cultural work of formidable status," and "a literary and cultural phenomenon of enormous proportions." Words and phrases in no other play by Shakespeare are so instantly recognisable to anyone anywhere. The language of *Hamlet* can be found to be seeping into the very fabric of the mind or thought everywhere in the world. *Hamlet* is a challenge of immense proportion for any actor/director creative artist as *Hamlet* becomes a milestone in the life of any artist. No other work of Shakespeare has been subjected to such varied and myriad transmutations as *Hamlet*. As Thompson and Taylor argue later in their book:

If a political interpretation of *Hamlet* was topical around 1600, it has also seemed relevant when *Hamlet* has been staged more recently in countries where there has been a real fear of the secret police, such as the former Soviet Union and the eastern Europe . . . [p. 30]

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## 5.3 RE-INVENTING HAMLET

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Michael Cohen ["On Reading *Hamlet* for the First Time" (*College Literature*, 19.1 (1992):48-59) considers "the desirability and the difficulty of approaching *Hamlet* without preconception, without a kind of 'pre-reading'." He wonders whether it is

possible to find someone who does not come to the play with foreknowledge of the details of the play or whether one can create conditions in which one can read the play for the "first time." Considering the power the play wields as a cultural icon—"the extra textual *Hamlet* has a real, unquenchable and even frightening existence"—it would be a gigantic task to shed, or persuade readers, students and others freed, the baggage of familiarity, to "re-learn" before one could teach!

There is little doubt that an innocent first reading of *Hamlet* unencumbered by our prejudices—acquired by being part of a social and cultural context—has always been considered an ideal pre-condition to a fuller and meaningful appreciation of the play. An innocent first reading of the play, the recovery of that pristine experience "uncontaminated by our subsequent intellectualising" of the play has been considered inescapable to our attaining the truth. And there are a great many believers in the truth of the first impressions: Cohen refers to G. B. Harrison, Thomas Kettle, Karl Werder, A. C. Bradley, G. Wilson Knight, C. S. Lewis, and Maynard Mack, among others.

Attempts have been made to view the question of reading *Hamlet* for the "first" time as a historical problem and to recover what must have been the initial response of the Bard's own audience. Cohen refers to the studies done in this regard by Mushat and McGee. What both the first-impression school of critics as well as the historical-retrieval school of critics seek to do is to offer an *ideal reading* of the play.

That Shakespeare seems to have made an attempt to "make new" (and to take away the predictability of the plot from an existing story) can be easily inferred. Cohen quotes Susan Snyder who believes that Shakespeare did his best to make the plot of *Hamlet* less predictable by throwing a shadow of obscurity, for example, on the queen's guilt and ghost's reliability. In other words "Shakespeare did his part towards making it possible to read or see *Hamlet* for the first time." In other words Shakespeare saw the "merit of reading a play for the first time."

What we have today is "a reading of *Hamlet* . . . overdetermined from the beginning: in the mind of the person reading *Hamlet* for the 'first' time, a culturally determined received extratextual interpretation of *Hamlet* joins a culturally determined way of receiving any text."

But what is the solution to this problem? Cohen locates the genesis of his problem in the scholarly practice of preparing an "editorial" text which the editor always insists is the real thing. We have looked into this question at some length in Unit I. Cohen finds these scholarly reconstructed editions of the play as "social constructions." The current editions of the play are nothing but a modern-type, modern-spelling confluences of early printed texts that reflect the individual editors' whims and outdated, unexamined assumptions and prejudices about the early printed texts.

For Cohen the solution lies in the suggestion made by Michael Warren when the latter recommended a text providing "the earliest versions—the First Quarto, the Second Quarto, and the First Folio—in photographic reproduction with their original confusions and corruptions unobscured by the interference of later sophistications . . . the editions get between the student or the scholar and the peculiar originals from which they derive." Editors generally privilege the Second Quarto but almost all editors adopt readings from the other versions of the play, too. The editorial principles themselves, thus, are not consistently followed.

It is in one sense no exaggeration to say that no student reading only a modern edition of the play has read the play yet. A student who reads either all or any one of

the three versions of the play has the best chance of reading the play for the first time. If then it is desirable to be able to have a first reading of the play at all, the solution lies in abandoning the editorially reconstructed textual editions of the play as "given" and allow the students to "compose" their own texts by reading all the three versions in photographic facsimiles. Leaving the student alone to decide what the real *Hamlet* is to offer them the best chance of achieving the first reading of the play.

On the other hand this also is true that admirers of *Hamlet* have sought to make up, in more ways than one, for the unfortunate lack of opportunity of having been there when the play was first staged to taste the flavour of the original! There are *Hamlet* versions in print, on stage, and screen in which *Hamlet* is re-constructed according to the needs, pressures, and the inner urges of those who have dealt with the play as creators and artists and even as readers and theatre- and cine-goers: and these reconstructions are unique, different and new. *Hamlet* has been printed, screened and staged in many different ways to give it a new shape and form and fit the needs of the time and space in which, and for which, it was being reconstructed.

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#### 5.4 PRIVATISATION OF *HAMLET*

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**Bowdlerised Shakespeare.** Thomas Bowdler [1754-1825] was a clergyman and editor. He prepared a four volume edition of the works of Shakespeare in 1807 (which he later expanded to ten volumes in 1818) in which his objective was to offer to the readers an edition "in which nothing is added to the original, but those words and expressions are omitted which cannot with propriety be read in a family." Shakespeare's plays, he felt, had given us "an inexhaustible fund of instruction as well as pleasure which even the severest moralist would not wish to withhold from innocent minds." He thus prepared a version of Shakespeare's plays which could be read in a family in the presence of women and children "unmixed with anything that could raise a blush on the cheek of modesty," or that could be unfit "to read aloud by a gentlemen to a company of ladies." The Bowdlerised Shakespeare, called *The Family Shakespeare*, was widely read throughout the nineteenth century and earned high praise from many including the poet Swinburne who remarked that "no man ever did better service to Shakespeare than the man who made it possible to put him into the hands of intelligent and imaginative children."

**Marowitz *Hamlet*.** Charles Marowitz, the author, critic, playwright and director, has decided to take *Hamlet* "imprisoned by three-and-a-half centuries of critical appreciation and grand acting," (as the blurb to the Penguin Plays edition [1968] of *The Marowitz Hamlet and The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* describes it), "boldly, broken it into pieces and reassembled it in a collage which he hopes makes its meaning real again." *Hamlet* is described in the sub-title as "A Collage Version of the Shakespeare's Play." In his introduction to this edition Marowitz says:

Can a play which is well known be reconstructed and redistributed so as to make a new work of art? If *Hamlet* were a precious old vase which shattered into thousand pieces, could one glue the pieces all together into a completely new shape and still retain the spirit of the original. . . . if Shakespeare is our contemporary, why can't we speak to him in our own tone of voice, in our own rhythm about our own concerns? . . . [p.10]

And that is what precisely the play turns out to be: a collage of broken pieces put together again into a shape. And the play opens in the very first scene with:

*Hamlet and Fortinbras standing facing each other. After a moment Fortinbras moves down to meet the Captain. Hamlet falls in behind the Captain like soldier in the ranks.*

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Fortinbras: Go, Captain, from me greet the Danish King . . .

and we have *Hamlet* beginning his famous soliloquy, "How all occasions . . ." at line sixteen of act one, scene one!

The Haunted House *Hamlet*. Tamahou Theatre of Vancouver, Canada presented a version of *Hamlet* in the summer of 1986) which was spread all over a three-storey house. Every room in the house had a scene from *Hamlet* being staged and the audience were free to roam about the three floors, peep into different rooms and piece together what was going on in those rooms and re-construct a *Hamlet* for themselves. The beginning of the play as well as the ending, along with the Players' scene was all that the entire audience shared in common. Otherwise while some watched Claudius in his court, some others went and eavesdropped on the conversation between Horatio and Hamlet or between Polonius and Ophelia. There was the whole house full of goings on that would remind the audience of the play that they know as *Hamlet*, but it was also a new play. The angry outbursts of Hamlet could be heard when Ophelia sat whimpering in one room and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern plotted their own plans in another. The house became a metaphor and the householders revealed themselves, an unhappy lot, each with a tale of his own to tell.

*Hamlet* was staged outside Britain fairly soon. It reached France in 1745; Russia in 1748 and in America 1759. Within the next hundred it was being staged all over the world: so much so that foreign companies would come to London to perform their versions of *Hamlet*. An Indian company was in London 1877 to stage a performance of *Hamlet*. There are more than half a dozen film versions known to exist: those by Olivier, Kozintsev, Richardson, Bennet, Zeffirelli.

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## 5.5 UNIVERSALIZATION

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*Hamlet* thus appears to speak a universal language. In the West Shakespeare occupies a position of unique centrality. Harold Bloom has recently maintained in *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* [1994], Shakespeare "is the central figure of the Western Canon" [p.2] "... more central to the Western culture than Plato and Aristotle, Kant and Hegel, Heidegger and Wittgenstein." [p. 10] Shakespeare's "aesthetic supremacy has been confirmed by the universal judgement of the four centuries," [p. 23] Bloom tells us. "His powers of assimilation and continuation are unique." [P.3] "We owe to Shakespeare not only our representation of cognition but much of our capacity for cognition." [p. 40]

"The enigma of Shakespeare," Bloom says elsewhere, "is his universalism: Kurusawa's film versions of *Macbeth* and *King Lear* are thoroughly Kurusawa and thoroughly Shakespeare." [p. 524] Bloom then isolates what makes Shakespeare so unique and so universal:

What is the Shakespearean difference that demands Dante, Cervantes, Tolstoy and only a few others as aesthetic companions? To ask the questions is to undertake the quest that is the final aim of literary study, the search for a kind of value that transcends the particular prejudices and needs of societies at fixed points in time. Such a quest is illusory, according to all our

current ideologies . . . There is substance in Shakespeare's work that prevails and that has proved multicultural, so universally apprehended in all languages as to have established a pragmatic multiculturalism around the globe, one that already far surpasses our politicised fumbblings towards such an ideal. Shakespeare is the centre of the embryo of a world canon, not Webster's Dictionary and Lewis and Clark's Encyclopaedia. . . [p. 67, emphasis added].

But let us not forget that even in the West Shakespeare's supremacy has not gone unchallenged. Charles Forker, a noted Shakespeare scholar, once remarked to this writer in an interview:

In America black American response to Shakespeare is a racial response. A black American student regards Shakespeare as a white man's cultural baggage. In my classes very few black American students take interest in Shakespeare or even attend classes. When they are educated at higher levels, they respond to Shakespeare much the same manner as educated Indians. But an average educated black American tends to contain his interest in Shakespeare. . . ."

Referring to one of his black American student who did his doctoral work on Shakespeare, Forker said, "But then he is not too popular with his fellow black American students who regard him as having identified with a symbol of white man's oppression." But generally speaking one could say that Shakespeare in America is an off-shoot of British literature and the Bible and Shakespeare are the two most profound and pervasive influences on American literature. Even the Gettysburg address by Abraham Lincoln, Forker claimed, could be shown to embody these two influences. Not only in Britain, but also in America, Shakespeare is treated not merely as literature or theatre but has become a cultural construct.

Indian failure to respond to deal with Shakespeare at deeper levels is perhaps because English language and literature is associated in the minds of the people with the oppressors which the British colonisers were for a such a long time. In Japan, where they did not have the advantage or the disadvantage of a similar cultural interaction forced upon them, Shakespeare has permeated the life of the Japanese obviously because of a choice deliberately made and consciously cultivated. Thus the cultural and literary scene in Japan is inundated with novels, poems, films and other artistic manifestation derived from, or inspired by, Shakespeare. But Shakespeare came to India early, indeed.

*Hamlet in India.* *Hamlet's* Indian connection took shape even before the play crossed over to the Indian ocean. The third voyage sponsored by the East India Company to India left England in 1607. One of the three ships, *Hector*, while anchored at Sierra Leone, is reported to have had two performances of *Hamlet* aboard done by the sailors of the ship. The development of the Parsi theatre in the mid-nineteenth century led to an upsurge of interest in Shakespeare in India. The Parsi theatre companies had grown out of amateur theatrical activities organised by the Parsi community. The Parsi community had colleges and clubs such as the Uppinstone Club. About this time British administrators were looking for ways and means to create a class of Indians who would share the burden of running the administration of the country at lower levels. The desire to improve the native culture through the means of British education too was not far from their minds. Even the educated Indian leadership believed in the need for revitalising the Indian culture. The Parsi theatre's attempt to appropriate Shakespeare and package it for the Indian audience received a great deal of encouragement. *Hamlet* in Urdu translation done by Munshi Mehdi Hasan with a new title, *Khuno Khamq*, was

formed in 1898 by Parsi Alfred Company. *Hamlet*, we must remember was not the only play that was being staged by the Parsi theatrical companies. *Othello* and *Macbeth* were frequently staged, as also *Cymbeline*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Winters Tale*, *All's Well that Ends Well*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Measure for Measure*. With the advent of the motion pictures, many theatrical companies turned to film-making. Sohrab Modi and his elder brother Pustern filmed their popular play *Hamlet* or *Khoon ka Khoon* in 1935 in which Sohrab and Naseem performed. Another Marathi adaptation of *Hamlet* called *Vikar Vilasit* featured Kamlabai Gokhale at the age of four as a boy in the "play" scene.

I remarked in an earlier unit that *Hamlet* has often found to have acquired a life of its own, a life outside the context of the play. No other text commands instant recognition of such a large number of moments, images, lines and words as *Hamlet* does. Words and phrases from the play have become part of our daily vocabulary. In a recent edition of the *Delhi Statesman*, a news item commenting on the uncertainty surrounding a politician's joining a political party carried the title: "To be or not to be—that is the question Madam!" [March 11, 1998] *Hamlet* exists in translation in many vernacular languages. In fact, there are many translations of *Hamlet* even in Sanskrit!

Another interesting example of an alien culture taking to Shakespeare is South Africa. *Hamlet* was first produced in South Africa in 1799 in Port Elizabeth and has enjoyed continued popularity ever since. Most Shakespeare productions were organised by English speaking whites and one of their objective used to be to ensure the triumph of English culture in a society where the Blacks and the other minorities were considered, under the then prevailing laws, inferior. The first Afrikaans production was staged in 1947 and was received with a great deal of enthusiasm. Afrikaners travelled from all over the country to see the production. So much so that first Afrikaans production was seen as part of the resurgence of Afrikaner nationalism. Afrikaans culture, considered crude and inferior by the English speaking whites, sought to claim for itself the sophistication of a great English playwright by staging *Hamlet* in Afrikaans.

Shakespeare in South Africa thus, always became a showcase for cultural sophistication whenever staged by the English speaking whites, Afrikaners, Coloured, or Indians. The English speaking whites used Shakespeare to maintain their cultural superiority, the Afrikaners sought to challenge this colonial-imperial pride and to validate their own culture. Other minorities groups such as Indian, Coloured and Blacks to claim a place in an equal opportunity, just society. Their access and ability to negotiate a play by Shakespeare was used to prove that they, too, were cultured or sophisticated groups within the South African society.

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## 5.6 LET US SUM UP

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*Hamlet*, thus, should be understood and appreciated not merely as a literary text in the context of the times and the literary conventions in which it was written. Over the last many centuries the world has become a much smaller place and cultural artifacts have tended to break loose from the tyranny of their geographical roots. In the larger context of today a play such as *Hamlet* has been appropriated by many other cultures. It is useful to examine how such diverse and varied readers from diverse and varied cultures have responded to it.

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## 5.7 QUESTIONS

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1. *Hamlet* is credited with a unique ability to communicate with diverse audiences in varied countries and cultures all over the world. Which elements of the play make it possible for the play to achieve this universal appeal?
2. Analyse Cohen's views on the significance of reading a play "for the first time" with reference to *Hamlet*.
3. Bowdlerised Shakespeare represents censorship at its worst. Comment.