

**Existential Crisis in the Character of Dr. Shashi from Putul Nacher Itikatha by Manik Bandopadhyay, and Hamlet from Shakespeare's Tragedy Hamlet: A Comparative Analysis**

**Sanjoy Kumar Bera**

Research Paper

State Aided College Teacher , Category -1

Deshapran Mahavidyalaya

Department of English

**Abstract**

This paper examines the theme of existential crisis in two emblematic literary figures: Dr. Shashi from Manik Bandopadhyay's *Putul Nacher Itikatha* (1936) and Hamlet from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1600). Though emerging from vastly different socio-historical and cultural contexts—colonial Bengal and Elizabethan England—both characters are united by their confrontation with the absurdity of existence, moral paralysis, and the conflict between reason and emotion. Drawing upon the philosophical frameworks of existentialism (Kierkegaard, Sartre, Camus), determinism, and psychoanalytic criticism (Freud, Lacan), this paper argues that both Dr. Shashi and Hamlet embody modern consciousness in their struggle between ethical responsibility and metaphysical despair. Their crises, rooted in intellectual over-awareness and disillusionment, reflect the universal condition of human alienation in a world devoid of inherent meaning.

**Introduction**

The modern human condition, as represented in literature, is often characterized by alienation, moral conflict, and the relentless search for meaning in a fragmented world. These concerns lie at the heart of existential philosophy, which examines human existence in its raw confrontation with freedom, absurdity, and mortality.

In *Hamlet* (1600), Shakespeare anticipates this modern crisis through the Danish prince whose moral and philosophical reflections paralyze him. In *Putul Nacher Itikatha* (1936), Manik Bandopadhyay—a leading figure of Bengali psychological realism—creates Dr. Shashi, an intellectual and idealist doctor, whose moral disillusionment and alienation within a decaying rural society mirror Hamlet’s metaphysical conflict. Both characters are thinkers trapped in thought, aware of the futility of their ideals and the contradictions of human life. This comparative study explores how existential anxiety, deterministic forces, and psychological fragmentation shape their consciousness. It situates Hamlet and Dr. Shashi as parallel embodiments of the modern self in crisis, struggling between rational knowledge and the incomprehensibility of life.

### **The Existential Framework: Freedom, Meaning, and the Absurd**

Existentialism, as articulated by Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Søren Kierkegaard, emphasizes the individual's confrontation with the meaninglessness of existence and the need to create meaning through choice. As Sartre argues in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), “Man is condemned to be free,” implying that freedom, far from being liberating, imposes unbearable responsibility.

Both Hamlet and Dr. Shashi experience this paradox. They are aware of their freedom to act but are paralyzed by self-consciousness, doubt, and moral ambiguity. In Camus’s terms, they live the condition of the absurd—the tension between the human desire for coherence and the world’s silent indifference (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1942). Kierkegaard described this existential conflict as “the sickness unto death,” the despair of the self that cannot reconcile its finite existence with its infinite longing (*The Sickness Unto Death*,

1849). Both Hamlet and Dr. Shashi exemplify this despair: intellectuals whose awareness of truth becomes the very source of their suffering.

### **Dr. Shashi's Existential Crisis: Rational Idealism and Disillusionment**

Dr. Shashi, the protagonist of Putul Nacher Itikatha, is a rational, educated man who enters a morally stagnant village with humanitarian ideals. However, his attempts to heal both the physical and moral decay of society expose him to the absurdity of existence and the limitations of rationality. Bandopadhyay portrays him as a disillusioned intellectual, alienated both from the corrupt village society and from his own sense of purpose. Shashi's crisis begins as moral idealism but deepens into existential despair. His scientific rationalism, initially a source of faith in human progress, fails to address the moral degradation he witnesses. He recognizes that knowledge and ethics are powerless against the irrational forces of greed, lust, and social hierarchy. Bandopadhyay writes that Shashi is "a man trying to cure not only bodies but a diseased humanity." His failure is not professional but existential—a confrontation with the futility of human effort in the face of systemic decay. From a deterministic standpoint, Shashi's predicament reflects the Marxian and Freudian influences in Bandopadhyay's work. His consciousness is shaped by social determinism—the material conditions of rural Bengal—and by psychological determinism, as his motivations stem from unconscious guilt and repressed desires. Freud's concept of the repetition compulsion (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920) helps explain Shashi's persistent but futile attempts to reform society: he repeats the cycle of disillusionment in an unconscious quest for redemption. Shashi's alienation parallels Sartre's concept of "nausea"—the visceral awareness of life's contingency and absurdity. His increasing withdrawal from society, his detachment from

emotional relationships, and his ultimate moral exhaustion all signal an existential crisis: the collapse of faith in both reason and humanity.

### **Hamlet's Existential Crisis: The Weight of Consciousness**

Hamlet's crisis, while articulated in metaphysical and moral terms, stems from the same psychological and philosophical awareness that afflicts Dr. Shashi. When Hamlet declares, "How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world" (1.2.133–34), he expresses not merely grief but existential disgust—the realization that life lacks inherent purpose.

Like Shashi, Hamlet is an intellectual who thinks too much and acts too little. His famous dilemma—"To be, or not to be" (3.1.56)—reflects the conflict between existence and nothingness, between the desire to act and the awareness of the futility of action. As Albert Camus observes, "Consciousness makes of every man a stranger to himself" (*The Myth of Sisyphus*). Hamlet's introspection, his obsession with moral purity, and his inability to reconcile thought with action all transform him into a stranger within his own existence. Hamlet's paralysis also reflects Freudian repression. In *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), Freud identifies melancholia as a condition in which the ego internalizes the loss of an ideal object. Hamlet's melancholia after his father's death—and his disgust at his mother's sexuality—suggest a deep internalization of guilt and disgust. His inaction thus becomes a symptom of psychological determinism: the unconscious sabotaging the will.

### **Alienation and the Collapse of Meaning**

Both Shashi and Hamlet experience existential alienation, though from different origins. Hamlet's alienation is metaphysical—a rupture between the moral order and the chaos of reality. His world has lost coherence; the divine order that once gave meaning to human action has

collapsed. He stands between faith and nihilism, reason and absurdity. His famous reflection on death—“the undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns” (3.1.79–80)—reveals both curiosity and terror before the void. Shashi’s alienation, on the other hand, is social and intellectual. In colonial Bengal, the educated elite often found themselves estranged from both Western rationalism and traditional Indian values. Shashi embodies this hybrid consciousness—a modernist skeptic trapped between the ideals of enlightenment and the realities of human suffering. His disillusionment with the villagers’ superstition, greed, and moral hypocrisy transforms his medical mission into a symbol of the futility of idealism. Like Hamlet, he becomes a solitary thinker, alienated from action and community alike. From a Lacanian perspective, both characters inhabit the split subject—their language and consciousness separate them from authentic being. In *Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet* (1959), Jacques Lacan interprets Hamlet’s hesitation as the structural effect of desire itself: he cannot act because the symbolic order (language, morality, social law) displaces his will. Similarly, Shashi’s rationality—the symbolic law of science and ethics—prevents him from connecting authentically with life’s emotional reality.

### **The Search for Meaning and the Inevitability of Defeat**

Both Dr. Shashi and Hamlet seek meaning in a world that denies it. Hamlet’s pursuit of justice and moral clarity ends in death, while Shashi’s pursuit of social reform ends in disillusionment. Their quests reveal the same tragic irony: the more they seek truth, the more meaningless the world becomes. In Camus’s philosophy of the absurd, this paradox defines the human condition: “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart.” Hamlet’s final acceptance—“There’s a

special providence in the fall of a sparrow” (5.2.219)—marks his reconciliation with fate; he accepts death not as defeat but as inevitability. Dr. Shashi, by contrast, does not find transcendence. His defeat is ongoing—a life of perpetual awareness without resolution. His silence and withdrawal signify what Camus calls “philosophical suicide”: the surrender of hope in a rational universe.

### **Conclusion**

Through Dr. Shashi and Hamlet, Bandopadhyay and Shakespeare articulate the universal tragedy of the modern intellect—the awareness that human reason and morality cannot overcome the absurdity of existence. Hamlet’s existential crisis is metaphysical, rooted in cosmic uncertainty; Shashi’s is material and psychological, rooted in the deterministic forces of society and the unconscious. Yet both converge in the realization that consciousness itself is the source of suffering.

Their alienation, paralysis, and despair reflect the essence of existential humanism: the struggle to live meaningfully in a world devoid of inherent meaning. Hamlet’s final surrender and Shashi’s enduring disillusionment are two expressions of the same truth—that existence, in its deepest sense, is a dance of puppets moved by invisible strings of fate, desire, and absurdity.

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