

A Study on Women Oriented Characters in the Works of Shakespeare

Jebamani Anthoney^{1*} Dr. Sangavikar Nanasaheb Vasudeo²

¹ Research Scholar, Himalayan University, Faculty of English Literature, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh

² Research Supervisor, Himalayan University, Faculty of English Literature, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh

Abstract – Shakespeare showed positive attitude toward women in his tragedies like Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello etc. He showed various aspects of women behavior in his tragedies very intelligently. The women character of Ophelia in Hamlet is the good example of that. She was deployed as victim figure. Hamlet used Ophelia as a tool for revenge throughout the play. She considered herself guilty when Hamlet murdered her father and got mad.

Also, in Othello, Shakespeare showed the character of Desdemona very obedient in her disobedient. Desdemona had to suffer a lot due to misunderstandings. Othello considered her betrayal. She loved Othello very much but he lost his trust on her due to virtual circumstances.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Women, Juliet

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INTRODUCTION

Cleopatra described by Shakespeare is considered to be the most powerful women character. She rejected her feminine qualities and died according to Rome traditions. Shakespeare showed the pain of death through this character very effectively.

Through the character of Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare showed one more aspect of women behavior that was of political ambition. She had a goal in her mind to be an effective leader so she sacrificed a lot in her life. This character showed that an ambitious lady can do anything if she decided to achieve anything in life.

In Romeo and Juliet, the character of Juliet was very famous. Juliet was very young girl. She fell in love with Romeo who was impulsive in nature. She loved him very much. She allowed him to kiss her. She also set the foundation in the relationship with Romeo.

The character of Juliet showed the romantic aspect of women that she can do anything for her love. She was very intelligent and mature. She was the true hero of the play. Her maturity was highlighted when Romeo killed Tybalt and she forgave Romeo.

Thus, Shakespeare showed many aspects of women behavior through his works. Women can be loyal, lair, obedient, mature, childish, romantic or cruel.

She suffers a lot but when her patience don't help her then she can do anything to save and defend her.

Society has been male dominated from the ancient time. Women were supposed to be inferior to men. Women were not allowed to participate in any social work. Even, they had no right to choose their career.

With the development all over the world, the attitude of society began to change. Now, women are considered to be equivalent to men. They have the freedom to do what they want. This feminism has certainly changed the prospect of women in society.

Proficiency in English is available only to writers of the intelligent, affluent and educated classes. Shakespeare's works are often therefore, belong to high social strata and cut off from the reality of life.

When we discuss about literature it's not only about novels but also about poetries, short stories and dramas. Before the evolution of novels, several writers composed songs, short stories and plays. With the passage of time, writers like Shakespeare have incorporated recurring female experiences in their writings and it has affected the cultural and language patterns of literature.

The majority of novels written by Shakespeare depict the psychological sufferings of the frustrated homemakers. This subject matter is often considered superficial compared to the depiction of the replaced and oppressed lives of women.

Shakespeare started questioning the prominent old patriarchal domination. They are no longer puppets in the hands of man. They have shown their worth in the field of literature both qualitatively and quantitatively and are showing it even today without any hurdle.

Shakespeare moved away From traditional portrayals of enduring self-sacrificing women, towards conflicts, female characters searching for identity; no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status.

WOMEN ORIENTED CHARACTERS IN THE WORKS OF SHAKESPEARE

According to some critics like Coppelia Kahn women are seen as a positive force. Thus Lear is redeemed by means of a loving nonpatriarchal relationship with Cordelia. But McLuskie thinks this is only a restoration of patriarchy. In my opinion, though I agree with McLuskie in considering King Lear an anti-feminine play, I do not think that Cordelia's function is a restoration of the "old order." She is a balance against her sisters. Shakespeare realizes that throughout the history of mankind, women have always been at a disadvantageous position socially, economically and politically. Through strong female characters, Shakespeare has delineated gender issues. He has given a comprehensive view of life with equal emphasis on both male and female characters.

His female characters show the social stigmas they have undergone during that time. He has portrayed his personal admiration for intelligent, strong women, using virtues and strength he gives his female characters. So we can say that Shakespeare should be considered one of the pioneers of feminist movement. Actually, through representation of women characters in the tragedies, he wants the elimination of gender discrimination and advocates the true liberation of women in society.

An analysis of gender allows us to understand the variety of ways in which Shakespeare responded imaginatively to gender as a crucial determinant of human identity and political power.

By gender we mean the division of male and female and the attribute considered appropriate to each masculine and feminine. Gender exists primarily as construction of particular societies. Man or woman desire to be the same or opposite sex and this varies from culture to culture and changes historically. Masculinity is typically associated with sexual aggression in our time, whereas in Shakespeare's

time women were considered to be more lustful than men. The question of gender ensured that certain roles were determined for women in society by a particular ideology. Any transgression or refusal to adhere to a set pattern was seen as unnatural and deviant.

Again interpretations of action and ideas were made along gendered terms. Certain types of behaviour or conduct including work and participation in the public world of power politics and social welfare were deemed as a masculine preserve and so out of bounds for women. Women who showed any interest in education, work (other than domestic) or public affairs were discouraged and even penalised. Their territory was restricted to the home and hearth.

Women characters play an important role for the dramatic run of events in Shakespeare's plays. Just as in reality, women of Shakespeare's dramas are also seen to be bound to rules and conventions of the patriarchal Elizabethan era. To understand gender in Shakespeare's life time is first to understand the patriarchal household. In the late sixteenth century patriarchy meant the power of the father over everyone in the household, including servants and apprentices.

Early culture was hierarchical, with women under the rule of men. Women were believed to be less rational than men and were deemed to need male protection and guidance. Single women were the property of their fathers and were handed over to their future husbands through marriage. In Elizabethan time, women were considered as the weaker sex and dangerous, because their sexuality was supposedly mystic and therefore feared by men.

Women of that era were supposed to represent virtues like obedience, silence, sexual chastity, piety, humility, constancy, and patience. All these virtues, of course, have their meaning in relationship to men. The role allocation in Elizabethan society was strictly regulated; men were the breadwinners and woman had to be obedient housewives and mothers. However, within this deprived, tight and organized scope, women are represented in most diverse ways in Shakespearean Drama.

Women had few legal or economic rights and her identity was subsumed under her male protector. Women were made to accept their natural inferiority which was instilled into them mainly because of their financial insolvency: they had to depend on their fathers or guardians for support.

In order not to lose authority over women, men condemned women as shrews or scolds. A women's social status was assessed by her economic position, chastity, and fidelity. But

women of all social classes ventured out in public, like Shakespeare's own theatre audience.

DISCUSSION

Women also held productive roles in the economy. However, Shakespeare limits his presentation of economic labor to that of household servants, tavern-keepers, bawds and prostitutes. Interestingly, Shakespeare's London had a visible female presence: they could be seen assisting in household matters as well as buying and selling in the market, engaging in litigation on their own, and frequenting the playhouses.

In Southwark the immediate vicinity of the theatres, some of the household were headed by women. While the projection of some energetic and somewhat emancipated women might have attracted a section of female theatre going public, the male spectators would have responded with anxious hostility to the representation of women's power and autonomy.

Women in Shakespeare's age appear to have had a good deal. While unmarried women seem to have had virtually all the rights of a man, it was impossible for a woman to remain unmarried and independent. Marriages were arranged to further the interest of power either in the form of land or the throne. On marriage the girl's legal rights ceased and she became a property of her husband.

Some husbands broke with the medieval conventions and allowed their wives to take part in running a business or to join a Guild, but this did not give the wives any kind of legal independence. While they gained confidence and a greater sense of personal identity by being allowed out of the traditional sphere of the house, they were still seen as their husband's chattel. If for some reasons it was impractical for a girl to marry, she was encouraged to enter a nunnery.

In the eyes of the law then a woman was only theoretically the equal of a man. But in practice, most women were never able to wield any significant legal and political power because they belonged either to a man or to the Church.

There was however a significant development on the demand for education for women which grew out of the principles and activities of the humanists. The humanists did not, however, see girls and boys as equal. Their concept of education was founded on the old medieval principle that women were the weaker sex. They believed that women were more frivolous and less stable than men. It was necessary, according to them, to have women educated in order to enable them to cope with their inherent deficiencies. The humanists are seen to be working towards intellectual not social ends. Nevertheless it

became a fashion for the girls from rich bourgeois, as well aristocratic families to learn foreign languages and study the scriptures.

But throughout Shakespeare's drama women can be seen pushing against the patriarchal strictures. A study of Shakespeare's plays, especially the history plays and the plays otherwise dealing with power politics shows that the stage of English history or even the world of statecraft was deemed to be no place for women. For example in Richard II, when the Duchess of York goes to plead with the new king Henry IV, her conduct is presented as an indecorous intrusion.

Similarly Joan and Margeret (Henry VI) are demonized for their intrusion into the historical arenas of court and battlefield. The more active the female characters become the more negative is their characterization. On the other hand helplessness seems to be an essential component of female virtue. The women are confined to enclosed domestic settings; they are kept away from the council chambers and battlefields.

The picture becomes more complicated if we look beyond the prominent English History plays. King John, Henry VIII and the Henry VI plays, however, do include female characters who intervene in the historical action. In the opening scene of King John, Eleanor announces that she is a soldier and both Eleanor and Constance play leading roles in the conflict for the English throne. In Richard III, too, women have more space and pose a theatrical challenge to Richard with his demonic energy.

Shakespeare's plays address some of these troublesome areas in the representation of gender and the roles given to women characters. They also touch upon some of the key patriarchal assumptions concerning gender. The world of real politic is considered to be outside the province of women: the stage of history is no place for women. This view prevailed despite the reigns of Mary and then Elizabeth in England. Again martial valor is presented as a monstrous anomaly in women. In fact women are seen to be caught in a double bind in the Shakespearean play.

CONCLUSION

Strong women like Goneril, Cleopatra and others are unchaste and unwomanly; virtuous women like Ophelia, Octavia and others are confined to playing roles of helpless tools or bystanders, powerless to affect the course of history. Thus the female characters in Shakespeare are confronted with a dilemma: they can be either womanly or warlike. They can be virtuous or powerful, never both. This suggest that the construction (and constriction) of women's roles was well under way in Shakespeare's times and gender specific territory

was being charted out, with a little resistance no doubt.

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Corresponding Author

Jebamani Anthony*

Research Scholar, Himalayan University, Faculty of English Literature, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh

drtanthy2011@yahoo.com