

Depiction of Women Characters in Shakespeare's Selected Plays during Elizabethan Era

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Abstract

Shakespeare's plays have been lauded for the depiction of witty, beautiful and intelligent female characters. In all his plays, the number of women characters is less than 16 % of the total characters. There are total 981 characters, out of which 826 are male and 155 are female characters. There are a number of powerful women in Shakespeare's plays. They have political sense. Shakespeare's strongly presentation of women in his plays is his salient feature about his depiction of women protagonists. Cordelia in *King Lear*, Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Beatrice in *Much Ado about Nothing*, Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, Desdemona in *Othello*, Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Viola in *Twelfth Night*, Margaret of Anjou in *Henry VI, Parts- 1, 2, 3, and Richard III*, and Hemia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Despite the power of Elizabeth I, women during this time had very little authority, autonomy or recognition. They were expected to be silent observers, submissive to their husbands. In true sense, women of Shakespeare's dramas are also seen to be bound to rules and conventions of the patriarchal Elizabeth Era. Women of that era were supposed to represent virtues like obedience, silence, sexual chastity, piety, humility, constancy and patience. Despite the relative insignificance of women in Elizabethan patriarchal social order, Shakespeare uses them in many significant ways. He seems to be extremely sensitive to the importance of women in society even though they are often overlooked. Shakespeare recognizes women as a real and significant part of society. Like all aspects of Shakespeare's plays, the female characters play a significant role in contributing to plot and theme of his plays.

Key Words: The patriarchal Elizabeth Era, Lively sensibility, full of wisdom, beauty and tenderness of thought

I. Introduction

William Shakespeare is the greatest English poet and the greatest English dramatist of the world.

His writings and literary works are masterpieces that evince not only artistic excellence but also the quality of serving the interests of the human mind and transgressing the boundaries. Shakespeare does not consist in inventing the segmentation of human life, but in exhibiting it more brilliantly and impressively than has ever been done before. The beauty and tenderness of the thought that life is a kind of drama, with intermingling scenes of joy and sorrow, together with the justness of the sentiment, would have kept this immortal in the public view.

The idea that men are often product of the women in their lives, indirectly suggests the significant impact of women on men in the plays. Isabella has a profound influence in the lives of Angelo and Claudio; Desdemona, without true fault of her own, turns out to be both blessing and curse in the life of Othello. Cleopatra is a major cause of Antony's downfall. Lady Macbeth instigates Macbeth towards fulfilling the witches' prophecies because her strongest desire is to become queen at any costs. She pushes her husband to murder the king.

Therefore, both the comedies and tragedies bear the mark of women, one way or another. Women play main part. Beside every strong male character, there is a woman. In Shakespearean plays female characters are wiser and more rational than the main male characters. In many plays of Shakespeare, women offer reasoning to control the situation. In **Othello**, Desdemona surrenders before her husband passively. Othello puts her to death. She has been depicted as very powerful women in the beginning of the play when her father Brabantio asks the Duke of Venice to stop her marriage to the moor, Othello. Desdemona fully convinces the duke saying, I saw Othello's Visage in his mind,
And to his honour and his valiant parts
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.

(Act One, Scene Three)

Desdemona like her husband is not secure. Othello calls her 'whore', even then she remains loyal to him and resolves to live with him and says,
My love doth so approve him

That even his stubbornness, his checks, his frowns

(Act Four, Scene Three)

Desdemona is confined with rationality and tenacity. She does not shy away from her fear and bids Othello to do sensible things.

Emilia continuously attempts to convince Othello of Desdemona's innocence. Emilia convinces Othello that his wife is chaste, honest and true but Othello does not listen to her reasoning. Desdemona is a very charming, beautiful, tender, and gentle and an ideal wife of Othello. She is "the most exquisite lady". She becomes victim in this tragedy due to devilish plan of Iago and uncontrolled jealousy of Othello.

Desdemona falls in love with Othello who is older, poorer and uglier than she is. She pities him because of his tragic life. She displays her rational and brave characteristic. She tells her father that like her mother, she must show her duty to her husband. She is an unselfish victim who defends her husband to the very end of her life. Another important female character in **Othello** is Emilia. Like Desdemona, she is a brave and respectable character.

Shakespeare's representation of another important gentle-hearted female character in his famous play **Hamlet** is Ophelia, Hamlet's unfortunate lover. She is an obedient, childish and loving woman who seems lost in the world surrounding her and too cruel for her fragile soul. She is incapable to understand her own father and her lover. She lived an unhappy life due to her father's death and her lover's not respecting her deep feelings.

The very same tragedy is also marked by another female character queen Gertrude, Hamlet's mother. She is trapped into living with her husband's murderer but her gesture is not to be justified in any way.

Another female character, even more obsessed with power is Lady Macbeth. Evil and ambition gradually take control over her soul and deeds. She pushes her husband towards fulfilling the witches' prophecies. Her strongest desire is to become queen at any cost. She instigates her husband to kill the king Duncan. She directs the whole crime stage. She puts the dagger in her husband's hand but internal turmoil fills her soul. She loses control and become insane. Therefore, Lady Macbeth, who used to think that consciousness is only for the coward, is ruined by the sentiment of guilt and ultimately dies.

Other female characters obsessed with power, but not to such a great extent as Lady Macbeth, are King Lear's elder daughters, Goneril and Regan go overboard in their hypocritical statements. Cordelia says she loves him according to her duty as a daughter and bond between parent and child. Their deeds are hateful and curse to humanity and their selfishness & cruelty has no limits. With all the evils residing in this play, Cordelia is the epitome of goodness. She is loving, virtuous, kind, forgiving and angel like character. She is a devoted daughter and has great respect for his father, his position and social norms. Unfortunately she gets tragic downfall and death. She makes the distinction between good and evil. The youngest daughter Cordelia is King Lear's favourite daughter, she is not like her elder sister, Goneril. She refuses to say anything in the prayers of the king. She declares 'Nothing, My Lord', There is nothing to compare her love to, no words to express it properly. She says that she loves him according to her bond, no more and no less and will reserve half of her love for future, for her husband. As a result, the king Lear in anger, disinherits Cordelia and divides her share between her elder sisters.

Another important female character of Shakespeare's play "**Antony and Cleopatra**" is Cleopatra. The play was written in around 1606. Antony and Cleopatra is tragedy of passion and contains ironic and heroic theme. Antony is captivated by Cleopatra, the queen of Egypt. She has been considered queen of love. She embodies the feminine eternity and love. She takes control over life through love's strings but when something happens she loses control over these things. She becomes heartless and cruel. She is both an angel and a demon in the same time. Tenderness and cruelty mingle in her soul. Cleopatra is the black seductress. She lured Antony back to Egypt like a moth to a flame.

Another well-defined representative of womanhood is the character of Miranda from Shakespeare's last play **The Tempest**. Miranda's character encompasses all the elements of perfection and goodness. She is extremely beautiful, intelligent, humble, positive and virtuous. In all the plays of Shakespeare, no character is as overwhelming pure as Miranda. She has never been touched or even seen by another male. In all the facets of her character Miranda appears almost Christ like. It is extreme goodness and purity which enables Miranda to become an irreplaceable character.

Another strong female character of Shakespeare's play "**Romeo and Juliet**" is Juliet. Juliet is a female of enormous determination and courage and she is without doubt one of the strongest of all Shakespeare's characters. Juliet's father wants to marry Juliet to the Count of Paris but she refuses to marry the Count of Paris. Juliet falls in love with teen aged Romeo and she is determined to marry Romeo. Both families of Romeo and Juliet are involved in old feud in which all contact between them is forbidden. Ultimately Juliet sacrifices her life for sake of Romeo. Romeo has only one thing in her mind- to marry Juliet. Juliet is the female of enormous determination and courage.

Another central character in Shakespeare's play "**As You Like It**" is Rosalind, daughter of Banished Duke. She is disguised as a man throughout the play. She disguises herself as a shepherd named Ganymede. She organizes marriage of everyone according to her needs and desires. She marries Orlando who can match her qualities and as strong as She is. She makes Celia, her cousin (daughter of the Duke of Frederick) marry Oliver who can match her qualities and likeminded.

Another beautiful, intelligent, benevolent and wise female character of Shakespeare's play "**Twelfth Night**" is Viola. Twelfth Night is a fast paced romantic comedy containing several interwoven plots of romance. Having lost her twin brother in the shipwreck and finding herself at the beach of Ilyria, Viola's first instinct is not to appeal for help as a helpless woman but to disguise herself as a man and find a job as a servant in the household of the Duke. Her ability is to adapt herself according to circumstances in spite of her female upbringing. Viola has ability to manipulate her circumstances for her own wish. That is why she succeeds to marry the Duke and she also plays key role in the marriage between Olivia and Sebastian.

Shakespeare's representation of another female character in **The Merchant of Venice** is Portia. After the death of her father and having no brother, she has to play a role of a man and manage the wealthy estate. She is a **rich**, beautiful, and intelligent heiress of Belmont. Later in the play, she disguises herself as a man and assumes the role of a lawyer's apprentice (named Balthazar). Her power lies in her wisdom. She saves the life of Bassanio's friend, **Antonio**, in court from death and from Shylock's cruelty. Portia plays key role for the success of her husband Bassanio and for saving the life of her husband's friend Antonio.

Next strong and courageous female character of Shakespeare's play '**A Midsummer Night's Dream**' is Hermia. She is a girl of ancient Athens named for Hermes, the Greek God of trade. The only serious conflict is between Hermia and her father and that is a life and death situation. She loves Lysander but her father has chosen Demetrius for her marriage and has appealed to Theseus, the Duke of Athens, for support. Under Athenian law, Hermia's refusal of her father's command would result in her being put to death or being banished to a nunnery. She then courageously runs away with her lover. Her strength lies in her calm assertiveness and her determination to control her own destiny.

II. Conclusion:

In Shakespeare plays, there are several female characters who affect or influence other characters. Women characters in Shakespeare plays have very important roles. They have reasons and so they are leading characters. Shakespeare is the supreme exponent of the national life in one of its most glorious epochs and his literary works are not merely the scripture of the lovers of beauty but form a storehouse and treasury of global conceptions of domestic, social, civil and political perfection transgressing the global boundaries. About Antony and Cleopatra, Granville Barker's observes, "Antony and Cleopatra bears not only eloquent testimony to the profundity of his Shakespearean scholarship, but also his remarkable capacity to see a play in a broad comparative perspective. 'Here is the most spacious of the plays. It may lack the spiritual intimacy of Hamlet, the mysterious power of Macbeth, the nobility of Othello, may reach neither to the heights nor depths of King Lear; but it has a magnificence and magic all its own, and Shakespeare's eyes swept no wider horizon,'" (Barker, ix). In spite of the relative insignificance of women in Elizabethan social order & patriarchal era, Shakespeare respects them and uses them in significant ways. Shakespeare is extremely sensitive to the significant role of women in society, country and for better creation even though they are often overlooked. Shakespeare has depicted the women in his plays very beautifully, respectfully and with great wisdom. He was not for an age but for all times because his characters are true to the eternal aspects of human life and not limited to any contemporary society. Shakespeare is the supreme exponent of the national life in one of its most glorious epochs and his literary works are not merely the scripture of the lovers of beauty but form a storehouse and treasury of global conceptions of domestic, social, civil and political perfection transgressing the global boundaries.

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