



Portrait of women characters in Shakespearean famous tragedies

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Abstract : Women in Shakespeare plays have always had important roles, sometimes the leading role and they are put in challenging situations. Shakespeare realistically captured the essence of femininity. His women characters are perhaps the most attractive and also in a sense his most original creation from ideals of the feminine type prevalent in the literature of his days. Despite the relative insignificance of women in Elizabethan social order, Shakespeare uses them in many significant ways. He seems to be extremely sensitive to the identity of women in society even though they are often overlooked. Shakespeare portrays women as playing a significant role in the society. Though women are not the central characters of his plays, yet they are skillfully portrayed giving the message that behind every strong male character, there is a woman. For instance, in Othello unlike many other Shakespearean plays, the leading female characters are wiser and more rational than the central male characters.

Key words: consciousness, Shakespeare, Women

Narration of the concept

In order to explore women's role in Shakespearean plays, one has to study the social context of the Elizabethan society. Despite the power of Queen Elizabeth I, women during her period had very little authority, autonomy, or recognition. There were more restrictions on social and political rights of women than on economic rights. Women who attempt to assert their views were seen as a threat to social order.

Shakespeare is highly sensitive to his target audience in every aspect of his writing process. He actively plays upon the beliefs and fears of the Elizabethans. With characters such as Goneril and Cleopatra, Shakespeare demonstrates the devastating effects of female rebellion against social order. Shakespeare invokes sympathy in the audience by creating characters of extreme feminine virtue such as Cordelia, Miranda. However, Shakespeare often creates ambiguous

emotions in the audience by introducing an element of intelligence and boldness in the case of Isabella and Desdemona.

Despite the relative insignificance of women in Elizabethan social order, Shakespeare uses them in many significant ways. He seems to be extremely sensitive to the identity of women in society even though they are often overlooked. The idea that men are the product of women is indirectly suggested in his plays where we find that the impact of lives of women is on men. Isabella has a profound influence in the lives of Angelo and Claudio; Desdemona, by no fault of her own, turns out to be both a blessing and a curse in the life of Othello; Cleopatra is a major cause of Antony's downfall. Having respect in the social order of Elizabethan society, Shakespeare portrays women as playing a significant role in the society. Though women are not the central characters of his plays, yet they are skillfully portrayed



giving the message that behind every strong male character, there is a woman. For instance, in Othello unlike many other Shakespearean plays, the leading female characters are wiser and more rational than the central male characters. Emilia continually attempts to convince Othello of Desdemona's innocence, but he doesn't accept her reasoning. Desdemona is an ideal wife to Othello. Iago, with his devilish plans and Othello with his uncontrollable jealousy represent the evil in the play while the women reflect the goodness and sanctity.

Desdemona is the prototype of womanhood. She is very charming, symbolizing the woman ready to face the unknown of marriage being lured into the mystery that surrounds her husband. Very beautiful and tender, she is a true gentle woman, but becomes the naive victim in this tragedy. She falls in love with a man who is older, poorer, and uglier than her. She pities him because of his tragic life and respects his endurance for pain. She displays her rational and brave characteristics when she stands up to her father and tells him that, like her mother, she must show her 'duty' to her husband. This young woman also boldly asks the Duke if she can go with Othello to Cyprus so that she will not just be a 'moth of peace' while her noble husband is fighting for their country. The Duke, like all of the characters in the play, respects Desdemona and her wishes and allows her to go with Othello.

Everyone praise and respect Desdemona. Iago repeatedly speaks of Desdemona's 'honesty' and 'goodness'. Both he and Cassio agree that she is the 'most exquisite lady'. Emilia also shows her admiration by defending Desdemona's honour to Othello. She tries to convince him that his wife is 'honest,

chaste, and true'. Desdemona is a loyal spouse who will do absolutely anything for her husband. Even when he falsely accuses her of committing adultery and sin, Desdemona defends Othello. Instead of blaming him she tries to understand what has made him unrest. She is an unselfish victim who defends her husband to the very end of her life. Even when Othello kills her in a jealous rage, Desdemona does not want her husband to be responsible for her death. She claims that 'nobody, I myself' committed this tragic deed. Her death does not destroy either the ideal of the ideal marriage, or that of love, but only that of the impulsive and hazardous marriage.

Another important gentle-hearted female character is **Ophelia**, Hamlet's unfortunate lover. She is a naive young woman, who seems lost in the world surrounding her; she is an obedient, childlike and loving woman in her dressing but maiden in her desires. She is involved in a tensioned human world, always torn between fateful decisions. She seems to belong to another world, to another dimension; therefore, she does not belong to the world she has to live in. This will eventually kill her, as she is incapable to fit in, to understand her own father and her lover. Because of her naivety, she is lost in a world too cruel for her fragile soul. This character, which seems like having feminine perfume running in her veins rather than human blood, lives an unhappy life, being torn between her father's death, her lover not respecting her deep feelings and her brother's treating her like a child. The very same tragedy is also marked by another feminine presence, **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. She becomes the prisoner of the secret she has to keep, thus becoming the symbol of sin she displays with duplicity. Her behaviour, wrapped up in some mysterious deeds known only by herself, constitute the example of virtuosity of those possessed by power. She is constant with herself, but fate kills her by the very same poison and by the very same man who caused her husband's death. Therefore, fate's fury does not allow her to live any longer. She has to die, and her death does not aggrieve anyone.

Another female character even more obsessed with power, is **Lady Macbeth**. She is a 'sexless' character who seems to have forgotten that she was born a woman. Evil and ambition gradually take control over her soul and deeds, worsening her consciousness. She forces her husband to fulfill the witches' prophecies, as her strongest desire is to become a queen at any cost. As a consequence, her soul is emptied by feelings, becoming insensitive to murder. Therefore, she does not hesitate to provoke her husband to kill the king. She even humiliates him, calling him a coward; her strong will destroys Macbeth's doubts, as she's the one leading the dagger in her husband's hands: his hands are but tools of her criminal mind. She directs the whole crime stage, but little by little, her security seems like fading, as internal turmoil fills her soul and marks her behaviour. She loses control and becomes insane. Therefore, Lady Macbeth, who believed that consciousness is only for the coward ones, is ruined by the sentiment of guilt, and felt that the only salvation is death. But the one who dies is not as much the female as it is a person dominated by the distorted sense of power.

Another female characters obsessed with power, but not to such a great extent as Lady Macbeth, are King Lear's elder daughters, **Goneril** and **Regan**. Their deeds are wicked, their morality is overridden, trampled and their cruelty has no limits. Considering that they are allowed to encroach upon the obligations towards their father, that a kingdom can be ruled according to their own wish, without any sense of responsibility. After becoming powerful, their characters becomes primitive, selfish. With all the evil residing in this play, **Cordelia** is the epitome of goodness. She also demonstrates law and order in that she is a devoted daughter and has great respect for her father and his position. Cordelia, though, is a tragic character, her kindness and her limitations on the boundaries of the social norms of the Elizabethan age, ironically turned out to be her tragic downfall. Many people have been quite moved and bemused by her death, many of which deemed it as injustice. Cordelia's role in the play may be that of an angel – like the character who makes the distinction between good and evil more visible, or who makes us more aware of a crumbling society where many things were opposite to what one might think it should be, with evil generally prevailing over the good. The truth is that her presence is needed in order to counterbalance the effect of her two elder sisters' cruel deeds.

Somewhere in between Cordelia's tenderness, on one hand, and Lady Macbeth's cruelty, on the other, lies the 'Queen of love', **Cleopatra**. Her character is the one which is dominated by love. She embodies the feminine eternity. The wars outside are but 'children's play' as compared to the wars inside her soul. She



takes control over life through love's strings but when something happens, she loses control over these strings and becomes unkind and cruel. She's both an angel and a demon at the same time. Tenderness and cruelty mingle in her soul and these two keep working all the time under different shapes. Shakespeare also emphasizes on acting in such an aggressive manner, Cleopatra upsets the natural order of a male dominated society. She is contrasted by **Octavia** who yields in every aspect to men. This would parallel the Jacobean mindset that women were subservient to men and should not voice their own opinions. Octavia is the chaste and pure 'white beauty', while Cleopatra is the 'black' seductress. It is these exotic qualities that lure Anthony back to Egypt like a moth to a flame. It is this tension between two opposing natures that adds tension to the tragedy. By placing importance on their differences Shakespeare covers a broad spectrum of womanhood.

Another well-defined representative of womanhood is the character of Miranda from *'The Tempest'* who is extremely compelling for two reasons. First, it is important to note that Miranda is the only female character who appears in the entire play. This is the only Shakespearean play where a character has this kind of outstanding distinction. Miranda's character encompasses all the elements of perfectionism and goodness which is lacking in all the other respective characters. Secondly, She is extremely beautiful and intelligent. Shakespeare makes Miranda even more desirable by including the fact that she has never seen or even talked to another man (with the obvious exception of Prospero). Miranda personifies the ultimate source of good in the play, and provides the ultimate foil

for the evil character of Caliban. Even the nun Isabella in *'Measure for Measure'* wouldn't perform the virtuous act of sacrificing her virginity to save her brother's life. Miranda certainly would perform this act, because unlike Isabella she would place value on another person's life before protecting her own ego. In this and all the facets of her character Miranda appears almost Christ-like, and it is this extreme propensity towards goodness and purity which enables Miranda to become an irreplaceable character.

Conclusion:

Shakespeare creates women characters who support feminism through their intelligence and observation. He does not depict them as traditional unintelligent, all-forgiving characters; instead, he gives them their own desires and wants which were denied to them by men in Shakespeare's time. Though writing for a misogynistic audience, he incorporates his ideas of female power into his plays to make strong women who are courageous and intelligent enough to do what they want. Thus Shakespeare has never depicted women in a derogatory manner. The role of female characters is as important as male characters in most of his plays.

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