

Shakespeare's concern about women: Feminist perspectives in Shakespeare's plays

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare's greatness lies in the fact that he left no subject untouched. His plays reflect all the issues and perspectives of the contemporary England and the world in general. Ben Jonson's words are apt that he was for all times. The issues related to women are as old as human life. Shakespeare's feminist concerns are reflected in his tragedies like Othello, Macbeth, Hamlet, and comedies like Twelfth Night, Measure for measure, and The Taming of the shrew. These plays have a strong presence of patriarchal domination and emerging protest against it. The word 'feminism' is contemporary and new idea but the concept of gender equality is age old. Shakespeare cannot be called feminist in modern sense but deep down, he was a humanist who glorified man as the sublime creation. It is also natural that a writer cannot completely escape the influence of his age and social milieu. His plays reflect social-cultural environment of the contemporary England. Othello deals with cross-racial theme as Othello was a Moor and Desdemona, a white woman. However, the major theme of the play centres round adultery of a woman. Othello vindicates the murder of Desdemona on the ground of adultery. He speaks as a custodian of patriarchy and not just as the custodian of personal honour. Desdemona's choice of Othello as a husband indicates her free spirit and bold feminist stance. However, at the end, she becomes the victim of the very cruel patriarchal system. In Hamlet, Gertrude is portrayed as an adulterous woman and Hamlet generalizes frailty synonymous of woman. In Macbeth, Lady Macbeth is depicted as desexed woman with monstrous ambitions and cruelty. However, This can be seen as the fact that cruelty is not the temperament of a woman but of man. Shakespeare's commitment to feminist concerns over Patriarchal ones is depicted through the reversal of gender roles. In his comedies, Shakespeare overturns the gender hierarchies. In As you Like It, Rosalind has been depicted as bold and extraordinarily intelligent and rational. In The merchant of Venice, Portia is highly intelligent and logical in her arguments as a lawyer. In his comedies, Shakespeare goes beyond gender and racial border lines. This shows his liberal humanist and global outlook.

Key words: Feminist perspective.

The period from Renaissance to the Enlightenment is marked by the shift in paradigms of discourse and attitude towards Women Gender discrimination has been deep rooted in various cultures and countries but simultaneously, there have been thinkers, writers, poets and social activists who propagated and advocated gender equality and protested strongly against patriarchal mindset. Renaissance was synonymous with Humanism which places man in the centre of

everything. As Shakespeare proclaims in his *Hamlet*, for the first time, this-worldly ideology replaced the other-worldly thinking. Hamlet says,

“What a piece of work is man how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension. How like a god”

This means that humanism is an intellectual and social philosophy focusing on the beauty of individual and life on the Earth. In the earlier times, life and culture were church and religion centred. In the 14th century, the power of the church began to decline. This decline became the source of the development of humanism. People were now less interested in saints, gods and religious rituals.

They began to think more about the world around them and the life HERE and NOW. Material development, Scientific inventions and discoveries took place during Renaissance. The humanist paradigm of thought evolved from the Renaissance to Enlightenment period which promoted feministic concerns also because focus on man would naturally include all humans, men and women.

Feminism is usually defined as the advocacy of women's rights on the grounds of equality of the sexes. Humanism rejects the supernatural and focuses on worldly pleasures and success. It emphasizes on rational attitude towards life and nature. The humanist philosophy is created on man in general and not as a gender category-man or woman. Renaissance which stretched from 14th to late 17th century, it was a period of growth and development in the Western Europe. It was a revival of ancient Greek and Roman cultures with the emphasis on the individual. It witnessed the discoveries of new continents, the decline of feudalism and inventions of printing press etc. The crusades and the recapture of Jerusalem was one of the leading factors. The Bucolic plague killed one third of English population and it made people disillusioned about the idea of God and the ability of the church to deal with the holocaust.

The Renaissance humanism glorified the individual and elevated him to the Universal

Man. In the Middle Ages, human conscious lay in veils of ignorance and superstitions. During the Renaissance, the veil was removed and the light of knowledge and understanding illuminated human consciousness. By the 16th century, the entire Europe was full of fervour of social reform and awakening. The Renaissance which started in Italy reached the English shores transforming the English society into individualist, secular and urban society. The spread of education brought about great revolution leading to the study of ancient classical literature of Greece and Rome. The period produces great literary luminaries like Spenser, Marlow, Shakespeare and Milton.

During this period, humanist and protestant reformers showed their concerns about women and their problems. The humanists advocated education for all including women. It was for the first time that the issues of women were discussed and debated, "Women provided the English Renaissance with prolific topic for attack and defence."(M.C.Manus4)

The most important achievement of the Renaissance was the idea of 'self-knowledge'. Erasmus and Thomas More believed that knowledge could solve all human problems. They believed that education alone could liberate all human beings. They also believed that women possessed the same amount of abilities as men. Erasmus advocated the doctrine of the Western Culture which associated masculinity to rationality and femininity to irrationality and sensuality.

Thomas More in *Utopia* attacked and European countries for their religious intolerance. Earlier silence was considered the virtue of women that made them good wives. More said that the eloquence of women and their intellectual autonomy would make them better wives because silence does not mean obedience, it is a kind

of suppression. More advocated education as a means of providing women with spiritual and moral freedom.

“Because of her education, the wife’s company provides for the husband not only a retreats from the care of the world as the company of any wife might, but a solution to those cares through the husband’s submission to her wise perspectives on them”

Protestant reformers like John Calvin promoted education for all without any gender discrimination. Martin Luther, however saw silence as a sole virtue. He was an advocate of the institution of marriage as an ordained order by God. He also believed that the concept of celibacy was quite useless as it would lead to nothing but social disorder. However, many protestant thinkers believed that women were ordained by nature for domestic life, bearing and rearing children and looking after home and family. Marriage was primarily meant for procreation and women’s primary duty was to beget children and bring them up.

Literature always reflects the life, culture and social milieu of the period in which it is created. Shakespeare’s greatness lies in the fact that he left no subject untouched. He dealt with all types of people, their attitudes, issues and concerns. His views on different issues also reflect the views of his time. No writer can ever escape the influence of his period, social milieu and contemporary mindset. However, a great writer goes beyond his time exploring new horizons of thinking. Shakespeare’s plays have universal and eternal appeal because of his dispassionate observation of various issues of life and society. Shakespeare wrote about love, marriage and women in his tragedies and comedies that reflect not only contemporary views but his own. His plays

present patriarchal domination and also emerging protest against it. Shakespeare can not be called a feminist in modern sense but deep down his humanist stance makes him stand for gender equality.

During the Elizabethan England, the gender equality of ideal woman was a silent , virtuous, devoted, chaste woman. They were brought up to become good housekeepers and child bearers. In Greek literature, women were treated as inferior who depended on men as fathers, husbands and sons. They were described as ‘apolitical’(stone, 1990:71) In Roman literature also, Juvenal attacked women. In the Bible also one can perceive anti-woman bias. Women were thus regarded as source of temptation, infidelity and fall of man. After the reformation, marriage was taken as the only social order to earn a living while women had to bear children, rear them and perform household tasks. She was expected to remain silent and obedient to her husband. Eloquent women did not conform to this ideal.

Juliet Dusinbere in her work *Shakespeare and the Nature of women*(2002) says that feminist militancy started during the Elizabethan period when women put on men’s clothes as protests against patriarchy and male supremacy. Shakespeare foresaw the emerging feminist ideology and took side with gender equality. Sabrina Zerar in her article “William Shakespeare: Patriarchal faces VsFeminist Faces”(2010) says that in Shakespeare, we find his ambivalent attitude towards gender and gender bias. He catered to the needs of his contemporary audience and therefore could not openly crusade against patriarchal domination. However, there are red signals of resistance against domination of men over women. There is a clear cut paradigm shift in his attitude towards women as we move from his

tragedies to comedies. As Bamber Linda puts it, in Shakespeare, the self(man) is privileged in tragedy, the other (woman) in comedy (Bamber,6). Shakespeare could not escape contradictions because though he was timeless in dimension, he was also the representative of his time.

Patriarchy is the oldest form of exploitation and domination in the history of mankind. The unequal power between man and woman is believed to be the result of nature rather than culture. Scientific discoveries and political revolutions shook medieval order gradually and slowly and steadily, the attitude towards women began to change. Shakespeare belongs to the group of these emerging sympathisers if not feminists in modern sense.

During the time of Shakespeare, Queen Elizabeth ruled over England proving that a woman could manage political and state affairs as skilfully as man. However, patriarchy was an accepted form of belief. There was great inequality between men and women and women were repressed in various ways. Many people acknowledged that there were many women who were superior to their husbands both intellectually and spiritually. Yet, women were excluded from social life and political life. They had no right to vote or take active part in politics and social issues. They were thus confined to roles of child bearers, nurses, cooks and home makers. These traditional roles were supported by law, customs and the religious authority. Patricia Crawford rightly remarks that" men's power depended upon keeping women ignorant"(Crawford,228).In Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies, we find some powerful characters that prove that women were always equal to men. They may not be politically powerful but they were intelligent, bold and influenced their male counterparts. Even in male dominated

society, men were often influenced by women- mother, grandmother, sister, wife or daughter. Shakespeare's powerful women characters display their inner strength, intelligence, rational attitude and pragmatic approach to problems of life. Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Beatrice in *Much ado about Nothing*, Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, Viola in *Twelfth Night*, Hermia in *A mid Summer Night's Dream* can be cited as examples of women of substance in one or the other way.

Portia was a rich heiress from Belmont. She was rich and fair and therefore she was the most eligible woman for wife-seekers and suitors. Suitors came from far and wide to try their luck. Her father was no more but he had left a will and a scheme to find a right husband for her. Even from beyond the grave, her father controlled her decision to find a husband. Portia is not happy about it and she says to Nerissa her maid and companion,

"O me, the word "Choose"! may neither choose who I would nor refuse who I dislike. So is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa that I cannot choose one, nor refuse none?"

Though she is not free to choose her husband, there is a silent protest that she makes. This silent protest is a feminist concern expressed by Shakespeare. Deep down, he felt that women should have freedom to choose their husbands or even the profession. Portia is intelligent and rational in her attitude. She saves Antonio's life and her marriage. Her role as a lawyer Balthazar displays her argumentative skills and wisdom. She says to Shylock the Jew that mercy is a higher order than justice. Both the giver and the taker are blessed in mercy.

In *King Lear* ,Cordelia loves her father but she tells him that she loves him as a daughter

should. Lear is enraged and he banishes her without any share in his property. He gives away all his property to his other two daughters who finally reject him and imprison him in a dungeon. Cordelia helps her father showing the true bond between father and daughter. She displays her wisdom, independence and clarity of thinking. She reverses her role as a daughter to that of mother. In a state of madness, Lear is unable to recognise her but she forgives him for banishing her and nurses him like a mother. However, the play ends tragically. Edmund sends Lear to prison and Cordelia is hanged.

In *A Mid Summer Night's Dream*, Hermia is a powerful independent woman. Her father Egeus drags her to court to compel her to marry with Demetrius and not her beloved Lysander. If she would not obey her father, the law of the land would punish her with death. Hermia without taking an aggressive stand, tells Theseus and her father that her soul "consents not to give sovereignty" of itself to another including the ruler of the land. These words indicate her boldness and free spirit. The ability to express oneself with such clarity depicts the self-awareness of a woman. They know what society expects from them but they know their own minds.

Rosalind in *As You Like It* is probably the most powerful and independent female character. She controls the situations that take place in the play and arranges four marriages including her own. In disguise of a man, She convinces Orlando to woo her in the forest of Arden. She controls Orlando's sentimentalism and over-emotional outbursts by telling him that love is fickle and short-lived. At the end, she sheds her male identity reminding all that she is not a woman but an actor. Here, Shakespeare presents futurist ideas of gender equality.

In *Much Ado about Nothing*, Beatrice is bold, witty and beautiful. She is confident in her belief that she is equal to Benedick, the male figure and refuses to obey his dominating attitude.

Viola in *Twelfth Night* disguises herself as a man and finds a job as a servant in the household of the Duke. Her strength can be seen in her courage to face adverse situations and adapt herself to the circumstances. Bianca in *Taming of the Shrew* is a younger daughter of Baptista Minola. Her sister Kate is a shrew. She has many suitors. Her sweet temper and independent thinking ultimately results in marriage with the suitor she loves. Shakespeare repeatedly deals with the theme of woman's rights to choose her husband through love and not through arranged marriage.

Romeo and Juliet is a tragedy of star-crossed lovers. Juliet was exquisitely beautiful who falls in love with Romeo, the young man from the enemy family. She was only fourteen years old girl, the only child of the Capulets. She is innocent and gentle. Once she falls in love, she becomes bold and courageous. Even at the age of fourteen, love makes her mature in emotions and thoughts. Juliet represents the profound passion and emotion. *Romeo and Juliet* is a tragedy of love and Juliet's inner strength shows the greatness of a woman who rises above caste, creed or race. Shakespeare highlights the fact that love is not a mere passion for woman, it is life for her.

Ophelia in *Hamlet* represents young, naive and innocent girl. She is the daughter of Polonius, the Lord Chamberlain in the court of Claudius. She was raised by her father who taught her to be obedient, meek and chaste. She blindly followed her father's dictates. Her brother Laertes always discouraged her to keep away from Hamlet's company. Ophelia

obeys her father and brother and keeps away from the obsessive prince of Denmark. Polonius fears that his daughter would be seduced and abused by Hamlet. Ophelia suffers as she is torn between her father and her lover Hamlet. She becomes mad and drowns herself in a stream. She is the victim of patriarchal domination only in death.

Othello is a tragedy that deals with cross racial theme as Othello was a moor and Desdemona a white woman. She falls in love with Othello, the black moor. She is a daughter of Venetian senator called Brabantio. She looks shy and modest but when she speak about her love for Othello, she becomes quite bold denying the charge that Othello had seduced her. She says,

“My noble father, I do perceive here a divided duty. To you I am bound for life and education. My life and education both do learn me. How to respect you; you are the Lord of duty. I am hither to your daughter. But here’s my husband, And so much duty as my show’d To you , preferring you before her father, So much I challenge that I may profess Due to the Moor, My Lord.(1.3.194-203)

This speech of Desdemona shows her courage, independence and rebellious spirit. Her love for Othello fills her with bravery and strength. She is strangled to death by Othello who is suspicious of her infidelity towards her. She dies a brave death trying to prove her innocence and purity. Here, we find cruelty of patriarchal system that suppresses women in different ways- through fatherly domination to husband’s jealousy.

To sum up, we can say that Shakespeare did not claim to be a feminist in modern sense but his concerns about women display his

dispassionate observation of women’s roles in the world. Shakespeare was quite aware of the virtues and strength of women. He was also aware of the fact that they suffered they don’t fight openly against these vices, they voice their sufferings and protests against them. Shakespeare’s humanistic approach makes him sympathetic with women giving expression to their sufferings.

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