



SHAKESPEARE AS A PROTOFEMINIST AUTHOR

VANDANA UPADHYAY

Assistant Professor
Communication Skills
AS, SAGE, University, Indore
(MP) INDIA

NUPUR AGROYEE

Assistant Professor,
AS, SAGE University, Indore,
(MP) INDIA

ABSTRACT

Female characters play a significant role in Shakespeare's plays. Just as in reality, women of Shakespeare's dramas have been bound to rules and conventions of the patriarchal Elizabethan era. Therefore, it was very common back in Elizabethan England to compel woman into marriages in order to receive power, legacy, dowry or land in exchange. Even though the Queen herself was an unmarried woman, the roles of woman in society were extremely restricted. Single women have been the property of their fathers and handed over to their future husbands through marriage. In Elizabethan time women were considered as the weaker sex and because their sexuality was supposed mystic. Women of that era were supposed to represent virtues like obedience, silence, sexual chastity, piety 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 bread winners and women had to be obedient housewives and mothers. However, within this deprived and organized scope, women have been represented in most diverse ways in Shakespearean Drama. The construction of female characters in Shakespeare's plays reflects the Elizabethan image of woman in general. For all that, Shakespeare supports the English Renaissance stereotypes of genders, their roles and responsibilities in society, he also puts their representations into question, challenges, and also revises them. Feminist criticism appears to be the fastest-growing and most wide spread of all recent approaches to Shakespeare. The women's point of view raises several questions; how is meaning related to gender? How is 'maleness' related to feminism? What are the females' functions? Are there any at all? Hence, feminist approaches to Shakespeare and all those questions are best understood in the context of

VANDANA UPADHYAY**NUPUR AGROYEE**

1 Page



feminism itself: the drive to achieve rights and equality for women in social, political and economic life. However, this does not mean that feminism is anti-men; it is more against sexism, humiliation and gender discrimination. Consequently, it is against the beliefs and practices that structure and maintain the subordination and oppression of women. Further, summing up, feminism reveals and challenges the cultural shaping of gender roles in all social institutions like family, work, politics, religion, and, of course, in literature and drama. Feminist criticism examines how female experience is portrayed in literature and drama. It tries to expose how, in plays, in novels and other writing, patriarchal ideology often stereotypes, distorts, ignores or represses that experiences of the female protagonists whether Viola, Rosalind, Miranda, Lady Macbeth they all represented as powerful women characters of their time in Shakespearean drama.

Key words: *Feminism, Drama, literature, Elizabethan, society*

INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare (bapt. 26 April 1564 – 23 April 1616) was an English poet, playwright, and actor, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's greatest dramatist. He is often called England's national poet and the "Bard of Avon". His extant works, including collaborations, consist of some 39 plays 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems, and a few other verses, some of uncertain authorship. Feminist study approaches to Shakespeare criticism made significant gains after 1980. While the roots of feminism are buried in ancient Greece most recognized the movement by three waves of feminism. The third being the movement in which we are currently residing. Quite frankly, it all comes down to the dictionary's very simple yet profound definition: "The theory of political, economic and social equality of the sexes". Feminists, like New Historicists, were interested in contextualizing Shakespeare's writings rather than subjecting them to a historical formalist analysis. Turning to anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, feminist critics illuminated the extent to which Shakespeare inhabited a patriarchal world dominated by men and fathers, in which women were essentially the means of exchange in power relationships among those men. Feminist criticism is deeply interested in marriage and courtship customs, gender relations, and family structures. Diaries, marriage-counseling manuals, and other such documents become important to feminist study. Revealing patterns emerge in Shakespeare's plays as to male insecurities about women, men's need to dominate and possess women, their fears of growing old. In Shakespeare's world, women were free to be just as witty /brave/lovesick as men. In his plays, the men are emotional wrecks and the heroines are the ones keeping it together.

Feminist critics of the late 20th and early 21st centuries included, among many others, Lynda Boose, Lisa Jardine, Gail Pester, Jean Howard, Karen Newman, Carol Neely, Peter Erickson,

VANDANA UPADHYAY

NUPUR AGROYEE

2 Page



and Madelyn Spring ether. Late 20th-century and early 21st-century scholars were often revolutionary in their criticism of Shakespeare. To readers the result frequently appeared overly postmodern and trendy, presenting Shakespeare as a contemporary at the expense of more traditional values of tragic intensity, comic delight, and pureeing sight into the human condition. No doubt some of this criticism, as well as some older criticism, was too obscure and ideologically driven. Yet deconstructionists and feminists. In the eyes of many feminist critics, he portrays women with the kind of fullness and depth found in authors such as Virginia wolf and T.S.Eliot. What can not be dismissed, however, is the context in which Shakespeare wrote the plays. Speculation of his historical surroundings denote Shakespeare's tendency to pander to leadership, in this case, England's greatest female monarch, Elizabeth. Though society was largely patriarchal, the monarchy led by queen who did not marry. It is not completely unlikely that Shakespeare pandered to the female monarch, emulating her reluctance to wed in his "The Taming of the Shrew." Queen Elizabeth, after all, did not marry, nor would she fit into society's mold of the typical woman. Shakespeare's characters were daring for the time, as they also broke the traditions of Elizabethan women. Unlike Queen Elizabeth, however, the strong female characters of Shakespeare's plays were exemplified by their ability to manipulate, control, over power men. In many ways, the strength of women served as a men to make women antagonists. For example, Desdemona's power existed to drive Othello mad with her unchecked sexuality. She exhibited a power over men, one that would not be contained or controlled by men. Though I ago manipulated the characters of 'Othello', it was extreme jealousy that drove the play's name sake mad, causing him to kill him self and the woman he could not control. The message conveyed in 'Othello' could be construed to before boding one to women in society who dominated them :losing control of women and compromising male dominance leads to tragic consequences.

Methodology:

Primary and secondary data is used to explore some hitherto aspects of Shakespeare's dramas. Original texts, literature review and some reliable websites are used to elaborate the idea of this research work. The work focus on Elizabethan period and condition of European women their role in society. On contrary Shakespeare's dramas show powerful women characters. Protofeminism is a philosophical tradition that anticipates Modern feminism when the concept of feminism was unknown i.e. prior to 20th century

Shakespeare's style of portraying his heroines:

Shakespeare's Rosalind was unique, different from Desdemona and Katharina in her omniscience and enlightened state. Though the complexity of her emotion and thoughts is unrivaled in 'As You Like It', she takes on a darker side, one of manipulation and social subversion. Though laudable, her social deviance still leaves the play demands for a male

VANDANA UPADHYAY

NUPUR AGROYEE

3 Page



counterpart to complement her. She cannot criticize the respective stations of men and women for too long without succumbing to love's fetters herself. It is as though Shakespeare is communicating the futility of female non conformity. Though women are welcome to mock but society and live outside its bounds, they all must eventually grow into wives and docile domesticates. It is well remarked by famous British poet John Keats in one of his letters of 1818 that:

"I have great reason to be content, for thank God I can read, and perhaps understand Shakespeare to his depths."

While Shakespeare created unforgettably empowered female characters, his writing did little to influence society outside writers he inspired. It is more likely that Queen Elizabeth changed the outlook of society on women, as it was under her rule that the arts, including theatre, flourished. Female empowerment, after all, does not connote feminist thought; it is only an aspect of feminism. In order for characters to be feminist, they must seek equality with men on the grounds of society, economy, and politics. Shakespeare's characters worked only to exemplify the patriarchal traditional values of marriage, family, and chastity. The male characters of Shakespeare, like Iago, are more likely to be truly evil yet accepted by society. Petruchio, a slovenly drunk, is far less grating to an audience than Kate, whose sharp tongue and violent outbursts earn her the title of "shrew". Rosalind's sexual empowerment, though unique among her contemporaries, is more a reflection of male desire than feminist assertion. The three Shakespearean characters all exist to serve in a patriarchy; none of the plays revolve around them exclusively. As stipulated by several critics, Desdemona exists only to drive Othello insane, completing his tragedy. Kate exists solely as a challenge to be overcome in order for Lucentio to wed Bianca; she is the most understated pawn in any Shakespearean work. Rosalind, though defiant of her father in her choice of Orlando, exists solely to further her relation with him, and though indicative of feminist empowerment, her actions lead to her marriage and subsequently neutralize the power of her sexuality. Romeo and Juliet is one of the first Shakespeare plays where the female lead gets equal billing to the dude. She is equally important to the story, too. Romeo is a touchy-feely guy who likes sighing poetically and talking about the moon. Juliet gets stereotyped as a silly romantic teen as well, but if you look at the text, she is really the more grounded, intellectual one. She speaks over him, she shuts down his mushy moon metaphors, and she's the one who gets a lengthy soliloquy about how freaking excited she is to have sex with Romeo for the first time. She's a teenage girl with brains and sexual desire. The play condemns her hateful family and for trying to force marriage on her, but Juliet is never demonized for being a normal human woman. Because there is nothing wrong with being a normal human woman. And then there are the Shakespearean women who dress in drag (so back in the day it would have been a male actor pretending to be a female character pretending to be a male character). Viola, Rosalind, Julia, and Imogen all end up disguising themselves as men. And sure, there are



some classic drag jokes , like Rosalind almost kissing her (male) love interest while still dressed as a man . But this is also a sneaky way for Shakespeare to take a female character and give her all the free range of a man. There are funny women in his plays, like Beatrice from Much Ado About Nothing, who can fling an insult better than anyone. She falls for Benedick because he's the only one who can match her level of shade. There are brave women like Cordelia, who stands up to her father, King Lear, and tells him to stop being a whiny man-baby. There are romantic women like Desdemona, who ignores her father's threats and marries her true love, Othello . There are smart women like Portia from The Merchant of Venice, who disguises herself as a lawyer to get her dumb boyfriend and his friends out of trouble. There are power-hungry women like Lady Macbeth, who orchestrates regicide. And there are tough-as-nails women like Paulina from The Winter's Tale: when her king tells her he'll have her burnt to death, she comes right back with "I care not."Shakespeare writes strong women. And Shakespeare writes weak women. It's not all desperate queens rolling their eyes at men. Shakespeare also wrote Ophelia, a young woman who has been so mistreated and infantilized by the men in her life that she has driven to insanity. He wrote Helena from All is Well That Ends Well, who's an incredibly talented female doctor . And yet, even though she's a medical genius, Helena spends all her time feeling heartbroken about a hot guy who won't go out with her. Shakespeare's women aren't just uniformly strong, they're also human. By the end of his career he was writing women like Volumnia from Coriolanus, who prevents the destruction of Rome, or the powerful Queen Cleopatra.

Five strong female Protagonists :

The female character who speaks the most lines in any Shakespeare play is Rosalind, the spirited heroine of the romantic comedy As You Like It. Rosalind comes in first with 685 lines. Ironically, she speaks many of those lines while playing a man – and Rosalind would have been played by a boy during Shakespeare's time anyway. Here are the top five character descriptions

1. Rosalind, As You Like It

Lines: 685

Rosalind is the daughter of the banished Duke Senior and cousin to Celia. She is also the saucy, cross-dressing girlfriend of Orlando. In the play, Rosalind get exiled from her uncle's court but, instead of being upset about her lousy circumstances, she puts on a brave face and runs away to the Forest of Arden in search of freedom. The girl is not only adventurous, but she's also gutsy.

2. Cleopatra, Antony and Cleopatra

VANDANA UPADHYAY

NUPUR AGROYEE

5 Page



Lines: 678

Cleopatra is the Queen of Egypt, lover to Antony, and former lover of both Julius Caesar and Pompey the Elder. She's one of Shakespeare's richest female characters (in terms of both wealth and character development), and can be used as a case study of both a woman in power and a woman in love.

3. Imogen, Cymbeline

Lines: 594

This British princess is just about as perfect as they come: She is wise, beautiful, resourceful, and honest. She stands up for herself to her dad and notices the Queen is a "dissembling courtesy" (read: faker) right away. While she mourns the banishment of her husband and moans about having a "foolish suitor" (Cloten), she doesn't wallow in self-pity.

4. Portia, The Merchant of Venice

Lines: 574

Portia is rich and beautiful, which makes her the most eligible bachelorette in Belmont. The heiress to her dead father's fortune, Portia's wealth makes her a meal ticket in the eyes of Bassanio, who sees Portia as the answer to all his financial woes — if he can marry her that is. As Bassanio points out, he's not the only guy who'd like to land the heiress. Not only is every potential suitor out to get his hands on Portia's wealth, but Portia doesn't even get to choose her husband.

5. Juliet, Romeo and Juliet

Lines: 542

Juliet not only does she end up dead, she doesn't get nearly the love that Romeo does. As the beautiful and only daughter of the Capu lets, Juliet is slated to marry Verona's hottest non-Montague bachelor until she takes her fate in to her own hands. This is a girl who knows what she wants, and gets it, even if it means death.

CONCLUSION:

Shakespeare portrays his female protagonists as dominant one like Viola in 'Twelfth Night' finding herself ship wrecked of the beach at Ilyria, and having lost her twin brother in the ship wreck, Viola's first instinct is not to appeal for help as a help less woman but to disguise her self as a man and find a job as a servant in the house hold of the Duke. As a man, she has the freedom to move around with out a chaper one. Her ability to adapt herself

VANDANA UPADHYAY

NUPUR AGROYEE

6 Page



to her circumstances in spite of her female up bringing where she has been protected by men and all decisions about her have been made by men is an indication of her strength. It is not only that adaptation that suggests strength but the ability to manipulate her circumstances for her own desired out come, which is to marry. Lady Macbeth is though a very strong woman. She certainly exercises power over her husband, Macbeth, in the first half of the play, as she encourages him to murder Duncan. She uses her sexuality, she taunts him and mocks his lack of courage. She appeals to his sense of obligation towards her. She comes in more strongly as he waver and finally he goes a head with it. She seems like a strong woman but psychologically, she is not strong enough to deal with her guilt. Their marriage falls apart and they become estranged. She suffers terrible night mare and finally commits suicide another play 'Much Ado about Nothing' is a remarkable play in which Shakespeare inter twines an ancient mythological story with an ultramodern love story invented by himself. Beatrice is a feisty, independent woman, seen by all those around her as such. She does not have to disguise her self as a man because of her reputation in the family as a feisty woman who shouldn't be tangled with. She is highly intelligent and would be regarded as a feminist in our time. There is no question of her being told who to marry, as she will always do as she pleases, but in any case, she has contempt for men. She particularly likes Benedick, as oldier who visits Messina regularly and stay in her uncle, the governor's, house. Shakespeare has invented the most incredible word play between these two characters, who are both anti-marriage. But they are tricked by their friends in to falling in love. Beatrice draws Benedick in to a plot to get revenge on Claudio, who has betrayed her cousin, Hero, who was about to marry him. The play ends with the couple confirmed in their love and their decision to marry. Beatrice reverts to the traditional female role but in her case, there is a decided edge to it. Thomas Carlyle in his 'On Heroes and Hero-Worship aptly commented:

"If I say therefore, that Shakespeare is the greatest of intellects, I have said all concerning him. But there is more in Shakespeare's intellect than we have yet seen. It is what I call an unconscious intellect; there is more virtue in it than he himself is aware of... . Shakespeare's Art is not Artifice; the noblest worth of it is not there by plan or precontrivance. It grows-up from the deeps of Nature, through this noble sincere soul, who is a voice of Nature."

Shakespeare can not be called a feminist at his time as we define the term today, and he certainly was not a intersectional feminist. The fact that Shakespeare was writing women with complicated inner lives, with fears and sexual desires and wisecracking attitudes was actually pretty radical. In a world that viewed women as a weaker sex Shakespeare wrote some of the strongest female characters in literature. Even if he is not the ideal feminist today he can be called as a Proto feminist. The strength of women in Shakespeare's plays, therefore, is a literary tool used to build up the glory and triumph of men and the patriarchies in which they exist. It is said that the texts are the mirror of authors personality. At that times



women were not writing, in fact they were not educated. Even in the 19th century Bronte sisters were writing with the pseudonym. at that time framing such characters is really admirable.

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