



SHAKESPEARE'S DRAMATIC ART OF DEPICTING WOMEN AS THE SWEETEST DREAMS OF SUPREME WOMANHOOD : AN ANALYSIS

DR. C. RAMYA

Assistant Professor,
Department of English
E.M.G.Yadava College for Women,
Madurai – 625 014. (TN) INDIA

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Shakespeare's dramatic art of depicting women as "the sweetest dreams of supreme womanhood and shows how his women are mostly distorted visions of youthful fancy and are therefore in the form of exaggerated virtues that have no prototype in reality, for it was Shakespeare who discovered the real mystery of woman's nature, caught her in very flesh and blood and viewed her total personality in the light of earthly perfection and worldly limitation

Keywords : *women , dramatic art, sweet dreams, supreme women, mystery, flesh and blood, earthly perfection*

INTRODUCTION

"Shakespeare has no heroes, he has only heroines" said Ruskin. Shakespeare's women are more remarkable than his men. Even Marlowes, who paved the ways for Shakespeare, had no natural conception of womanhood. His women are mostly distorted visions of youthful fancy and are therefore in the form of exaggerated virtues that have no prototype in reality. It was Shakespeare who discovered the real mystery of woman's nature, caught her in very flesh and blood and viewed her total personality in the light of earthly perfection and worldly limitation. Every woman in Shakespeare is so natural that she forms a single character, a distinct individual, unique by herself *"Every single character in Shakespeare is as much an individual as those in life itself"*

Every noble woman depicted by Shakespeare is an exemplar of true love as conceived by Shakespeare and described in his sonnet No. CXVI:

DR. C. RAMYA

1P a g e



*“Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
which alters when it alternation finds,
or bends with the remover to remove:
O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,*

*.....
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom”*

Death alone can put an end to true love. It is only woman that fulfill this ideal love. According to Shakespeare, it is “the women who always love at first sight and once for all. Juliet, Rosalind, Olivia, Viola and Miranda are all governed by this principle” (Jain 11). Truly Speaking, after marriage, the woman meekly submits herself to the guidance of her husband. Even a woman of great intellect, charm and wealth is characterized by great humanity, and she acknowledges the superiority of her husband as a matter of course:

*Portia: Happy in this, she is not yet so old
but he may learn; happier than this,
she is not bred so dull but she can learn:
happiest of all is that her gentle spirit
commits itself to yours to be directed,
As from her lord, her governor, her king.
Myself and what is mine to you and yours
is now connected: but now I was the lord
of this fair mansion, master of your servants,
Queen o'er myself; and even now, but now,
This house, these servants, and this same myself
Are yours, my lord”*

Such is the characteristic self-surrender of an ideal woman of ancient times. There is not the slightest inkling in any of the plays of Shakespeare of woman asserting her rights of equality. The essential modesty and delicacy of womanly nature are always preserved in Shakespeare's plays. He does not represent woman being forward and making love to man. Even in exceptional situations, Shakespeare tries his best to remove all traces of forwardness from his favourite women. Rosalind's device is peculiarly suited to the purpose of making Orlands woo her in her peculiar condition and it also serves her to test the sincerity of her larer's heart. Juliet's apology for her maiden boldness is cited by Hazlitt to show ‘the perfect refinement and delicacy of Shakespeare's conception of the female character. This passage reveals her maiden modesty, her frank innocence and the fervour and constancy of her love:

Juliet: Thou know'st the mask of night is on my face,



*Else would a maiden blush be paint my cheek
For that which thou hast heard me speak to night.
Fair would I dwell on form, fain, fain deny
What I have spoke; but farewell compliment!*

Juliet's unalterable love is proclaimed when she asks the Nurse to enquire about Romeo:

*Juliet: Go, ask his name; if he be married
My grave is like to be my wedding bed".*

She is the exponent of great ideals and is endowed with undaunted courage and strong will to live up to those high ideals. Though she is not the child of nature as Miranda – she is, no doubt, 'the flower of Veronese young ladies'.

In the words of T.K.Dutt, "In Shakespeare's women, there is no conflict of impulses, no mixture of motives, which lead to complexity of character and therefore they are mostly either good or bad. In *King Lear*, the character of Goneril and Regan are very simple. They are wicked to the backbone from the very beginning and with all their evil designs, they are out-spirited by their own jealousy, malice and hypocrisy. Cordelia is also equally simple; She is foolish, innocent and loving. There are many women in the world like her who never think before unlocking their hearts, who can never imagine that truth does not always prevail, who know only to confess, suffer and weep all their life" (P 26).

Shakespeare's imagination is poetic and creative in every sense of the word. It is by virtue of his powerful imagination that he delves deep into human emotions and vividly portrays them. No dramatist can create live characters save by bequeathing the best of himself into his work of art, scattering among them his own traits, his own wit, his comprehensive cogent philosophy, his own rhythm of action and the simplicity and complexity of his own nature. Feminism is nothing but a movement fighting for the cause of women, establishing their status in the society and declaring to the world that woman is no more a weaker sex but a strong potent force standing on a par with man. Feminism, as observed is a modern trend, but one would marvel at its existence even in the times of Shakespeare and Shakespeare himself was a great feminist in the sense he was obsessed with little male ego which is a dominant feature in man, and if not in all men, the majority of men. It is an established notion that only a woman can portray another woman effectively. The same cannot be said of this great Elizabethan dramatist.

Shakespeare's man as class may not be compared with his women for practical genius. Compton Rickett admires Shakespeare's knowledge of the female psychology and the modernity of Shakespeare's women and comments, "Shakespeare's women have the primal qualities of womanhood common to every age and therefore can never be outdated" (39). Shakespeare's heroines are virtuous, witty and ethereal representing all human emotions. Shakespeare is so gentle a being that he finds good even in bad. His portrayed of Emilia and Bianca in *Othello* and Queen Gertrude in *Hamlet* testifies this. He depicts them as loose in morals and finally makes the leader astonish at their



sense of sacrifice and loyalty. Women in Shakespeare's comedies outwit their male counterparts as they are endowed with rare genius, power and magic. They are never aggressive but are always sweet tempered and when occasion demands, they prove more valiant than their men and yet remain submissive loving and honouring them. Miranda is the heroine of *The Tempest*, one of the last plays of Shakespeare. She occupies a unique place among the heroines of Shakespeare and to put it in the words of Mrs. Jameson, she is the "Eve of an Enchanted Paradise". She is worthy of her name which means "a person to be admired". Miranda has a fascinating personality. But it is not her ethereal beauty that captivates Ferdinand who feels that she is a perfection of womanhood. He does admire her beauty and praises.

*"Admired Miranda !
Indeed the top of admiration ! Worth
What's dearest to the world"* (Act-III, Sc-1, Lines 39-41)

Ferdinand hails her as perfect, peerless and the best of every creature. Viola is an epitome of all feminine qualities such as tenderness, modesty and shrinking delicacy of feeling. She does dominate the whole action of the play "Twelfth Night" and as Hazlitt rightly points out, "She is both the hero and heroine of the play. She is filled with a sweet consciousness of her feminine nature". Rosalind is the heroine of the play *As You Like it* who has captivating looks and Orlando adores her as a wonderful combination of Helen's beauty, Cleopatra's majesty, Atlanta's requisite symmetry and Lucretia's modesty:

*Nature presently distill'd
Helen's cheek, but not her heart,
Cleopatra's majesty, Atlanta's better part,
Sad Lucretia's modesty"* (Act III, Sc-11, Line 127-31)

Rosalind is Shakespeare's ideal woman who has beauty and wit interwoven together making her the cynosure of the play. Portia, a wonderful creation of Shakespeare, shares the excellent qualities of his other women. She is gracious, vivacious, agile and Candid in her speech. An amiable, intelligent and accomplished woman, she is a synonym of perfect womanhood. Bassanio's words to Antonio reveal how virtuous and peerless Lady Portia is

*"And she is fair, and fairer than that word,
of wondrous virtues: sometimes from her eyes.
I did receive fair speechless messages:
Her name is Portia; nothing undervalued
To Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia:"*
(Act-I, Sc-1, Lines 162-66)

A woman with all feminine sensibility, she does indicate Bassanio of her love by her looks though she never voices it out to him. But she is a true daughter abiding by the will of her father. Her womanliness appears at its best in the casket scene. Ophelia is innocent, tender, docile, affectionate and



obedient. Ophelia's love - affair with Hamlet is the source of her tragedy. She falls in love with him and her love is reciprocated. Mrs. Jameson is all pity for Ophelia and comments that she is "too soft, too good and too fair, to be cast among the briars of this working day world and fall and bleed on the thorns of life" (15). The grave diggers scene stands a testimony to how much she is held in high esteem by her brother and lover. Cordelia is another superb creation of William Shakespeare and Shakespeare portrays Cordelia as pure and perspicacious in expression. She is a synonym of Candour lacking the wiles and guiles of her sisters Goneril and Regan. In the words of Laximikant Mohan, "Cordelia is a real woman of the Renaissance; nobody can lord it over her pure soul. She is a stoic, of course; all honest souls are. She cannot cling to her father and chant sweet lies in his ears" (P 149). Everything about Cordelia shows that she has what one calls strength of character and capacity. And this quiet strength is penetrated with an infinite tenderness, "too sacred for words, and almost too deep for tears":

"Thou art a soul in bliss"

(Act-IV, Sc-VII, Line-46).

To conclude, Shakespeare has presented woman in her varied forms. Women in his plays represent different emotions. He attaches too much importance to filial affection as he does to love between man and woman. The behaviour of Shakespeare's woman is nothing but an impulsive response to the need of the moment. We notice it particularly in the character of Lady Macbeth, who acts only on failure, courage of nervousness, cruel temper or motherly tenderness. This makes the character of all women comparatively simpler for purpose of analysis and generalization. All women characters like Gooril, Portia, Regan, Ophelia, Desdemona, Lady Macbeth and Cordelia are the sweetest dreams of supreme womanhood.

WORKS CITED

1. Adams, Quincy Joseph. *A Life of William Shakespeare* New York: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1952.
2. Dutt, T.K. *Shakespeare and His The Winter's Tale* Bareilly: Student Store, 1982.
3. Iyengar, S.K.R.S. *William Shakespeare : His World and His Art* New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1964.
4. Jain, S.A. *Shakespeare's Conception of Ideal Womanhood* Madras: Madras Publishing House, 1948.
5. Jameson, Anna Murthy. *Shakespeare's Heroines* Canada : Broad View Press, 2005.
6. Masefield, John. *William Shakespeare* London: Heinemann, 1954.
7. Mohan, Laximikant. *Shakespeare's Men and Women: A Psychological Interpretation: Tragic Heroes and Heroines* Vol.I. Hyderabad: Sri Saraswati Book Depot, 1960.
8. Nicoll, Allardyce. *Shakespeare* London: Methuen, 1952.