

# SOCIETAL CONTROL AND WOMEN: A STUDY OF SELECT SHAKESPEAREAN PLAYS

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## **Abstract**

*Shakespeare's women characters have influenced generations. But that was not a true representation of women. In fact as the new historicists claim that a writer is influenced by the times in which he lives seems to be true in case of Shakespeare. Not only Shakespeare but most of the Elizabethan period playwrights portrayed women in poor light. The Duchess of Malfi is tortured for selecting her own husband, Hermia and Helena had to run away to another country for disobeying their father in terms of choosing a husband. Similarly there are so many instances that showed woman as a mere object of the society, as a means of pleasure, as an entity that is ought to obey the laws set by men for her.*

*The focus of the study comprises of the social circumstances and the misogynistic actions of the male characters and how these impacted the lives of female characters. This paper also tries to analysis the way Shakespeare tried to portray women as submissive characters however, in comedies he gave liberty to his women and many a times presented them as powerful characters by showing them disguised as male characters. In comedies he presented them as independent and not submissive characters to the patriarchal behavior of men during those times.*

**Key words:** Feminist perspective, Misogyny, Patriarchal, submissive women.

## **INTRODUCTION**

During the Elizabethan period, women were deprived of certain rights. They belonged to their fathers, brothers, husbands and then to their sons. Gender equality of women was nowhere. All that was expected from them was they should be virtuous, devoted and chaste women. They could not own property of their own. The girls were brought up to become good house keepers and child bearers. There was complete absence of freedom. That was the reason Queen Elizabeth didn't marry despite being an ambitious woman. She could not afford to give up her power to a man. To certain extent Shakespeare was that not rigid in portraying women in a compartmentalized manner. It has been rightly said that Shakespeare was ahead of his own times. Ben Jonson already said in 1623, "He was not of an age, but for all time!" and he was true, because till now people read his plays and his dramas are still adapted by film directors.

## **WOMEN IN HAMLET**

There are only two main female characters in *Hamlet* i.e. Ophelia and Gertrude. The character of both these women are presented from the male and patriarchal perspective. Ophelia is a beautiful young daughter of Polonius. She is a sweet and innocent girl, who obeys her father and her brother, Laertes. She loves Hamlet but avoids and abstains herself from Hamlet when forbidden by brother and father. Ophelia absolutely obeys her father and brother even at the cost of her own emotions and feelings. Eventually, Prince Hamlet accuses Ophelia and through her the whole woman kind is accused of faithlessness, treachery and falsehood.

Gertrude, the wife of Hamlet the king and mother of Prince Hamlet is portrayed as a negative stereotype of a woman. French (1982) calls such woman, "as the outlaw aspects of the feminine." These women are considered whores and witches who are associated with darkness and sexuality. When King Hamlet died, she wept like Niobe at the funeral of her husband but within the days she re-married Claudius, the brother of King Hamlet. So, she is characterized as a treacherous and disloyal woman who did not even wait for mourning period of her husband to be over. It is said that she had violated the social and religious laws and sanctions. Her son is shocked to see her hasty decision of remarrying Claudius, he turns against her desires and tries to stab his mother with his words, "frailty thy name is woman". Even he regards his mother as the property of his father, he behaves like a typical male who starts dictating patriarchy. Prince

Hamlet did not accept the re-marriage of Gertrude. He curses his mother, "as the most pernicious woman, a witch," who intrigued the murder of his father with the help of Claudius. He calls her, "smiling villain," and number of titles are given to her. But if a man enters into re-marriage nowhere such titles and labels are given to him. Prince Hamlet condemns his mother strongly. His behavior shows how depicted the women were controlled by their father and brothers before marriage and how after marriage she was controlled by her husband and later the sons imposed restrictions in her life. Prince Hamlet declares her mother's decision as a shameful act. His false claims are the representation of patriarchy.

## PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN KING LEAR

One of the major tragedies of Shakespeare is *King Lear* and there are three women in it, Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. King Lear is not only a monarch of his kingdom but also a father to his daughters. In the opening dialogue between Gloucester and Kent we learn that King Lear had already divided his Kingdom among his three daughters. King Lear asks his daughters to engage in a contest of love test that will decide who shall get what. Goneril and Regan are portrayed as monsters, liars, greedy and selfish. They are mean, morally corrupt and are loyal to no one. When their father tries to hand over the respective territories to his daughters, he asks them to express love for him. The wicked and cunning Goneril declares that she loves her father more than anything else in this wide world including life and eye sight. Her cruelty is shown clearly when Cordelia is banished by their father for expressing no love for her father. Regan also expressed the true fondness and love for her father. Regan too like Goneril is shown as

cruel, wicked, selfish and treacherous. She shuts the door on the face of her old father during a stormy night. Both Goneril and Regan compete with each other and both of them do not have an affectionate attitude towards their father. In fact, both of them want the entire Kingdom individually. Overall, we can say that ambitious women are shown in poor light. If women desire for more property she is termed as treacherous and wicked while if a man is ambitious for such things he is shown in positive light. It is his birth right to expand his territory.

## WOMEN IN TEMPEST

Miranda is one of the main characters in the play *The Tempest*. She is the only one who played on the stage and the other three are Sycorax, Caliban and Miranda's mother are just mentioned. She was just three years old when her father was exiled by Antonio (her uncle). Before Ferdinand she had never seen any other man. Prospero tells Miranda about their origin history of twelve years of her living. Her character is considered just to be a pinnacle of female virtue.

Many of the Shakespeare's plays contain cross-dressing, with either a man dressing as a woman or a woman dressing as a man. About thirty-eight plays of Shakespeare expressed the idea of intelligent and capable women and seemed to recognize that the restrictions of society are not always fair.

## SHAKESPEARE AS A FEMINIST

Many of Shakespeare's plays contain crossdressing, with either a man dressing as a woman or a woman dressing as a man. In all, about one fifth of Shakespeare's thirty-eight known plays contain gender disguises. The effect of this gender confusion was certainly enhanced by the fact that during Elizabethan times, women's roles were played by young male actors. While no one can know why Shakespeare was so intrigued by the idea of cross dressing, there seem to be two general theories: Either Shakespeare enjoyed the comedic element of a man dressing up as a woman or a woman dressing up as a man, or he was secretly a feminist. While the humour of the situation can't be ignored, the fact that many of Shakespeare's female protagonists are strong, intelligent, capable women who go against the grain suggests that he was the 16th century equivalent of a feminist.

William Shakespeare wrote during the Elizabethan Era, otherwise known as the "Golden Age." This time was a brief period of peace in England and because the citizenry wasn't focused on fighting wars, theatre, art and music flourished. Women had specific roles. Girls who were in noble families were highly educated and taught by the older women in their house, yet they were not allowed to enter into professions. Women were expected to be housewives and teach and care for their children. In families, everything was passed down to the sons, and girls were married off to men that their fathers picked. Ironically, the only exception to these rules of succession was the royal crown, which could be passed to a daughter. Because the Queen was a woman, she encouraged fathers to educate their daughters and hoped that all men would strive to educate the women in their lives.

Shakespeare seized the idea of intelligent, capable women and seemed to recognize that societal restrictions were not always fair. He used the device of cross-dressing to show that many women are actually as competent as men. Some examples of female Shakespeare characters who spend much of the play as men are: Viola in 'Twelfth Night', Portia in 'The Merchant of Venice', Julia in 'The Two Gentlemen of Verona' and Rosalind in 'As You Like It'. In each of these plays, the women dressed as men so that they could perform a task that they would not normally be able to do as a woman.

In Twelfth Night, Viola dresses as her twin brother after they lose each other at sea. It was very dangerous for a woman to be on her own, so Viola dresses as her brother to enable her to find work and provide for herself. She continued her deception because she fell in love with Duke Orsino and wanted to stay close to him. Dressing as a boy seems to embolden Viola, and allows both her and the duke to show their true characters as they fall in love. In The Merchant of Venice, Portia dresses as a man so she can travel to Venice and enter the courtroom as a lawyer to save her husband's best friend, Antonio. While this is a courageous move, Portia's assumption of a male identity also transforms her and allows her to take control of her own destiny. She starts out as a woman who is

controlled by her late father's wishes, but by the end of the play, has taken control of her own destiny by testing Bassanio's fidelity to her.

Julia first dresses as Sebastian in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* so she can safely travel by herself to Milan to follow the love of her life, Proteus, who was set to Milan to study. But then instead of revealing her identity when she arrives, she takes a job as the pageboy for her lover Proteus. Similar to Portia, she enjoys the freedom to play a role she never could as a woman, and the measure of control she gains over her life by pretending to be a man. By pretending to be a pageboy, she gets to have a job that she would have been ineligible for as a woman, and thereby has control over the situation of her lover pursuing another woman because of his father.

## CONCLUSION

The study has also found answers to the research questions raised in beginning. The study has found that these texts do present women as lesser and inferior to men. Women don't occupy equal positions with men in society, socially, politically and economically. If they happen to occupy such positions, it implies disaster. The women are portrayed as creatures of passion and irrationality. The women are not capable to handle serious issues and challenges and because of this lack cannot be true leaders. The ample textual evidence has shown that women are presented as immoral and negative stereotypes. The women in these tragedies do not have the genuine freedom and liberty and all major decisions about their lives are taken by men without them being ever consulted. Even though the women in Shakespeare's plays went against the rules of being a woman in the society of his time, is it fair to call him a "feminist" when feminism wasn't even a thing during the span of his life, nor did it come around for hundreds of years later? Should we look at Shakespeare's work with through the lens of modern feminism? In the end, men were still playing the roles, and technically it was a man pulling off a woman being a man, so some critics may conclude that it is not fair to look at William Shakespeare as a true feminist. The problem is that it is nearly impossible for us to look at a play from the perspective of one who was watching the same play in the Elizabethan era. We can try, but we can't completely forget the events of the past 350 years and entirely disregard what we have learned and now know. We look at just about everything through the mind-set of a person who lives in modern times. So, because it is nearly impossible, we are bound to look at his plays with the ideas of underlying racism or feminism or some other major idea that is prevalent in our modern world.

The key word connected to feminism is idea. Feminism is just an idea we have developed. Just because the word itself did not exist during Shakespeare's time doesn't mean there weren't strong women before, or that Shakespeare didn't have a thought that maybe women were worth more than what his society allowed. Perhaps he thought that women were just as strong, capable and intelligent as men were. Gender roles play such a major theme in almost all of Shakespeare's work, it's possible to think that he believed in an idea akin to modern day feminism. Instead of coming out and saying something about a woman's role in society he used gender roles in his plays to show the audience that a woman is capable of conquering a man's role.

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