

# FEMINISM AND MISOGYNY IN SELECTED SHAKESPEAREAN PLAYS

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## Abstract

*This paper is a feminist-based reading of women portrayed in the plays of Sir William Shakespeare. The reading, although borrowed from the feminist perspective, is not fully blown feminist reading of Shakespeare's works. The focus of the study comprises of the social circumstances and the misogynistic actions of the male characters and how these impact on the lives of female characters. This paper also tries to analysis the way Shakespeare tried to portray women as bold, independent and not submissive to the patriarchal behavior of men during those times.*

**Keywords:** Feminist perspective, Misogyny, Patriarchal, submissive women.

## INTRODUCTION

During the Elizabethan periods, women were deprived from certain rights. They belonged to their fathers, brothers, husbands and then their sons. The gender equality of women was silent. There was no place of 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 in their life. That was the reason Queen Elizabeth didn't marry being an ambitious woman she was not willing to give up her power to a man.

It has been rightly said that Shakespeare was ahead of his own time. 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 adaptation in different works and films.

### Women in Hamlet

There are only two 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 for faithlessness, treachery and falsehood.

Gertrude, the wife of Hamlet the king and wife 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 wait for blowing off the pyre of her husband. It is said that she had violated the social and religious laws and sanction. Her son is shocked to see her hasty decision of remarries with Claudius, he turns against her desired and utters his judgement against her mother, "frailty thy name is woman". Even he regards her 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 her 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 her mother strongly depicted that earlier, girl is controlled by her father and brother after marriage by her husband and later a son imposes his restrictions in her life. Prince Hamlet declares her mother's decision as a shameful act. All his false claims are the presentation of patriarchy.

### 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. The tragedy King Lear is not only a monarch and his kingdom but also a father and 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 elfish. They are mean, morally and corrupt and are loyal to no one. When their father trying 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 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 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 wants the entire Kingdom individually. Prince Hamlet utters his judgement against her mother “frailty thy name is woman”.

### **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 the other three are Sycorax, Claribel 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. The gender discrimination that how well she internalized patriarchy. Prospero tells Miranda about their origin history of twelve years of her living. Her character is considered just to be pinnacle of female virtue.

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

### **Women in Antony and Cleopatra**

In Antony and Cleopatra, Cleopatra enjoys a political hegemony. During the whole play she is seen commanding everywhere and invert the natural hierarchy but this inversion is readily transformed into female sexual predatoriness. In the play Cleopatra is presented as a woman of mind very intelligent and bold. Being the widow of Ptolemy’s, she rules over Egypt. When Julius Caesar conquered Egypt she was young and surrender herself completely to him. After giving birth to Caesar’s son, she accompanies him back to Rome and she undermines Roman succession. It is said that Antony and Cleopatra have a tragic hero paralleled by a heroine. Being the monarch of Egypt, we constantly witnessed the personal and political power of Cleopatra. Cleopatra amalgamates all the qualities of beauty, art and leisure which Rome lacks. Roman patriarchy is threatened by her political powers and tries to demolish her empire by the allegations of female, barbaric and out spoken. They don’t negotiate with her or with Egypt on equal terms. This is evident in Rome’s assessment of Egypt and Cleopatra. The irreducible difference between man and woman is the main cause of tragedy in the play. There is female subordination in the play rather the principle of female chastity. Though Cleopatra is independent woman but always threatened by the Roman Empire. His insecurity and fear of invasion, not only as a ruler but also as a woman who is threatened by her lover is evident in her reluctance to move from her territory. Her gender renders her politically unacceptable and her political status problematize her femininity.

“Shakespeare’s Sister”, Virginia Woolf in her essay rightly said that a woman in the Elizabethan era would never be able to read and write, perform or even strive due to inevitable gender bias. She describes the role of men and women in society in comparison to today. In her essay she compares the role of Shakespeare as male during Elizabethan age to his fictional sister Judith’s life shows that men were able to make their own decisions while women were only capable of being mothers and housewives. Woolf pointed that a woman’s lives had to follow a standard that at the age of fifteen or sixteen the girls have to marry whether they liked it or not. On the consent of father girls were betrothed to any boy, they have no liberty on their own decisions. During Shakespeare’s period women were considered inferior to men, they have no permission to pick up a book or learn or how to write. They couldn’t raise their voice.

### **Portrayal of Women in Macbeth**

The play opens with three witches, who are in the middle of their spell. The witches are exaggerated and distorted form of women, turned into monsters, with special supernatural powers. Macbeth contends that they should be women, but for their beards. Later, the witches call themselves as Weird Sisters (the goddesses of destiny). Even Banquo calls them as Weird Women. The witches are portrayed true to their name as evil doers, greedy, vicious, vindictive and inhuman. The fact that they have a definite plan to meet Macbeth, suggests that their spell is against Macbeth, and they have their further designs on Macbeth. With their spell and charms, they establish their control over Macbeth. Banquo suggests the possibility of the victim surrendering his reason as prisoner to such creatures. Macbeth repeats the words earlier spoken by the witches, while commenting on the foul weather, betraying his vulnerability to the influence of the witches. Witches deliver their predictions. The predictions are proved partially true by the messengers of the King, who bring news of Macbeth’s elevation to an additional honor of Thane of Cawdor. This is the time for the birth of evil in Macbeth and he contemplates on the possibilities and implications of the predictions and their partial realization. His own ambitious nature aside, the role of witches (women) as manipulators and temptresses cannot be ignored. This brings us to the main thesis of this study that women characters are portrayed as negative stereotypes (as evil beings). Macbeth breaks the news of these developments to his beloved wife lady Macbeth, who is portrayed as the fourth witch and a monster. Macbeth is ambitious, but her ambition brooks no barriers, moral or temporal. Her speech, leaves no one in doubt that she is the fourth sister to witches. She craves the spirits to fill her with

direst cruelty, from head to toe. She asks the murdering ministers and the invisible spirits of hell to fill her womanly breasts with gall and to strip her of any humanly feelings, remorse and sympathy. She prays to the spirits of hell to give her strength to complete her fell purpose. She declares that King Duncan shall never go back alive from palace. Not only she herself is a hypocrite par excellence, it is lady Macbeth who teaches Macbeth to be serpent but look like a flower. She wants the business of that night (murder of Duncan) to be trusted to her. She chides Macbeth for his reluctance and hesitation. Macbeth on further thought and consideration, reins in his “vaulting ambition” and informs his wife that they will not proceed further in this business (murder of Duncan). He makes it clear that this act is neither good nor wise. But Lady Macbeth abuses him, reprimands him and challenges his manhood. Then like her weird sisters she declares that she can kill her own infant with her own hands by dashing it on to the ground, while it is still sucking upon her breasts. This is how she compels Macbeth to the murder of Duncan. It becomes very clear that women, both natural and supernatural, are portrayed in Macbeth as monsters, irrational creatures and the embodiments of evil. It is obvious that women are presented as negative stereotypes.

### **Women in Romeo and Juliet**

A traditional reading of Romeo and Juliet blames the stars (their fate) and the enmity between the Capulet's and the Montague's for the tragedy. This is what the prologue (chorus) says in the start of the play. But a Feminist reading holds deeply entrenched patriarchy and patriarchal values responsible for the tragic ending of Romeo and Juliet. There are four female characters in this play. The role of Lady Montague is not very significant. Lady Capulet is a patriarchal woman. She knows and has accepted her lesser place in the household and the society as defined by patriarchy. She breaks the news of the imminent marriage of Juliet with Lord Paris, though Juliet is hardly fourteen. Patriarchy does not see the role of women outside the institution of marriage; therefore, Juliet is good enough to become the wife at fourteen. The decision of marriage is taken by the father of Juliet, Lord Capulet. Capulet, in the beginning, does accept and apparently give the freedom of choice to her daughter, Juliet, but when the time comes, he proves himself the most tyrant father and a very relentless patriarch. Juliet herself defines her status under the strict control of her father as bondage. Marriage for women is regarded as their ultimate destiny and an act of utmost honor. Lady Capulet, like other women of rank, was herself a mother at this age. Nurse's remark that women grow by men is reflective of the patriarchy and the inherent dependence of women upon men for everything. Juliet is expected to approve the choice of her father and seek happiness with Lord Paris. But at the ball, she falls in love with Romeo, the son of the family enemy. She promises to become the wife of Romeo and follow him as her lord through the world. She also declares him to be her god of idolatry. This throws light on the place of women, portrayed by Shakespeare in this play, as lesser creatures. Since, she is required to accept the decree of her father on the question of marriage; she dare not raise this issue with anyone, including her mother. Here in resides the only cause of this tragedy. Had she been a free human being, capable of independent decisions, she would have told her parents of her love for Romeo and her wish to marry him. The question of her secret and over-hasty marriage with Romeo, and the subsequent disaster would not have arisen. This shows the lesser position of women as portrayed by Shakespeare in this play.

After the murders of Tybalt and Mercutio, Capulet, the father of Juliet, decides the date of the marriage of Juliet with Paris, without taking Juliet in confidence. Juliet, being already married to Romeo, naturally is not in the position to oblige. She tries to seek the help of her mother. Lady Capulet, because of her own lesser position vise- a- vise her husband, dare not intervene in the territory of her husband. In the male-dominant world of this play, it is the prerogative of the husband/father to impose decisions. The reluctance to obey, earns Juliet the titles of headstrong, fool, mistress minion, baggage, a curse, disobedient wretch, a wretched puling fool, a whining Mamet. She is further threatened to be thrown out of the house on to streets to beg, starve and die in misery. Juliet kneels to her father for delay in marriage, but all she gets is the final decree that she must to the church on coming Thursday, whether alive or dead. Marrying Paris, while her husband Romeo is still alive, is impossibility. She, naturally, is prepared to put an end to her life or any such desperate act to avoid marriage with Paris. But she cannot tell her father that she is already married, she knows the consequences too well.

It is in these circumstances, that she approaches the priest for that very desperate remedy, which leads to the tragedy. Apparently, confident and fortified by the stratagem of the priest, she informs her father that she is ready for marriage with Paris. Now the same wayward and head strong daughter is reclaimed in the eyes of her father. The thorough analysis has amply shown the place of women as portrayed in Romeo and Juliet. Even the nurse is portrayed as greedy, fickle and foolish person.

### **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 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 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 women 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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