



Patriarchal Arrangement in Shakespeare's Hamlet, King Lear, and Macbeth: A Reconnaissance from a Feministic Perspective

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Abstract

Literature is full of ideologies, which at times is apparent and sometimes concealed. Shakespeare's tragedies provides a platform to all the theories and principles and are seen as the hauler of various issues like love, abhorrence, envy, battles, hamartia, and catharsis. Women are often seen as feeble and languid creatures in various literary texts but Shakespearean women are not only strong but also exceedingly influential to control the patriarchal state. Women in his tragedies range from the acquitted to the intricate and deceitful, to fit in the needs of the text and of society. Shakespeare's tragedies there is no dearth of women with positive attributes of humanity and chivalry and some of them are endowed with the qualities at par with men.

As a feminist critic and writer, Simone de Beauvoir reflected that the character of a woman is shaped by an imposed identity, which a society frames for her. In a way, her original self gets ignored by a foisted identity, which is produced by patriarchal social standard. The present paper will try to investigate the portrayal of

Renaissance women in Shakespeare's tragedies in the luminous of feminism. Each of his works presents the character of woman in different historical contexts.

Keywords: Tragedy, Women Characters, Feminism, and Renaissance.

The tragedies of Shakespeare have attracted a host of critics from various generations. Customarily, Shakespeare's plays have been appreciated for the portrayal of amusing and prudent female characters through several centuries. During late twentieth century critics encouraged by the feminist movements began an investigation of gender role in the plays of Shakespeare. Simone de Beauvoir points out:

But we shall be able to understand how the hierarchy of the sexes was established by reviewing the data of prehistoric research...I have already stated that when two human categories are together, each aspires to impose its sovereignty upon the other. If both are able to resist this imposition, there is created between them a reciprocal relation, sometimes in enmity, sometimes in amity, always in a state of tension. (p.69).



Hamlet has only two female characters and both these characters have been presented from the patriarchal point of view. Hamlet's beloved, Ophelia is a representation of a good daughter of her father and a good sister of her brother. She is dedicated to her father and brother without even caring for her own feelings. A man is allowed to indulge in affairs outside the institution of marriage whereas Ophelia will damage her honour and dignity from any such indulgence. There is no doubt that Ophelia's brother; Laertes holds a superior position in the family. Ophelia's father compares her to a woodcock. Threatened by father and brother she hides her love for prince Hamlet and avoids him. Later on, prince Hamlet alleges Ophelia of infidelity and duplicity. On the other hand, king Hamlet's wife Gertrude is seen as a negative side of a woman. She becomes a symbol of disloyalty and sexuality and exactly this happens when within days of her husband's death she remarries Claudius, the brother of king Hamlet. Shocked at the behaviour of his mother prince Hamlet gives a statement against his mother saying that, 'Frailty thy name is woman' (I.ii.6). He behaves like a stereotype male by remarking that his mother is the property of his father and calls her most malevolent woman. Prince Hamlet along with society rejects Gertrude's right to remarry. Earlier, her father and

brother controlled Ophelia and later Gertrude is subjected to her son's abhorrence. Therefore, Ophelia's father, brother and prince Hamlet becomes the strong symbols of patriarchy.

King Lear is another major tragedy from Shakespeare's pen. King Lear has three daughters Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. Cordelia is portrayed as an obedient and virtuous daughter. Her lack of worldly knowledge affects her fortunes. She is commanded to leave the palace of her old father and without any mark of protest she obeys the order. She later comes back to England to save her father from her cruel sisters. Goneril and Regan are seen as wicked and unkind women. They lack ethics and are not loyal to anyone. The play embarks with the old king Lear giving away his kingdom and authority to his daughters. He asks them to express their love for their father prior to giving them their share of territory and rule. Both Goneril and Regan declare their true love for their father but do not empathize with Cordelia when she was banished by their father for not showing love to the old king like her shrewd sisters. Instead they curse her for an unkind treatment from her husband. Goneril and Regan further decide to forge a war against their father. Goneril is seen as critical of her father's indiscipline

amongst his knights who are always engaged in mutual bickering all the time. Even Regan calls her father as, 'infirm and ignorant of his own good self, capable of many unpredictable acts' (I.ii.300). Goneril is even disloyal to her husband Albany, and enters into an illicit relationship with Edmund, the bastard son of Gloucester. On discovering her affair with Edmund, Albany calls her a beast, most degenerate, worse than head-lugged bear and speaks of her as, 'Proper deformity shows not in the fiend. So horrid as in woman' (IV.ii.60).

Regan is equally treacherous and discourteous towards her father like her elder sister. She encourages her husband Cornwall in insulting Kent, the messenger of the king. She makes fun of her old father when he begs her for food and shelter and shuts up the door on him during a stormy night without feeling bad. She urges her husband to pluck both the eyes of Gloucester, their host and throws him out of the palace. Regan like Goneril is also in love with Edmund and plans to marry him. However, in the end out of jealousy, Goneril poisons Regan and she herself commits suicide. On their death, Albany says, 'This judgment of the heavens, that makes us tremble, touches us not with pity' (V.ii.230). Cordelia, in this play becomes a woman of kindness and redemption. She has no wish to

attain power, 'A sight most pitiful in the meanest wretch,/ Past speaking of in a king. Thou hast one daughter who redeems nature from the general curse which twain have brought her to' (IV.vi.200-203). The identity imposed on her by patriarchal society ignored her original self, which is clearly represented in king Lear's remarks:

I might have saved her, now she's gone forever.

Cordelia, Cordelia, stay a little. Ha?

What is't thou sayst? Her voice was ever soft,

Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman. (V.iii.268-271)

Macbeth also underlines some of the qualities that Shakespeare's women possess to a large extent. The play unlocks with three witches, which are disfigured form of women, turned into monsters. Macbeth thinks that they are women, 'but for their beards' (I.ii.45). Their portrayal is true to their nature as evildoers, malicious and inhuman. They establish a control over Macbeth through their spell and charms. They further give their predictions regarding Macbeth and Banquo. Their predictions come partially true by the messenger of king Duncan, who brings the news of Macbeth's promotion to an additional honour of Thane of Cawdor. The witches are seen as manipulators and

temptresses, which once again highlight the negative side of these women characters.

Macbeth shares these developments with his wife lady Macbeth, who is no less than a witch. Macbeth is ambitious but lady Macbeth's ambition is perilous. In order to firm her resolve of murdering the king, she strengthens herself by calling upon the spirits:

Come you Spirits

That tend on moral thoughts, unsex me here,

And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full of direst cruelty!

Make thick my blood, Stop up th'access and passage to remorse;

That no compunctious visiting of nature

Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between

Th'effect and it! Come to my woman's breast,

And take my milk for gall, you murth'ring ministers. (I.v.41-48)

She even teaches Macbeth to be serpent but look like a flower. She rebukes Macbeth for his reluctance and uncertainty and even challenges his manhood. She shows her dark side by saying that if circumstances demand she can kill her own infant with her own hands by dashing it on the ground, while it is still sucking milk from her breasts. This is

how she coerces Macbeth to the murder of king Duncan. It is hence clear that women are shown in *Macbeth* as the embodiment of evil.

The present study therefore reinforces the ideology of patriarchy and presents women as inferior to men in power and position. Though they can motivate their men but are not allowed to come in the forefront in the struggle for power. They are mere objects of craving and unreasonableness. They are incapable of handling grave issues and challenges and because of this shortcoming they cannot become leaders. They are simply seen as villain and are presented as lesser beings. Simon de Beauvoir comments that, 'She stands before man not as a subject but as an object paradoxically endured with subjectivity; she takes herself simultaneously as self and as other, a contradiction that entails baffling consequences' (799).

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