



Women Portrayal And Development In Shakespearean Dramas

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare, the greatest ever playwright dealt with women in a different way in his plays. This research is based upon extensive literature review of various articles and works by Shakespeare. We also used Random Sampling Method to review famous female characters of Shakespeare like Lady Macbeth, Cordelia and Desdemona. Our main objective had been to find out Shakespeare's outlook about the Women in Elizabethan society that had been a controversial issue for the literature experts most of whom found out Shakespeare to be a misogynist. After our study, literary survey and long research we could understand that Shakespeare created his female characters obviously to show their important role in the society; in an age when no women were found inspired even to participate in the stage play. Likewise, in most cases, Shakespeare showed that the role of women had been very much vital in the change of fortune of the protagonists in most of his plays; be it Othello, King Lear or Hamlet. The sincerity to show the role of women in the society, important role-play in the play-all prove Shakespeare to be rather a feminist than a misogynist and these unparalleled efforts by Shakespeare in an age like 16th Century is unique and superb. The more we watch and analyze Shakespeare's plays, the more we become convinced that he showed relentless efforts to establish the right of women in the society and develop women as the main force.

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1. INTRODUCTION

We had from the very beginning a strong urge to write about Shakespeare's remarkable women characters. We took the important women characters of Shakespeare as samples to judge his placement of women in his dramas and in the same way we tried to find out how much the playwright was careful about establishing development and power of women in the Elizabethan society. Shakespearean Dramas are an important part of English Literature from the time immemorial. In these dramas, the representation of women by Shakespeare is unique and his development thinking for women made us sometimes puzzled and we started thinking that he had been a misogynist as we studied the character of Gertrude in 'Hamlet'. Shakespeare's orthodox style of Women presentation not only made us think newly about women's role in his society but also, we could understand that his heroines are vital characters in his

society who brought about a change in fortune of the protagonist from time to time. Commenting upon Shakespeare's thoughts and beliefs upon women is a tough job but if we analyze these characters and their role we will certainly be able to understand that Shakespeare's notion about women is positive and he placed those characters in a way so that the audience can easily realize their importance in the society apart from their pivotal role-playing in dramas. Before we analyze the characters of Lady Macbeth, Desdemona and Cordelia, it is important that we discuss about the role of women in the Elizabethan society.

2. THE STATUS OF WOMEN

The life of women in the Elizabethan era in England during Medieval times reflected the condition of most of the other European countries back then: religion, social class and gender decided the fate of the residents. King

Lear, Othello and Macbeth were written under the Elizabethan era, a period dominated by patriarchal rules and regulations. It was a society with numerous restrictions, especially for women. Schools were not open for girls, just for boys. Girls in wealthy families were often tutored at home. The critic, Axelrod observes that "theoretical knowledge was considered as important as rhetorical ability; eloquent people were seen as educated." Most Elizabethan women were subservient and destined to blind obedience. According to the same source: "except among the lofty nobility, most people arrange their children's marriages with children of neighbours and friends. The lower on the social scale you are, the more likely you are to have a choice in the matter" (Fox-Davies, Stone and Williams, Web). Consequently, royal daughters had no saying in matters of marriage. We have reason to believe that the same rules applied to Cordelia, who was not free to choose a spouse but had to obey her father as was custom and practice.

3. LADY MACBETH

Lady Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's most famous and frightening female characters. Throughout the play, she is more decisive, ambitious and ruthless than Macbeth which was considered to be unconventional during the time when the play was written. The Jacobean age was predominantly a patriarchal society. However, Shakespeare highlighted the idea of role reversal through the characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth where the fate of the play is unfolded through the desires of Lady Macbeth. This idea of gender and power is vital to exploring the character of Lady Macbeth – Macbeth implies that she is a masculine soul incorporated in a female body, which creates a bridge between violence and ambition with masculinity. However, it could be considered that the technique that Shakespeare used to show Lady Macbeth's dominance was not through physical violence, rather through manipulation. This shows that women can be cruel and ambitious as men; however, they cannot pursue these desires due to the social constraints.

We come across the idea of feminism by Elaine Showalter, who in her theory stated through the concept of *Feminist* stated that women have the ability to fight back or protest against the existing norms in the societies which have been established by men. In Macbeth, it is Lady Macbeth who dominates the decisions and willpower of her husband by going against her husband's fear. Furthermore, we can also find elements of a Machiavellian villain in her character. To the outside world, a Machiavellian villain would be a nice person. He/she would give to charity, be pious, intelligent, polite, and be a generally nice guy. Internally, however, he/she would be scheming, plotting to get what that person wants by any means necessary, which is exactly what she did in order to achieve more power for her husband and also for herself. Lady Macbeth convinced her husband

with great effectiveness- every time Macbeth tried to emphasize on his humane qualities and hesitate in committing the murder; she challenged his manhood until Macbeth decided to commit the murder of King Duncan for his throne in order to prove himself. She was completely aware of her ability to dominate her husband which can be seen in the following lines from Act I Scene V:

"Hie thee hither,

That I may pour my spirits in thine ear;

And chastise with the valour of my tongue

All that impedes thee from the golden round."

4. CORDELIA

Cordelia, the youngest daughter of King Lear, is portrayed as a near to flawless figure, close to that of Virgin Mary. She is the only daughter of the King who genuinely loves her father, but her refusal to flatter him leads to the tragedy that unfolds and leads to her abolishment from his kingdom. Many critics might perceive Cordelia to be slightly stubborn for refusing to take part in her father's love test; she is an embodiment of a daughter who believes that a child's love should be felt and understood by their father, not through words of flattery like his other two elder sisters did.

She was a victim of the Patriarchal society where the women were expected to live according to the desires of the male characters in their family. The moment her father disliked her response towards expressing her love towards him and talks in grandly manner about him, she was humiliated and criticized by her father for her failure to do so. Shakespeare here is taking a closer look at the materialistic society that was slowly blooming as Britain was progressing as a country in terms of both, power and science. King Lear failed to see past the stubborn attitude of her daughter. Rather he believed in the words of his other two daughters, Goneril and Regan, whereas they only had evil intentions of usurping the entire kingdom of their father.

However, there are other critics who think that Cordelia indeed is a more complicated character than she appears to the readers. The love test, orchestrated by her father, is a thorn in Cordelia's eye and naturally she wants to revenge herself, but convention and patriarchy are holding her back. She can possibly understand that the king will be affected by her taciturnity during the love test, but nothing can induce her to speak, her lips remain shut. Sometimes she is simply silent in her frustration, but on other occasions, she shows courage. It is worth noting that she neither shows fear nor reticence in the scene where she asks the king why she has been unfairly treated:

"Why have my sisters' husbands, if they say
They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty.

Sure I shall never marry like my sisters, To love my father all." (1.1 99-104)

This scene makes the reader wonder about where does she suddenly find all the words? Are they uttered by someone who a moment ago was almost speechless? These conflicting attitudes, wordiness versus reticence, show all too clearly how inscrutable she is. Already when the play begins we understand that Cordelia is complicated, and as observed by Rosenberg "Cordelia is the first to reveal her private self, her inner conflicts, and to expose publicly, much more than she is allowed to be consciously aware of, the underside of her nature." Had she decided to flatter her father when she had the scope to do so, she could have saved, both herself and her father from the impending troubles, which she despite being aware of the outcome, decided to stay silent.

In the play, Cordelia is closer to her father's heart than the other children, and she in turn knows him better than her sisters do. There is a bond between these two, the aged monarch and the daughter. The king expects warmth and affection from his darling daughter. Hamilton claims that "...it is the youngest whom the father 'love[s] the most' [I.i.290]. Such doting, Shakespeare implies, does not necessarily spoil the child." Taking this point into consideration, the expectation that King Lear had from his most beloved daughter during the love test could be understood.

5. DEDEMONA

Othello is taken for granted that it is Shakespeare's incredibly tragic drama and so are its characters including the heroine Desdemona and her lover Othello, 'The Moor'. Out of all the deaths that take place in Othello, Desdemona's one is the most tragic and undeserved. She is a loyal and mesmerizing beauty who remains honest to her husband till she was wrongly killed at the hands of her beloved. Othello falls in love with her at the first sight. She is a kind hearted woman from a noble family who lacks the penetrating wit of Portia, her foil character in the drama. Compared to Portia, Desdemona seems meek, submissive and passive. Her innocence is her biggest weakness that leads her to death. At the core of the drama are the love and personal relationships and their inbuilt vulnerabilities. Suspicion leads to loss of trust and relationships are spoilt to the extent that both the lovers are dead by the end of the drama. From the outset of the drama it's evident that Desdemona is just as beautiful as she is innocent.

Throughout the drama Desdemona loves Othello and remains loyal to him. However, her fate is the poorest of all the Shakespeare's heroines because when it is time to prove her loyalty she looks at a loss. She does not get loyalty in exchange for her love. Instead, she has to face death at the hands of her lover. She did nothing to deserve this fate but then she has kept losing control not long after she and Othello get married.

Things go on happily initially for between Othello and Desdemona. Their relationship is spoiled once Iago decides to doom their relationship for his own gain and executes his evil plan. Othello's trust in Desdemona's fidelity is weakened after Iago cleverly fills his mind with suspicion about her. Othello does love Desdemona deeply, but he cannot overcome his suspicion. They both fall victim to Iago's Iago streak. Iago's moves worked and the brave General could not survive the misery of being called a cuckold. Desdemona herself is not so clever either. She has escaped against her father's will and he would no more like to take her back. Her husband does not trust her like he did when they had newly fallen in love.

She is clueless why she has lost Othello's love and become an object of his suspicion. Othello is brave but not clever enough to understand Iago's evil intentions. Desdemona dreams of leading a romantic and peaceful life with her brave General. However, fate has decided otherwise and future holds things in stock that are quite unfortunate for the young couple. Iago tries his best to make a controversy out of their love story but fails because of Othello's influence as a General. Othello and Desdemona start living a peaceful life after the General is posted in Cyprus, but Iago is still behind them trying to make their life hell for he seeks revenge from Othello.

In act 3, scene 4 she is talking to Emilia about her lost handkerchief and how people are poisoning Othello's mind behind her.

"Believe me, I had rather have lost my purse
Full of crusadoes. And, but my noble Moor
Is true of mind and made of no such baseness
As jealous creatures are, it were enough
To put him to ill thinking." (Act 3 scene 4)

Desdemona has some idea about things going wrong between her and her husband but cannot do anything because she is rendered helpless by her innocence and complete devotion to her love. Basically, Iago has made her lose control of her affairs turning her into a poor scapegoat. First, she lost her father when she left with the Moor, then Iago took away her loving husband without whose love and trust she has even lost herself. Her marriage with Othello had brought her pride and position and she would have been leading a happy life, had not it been for the evil machinations of Iago. She is beautiful and demonstrates all the characteristics of a lady from a noble family.

Othello cannot initially believe what he is told about Desdemona because he cannot doubt his own senses that he may have been wrong at judging her, but then his color and his inferiority complex affect his judgment. Iago brilliantly orchestrates the entire drama

killing the two in the process. Neither is Emilia able to expose the truth nor Othello can find it out till the end. Desdemona is virtuous and should not have met the tragic end she did. Yet, it is her innocence that despite trying her best she cannot prove her fidelity before Othello. Rest of the credit goes to Iago who brilliantly manipulates the entire drama using every character skillfully. Desdemona is not foolish but still she is ignorant. Not knowing what goes on behind her back she just believes in her love and hopes things to get fine again.

The audience's sympathy still remains with Desdemona for her innocence. She is adored by her lover, her father and the people she comes across. She loses control of her love and her life. This also makes her fail to convince Othello. Othello has to bear the pain of being cuckolded (even if that is not true). At last Iago's plan has worked; however, he is caught at the end and has to die. Desdemona is pure and gentle but all her goodness makes her a vulnerable target for Iago who has cruelly led the innocent beauty and her marital relationship to their death, just for the sake of revenge.

All throughout until his own death, Iago cunningly makes the General believe that he is a cuckold and his wife whom he loves with all his heart has disgraced him, forcing him to kill his own love. Desdemona is made to pay for being the General's wife and to face the things she never wanted or deserved. So, if any character has died the most undeserved death in the drama apart from Emilia (Iago's wife), then it is Desdemona. If anyone is really responsible for her death, it is Iago. Othello is also to be blamed to some extent but Desdemona has met a death that she had neither chosen nor done anything to deserve. She is just made to pay for having fallen in love with Othello.

6. CONCLUSION

Having analyzed the characters of these women, who are considered to be the most powerful and significant women characters of Shakespeare, we can say that these women, in spite of women being treated as the lesser sex in the Elizabethan period, played a vital role in the unfolding of these dramas. Without their roles, the dramas would not have been complete, let that be for their evil nature or the good ones. Shakespeare had tried to portray women in such a manner that even if we consider that women are of less importance in the societies, but they are still of great importance. We cannot neglect their presence at any cost.

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