

MAIDENS OF MAN-MADE DESTINY

FEMINIST READING OF SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET, MACBETH AND OTHELLO

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Abstract: William Shakespeare holds, by general acclamation the foremost place in the world's Literature, and his overwhelming greatness renders it difficult to criticize or even praise him. Play after play runs from his pen, mighty dramas of human life and character following one another so rapidly that good work seems impossible; yet they stand the test of time and their poetry is still unrivalled in any language. His plays have stimulated thoughts about abstract issues such as heroisms, government and war; friendship and love; sexuality and gender; personal and public responsibility. There are however, obstacles to an easy appreciation of Shakespeare which we cannot ignore. The fact that Shakespeare's plays have been read and performed, studied and written about for centuries means that it is not always easy to come to them freshly. Traditions of performance and critical attitude that have accrued around them need to be reassessed. It is increasingly been realised that Shakespeare's plays shift in meaning according to the mental attitudes that people bring to them. His works interact with the preoccupations of those who experience them, and can be appropriated for many different reasons. Shakespeare's works have been judged in according to many perspectives for example the feminist view, the psychoanalytic view, the humanist interpretation, the materialist criticism and so on. Here the study is based upon the exhaustive analysis of three of Shakespeare's major plays namely Hamlet, Macbeth and Othello. The main centre of focus is his treatment of women characters in these three plays. The present research paper focuses on the breaking of silence and celebration of hitherto hidden feminine sensibilities, comprehending their complexities, inhibitions and secret desires.

Keywords: Feminism, Shakespeare, Complexities, Patriarchy, femininity, Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello

1. INTRODUCTION:

The works of Shakespeare, usually praised as being the epitome of human values and experiences and also a contributor of hundreds of words into English language, finds the women characters not treated with much importance and respect. This statement does not attribute itself to the comedies, but only tragedies. The comedies are largely the stories of heroines than heroes. The heroines are superbly beautiful, intelligent, witty and sparkling young ladies. But in the tragedies Shakespeare seems to have a very limited vision when it comes to judging a woman's mind. His is a typical man's view i.e. man at the centre and women at the periphery. Here in his tragedies, he has made a woman a subordinate of man. It is not just in the roles attributed to the woman characters, in the Dramas; it's the way Shakespeare has made the woman's personality merge into the stronger colours of man's personality.

All the plays are full of puzzling occurrences. For example, in Hamlet probably one of the most famous tragedies, prince hamlet is ordered by the ghost of his father to take revenge on the uncle who has murdered him. But for much of the play the prince delays his revenge on the uncle who has murdered his father and turns his anger against his mother Gertrude, even though the ghost has commanded him to leave her alone. Why does Hamlet do this? There is no answer to this question. But in such type of situations feminist criticism helps in creating a mode of analysis that helps make sense of dilemmas such as these in which gender issues seems to lie at the heart of a play's mystery.(Wells 434).

Feminist Criticism takes many forms, and a brief history of its developments with feminist studies in the few decades will underscore this diversity. In the 1970s and early 1980's, the first goal was to change the questions one could ask of Shakespeare's plays and to put issues such as gender and sexuality on the critical agenda. Early feminists analysed, in particular, the portrayal of women characters in each genre, focusing on the patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes that shaped these representations.

2. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS:

2.1 Women in Hamlet:

Hamlet, both the play and the prince have long held a privileged place in the popular and scholarly imagination. Harold Jenkins (1982) in his commentary on Hamlet focuses on the dramatic problems and ambiguities of the play. The play vividly charts the course of real and feigned madness, from overwhelming grief to seething rage and explores themes of treachery, revenge, incest and moral corruption. The two female characters in the drama are presented from a thoroughly male perspective. Ophelia is portrayed as being exquisitely simple, beautiful and ironically pitiful too. Presented as a child of nature in simplicity and innocence, without guile, without suspicion and therefore without reserve which often stimulates a modesty, we often find her standing bewildered as she

undergoes a series of heartbreaking experiences. In this drama we find the young prince being fixated with the fact that his mother quickly remarried after the death of her husband. Worse yet, she married Hamlet's uncle, the man, the ghost of old Hamlet identifies as his murderer. In the imagination of the prince, a wife should be faithful to the memory of her dead husband. If not, she becomes an example of unrestrained lust, a whore and a not so devoted wife. So powerful is Hamlet's observation with his mother's sexuality and her infidelity that he is unable to trust other women. In consequence, Hamlet loses faith in Ophelia, thereby treating her as a whore and as being dishonest to him.

The feminist critics have defended both Gertrude and Ophelia, though middle aged Gertrude has fewer partisans among readers of the last two centuries. Defences of Gertrude tend to take two different approaches. In an essay published in 1980, Rebecca Smith's analysis of Gertrude depicts her positive women. Gertrude is maintained as a woman who has the best interests of her son and the kingdom at heart. Carolyn Heilburn's 1957 essay, 'Hamlet's mother', defends Gertrude arguing the drama never hints that she knew of Claudius poisoning King Hamlet. This analysis has been championed by many feminist critics. Gertrude for centuries has been completely misinterpreted, accepting at face value Hamlet's view of her instead of following the actual text of the play. By this account, no clear evidence suggests that Gertrude is an adulteress: she is merely adapting to the circumstances of her husband's death for the good of the kingdom. Although not the sexual monster as perceived by Hamlet, Gertrude does fit another traditional stereotype: the nurturing, submissive wife and mother who is destroyed by her divided loyalties to her husband and son.

Ophelia is permanently under the scrutiny of her father and brother. A green girl, baby, these words are often used by Polonius to describe his daughter. There is no doubt about the affection Polonius has for her yet to a certain extent we find him stifling her dreams and aspirations. And Ophelia in obedience repels all of Hamlet's letters and denies any access to him. At the mouse trap scene, Hamlet is seen making sexually suggestive remarks and exclaiming that woman's love is brief. Through these lines Shakespeare clearly voices out the fact that women are clearly not trustworthy and all they have to offer is their body to satiate the lust of man. Towards the end, all we get to hear of Ophelia is from Queen Gertrude that she has fallen into a brook where she drowned. Be it a suicide or a tragic death caused by her insanity, the fact remains that a woman's weakness is displayed. She is shown to be possessing no iron will power or courage or strength of mind. The hero's tragedy makes her suffer and darkens her entire life, and there is no mention of her taking any step to prevent disaster or help Hamlet: her role is that of a passive observer who vanishes into oblivion even before the drama ends.

2.2 Women in *Macbeth*:

Macbeth, the best known play of Shakespeare presents two main female characters, Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff. Both are wives of noble, respected kings, yet they are portrayed in two entirely altered poles. On one side there is Lady Macbeth who has openly deprived herself of all feminine instincts and is a cruel vicious lady and on the other side Lady Macduff stands bewildered, thinking unbelievably accepting the fact that her husband has abandoned her to a gruesome fate. The two contrasting pictures of these two women shed the light on Shakespeare's treatment of women. Either the woman is too naive and feeble to not be able to save herself from death or she is too wicked and ambitious that she puts herself and her husband's life in jeopardy.

Lady Macduff is one woman whom we can shower all our pity and sympathy on. Too horrified to comprehend the fact that she is at the mercy of some murderers, she goes into a self-justification mode. She exclaims of doing no harm to anyone and when she has done only good, why does she have to go through this trauma. She feels it futile to even put up a womanly self-defence. If Shakespeare had portrayed her as a noble urging her husband to leave and then meeting her fate with dignity, one could never question the treatment of woman by the great author in his drama. But this instance definitely invites our reproach.

Shifting over to Lady Macbeth, the co-protagonist of the drama and certainly the most 'powerful' woman character in literature, she claims the major share of the drama as being the final and most dangerous of the witches that has ever entered Macbeth's life. Here the quality of the strong is in itself a mockery. Her strength comes from a complete reversal of anything humane and good. She is shown as a deeply ambitious woman who lusts for bloodshed. It is thought that Shakespeare used the ruthless, manipulative Lady Macbeth to subvert the traditional Jacobean attitudes toward femininity. In the years since the drama, she has become an archetypal character symbolising a standard template for a wife, who seduces her husband into committing murder in order to fulfil her ambition. Her burning desire to be a queen is the single most feature on which

Shakespeare develops her entire characterisation. Motherhood, the most tenderest of feelings is brought in here by Shakespeare as a metaphor wherein we hear Lady Macbeth voicing out that she would dash out the brains of her child if that could satisfy her desire. The chamber scene wherein we find her going to the room to smear the blood on the guards shows her meticulous attention to detail. However as time advances, her strength diminishes as she fights the torments of her conscience. By the time she is seen again, Lady Macbeth's long suppressed conscience has begun to plague her: she sleepwalks, haunted by visions of spots on her hands which she cannot wash off. This is when Shakespeare kills her off. Just before the climax between Macbeth and Macduff, she commits suicide. It definitely seems that she has been disposed off unceremoniously. She was shown as splendidly starting off, but so much of positiveness, so much of action seems to be too much for the poor female and she bows out before the climax of the drama.

Coleridge discovers that Lady Macbeth is the mock fortitude of a mind deluded by ambition. She shames her husband by a superhuman power of fancy which she cannot support, but sinks in the season of remorse, and dies in suicidal agony. There are many factors that contributed to the degeneration of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's influence was only one amongst them. One must not forget that he was an extremely ambitious man and along with the prophecy of the witches, his character degrades from a noble man to that of a violent individual. Lady Macbeth initially the stronger partner, who had forced him to wrong deeds and had stood by him when he kept threatening to crack, ultimately is seen to break down first, driven to madness and later commits suicide and the preternaturally sensitive man, Macbeth grows brutalised, hardened almost beyond recognition. In conclusion Lady Macbeth's

influence plays a small role compared to the soaring desires Macbeth himself nurtured and hence the criticism imposed on her as being the sole temptress is untrue.

2.3 The place of women in *Othello*:

Othello by far regarded to be Shakespeare's supreme achievement is an unusual tragedy. Considered to be a love story with a tragic end to it, the central theme focuses on the more human and universal one of jealousy and revenge, and therefore its material is more truly of everyday life. Desdemona, the female protagonist of the play is a woman with modesty, tenderness and grace, having in her the predispositions to wonder, to pity, to admire and to love abundantly. Yet her character is that of being continuously distrusted by those who should have trusted and loved her the most. First we find Brabantio, refusing to believe that his daughter is capable of loving Othello and he insists that the latter must have used some sort of witchcraft to trap her. The character of Desdemona represents a woman of the 17th century who surpassed the norms of sexual morality set for Venetian women at that time. When Desdemona decided to marry Othello, it seems as though she was breaking the norms and strictness imposed upon her. By denying her father any right in choosing or granting allowance, her initial actions were bold. She readily moves forward to testify for her love and is shown as being neither afraid of public nor embarrassed to speak her mind. Desdemona strived to play an equal role with the men of Venetian society. Sadly the ultimate price that she had to pay for her liberation was death. The attitude of trying to break free from the patriarchal society was exploited by Shakespeare to turn against her. Her bold behaviour becomes an allowance for sinister interpretation. Iago is seen poisoning Othello's mind that because Desdemona defied her father to marry him, she would turn against him in future. The fact that she abandoned her father, left her home, all for Othello becomes a matter for no consideration. Apparently this act turns into a degrading one in his eyes.

The surprising factor remains as to why did Othello accept Iago's reading of his wife? Why did not Othello wait to remember the fact that Desdemona had rejected all the fashionable men of Venice and fastened her heart on her. Partly the answer lies in the way Iago adopts the voice of worldly common sense, speaking about 'women, as if everyone knows what he says to be true. Reading Desdemona, through his eyes, he turns her unusual attributes of courage, clear sightedness and verbal dexterity into marks of whoredom. And this is cleverly insinuated through the character named Bianca.

Bianca, one of the three females in the play is not a wife, but an unmarried woman in Cyprus who has developed a powerful affection for Cassio. Though she is treated as a courtesan, there is no indication that she is attached to a number of men simultaneously. Nonetheless, despite her unusual qualities, in the play's gender economy, Bianca stands for the non-wife, the sexually unchaste whore.

Feminists have particularly probed on the key symbolic object namely the handkerchief that was cleverly utilised by Iago to deceive Othello. The handkerchief is important not only as a sign of abstract bond, but as a material object in its own right. It is the kind of household object over which a good wife was to exercise control. And when he accuses of losing it, he is actually accusing her of ceasing to be a good wife and so of becoming a sexually and economically improvident whore.

Desdemona is further accused of choosing a man of not her own complexion, portraying her as a creature of excessive will and sexual appetite. The assumption that every outspoken woman is potentially unchaste and the notion that the union of black and white is impure, Desdemona is thoroughly degraded. Here we can conclude that Shakespeare while trying to picturize a woman fighting the domination of her father falls straight into the web of judgements that question this very act of her's. One can maintain the fact that here seems a woman is never free from dominations and subjugations.

Desdemona is clearly the heroine of the play, but some feminists have preferred the earthly pragmatism of the waiting woman to the idealised virtue of the martyred heroine. At many instances she is shown to be terribly naive and simple that she ironically and tragically ends up begging Iago for help. Desdemona is created as a limited character. There is one further point which concerns her gender; she in her distress turns to a man for help and advice. This suggests that she does not expect to understand for herself, but a man will be able to help her. It is tempting to say that Shakespeare makes Desdemona to be portrayed as a helpless, whimpering child who depends on a man's advice just because she is a woman.

3. CONCLUSION:

This paper which analysis the treatment of the female protagonists, without any doubt proves the major proposition that Shakespeare with his male perspective along with the race or era to back him has penned down the conduct and behaviour that the females are expected to perform. Here its safe to say that women have rules and regulations bound tightly around them and they should abide by them. The women here play a secondary role to men. They observe, sympathise and suffer passively, or they nurture; but they never take a stand for themselves

The other revealing feature in all these tragedies is that, Shakespeare kills off every woman prominent enough to have appeared in a tragedy's last scene. Lady Macbeth, Desdemona, Gertrude, Ophelia, all of their deaths are ill prepared and thinly explained. It seems as though Shakespeare was in a hurry to dispose of the heroines and place the heroes alone in the spotlight.

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