

**Exploring the Female Psyche: Portrayal of Shakespeare's Heroines in Hamlet and Othello  
in Patriarchal Contexts**

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**Abstract**

Shakespeare has been unanimously proclaimed as the bard of all ages, timeless and universal. He creates a world of romance, adventure, reconciliation and much more. He lived and wrote in the Elizabethan age, a time when the society was branching out and making itself known throughout the world by colonizing other cultures. Great Britain was reaching new heights of power. Shakespeare is a cultural icon of considerable symbolic significance in the world and his plays are conventionally represented as timeless works of genius which reveal transcendent truths about human condition. In terms of his life and his body of work, Shakespeare is the most written about author in the history of Western civilization. His canons include 38 plays, 154 sonnets and 2 epic narrative poems. His works have been studied analysed and enjoyed as some of the finest masterpieces of English language. He took the art of dramatic verse and honed it to perfection. He created the most vivid characters of the Elizabethan Era than any other era on the stage. His usage of language, both lofty and low, shows a remarkable wit and subtlety. Most importantly, his themes are so universal that they transcend generations, to stir the imaginations of audiences everywhere, till this day. His maturity as a playwright signified a changing trend in Elizabethan theatre at that time. Shakespeare began his writing in the second half of the sixteenth century. Queen Elizabeth and Shakespeare were contemporaries; one in the political sphere and other in the sphere of art. Shakespeare's interaction with the Queen left a deep impact on his artistic flavours as he created powerful women in many of his plays. The representation of women varies throughout different texts. This is the result of the cultural context of the author. Women are however, often depicted as the inferior gender having no social standing, no significance of opinion and in midst of male dominance. Shakespeare seemed to be extremely sensitive in casting his female characters but their images and the roles given to them indirectly suggested the significant impact of patriarchy on their lives. The present paper endeavours to explore the female psyche and the portrayal of women in the plays of Shakespeare with reference to Hamlet and Othello in the patriarchal context. While exploring the female characters, the social context i.e. Elizabethan society and the views of feminist critics are also taken into consideration.

William Shakespeare began his writing and acting career in the second half of the sixteenth century. He lived and wrote in the Elizabethan Age, a time when the society was branching out and making itself, known

throughout the world by colonizing other cultures. Queen Elizabeth and Shakespeare were contemporary to each other; one in the political scene and other in sphere of art. Shakespeare's plays were performed at Royal

stage for Queen and he even interacted with her in the court. These interactions left a deep impact on his artistic flavours as Shakespeare created powerful women in many of his plays. As the issue of monarch's gender was one of the main subject of social discussions during the time of Shakespeare it was not possible for a popular and political writer to divorce himself from social concerns.

The representation of women varies throughout different texts. This is a result of the cultural context of the author. The way in which women are depicted in literature can have a diverse effect on the response gained from the receiver. A link can be seen between the portrayal of women in texts and the different cultural aspects of the composer's life and also the context in which the text is composed. In specific texts, women are portrayed as the centre of the universe, the core of all that surrounds men, the superior gender with significance in every aspect of life. However, women are often depicted as the inferior gender, having no social standing, no significance of opinion and in midst of male dominance.

The works of Shakespeare have been studied, analysed and enjoyed as some of the finest masterpieces of the English language. As centuries have passed, his genius eclipses all others of his age; Johnson, Marlowe, Kyd, Greene, Dekker, Heywood etc. None of them could approach the craft or the humanity of character that marked Shakespeare's work. He took the art of dramatic verse and honed it to perfection. He created the most vivid characters of the Elizabethan age. His usage of language, both lofty and low, shows a remarkable wit and subtlety. Most importantly, his themes are so universal that

they transcend generations to stir the imaginations of audiences till date.

Literature is the mirror of the society and writers perform the task of creating images on that mirror. Similarly, Shakespeare was also highly sensitive to his target audience while creating his masterpieces. He actively played upon the beliefs and fears of the Elizabethans. As the ideal of women's chastity, silence and obedience was proclaimed far and wide in early modern England, Shakespeare's heroines proved no exception. He seemed to be extremely sensitive in casting his female characters but their images, and the roles given to them indirectly suggested the significant impact of patriarchy on their lives.

Shakespeare's works open a window into Renaissance world; both politically and culturally. The instability of the Tudor monarchy as well as ambivalence of Elizabeth's feelings towards matrimony disturbed the people and they wished for a stable rule. Female rule lacked stability and this made people more anxious, believing that females are not fit to rule. This fact strengthened the patriarchal system, lowering the position of women in society both culturally and politically. In order to advance in exploring the role of women in Shakespeare's plays, it is indispensable to have a look at the social context to which they belong i.e. the Elizabethan society. Despite the fact that, England was ruled by a woman, women during this time enjoyed very little power, independence or recognition. Their social and political condition was even worse than their economic conditions. They were expected to be mute observers and meek followers of the male commands. It was

considered as the mark of dishonor and threat to social order, to assert their views or to raise their voice.

Till the advent of the 17<sup>th</sup> century women did not appear on the stage in England. Young boys played the feminine roles on stage. However, Shakespeare allotted powerful roles for women in his plays. He made the woman a more authoritative figure than the men, very tactfully. "Shakespearean dramas often attribute cunning intellect, calculated control and enigmatic beauty to his female protagonists within patriarchal boundaries" (Jamie Bence, 121)

Shakespeare has been considered as a feminist by many modern critics. He wrote, for male entertainment but his extraordinary genius for portraying human behavior made him create such rich female characters who transcended the limitations of his time. Shakespeare could have created his female characters as he may have either preferred women who were subservient or passive or he may have been trying to show, that defying tradition was unwomanly and undesirable on the part of women. The world of Shakespeare was defined by order. God, King, Man, Woman, Slave, Animal and everything and everyone fell in this order. When something happens to disrupt this order, the world is thrown into turmoil. Though influenced by the rise in independent thinking and Ovid's 'Metamorphosis' Shakespeare challenged the patriarchal culture and values of the Elizabethan context, but essentially remained in agreement with the longstanding perception of male dominance.

This argument can be seen through his different works whether comedies or tragedies, as they both bear the mark of women, one way or the other. Ophelia is model of virtue, obedient to a fault, innocent to the extreme, mentally and physically frail and always in need of protection. Gertrude is possessed of great strengths and flaws, not only these, but many more female characters are drawn by Shakespeare who while are intelligent, kind strong, caring and loyal but are easily led astray, capable of great guidance from a superior male.

Critics are of different opinions, so far as Shakespeare's representation of women is concerned. Traditional critics of Shakespeare believed that the plays show life's struggle for the individual, not necessarily because of sexual problems or gender oppression but when we analyze his plays from the 21<sup>st</sup> century upbringing, settling aside the pretty poetics, we see that the darker side of his famous works emerges as in King Lear, Othello and Hamlet. It is in this darker side that we see strong heroines raised up only to fall again.

Feminist critics read Shakespeare with a view of patriarchal system, where men dominate and women do as they are told. Feminist criticism explores the gender relationships within both marriage and family.

The representation of female subordination and sexuality in Hamlet essentially depicts how the suppression of women, is necessary in order to protect the welfare of man and society. In examining the representation of women through the character of Ophelia, it proves difficult to form and interpret her, through her falls into madness, and the initial

lack of her person throughout the play. The character of Ophelia represents a patriarchal assumption that women are degraded into those who lack a moral sense of their own. Ophelia's conscience is stifled initially by the authority of men throughout the play, disallowing her to embellish any of her own judgements. She is a typical example of a female character only existing through the voice and the interpretation of men. Both Ophelia's father and brother assume a position of authority over her, with Laertes advising her as though her judgement is flawed and Polonius treating her as though her feelings are irrelevant to her situation with Hamlet. Polonius' treatment of Ophelia is further highlighted through his contrasting treatment of Laertes, as he sends his son off to University to learn his own way in life; Ophelia's education is restricted to learning from the judgements of the men surrounding her. In his treatment of Ophelia, Hamlet too oscillates between protests of undying love and cruelty such as his cold and accusing speech in the 'nunnery scene'. Hamlet uses Ophelia as a tool in his revenge plan. Hamlet treated Ophelia harshly, as he was instigated by Gertrude's act of marrying so soon after her husband's death. His bitterness leads him to believe that all women are untrustworthy- '*Frailty thy name is woman*', (Hamlet, Act I, Scene II) .Hamlet projects upon Ophelia 'the guilt and pollution', he believes exist in Gertrude's behavior. Ophelia suffers due to Hamlet's patriarchal views of womanhood. While the conflicting messages from these masculine sources damage Ophelia's psychological identity, their sudden absence, provokes her mental destruction. Although at one level, Ophelia's decline into madness sets her up as a victim figure but at another level

her madness can be seen as Ophelia's active rejection of patriarchal restraint. Her madness offers the capability of Speech, the opportunity to discover individual identity and the power to verbally undermine authority. Unknowingly, where she is without man's order, her madness becomes a prelude to her death, as she has become unanchored in this patriarchal society. Ophelia's death essentially associates her with the fluidity of water, through her drowning, suggestive of her instability. Ophelia's madness after having been essentially shut out from her role as a woman, therefore could act as a brief moment of feminine empowerment.

In the later tragedy, 'Othello', feminist critics argue that tragedy occurs from adherence to patriarchal rules and stereotypes. Gayle Greene summarizes that the tragedy 'Othello' stems from men's misunderstandings of women and women's inability to protect themselves from society's conception of them'. Certainly Desdemona's feminine qualities of passivity, softness obedience are no match for Othello's masculine qualities of dominance aggression and authority. After Othello has struck Desdemona and spoken harshly to her, she tells Imago, "*I am a child to chiding*".( Shakespeare, Othello, Act IV, Scene II ) Protected by the system which makes women the weaker, dependent sex, Desdemona is unequipped to deal with such aggression; she is helpless against Othello. As Dreher puts it, "*following conventional patterns of behavior for wives and daughters, these women lose their autonomy and intimacy and do not achieve adulthood*".(Dreher, Dominated Daughters, 1986)

As the play develops Shakespeare shows an increasing interest in the association of Venetian Women with the private sphere and in the different roles they play. The inequality of gender in marital relations is clearly visible in the relations of Othello and Desdemona as well as Iago and Emilia. Desdemona wants to plead the cause of Cassio, because she feels he is right, but she merely has to follow Othello's decision saying " *Whatever you be, I am obedient.*" (Shakespeare, Othello, Act III, Scene III), thus traditional discourse of submission to male authority is at play. The marriage of Iago and Emilia is much more oppressive in which husband exerts a despotic control over his wife's actions and speech. In this relationship, Shakespeare portrays Emilia, deprived of any broader agency or public role. Her plight reflects Iago's virulent misogyny and his obsession with hierarchal relations, and also a contemporary republican tendency to masculinize the state and to confine women exclusively to the private order.

With regard to men's misunderstandings of women, Iago's manipulation of Othello-the cause of tragedy-occurs only because Othello too easily accepts a stereotypical view of his wife based on the authority of a male voice. He loses sight of real Desdemona, allowing every action of hers, once his suspicion is stimulated to reaffirm this stereotypical conception of her.

At the end of the play, Othello attempts to vindicate himself from intentional murder by claiming that he had nothing 'in malice', but is simply a man '*that loved not wisely but too well.*' (Othello, Act V, Scene II) This speech illustrates the precarious position of love in a society submerged in stereotypes. Othello's

excessive, 'unwise' love for Desdemona is tied up with his perception of her as representing perfect womanhood, and his underlying fear of her as endorsed by society as whore. Like Hamlet, who tells Ophelia 'get thee to a 'nunnery' in order to protect her chastity and remove his fear of women's infidelity. Othello too wishes to erase Desdemona's sexuality and potential for infidelity. His decision to kill her, he claims is to prevent her from further transgression. ' *Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.*' (Othello, Act V, Scene II) As Iago's insinuations build, the gulf between his perception of Desdemona as angel and fear of her as whore grows, leaving Othello in a void of confusion and doubt.".....*By the world, I think my wife be honest, and think she is not. I think thou (Iago) are just, and think thou art not*".. (Othello, Act III, Scene III) Othello's refusal to hear Desdemona's own protestations of innocence reveals his arbitrary exercise of power. Othello is very much a tragedy which is created within the framework of monarchical and patriarchal traditions of contemporary English politics.

For feminist critics, the position of women in the society and the ways in which there, non-compliance caused them to be banished or killed strongly emphasizes the problems that a patriarchal rule can cause. Feminist critics towards Shakespeare's drama emerged in the 1970's, and its focal concerns have developed alongside the theory itself. The body of work started out as an attack on Shakespeare's drama as displaying and reinforcing patriarchal ideology. Some critics also viewed Shakespeare as a man who wrote for men perpetuating a tenacious hold on a patriarchal system that subjugated women.

However, Shakespeare's dramas reflect the Elizabethan world. Within these tragedies one sees potential conflict arising due to patriarchal control over female sovereign body. Feminists sees the world of these plays a classic picture of the patriarchal society, in

which males are socially privileged and yet constricted in their emotional lives, while women are kept as a 'privileged' underclass, feted with luxury yet with little or no real voice in the exercise of power.

#### **References**

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