



## SOCIAL CONTROL AND REBELLIOUS DAUGHTERS IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S "THE MERCHANT OF VENICE"

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines *The Merchant of Venice* from a social viewpoint. It explores the types of social control on the two daughters, Portia and Jessica, and studies the ways of their resistance. In the play, the male-dominated society controls the two daughters through the rules and traditions of the Venetian society, and the daughters resist these rules and traditions through writing, cross-dressing, sexuality, and elopement. Therefore, through analyzing the two female characters in this play, this paper provides a literary analysis on the ways and means by which the two daughters are controlled, and at the same time it presents the ways that empower the daughters' resistance.

**Key Words:** Patriarchy, Social Control, and Rebellious Daughters.

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### INTRODUCTION

Literature is considered to be the writers' criticism on time and system in which they live. It is an important mean by which every society examines, defines itself, and "explores alternatives to the social and political status quo" (Booker, 1). Therefore, literature mainly existed to criticize the problems of society as well as the political systems. This criticism would be either through investigating the society and its political system or through predicting future events about this society.

Literature can criticize the worst part of society, and draw attention to unknown public issues through "energizing imaginations and providing fresh perspectives" (Booker, 176). Since literature focuses on the social problems, therefore, women's problems and concerns as social problems are obviously highlighted in the forms of literature. Usually in these forms women are considered as

inferior to men, suffering from being dehumanized by the male-dominated societies, and their duties are limited for child producing. As a result of this repression, women from their part try to resist and challenge the male-dominated society.

William Shakespeare in sympathy with the women's trapped condition in his age, tried to use literature in order to focus on their problems in order to portray a clear picture of patriarchy and strict rules of his society toward women. In Shakespeare's time, social system was patriarchal, although Queen Elizabeth was in charge of the Kingdom (Young, 30). Wives and daughters were considered as inferior to men, and their duties were limited for housekeeping and producing children. Bruce Young in his work *Family Life in The Age of Shakespeare* says, "father was served as a head of the family by the appointment of nature and God" (Young, 30). Therefore, daughters were

suffering from the absolute control of their fathers at home, and their duties were to increase their families' wealth and power through marriage. Majority of women were illiterate, because they were not allowed to enter the academic institutions such as courts and schools, which were specialized only for male students. As a result, these oppressions created a trapped condition for women who were dehumanized and deprived of their rights; right of education, expression, and movement.

Since in the time of Shakespeare the familial issues were considered as taboo subjects for the writers to write about, therefore, Shakespeare indirectly in his play *The Merchant of Venice* exposed the female's unfair life in his age to the audience through taking advantage of the "comic element" of the play (Hyland, 23). He wanted to shed light on the ways a daughter is controlled and repressed in his society, and at the same time he wanted to expose a model of a further daughter that has intelligence, self-confidence, and calls for equality through defying the patriarchal rules of her society. Crump Wright in his work *The Women of Shakespeare's Plays* argued that, "Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* comments on a society which would treat its women like chattel and expect total obedience while giving little respect or consideration" (Wright 9). So, Shakespeare uses literature as an outlet to criticize his society for repressing women as wives and daughters.

In his play Shakespeare provided two active daughters that reject the society's mistreatment through defying the rules of their society. These daughters move beyond the rules that are determined for them in order to demonstrate their struggles for their rights and independence in a male-dominated society. Jennifer D. Bazzell in her work *The role of Women in The Merchant of Venice: Wives and Daughters Ahead of their Time* argued that; "the play raised a voice for non-traditional women and manifests female characters who make decisions for themselves with no regard to their husband's thoughts on the subject" (111). Shakespeare through the repression and control that imposed on these daughters in the play demonstrates the controlled life of females in his society, and through the females' refusal of the rules

of society he wants to provide a new model of women that free themselves from any control.

#### **Social Control**

The methods of control in literature became a major topic for discussion in the past century; a lot of researches have been done in this area in order to examine the methods and the consequences of control in literature. Usually complete control is achieved in literature through taking advantages of discipline, ideology, and language manipulation, but in *The Merchant of Venice* we have two daughters; Jessica and Portia that are controlled by the society's rules and traditions, and patriarchy.

In her first appearance onstage, Portia complains about her father's lottery that represents patriarchy as appears in her speech to Nerissa, "will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father/ Is it not hard, Nerissa that I cannot choose one nor refuse none" (Act1.2). Portia exposes her repressed life to the audience in which she is controlled by a dead father, and cannot choose her husband. The problem with Portia is that she is controlled by the fear of patriarchy, and she internalized this fear in away even with the absence of her father she still cannot choose and decide on her husband. Michel Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punishment* says; a "body constantly can be regulated through making it internalize the mechanism of self-surveillance" (18). Foucault says, if you want to control someone's body, you just need to make him internalize the fear of you or the fear of being watched by you. In this way you can avoid any possible resistance.

In Shakespeare's time, father was portrayed as a person appointed by God, therefore this created an internal fear that made wife and daughter obey his decisions. So, the high position of father in the family used as an element to repress and control women. In *The Merchant of Venice* Portia considers the will of her father as an indication that puts women inferior to men, and it shows that women cannot think and choose what is in their best interest. Through her criticism on the lifestyle of women that surround her, Portia appears as an open-minded female or daughter to the audience that has liberal thinking, and tries to

correct a fault in her society through arousing sympathy in the audience to the women's problems in her society.

Another form of social control in this play manifests itself in Portia's marriage. At Shakespeare's time, "according the guide book and manuals of governing marriage" women must give their entire property to their husbands (Bazzell, 60). The reflection of this tradition can be observed clearly as we hear Portia's speech immediately after her marriage to Bassanio, "now, / this house, these servants, and this same myself / Are yours — my lord's!" (III, ii, 169-71). I think, this tradition in the Elizabethan period was set to belittle and disarm women from any possible power in the future over their husband, and this method of control clearly demonstrates the absolute control of the male-dominated society over women that did not leave any woman without control. This society first of all controlled and oppressed women as daughters under the control of their fathers which were depicted as being appointed by God, and then after their marriage, the male-dominated society put the wives under the control of their husbands.

The Elizabethan society considered marriage as a kind of transformation from one kind of control to another kind of control. In another word; in the Elizabethan period marriage symbolized the transformation of power and control over daughter from the absolute control of father to the absolute control of husband. Women were considered as a prize for men to increase wealth and power. Therefore, sometimes men were motivated by the money that they get from the marriage rather than the girl, and this can be observed in Bassanio's speech to Antonio as he asks him for three thousand ducats to marry Portia, "In Belmont is a lady richly left" (I.i.161). From Bassanio's speech appears that he is motivated by the money that Portia has rather than her beauty.

After Portia marriage, another form of control appears in front of her. She wants to go to the court to save Antonio's life, but soon she realizes that she cannot do this because of the society's traditions. Therefore, Portia disguises in male dress in order to defend Antonio. Portia does not have any doubt about her ability, but this her society that

makes her to hide her gender, and this appears clearly in her speech at the beginning of the play, "I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than to be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching" (I.ii.14-21). Portia at the court through her knowledge and intelligence teaches all the members a lesson. She is the only speaker in the court that draws the attention of the members including the duke who does not say a word. In this way Portia blames the rules of her society and "church" that prevent her participation in Antonio's trial as a female. Jennifer D. Bazzell also interpreted Portia's comment on her own ability by stating that;

Portia appears to be making fun of those who tell people what to do. Furthermore, as most of the people giving advice on how females should behave were men, the sentence becomes even more interesting. Portia acknowledges that it is easy for churchmen to give instructions on how to behave, but wonders how many are actually able to follow their own advice. She sets herself up in direct contradiction to the messages being espoused by the church (58).

I think Portia here is questioning the rules and the patriarchal pressures upon her as female or daughter, rules that do not let her reveal her identity at the end of the trial although she was the cleverest person in the court. This reveals another restriction that women were suffering from at the time of Shakespeare. I think if Bassanio had known that Portia goes to the court and defend Antonio, he would have never let her to go. He would have never let Portia travel alone from Belmont to Venice. At the end of Portia's trial, if the Duke and the judges had known about Portia and Nerissa's identity, they would have never accepted the result.

What makes Portia to be an acceptable character for the audience rather than other female characters in the play is her normal relationship with her father that based on emotions. Although Portia does not agree with his father's will as appear in her speech, "I will do anything, Nerissa, ere I will be married to a sponge", but she obeys her father and remains faithful to his will (I.i.98-99). I think Portia resists the traditional rule, but at the same time

remains as a faithful daughter because her father's will is in her interest, and this appears in her speech, "If I live to be as old as Sibylla, I will die as chaste as Diana, unless I be obtain'd by the manner of my father's will" (I.ii.106-08). When Bassanio arrives at Belmont, Portia falls in love with him, therefore, she wants to help him choose the right casket, but her emotional relationship with her father makes her withdraw from this plan as appear in her speech, "I could teach you How to choose right, but then I am forsworn. So will I never be, so may you miss me" (III.ii.10-12). Nicholson also argued about Portia's decision about her father's will by stating that, "although Portia frustrated from her father's will, but she recognizes her father's plan that protect her from fortune hunters" (197). So, in this way Portia can be separated from other female characters or daughters. She resists most of the patriarchal rules of her society, but without trampling her father's will.

Jessica is another daughter in this play that suffers from the control of her society more than Portia. Jessica suffers from her alienation from the Venetian society as a Jew, and at the same time suffers from her father's patriarchy that makes her appear as a servant rather than a daughter of a rich Jew. The relationship of Jessica with her father is so bad that makes her take advantage from any opportunity to get rid of her father's hell and convert from his father's religion, and this can be observed clearly in her speech, "alack, what heinous sin is it in me /To be ashamed to be my father's child! / But though I am a daughter to his blood /, I am not to his manners (II.iii.16-19). Through her speech appears that Shylock's absolute control makes Jessica to "rebel" against everything in the society including the rules of her society, her role as a daughter, and her religion (Bazzell, 97).

Shylock's manner toward Jessica creates a kind of master-slave relationship between them, and this appears clearly in Shylock's speech, "There is my keys/Look at my house/ Lock up my doors/ Nor thrust your head in to the public street, To gaze on Christian fools/ well, Jessica, go in/ I bid you; shut doors after you" (II, v, 16-50). I think through Shylock's speech one can say that Shylock's relationship with Jessica is just like the one of a

master with his servant rather than between a father and his daughter (Nicholson, 180). So, one can easily imagine Jessica's miserable life; a girl is imprisoned by her father that does not let her leave the house, and what makes the situation worse is Shylock's order for Jessica "don't look" at the street from the window, and to depict a complete image of prison for the audience, Shylock shuts the door and locks it like a prison.

Since there is no sign of fatherly and filial relationship between Jessica and Shylock, therefore, Jessica decides to escape from home and end her suffering. Maryellen Nicholson in her work *Like Father, Like Daughter: The Similarities between Fathers and Daughters in Five Shakespearean Plays* argues about Jessica's lifestyle with Shylock by stating that, "Shylock provides Jessica with money, but he did not provide her emotional relationship that make their relationship stronger" (180). Jessica also approves this idea in her speech after Shylock leaves the house by stating that; "His words were 'Farewell, mistress!' – nothing else" (II.v.45). From her speech appears that Jessica lacks emotional relationship with her father. Although Shylock provides money for her, but this does not satisfy her because she need his emotions as a father rather than his money.

Jessica confirms her father's cruelty and control not only toward her, but toward others as well, and this appears in her speech to Lancelet, "Our house is hell, and thou, a merry devil, / Didst rob it of some taste of tediousness" (Act II.3). It seems that Jessica agrees with Lancelet's decision to leave her father's house. She compares their house to hell that one cannot live in it. Here I think Shakespeare presented the trapped condition of Jessica and Portia for the audience in order to justify the future acts and decisions of the daughters that contradict with the Elizabethan norms and traditions. After the presentation of Jessica's miserable life, Jessica decides to leave the house and convert to Christianity, "Farewell, and if my fortune be not cross'd, / I have a father, you a daughter, lost" (II.v.56-57). So, through presenting her pervious life, now the audience warmly welcome her elopement. As a result, Jessica appear as a "more liberated" daughter in the play that

rebels against her father's will as well as the society's rules (Bazzell, 91).

Jessica is not only obeying her father's instructions, but instead she tries to do things that Shylock completely rejected them. Shylock told her to keep inside, but she escapes, he told her "don't look at the Christian fools" in the street from the window, but instead she elopes from the window with Christian Lorenzo. So, I think Jessica's acts can be interpreted as a reflection of a huge pressure that imposed on her by Shylock's patriarchy, that is why she wants to convert into Christianity to end her strife, as she says, "O Lorenzo/ If thou keep promise, I shall end this strife/ Become a Christian and thy loving wife" (Act II.3). In this way, Shakespeare's audience accepted Jessica's rebellious character, and praised her acts.

What makes Jessica be different from Portia is her way of resistance. Jessica rejects everything in her present life including her father, religion, and house, but Portia, although she does not agree with her father's will, but still she respects it. Since there is no sign of fatherly and filial relationship between Jessica and Shylock, therefore, Jessica's tone of speech appears as a kind of revenge from his father as Shylock asks Jessica about "what Lancilet have whispered to her" (Bazzell, 91), Jessica lies to her father because Launcilet discussed "details about the elopement" with her (Bazzell, 91). Shakespeare here presented a rebellious daughter that lies to her father, escapes from her father's house, steals from her father's money, and converts from her father's religion.

When Jessica escapes from Shylock's house, she decides to disguise in male dress in order to be able to escape with Lorenzo. I think Elizabethan traditions do not let her leave her father's house at midnight with a boy and escape from home. Therefore, Jessica decides to disguise in male dress that gives her freedom of movement. Jessica frustrates from her male-dress, but she does not find any choice to escape from the hell of her father, and this appears clearly in her speech, "I am glad 'tis night, you do not look on me/ For I am much ashamed of my exchange/ But love is blind and lovers cannot see/ The pretty follies that themselves commit/ For if they could, Cupid himself

would blush/ To see me thus transformed to a boy" (II.vi.35-39). Jessica confesses that her acts are "follies", and contradict with the renaissance traditions, but she gives justification to the audience that she is in love with Lorenzo, and her father and the rules of her society do not allow them to get married. Therefore, Jessica is ready to do anything for the sake of her liberation and love.

#### **Rebellious Daughters**

Although the life of women are highly controlled mentally and physically in this play, but there are some daughters that are trying to resist this control. They try to speak out about the injustice around them in order to free themselves, and the available ways of resistance in front of these daughters are; cross-dressing, sexuality, elopement, conversion (religion), writing, and knowledge.

After Shakespeare presents the patriarchal pressures upon the daughters, he lets them defy these pressures, and show their many talents by taking advantage of the comic element of the play in order to prevent anger from the audience and the authority. Jennifer D. Bazzell states that,

Shakespeare purposely presented his audiences with these female characters of intelligence as well as independence. Shakespeare did not create these unique women merely to amuse an audience but to challenge his audience's perceptions about women's capabilities (114).

Portia's talents appear as she marries Bassanio. She gives Bassanio her fortune, but she does not let him control her as a tradition of Elizabethan wife. Portia achieves her father's will, but remain superior to Bassanio. Portia accepts the traditions of marriage of her society, but at the same time she preserves her independence. Portia's superiority appears as she replies to Bassanio's request for permission to go to Venice, "first go with me to church and call me wife/ And then away to Venice to your friend; For never shall you lie by Portia's side /With an unquiet soul. You shall have gold / To pay the petty debt twenty times over". (III.ii.303-07). Portia here uses her intellectual superiority to resist Bassanio's control over her as a wife, and at the same time she rejects the rules of the guide book and manuals of governing marriage.

Portia through her knowledge and intelligence manages the atmosphere. Now, she is the one who gives instructions and decisions rather than Bassanio. When Portia leaves the house with Bassanio also gives instruction to Lorenzo as she says; "Lorenzo, I commit into your hand / The husbandry and manage of my house / Until my lord's return" (III.iv.24-26). Portia also shows her knowledge and intelligence as she goes to the court to defend Antonio. She demonstrates that there is no one in the court can save the life of Antonio except her. Therefore, this makes her character be acceptable and at the same time applauded by the audience.

Jessica like Portia also demonstrates her superiority over Lorenzo as she plans the way of her elopement with Lorenzo. She is the one who sets the plan and tells Lorenzo what to do. She uses Lancelet to take her letter to Lorenzo and inform him about the details. Jessica's domination over her husband continues even in the elopement scene. Jessica takes some money from her father, although Lorenzo does not agree, "I will make fast the doors, and gild myself / With some moe ducats, and be with you straight" (II.vi.49-50). Jennifer D. Bazzell says, "despite Jessica's supposed inferiority due to her questionable Jewish background; she is certainly the more in charge personality during the elopement. She gives orders, and her husband follows them without question" (63). So, what we have here is Jessica's superiority over Lorenzo in a male-dominated society.

Jessica uses elopement as a way of resisting her father's repression, and at the same time as an outlet toward freedom. Jessica is "struggling with her alienation from Venetian society" because of her religion (Nicholson, 182). So, she tries to integrate with the Venetian society through trampling any symbol of her father's ruling because she thinks that her father caused her alienation from the society.

Writing or narration is also considered to be a form of resistance and liberation for the daughters in *The Merchant of Venice* to defy the rules of their society. Julia Gerhard also argues that writing or narration can be considered as a mean of freedom from the authority's control because it "develops a sense of empowerment and authorship"

to confront the oppression of the authority (17). I think in this play writing serves as an opportunity or an outlet for the daughters to discover themselves in a society that imprisoned them. Jessica through writing and exchanging letters with Lorenzo liberates herself from her alienation from Venetian society, and Portia through narrating her problems as a daughter to Nerrisa expresses herself, and delivers a message to the audience to explain the major restrictions in front of women of her time. So, writing and narration in this play enable the daughters to challenge the rules of society, discover themselves, explore the people around them, and finally to share their thoughts with others.

Beside narration, Portia also uses her sexuality as a form of resistance to avoid any possible masculinity in her male-dominated society. She uses it as an "empowering" element over Bassanio to give her superiority, and this appears in her speech while they exchange their rings, "By heaven, I will ne'er come in your bed / Until I see the ring! Portia says" (V.i.190). Jennifer D. Bazzell interpreted her speech by stating that, "Portia through her speech challenges the accepted sexual role of women in the early modern period; women needed to acquiesce to their husbands' desires, but instead Portia explicitly denying her husband's access to her body" (77). I think Portia through her sexuality achieves a level of superiority over Bassanio, at the same time shows her intelligence in investing everything to reject the male-domination at home and in society.

Cross-dressing is another way of resistance in *The Merchant of Venice*. Shakespeare through cross-dressing his heroines wanted to depict a real picture of the women of his time; how they were suffering under the control of the male-dominated society. Shakespeare's interest in disguising his female characters "lies in the opportunity that cross-dressing offers" (Hyland, 23). Lucie Johnova in his work *Patterns of Cross dressing in Shakespeare's comedies* argues that in the Shakespeare's comedies female characters use cross-dressing to achieve "safety and greater freedom of movements, and at the same time to defend their life in a hostile world" (Johnova, 66). At that time, Shakespeare was not able to show a real picture of woman of his society

because comedies served as "entertainment", and were not going against the values of the society (Johnova, 65).

Since Renaissance plays and comedies were not presenting a true picture of women, therefore, cross-dressing "presented as an important change of status"(Johnova, 65). In Shakespeare's comedies, we can find different heroines that accepted by the audience because Shakespeare beside his real purpose added some comic elements as appeared in the Portia's test of Bassanio after the trial of Antonio. Therefore, Jessica and Portia through cross-dressing challenge their society's traditions that prevent them from going outside the home alone.

Through cross-dressing Jessica and Portia get the freedom of movement. Jessica escapes from home with Lorenzo, and Portia goes to Venice with Nerissa. This opportunity that cross-dressing offers continues even after they enter the court to defend Antonio. At the court, the male disguise gives Portia "freedom of speech" in a way that no one utters a word except her in the court room (Larkin, 2). So, Portia through cross-dressing provides a new model of woman with "masculine energy" that demonstrates the capability of women to the audience (Bazzell, 64).

After Saving Antonio, Portia through cross-dressing punishes Shylock for "his attempts to make his daughter a virtual prisoner in her own home and deny her happiness with her spouse" (Bazzell, 105). At the end of the trail Portia again takes advantage of her male-dress to ensure half of Shylock's fortune for Jessica and Lorenzo, and then she test her husband's love with Nerrisa through their male-dress.

#### CONCLUSION

William Shakespeare through his play *The Merchant of Venice* wants to present females' miserable life as daughters and wives to the audience. Since he was not allowed to talk about a serious issue like this in literate, therefore, Shakespeare took advantage of the genre of his work which is comedy to deal with this issue, and avoid audience's anger. Through providing life of the two daughters under the control of their fathers, Shakespeare presents the miserable condition of women of his time, and then he gives the two

daughters some talents to challenge the male-dominated society. So, in this way Shakespeare encourages women of his society to defy and challenge the patriarchal rules, and ask for their rights.

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