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WOMEN IN SHAKESPEARE: A RE-READING

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ABSTRACT

Essential aim of this paper is to portray the female characters in Shakespeare plays of the Elizabethan era especially in comedies. It is considered as patriarchal dominant society and he portrayed 'His' women in a realistic way so that whoever goes through his plays, should accept it. It also discussed how women were considered as a 'purchasable goods' in their marriage and their opinion was not anticipated. It also showcased how Shakespeare has transformed the situation as an early modern revolutionary playwright.

Keywords: Profit, Rights, Revolution, Decision, Marriage.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on three elements in Shakespeare women such as marriage as a profitable transaction; no rights to choose her husband to marry; and a revolutionary decision in choosing the life partner. In order to discuss the women in the plays of Shakespeare, in the genesis it is relevant to know about the women in the Elizabethan era. Overall the past years, women are seen inferior to men who were dwelling in 16th and the beginning of 17th century, as it was elaborated in the twilight of the Elizabethan England it was told as the patriarchal society. They were given only few rights and they were seen inferiors to their fathers when compared to their sons. In some actual statuses daughters were considered as the precious gifts of the God; this might be the reason why Queen Elizabeth has written condolence letters to the noble families' during deaths of daughters and that shows she wanted to give equal status on par with sons. In the period of Renaissance, we can say it is also the rebirth for the women and their deeds as Jardine in her book *Still Harping on Daughters, Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* says, Golden age of emancipation (p.51)¹

As Queen Elizabeth never wanted the women from noble families to look down in society, she gave encouragement for the education of women, in the part of marriage typical Elizabethan women never chose their partner. Their husbands were chosen by their father based on the economic interests. Clearly, this shows that they lived in the society of patriarchal dominance. Contemporaries of Shakespeare have readily accepted his plays as they had believed that women are inferior to men.

Women's Hardships in the Plays of Shakespeare

Life in England during the time of Elizabeth, they usually considered marrying the person whom they love was unwise; they considered love can happen even at the time of marriage. During Elizabethan era, marriages were considered to be good and for the financial profit. The relationship between the daughter and the father were portrayed in the plays of Shakespeare in the usual manner, for an instance the relationship amidst of Lucentio and Vincentio, Bianca and Baptista, between Katherine and Baptista in the play *The Taming of the Shrew*. It portrays the truth that parents are more disquiet about the marriage of their daughter and also finding an apt partner for

her. Conversely, families go for arranged marriages for their daughters as their children do not want to suffer as well as they look for the impact of finance on the other side. Parents felt that marriage was meaningful with the financial safety on the other side, as Maggi Ros in his article about *Love and Marriage* in the edition *Life in Elizabethan England* expresses that,

A marriage contract included provision both for the bride's dowry and for a jointure, or settlement, in cash and property by the husband's family that guaranteed her welfare should her husband die first.(Maggi Ros)²

Authentically it shows that, families who are engaged in the marriage are being benefitted such as groom's side are getting dowry of the bride's and bride's side making a contract that she will be well equipped with the finance in case she becomes a widow. Regarding the marriages of the early modern families famous feminist Lawrence Stone in her book *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England* conveys that,

Among the landed classes in pre-Reformation England, nuptiality – the proportion of surviving children who married – was determined by family strategy. The three objectives of family planning were the continuity of the male line, the preservation intact of the inherited property, and the acquisition through marriage of further property or useful political alliances (p.37).³

In the play *The Taming of the Shrew* it is clearly depicted that, daughter has no right to take her self-decision in her marriage, as she was considered as a purchasable item in the item; throughout the play that nowhere it is asked about her opinion about the marriage.

In the conversation between Petruccio and Baptista it is evident that the decision about the marriage is taken and the financial security is taken without prior information to Kate, the following lines shows marriage as a business deal

PETRUCCIO:What dowry shall I have with her to wife?

BAPTISTA: After my death the one half of my lands,

And in possession twenty thousand crowns.

PETRUCCIO: And for that dowry I'll assure her of Her widowhood, be it that she survive me,

In all my lands and leases whatsoever.... (p.295).⁴

From the above lines it is portrayed that, without Katherine the decision is taken about her marriage and the dowry between her father and the groom, it is seen clearly Katherine as a purchasable item, it is also shown that Katherine did not like the groom in her words,

KATHERINE: Call you me a daughter? Now I promise you

You have showed a tender fatherly regard,

To wish me wed to one half-lunatic,

A madcap ruffian and a swearing Jack,

That thinks with oaths to face the matter out (p.297).⁵

Above lines prove that, she never liked the groom, still she is being forced to marry her, it is evident that she is dominated by her father in fact patriarchal dominance. Though, she rebelled against her father with her words, this shows disapproval of her marriage. However, Petruccio says that their day of wedding will be the coming Sunday, which shows that there is no likeness of the bride. Shakespeare clearly portrayed the problem of marriage of women during Elizabethan era.

The character which has no rights to marry Portia in the play *The Merchant of Venice* the essential female character who lost her father and there is no mention about her mother throughout the play we can assume, her mother also expired long before her father. In other words she is an orphan. There is no possibility to think that she is bound free and can live as she wishes. The circumstances of patriarchy still exists though she lost her father, it is pertinent Elizabethan women, bound to her father's decisions. She cannot choose the person she is in love with, she cannot have that right yet, following lines clearly portrays

PORTIA:O me, the word 'choose'! I may neither choose who I would nor refuse who I dislike; so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father..... (p.225).⁶

She is curbed by the will of her father which is that, whoever opens the right casket contains the portrait of her daughter's picture, she has to marry him. Another glance of patriarchal dominance, she obeys her father's will though he isn't alive. Dymna Callaghan in her book *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare* gives a better elucidation about the uncommon game of the casket and why he included it in the marriage of Portia.

What is at stake here is not Portia's happiness alone – [...] – but the future welfare of Belmont itself. For the man who marries Portia will also become master of her realm, and the late Lord of Belmont has therefore contrived the casket test as a procedure for selecting his own successor. The apparently arbitrarily and tyrannical decree [of the test of the caskets], so different from the ostensibly rational and liberal statutes of Venice, in fact reveals itself to be a manifestation not only of parental solicitude, but also of a deeply responsible concern to ensure that political power will remain at the service of what is truly significant in life.⁷

Portia's father might have believed that she is not wise enough to choose her life partner, but in fact she has good skills, Shakespeare has given this character good skills in choosing her husband, yet she cannot do that because it is patriarchal dominated society; the following lines prove that she is good in understanding the character of her suitors,

PORTIA: God made him, and therefore let him pass for a man. In truth, I know it is a sin to be a mocker, but he – why, he hath a horse better than the Neapolitan's, a better bad habit of frowning than the Count Palatine. He is every man in no man. If a throstle sing, he falls Straight a-cap'ring. He will fence with his own shadow. If I should marry him, I should marry twenty husbands. If he would despise me, I would forgive him, for if he love me to madness, I shall never requite him (p.225-226).⁸

These lines clear that she has keener observation than the many other Shakespeare women, gives that

her capability to select her wooers. Further scenes in the play describes her helplessness and she did not like her fate to overtake her life and manipulates her wooers to make them select the incorrect casket.

PORTIA: Therefore, for fear of the worst, I pray thee set a deep glass of Rhenish wine on the contrary casket; for if the devil be within and that temptation without, I know he will choose it. I will do anything, Nerissa, ere I will be married to a sponge (p.226).⁹

Though in the play later she marries the person who she likes but it happens as a matter of luck. In the beginning of the scene Shakespeare depicted Portia as one of the women in Elizabethan era.

Anne Page in the play *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in the beginning seems that she was struck in the helpless situation, not because of her father only also by her mother which means both her parents. It is known that Elizabethan era: a patriarchal society, Anne's parents want her daughter to get married to the person they choose. They did not give her any option to go with, we know that Anne is already in love with Fenton, who in the beginning of the play loved her because of her money it is evident from the below lines.

FENTON: Albeit I will confess thy father's wealth Was the first motive that I wooed thee, Anne, Yet, wooing thee, I found thee of more value than stamps in gold or sums in sealed bags; And 'tis the very riches of thyself That now I aim at (p.70).¹⁰

It is well known that marriage of women during Elizabethan period is all about money, Fenton was enticed by Anne's wealth of her father. Anne's parents Master Page and Mistress Page however did not allow Anne to wed Fenton. As they were busy searching their own suitors for Anne, she was busy planning to elope with Fenton. In this play, Mistress Page is portrayed as a rebellious Elizabethan wife. Mistress wanted her daughter to wed with Caius where as Master wanted his daughter to wed with Slender. In their comic fight they did not take much care about her daughter Anne. Meanwhile she eloped with Fenton and lives a happy life.

Conclusion

It is meant to show that Shakespeare is demonstrated as early modern playwright of

revolutionary it is justified with the female character Anne as she broke the rules of patriarchal dominance regarding arranged marriage and having a successful married life by marrying her loved suitor. Shakespeare tried to generate the awareness that women can accomplish enlightenment if they broke the rules, revolt against the patriarchal dominance and disobey the rules which were being followed.

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