



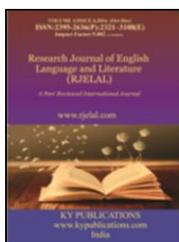
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## FEMINISM IN SHAKESPEAREAN LITERATURE: COMPARISON OF ELEMENTS OF FEMINISM AND MISOGYNY IN SELECTED PLAYS

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is a feminist-based reading and comparison of women portrayed in Shakespearean plays. The reading, although borrowed from the feminist perspective, is not a fully blown feminist reading of Shakespeare's works. The focus of the study comprises of the social circumstances and the misogynistic actions of the male characters and how these impact on the lives of the female characters. The relationships between the male and the female characters are often characterized by the physical and the psychological victimization and their feelings. Men allow their egos to persuade their decisions, attack their internal emotions and demolish virtuous women who are forced to become victims of political intrigues and machinations.

This paper also tries to analyse the way Shakespeare tried to portray women as bold, independent and not submissive to the patriarchal behaviour of men during those times. He enjoyed the element of cross-dressing men and women in order to hide the gender disparity. As a result the paper tries to draw the conclusion that Shakespeare was a writer who identified feminism in his works long before the notion of feminism emerged in Europe. Truly, he is a man who lived way ahead of his time.

**Keywords:** Feminist perspective, Shakespeare, misogyny, submissive women, cross-dressing

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### INTRODUCTION

It has often been said that Shakespeare was ahead of his own time. Ben Jonson already said in 1623 "He was not of an age, but for all time!" (The Author, l.43) and he was right, because to this day people read his plays and adapt and appropriate his works. In the Introduction to King Lear it is stated that "What perhaps most distinguishes Shakespeare's language from everyday modern usage is its richness, density and flexibility; the cumulative effects to open up resonances and implications in such a way that the possibilities for interpretation seem inexhaustible". This statement is proved true by the very fact that there are

hundreds of Shakespeare adaptations from all over the world.

This paper is a feminist-based reading and comparison of women portrayed in Shakespearean plays. The reading, although borrowed from the feminist perspective, is not a fully blown feminist reading of Shakespeare's works. The focus of the study comprises of the social circumstances and the misogynistic actions of the male characters and how these impact on the lives of the female characters. The relationships between the male and the female characters are often characterized by the physical and the psychological victimization and their feelings. Men allow their egos to persuade their

decisions, attack their internal emotions and demolish virtuous women who are forced to become victims of political intrigues and machinations.

Shakespeare portrays two kinds of women throughout his plays:

- i) Women who refuse to submit to men and demand equal rights and,
- ii) Submissive women who carry out the roles of an Elizabethan women.

Those who followed the roles of an Elizabethan woman, which is to be submissive to men, also demonstrate that bowing down to patriarchal rules does not guarantee happiness for women. Infact, it may actually lead to their domination and victimization. Furthermore, all female characters, whether submissive or not, suffered the consequences of male dominance and victimization. However, the females who lived up to the women roles of the patriarchal society suffered more than the women who fought against male dominance.

The present study is based upon the exhaustive analysis of the selected plays in the light of Feminist theories and deconstructive approaches. The major proposition of the study is that Shakespearean tragedies have presented and projected women in these plays as lesser beings and negative stereotypes.

The following research questions are designed to streamline the study:

- i) Are women presented as lesser and inferior to men?
- ii) Do women occupy socially and economically an equal position with men?
- iii) Are women presented as irrational and creatures of passion?
- iv) Are women presented as immoral, devoid of human values (evil) and as negative stereotypes?
- v) Do Shakespearean tragedies reinforce or undermine patriarchy?
- vi) Are women presented as fully developed human beings who can decide about their own lives?

### Women in Hamlet

There are only two female characters in Hamlet. Both of these characters are presented from the male and patriarchal perspective. Ophelia, the beloved of Hamlet is a good daughter of her father and a good sister of her brother. She stands for what Marilyn French (1982) calls the 'in-law' aspect of the feminine, thereby a woman is associated with divine. Ophelia absolutely obeys her father and brother, event at the cost of her own feelings. Laertes manifests the double standard prevalent in the sixteenth century for men and women. A man's honour is not at stake for indulging in affairs outside the institution of marriage. But Ophelia is to ruin her honour from any such alliance. She gives Laertes her word that she will keep his dictates in her memory and he himself will keep the key to it. This leaves in no doubt about the superior position of the brother as compared to the sister. Ophelia's father compares her to a woodcock which cannot fend for itself. Polonius makes it clear that Hamlet, being a man can walk with a longer tether than can be given to Ophelia. She loves Hamlet but, avoids and abstains herself from Hamlet when forbidden by brother and father. Subsequently, Prince Hamlet accuses Ophelia, and through her the whole woman kind of faithlessness and treachery, of hypocrisy and falsehood.

Gertrude, the wife of Hamlet the King, is portrayed as a negative stereotype of a woman. French (1982) calls such women as the outlaw aspect of the feminine. Such women are associated with darkness and sexuality. They are whores and bitches. She re-marries Claudius, the bother of King Hamlet, within days of the death of her husband. It is her conduct that has pushed the Prince Hamlet to the thought of committing suicide. She wept like Niobe at the funeral of her husband, but within days enters into a new wedlock. She is portrayed as a faithless and disloyal woman. She turns her back upon the memory of her loving husband and with indecent haste and speed marries Claudius, in violation of social and religious laws and sanctions. Shocked at her conduct, her son Prince Hamlet utters his judgment against her mother, "frailty thy name is woman". Even the prince Hamlet regards her mother as the property of his father. He behaves

like a typical male, reinforcing the dictates of patriarchy. He comes up with a sweeping and general judgment against women. Gertrude's right to re-marry is not accepted. Prince Hamlet calls her mother the most pernicious woman, a damned smiling villain. Nowhere else such titles and labels are given to a man for re-marriage after the death of his wife. This is nothing but the double standards patriarchy upholds and reinforces.

Later on, Prince Hamlet further condemns her mother for her re-marriage. Earlier, a father and a brother controlled the life of a daughter and a sister, now a son imposes his edicts upon her mother. Prince Hamlet the re-marriage of his mother is the violation of modesty and grace. He finds it as the disgrace of virtue and love itself. He questions the right of a mature woman to decide about her life. He does not respect the choice of her mother and wants her mother to view things from his perspective. He declares it as shameful and a gross trespassing. He forces his mother to withhold herself from her husband. This is the presentation of patriarchy in its undiluted form.

#### **Women in King Lear**

King Lear is a major tragedy by Shakespeare. There are three women in King Lear, Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. They all are daughters of the King Lear. Cordelia, is portrayed as a loving daughter and a virtuous woman. In spite of her virtue and piety, she is presented as a woman who subscribes to patriarchy and patriarchal values in letter and spirit. She is not free to decide about her marriage. Her lack of tact mars her fortunes. She leaves the palace of her father without the least protest. She comes back to England to the rescue of her father. Goneril and Regan are portrayed as monsters. They are liars, hypocrites, greedy and selfish. They are morally corrupt and are loyal to no one. Even Cordelia, who apparently is almost perfect daughter and with all the good qualities, is the one that in a way is cause of the destruction of everything. The play opens with the old king surrendering his kingdom and authority to his daughters. He asks his daughters to express their love for their father before he hands over their respective territories to them. Goneril, being the eldest, is the first to oblige. The hypocrite, cunning

and false Goneril declares that she loves her father more than anything in this wide world, including life, liberty and eye-sight. She does not show any sympathy for or say any kind words to Cordelia when she is banished by their father for saying nothing, and thus offending the old fond father. Instead, she hurts her further by declaring that she deserves her present dowerless status and future possible unkind treatment from her husband, because in her opinion Cordelia asked for it. Goneril is portrayed as cruel and ungenerous, instead of being grateful and obliged towards her father, as claimed in her earlier speech, she points out his rashness, unstable nature, poor judgment and bad temperament (I—i---290). Now she discovers not only the imperfections of long- engrafted condition in the person of her father, but she believes that these have been compounded by his age and choleric years. She is the one who suggests to her sister that they should forge a collective front against their father. After she gets her one third of kingdom, is extremely rude, discourteous and ungenerous towards her father- king. She is critical of the king for the lack of discipline amongst his knights, who are said to be carping and quarrelling every single moment. She dubs her knights as disordered and debosh'd. She accuses the knights of her father of violating the decorum and the precedence established by the class system. She offends her father to the extent that he leaves her palace and goes to live with her other daughter Regan. Regan also reveals her true self by declaring her father as infirm and ignorant of his own good self, capable of many unpredictable acts(I—ii—300). Goneril is so selfish that she finds fault with every act of her father, whom she earlier loved more than eye- sight, life and liberty. She finds her knights as riotous, and the behaviour of King Lear as unacceptable. She encourages her servants to be rude towards the King. In the eyes of Goneril, King is not more than an idle, old fool (I—iii—20). Goneril is also portrayed as disobedient to her husband Albany, whom she criticizes for his gentleness. She has an affair with Edmund, the illegitimate son of Gloucester, and calls her own husband, Albany, as fool. She wants Edmund to kill her husband and then become his wife (IV— VI—265). Albany calls Goneril as vile, filth,

a beast (tiger), most barbarous, most degenerate, worse than head-lugged bear, a devil and finally declares Hamlet fashion:

Proper deformity shows not in the fiend

So horrid as in woman (IV—ii—60).

He further declares, "However thou art a fiend, a woman's shape doth shield thee". Edgar, after he has discovered the conspiracy of Goneril against the life of Albany, also echoes Hamlet when he utters, "O in distinguished space of woman's will!" (O limitless range of woman's lust!). At the end, out of jealousy, Goneril poisons her own sister Regan and she herself commits suicide.

Regan is not behind her sister in cruelty, selfishness and treachery. She is portrayed as a monster. She supports her husband Cornwall in humiliating Kent, the messenger of the King. She is rude and discourteous towards her father. She takes the side of her sister Goneril against their father. She has the guts to mock her father when he, on his knees, begs of her for food and lodging (II—iv—151). She calls his requests as unsightly tricks. She shuts up the door on her old father during a stormy night, without a trace of remorse. Both Regan and Goneril compete with each other in a bid to come out with the most horrible punishment for Gloucester, their host. Regan desires his immediate execution, while Goneril wants him to be blinded. Regan pulls hair from off his beard before he is blinded. She is not satisfied with Gloucester blinded in one eye. She urges her husband to pluck the second eye of Gloucester as well. Then she gets Gloucester thrown out of palace. Regan is in competition with her dear sister for Edmund as well. Now that her husband is killed, she plans to marry Edmund. But as said earlier, she is poisoned by her sister. On the death of these two sisters, Albany says, "This judgment of the heavens, that makes us tremble, touches us not with pity

#### **Portrayal of Women in Macbeth**

The play opens with three witches, who are in the middle of their spell. The witches are exaggerated and distorted form of women, turned into monsters, with special supernatural powers. Macbeth contends that they should be women, but for their beards (I—ii—45). Later, the witches call themselves as Weird Sisters (the goddesses of

destiny). Even Banquo calls them as Weird Women (III—i—2). The witches are portrayed true to their name as evil doers, greedy, vicious, vindictive and inhuman. The fact that they have a definite plan to meet Macbeth, suggests that their spell is against Macbeth, and they have their further designs on Macbeth. With their spell and charms, they establish their control over Macbeth. Banquo suggests the possibility of the victim surrendering his reason as prisoner to such creatures. Macbeth repeats the words earlier spoken by the witches, while commenting on the foul weather, betraying his vulnerability to the influence of the witches. Witches deliver their predictions. The predictions are proved partially true by the messengers of the King, who bring news of Macbeth's elevation to an additional honor of Thane of Cawdor. This is the time for the birth of evil in Macbeth and he contemplates on the possibilities and implications of the predictions and their partial realization. His own ambitious nature aside, the role of witches (women) as manipulators and temptresses cannot be ignored. This brings us to the main thesis of this study that women characters are portrayed as negative stereotypes (as evil beings). Macbeth breaks the news of these developments to his beloved wife lady Macbeth, who is portrayed as the fourth witch and a monster. Macbeth is ambitious, but her ambition brooks no barriers, moral or temporal. Her speech (I—iv—45), leaves no one in doubt that she is the fourth sister to witches. She craves the spirits to fill her with direst cruelty, from head to toe. She asks the murdering ministers and the invisible spirits of hell to fill her womanly breasts with gall and to strip her of any humanly feelings, remorse and sympathy. She prays to the spirits of hell to give her strength to complete her fell purpose. She declares that King Duncan shall never go back alive from palace. Not only she herself is an hypocrite par excellence, it is lady Macbeth who teaches Macbeth to be serpent but look like a flower. She wants the business of that night (murder of Duncan) to be trusted to her. She chides Macbeth for his reluctance and hesitation. Macbeth on further thought and consideration, reins in his "vaulting ambition" and informs his wife that they will not proceed further in this business (murder of Duncan) (I—vii—31). He makes it clear

that this act is neither good nor wise. But Lady Macbeth abuses him, reprimands him and challenges his manhood. Then like her weird sisters she declares that she can kill her own infant with her own hands by dashing it on to the ground, while it is still sucking upon her breasts. This is how she compels Macbeth to the murder of Duncan. It becomes very clear that women, both natural and supernatural, are portrayed in Macbeth as monsters, irrational creatures and the embodiments of evil. It is obvious that women are presented as negative stereotypes.

### **Shakespeare as a feminist**

Many of Shakespeare's plays contain cross-dressing, with either a man dressing as a woman or a woman dressing as a man. In all, about one fifth of Shakespeare's thirty-eight known plays contain gender disguises. The effect of this gender confusion was certainly enhanced by the fact that during Elizabethan times, women's roles were played by young male actors. While no one can know why Shakespeare was so intrigued by the idea of cross dressing, there seem to be two general theories: Either Shakespeare enjoyed the comedic element of a man dressing up as a woman dressing up as a man, or he was secretly a feminist. While the humour of the situation can't be ignored, the fact that many of Shakespeare's female protagonists are strong, intelligent, capable women who go against the grain suggests that he was the 16th century equivalent of a feminist.

William Shakespeare wrote during the Elizabethan Era, otherwise known as the "Golden Age." This time was a brief period of peace in England and because the citizenry wasn't focused on fighting wars, theatre, art and music flourished. Women had specific roles. Girls who were in noble families were highly educated and taught by the older women in their house, yet they were not allowed to enter into professions. Women were expected to be housewives and teach and care for their children. In families, everything was passed down to the sons, and girls were married off to men that their fathers picked. Ironically, the only exception to these rules of succession was the royal crown, which could be passed to a daughter. Because the Queen was a woman, she encouraged

fathers to educate their daughters and hoped that all men would strive to educate the women in their lives.

Shakespeare seized the idea of intelligent, capable women and seemed to recognize that societal restrictions were not always fair. He used the device of cross-dressing to show that many women are actually as competent as men. Some examples of female Shakespeare characters who spend much of the play as men are: Viola in 'Twelfth Night', Portia in 'The Merchant of Venice', Julia in 'The Two Gentlemen of Verona' and Rosalind in 'As You Like It'. In each of these plays, the women dressed as men so that they could perform a task that they would not normally be able to do as a woman.

In Twelfth Night, Viola dresses as her twin brother after they lose each other at sea. It was very dangerous for a woman to be on her own, so Viola dresses as her brother to enable her find work and provide for herself. She continued her deception because she fell in love with Duke Orsino and wanted to stay close to him. Dressing as a boy seems to embolden Viola, and allows both her and the Duke to show their true characters as they fall in love.

In The Merchant of Venice, Portia dresses as a man so she can travel to Venice and enter the courtroom as a lawyer to save her husband's best friend, Antonio. While this is a courageous move, Portia's assumption of a male identity also transforms her and allows her to take control of her own destiny. She starts out as a woman who is controlled by her late father's wishes, but by the end of the play, has taken control of her own destiny by testing Bassanio's fidelity to her.

Julia first dresses as Sebastian in The Two Gentlemen of Verona so she can safely travel by herself to Milan to follow the love of her life, Proteus, who was set to Milan to study. But then instead of revealing her identity when she arrives, she takes a job as the pageboy for her lover Proteus. Similar to Portia, she enjoys the freedom to play a role she never could as a woman, and the measure of control she gains over her life by pretending to be a man. By pretending to be a pageboy, she gets to have a job that she would have been ineligible for as

a woman, and thereby has control over the situation of her lover pursuing another woman because of his father.

The comedy of gender confusion is most evident in *As You Like It*, where Rosalind runs away to the forest to get away from Duke Frederick. Because it is scary to be alone on a journey through a forest, especially as a girl, she decides to disguise herself as a man named Ganymede. She then falls in love with Orlando but continues the farce. Rosalind does anything for her love, including having her disguised identity, Ganymede, pretend to be a girl for Orlando to practice his courting skills:

Were it not better,  
Because that I am more than common tall,  
That I did suit me all points like a man?  
A gallant curtlexe upon my thigh,  
A boar-spear in my hand; and, --- in my heart  
Lie there what hidden woman's fear there will, ---  
We'll have a swashing and a martial outside,  
As many other mannish cowards have  
That do outface it with their semblances.  
(Act 1 Scene 3)

Despite the societal restrictions on women during the time of Shakespeare, the women in his plays were just as competent as the men. The comedy of cross-dressing seems to be simply a side effect of what was surely a deeper theme by Shakespeare. Women were able to complete the same tasks men did just as well as the men, and sometimes, even better. Portia, for example, not only argued her case successfully in the courtroom, but she taught Bassanio a lesson as well. Despite their strength, however, Shakespeare's cross-dressing heroines never let us forget they are women at heart. Even though each of them shows masculinity through how they dress and act, they still have the physical and emotional characteristics of a woman. This is a problem sometimes. For example, when Viola is challenged to duel with Sir Andrew Aguecheek, she is afraid that she will not be able to match up to him because of her lack of strength. Each woman also retains a compassion that is typically reserved for

female characters, as we see in Portia when she begs for mercy for Antonio.

The cross-dressed women always tend to be independent, strong and determined instead of passive. Each woman takes the steps required of her in order to reach her goals.

They travel alone and enter into situations most women wouldn't dare, especially when it is for love. They are able to do so without losing their essential femininity, and perhaps that is the best argument that Shakespeare was an early feminist. He recognized that women were ruled by men, and that their place in society was a difficult one. His plays showed that without the Elizabethan-era societal restrictions, women could actually compete with men in any arena.

#### Conclusion

The study has also found answers to the research questions raised in beginning. The study has found that these texts do present women as lesser and inferior to men. Women don't occupy equal positions with men in society, socially, politically and economically. If they happen to occupy such positions, it implies disaster. The women are portrayed as creatures of passion and irrationality. The women are not capable to handle serious issues and challenges and because of this lack cannot be true leaders. The ample textual evidence has shown that women are presented as immoral and negative stereotypes. The women in these tragedies do not have the genuine freedom and liberty and all major decisions about their lives are taken by men without them being ever consulted.

Even though the women in Shakespeare's plays went against the rules of being a woman in the society of his time, is it fair to call him a "feminist" when feminism wasn't even a thing during the span of his life, nor did it come around for hundreds of years later? Should we look at Shakespeare's work with through the lens of modern feminism? In the end, men were still playing the roles, and technically it was a man pulling off a woman being a man, so some critics may conclude that it is not fair to look at William Shakespeare as a true feminist. The problem is that it is nearly impossible for us to look at a play from the perspective of one who was

watching the same play in the Elizabethan era. We can try, but we can't completely forget the events of the past 350 years and entirely disregard what we have learned and now know. We look at just about everything through the mind-set of a person who lives in modern times. So, because it is nearly impossible, we are bound to look at his plays with the ideas of underlying racism or feminism or some other major idea that is prevalent in our modern world.

The key word connected to feminism is idea. Feminism is just an idea we have developed. Just because the word itself did not exist during Shakespeare's time doesn't mean there weren't strong women before, or that Shakespeare didn't have a thought that maybe women were worth more than what his society allowed. Perhaps he thought that women were just as strong, capable and intelligent as men were. Gender roles play such a major theme in almost all of Shakespeare's work, it's possible to think that he believed in an idea akin to modern day feminism. Instead of coming out and saying something about a woman's role in society he used gender roles in his plays to show the audience that a woman is capable of conquering a man's role.

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