



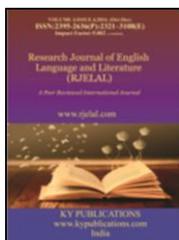
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“CAN THE SUBALTERN SPEAK?” : A RETROSPECTION OF WOMEN IN SHAKESPEARE’S PLAYS

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ABSTRACT

The term ‘Subaltern’ designates the population which are socially, politically and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure of the colony of the colonial homeless. Subaltern was coined by Antonio Gramsci notably through his work on cultural hegemony. The term ‘Subaltern and Subaltern studies’ entered through the work of Subaltern Studies Group (SSG). Subaltern refers to ‘any person or group of persons belonging to inferior rank and station, may be for race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion’. Gayatri Spivak in her essay ‘can the Subaltern speak?’ illustrates how can exclusively textual route towards understanding non-western customs is doomed only to replicating occidental patterns of understanding: There is no space From Where the Subaltern Subject Can Speak’. She also uses this theory to argue about gender difference and marginalization of women. This paper is an attempt to study the Subaltern characters especially women characters in Shakespeare’s plays using the theories of Gayatri spivak. The women characters like Audrey, Margaret as Bawdy women, the tragic innocent characters like Ophelia in Hamlet, Juliet from Roman and Juliet, Lavinia from Titus Andronicus etc, then the scheming Femme Fatal Sections Like Lady Macbeth, are all the subject of exploitation in one way or the other in the patriarchal male dominated society.

KEYWORDS: Subaltern, Antonio Gramsci, Subaltern Studies Group (SSG), Gayatri spivak, Shakespeare, marginalization.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In critical theory and post colonialism, the term Subaltern designates the populations which are socially, politically, and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure of the colony and of the colonial homeland. In describing “history told from below”, Subaltern was coined by Antonio Gramsci notably through his work on cultural hegemony, which ‘identified’ the groups that are excluded from a society’s established institutions and thus denied the means by which people have a

voice in their society. The term Subaltern and Subaltern studies entered post colonial studies through the works of the Subaltern Studies Group(SSG), a collection of South Asian historians who explored the political actor role of the men and women, who constitute the mass population, rather than the political roles of the social and economic elites, in the history of South Asia. Subaltern refers to any person or group of persons of inferior rank, and station, may be for race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion. This narrative

strategy most clearly inspired by the writings of Gramsci, Ranajith Guha, David Hardiman etc. Gayatri spivak uses feminist theory to argue that gender difference aggravates the marginalization of the colonized both within the European literary tradition and in contemporary culture. She just spoke against an overly broad application of the term in 1992:

.....Subaltern is not just a class word for "oppressed" for (the) other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the Pie In post colonial terms, everything that has limited or not access to the cultural imperialism is Subaltern-a space of difference. Now, who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. Its not Subaltern.....many people want to claim Subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated – against minority on the university campus; they don't need the word 'Subaltern'. They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They are within the hegemonic discourse, wanting a piece of the pie, and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves Subaltern. (Subaltern (Post colonialism) Wikipedia).

William Shakespeare used different dramatic techniques in his plays. One among them is of course the presentation of Subaltern women characters. The woman characters in Shakespeare's plays suffered man's psychological conflicts. The characters like Ophelia, Desdemona, Cordelia, Imogen, Queen Catherine etc, are all the victims of that. He appears to have developed a bias against women when we delve in to the soul of Gertrude, and that of Lady Macbeth. He seems to scandalize the readers by the delineation of such women as Cleopatra and Cressida. He condemned vehemently a wretched woman as Gertrude in the historical words, in hamlet Act1, scene II, line 146, "Frailty thy name is woman;" shows that Shakespeare treats women characters as Subaltern. His women characters are sexualized, cheeky and flirtations as Nurse in Romeo and Juliet, Margaret in 'much Ado about Nothing' or Audrey in 'As you like it' etc. Mainly speaking in prose, as befitting their low social

status, these characters often use sexual innuendo when conversing. The tragic innocent characters like Ophelia from 'Hamlet', Juliet from 'Romeo and Juliet' etc are tragically died once their innocence is lost. These characters are generally courtly, high born characters; The scheming Femme fatal characters like Lady Macbeth, an archetypical, last committed suicide.

II. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this paper is a retrospection of the Subaltern characters especially women characters in Shakespeare's plays. The methodology for this paper used here is analytical and I have taken materials from different sources like books, articles, journals, etc.

III. DISCUSSION

Early criticism of female characters in Shakespeare's drama focused on the positive attributes the dramatist bestows on them and often claimed that Shakespeare realistically captured the "essence" of femininity. According to Lewes "The poet's magic wand has laid open the depths of woman's nature, wherein, beside lovely and exquisite emotion, terrible passion play their dangerous and fatal part". The presentation of women in his plays does not deviate from the historical "order of words"- what Northrop Frye would say, He, of course, looks more lively and elegant in the presentation of super women characters, but the deformity of their existence with reference to their noble male counterparts is as wide and glaring as could be seen in case of any literary period of any other writer.

Women as Subaltern in Shakespeare's plays often related with the realities of Elizabethan period. At that time women were just subordinating the male ones. The female characters in his plays are totally assimilated into the play's design, is subject mechanism combined. Still, I can admit that Shakespeare is at all times a dramatist whose objectives are subdued to the needs of each dramatic enterprise. That enterprise will to created its own dramatic laws, its own problems and solutions. A designed concerned with high politics and therefore with men, may need women simply to throw light on the domestic side of their men folk. Lady Percy, Portia and Calpurnia exist only because

of Hotspung Brutus and Ceaser. His depiction of women such as Portia, Ophelia and Gertrude disrobe the entire saga of nobility in which the noble man is superior, and the noble woman is a Subaltern. The noble female has to secure a 'commanding' position to interfere in the politics beyond her bedroom service. So why does Portia address herself as Brutus 'half'? Why is a woman better half a man? The axiom has a dubious manifestation of the 'producer' and the 'product' why not man a better half of woman even when she is biologically capable of retaining and delivery the generations? For such displacement, the genesis of woman in all religious may be referred to.

Shakespeare's women characters are all intelligent without power. They don't have any power to stand alone and even to speak their voice on any matter. The presence of clown is one of the regular features of Shakespeare's comedies; with the fools come, the natural alliance woman. When Touchstone accompanies Celia and Rosalind in to exile; and Viola and Jeste strike up a guarded understand, Shakespeare degrade these characters with the assistance of men.(twelfth night, (III,I)). Spivak argues that the post colonial attempt at retrieving lost voices from historical archives and restoring them to history in a complicated issue, as even when the Subaltern does speak, her words are interpreted by scholars from within a patriarchal and imperialist model of discourse. Ophelia from Hamlet, is one such woman who lost voice, struggling between her father and brother. Unquestioningly obeying their remonstrances against perusing a relationship with Hamlet, she rejects his advances- which of course she believes to be genuine- and her speech reflects her deep and genuine sorrow, "And of ladies, most deject and wretched that sucked honey of his music vows.....o woe is me."

In Antony and Cleopatra, Shakespeare again proves the selection of Subaltern characters in his plays. The characters like Cleopatra who is just referred to as 'strumpet' and 'whore' on various

occasions throughout the play is unhidden and unrestricted. Here she is considered as a mere sexual product for men. Ophelia, the heroic

character in 'Hamlet' is complete dependent on her father, obedient to him and made here a victim of psychological oppression. Even Gertrude and Ophelia, die because of the selfish nature of the Claudius and hamlet respectively. "Frailty thy name is woman" is from the mouth of Hamlet about his own mother Gertrude who marries her husband's murderous brother. Rather to Lady Macbeth also who coerces her husband in to murder for voluptuous.

Desdemona one of the strongest characters but at last died of humiliation, replied to her father when her father asked her about her marriage, she answers forcefully, first pacifying him and then justifying her disobedience on the very ground of oppression by a Subaltern woman

.....my noble father,
I do perceive here a divided duty
To you I am bound, for life and education...
You are the lord of my duty,
I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband, And so much duty as my mother showed
To you preferring you before her father, So much I challenge that I may profers Due to the moor my Lord. (I.III. 179/188)

Desdemona by her cleverness thus appears obedient on her disobedient.

Shakespeare's Subaltern characters can be seen in the Winter's Tale, where the princess who happens to be brought up by a Shepherd on the desolate cost of Bohemia. Therefore, she is "the prettiest cow born class that ever ran on the green sword and indeed the Queen of curds and cream." In Loves Labour Lost, four women confront four male wooers, and arrive eventually at the terms on which the sexual settlement is made. So here, Shakespeare presented them as a weaker sex for the satisfaction of men. In the historical play Richard III, we can see four speaking parts for women; the three Queens, Margaret, Elizabeth, Anne and Duchess of York, Richard's mother. They constitute a single dramatic unit, though not a team comparable to the princess of Frances retinue. This unit is the chorus. The women are the elements of continuity in the civil war; they suffer, but survive as no man does. They are, if you like, the faded reminder of the

world of ceremony that was the England of Henry VI. Shakespeare presented these women as good for nothing because whatever happens to their men folk, the women remain to furnish alliances, to breed and to embellish palaces: Their expressive action is generally limited to anathema, lamentation and foreboding to explaining what it is like to be married to Richard or mother to politically dangerous children.

Women are treated in these plays as Subaltern because, I think having female characters on the stage is that they remained the audience of women off-stage. So, a female character addressing herself to matters of directly sexual interest, marriage and the importunance of city gallants. The legal position of Elizabethan woman evokes a strong audience reaction through the allusion to contemporary life. They are just like fools. The needs of stage craft go beyond straight reportage of women, as perceived by the dramatist. According to me, Shakespeare uses 'woman' is purely convention of discourse. Why these Subaltern women are for?

The political gender tensions already existent in the Elizabethan world influenced Shakespeare defeminizing Lady Macbeth to give here ambitions credibility. He takes Lady Macbeth and her oddity so far as to reverse the gender roles of Macbeth's weakness, as always is associated with the female but here, Lady Macbeth assumes Macbeth's bloody obligation and vice versa. The female cannot, although, survive in a world of men and thus Lady Macbeth's strength deteriorates and she falls into periods of lunacy and sleepwalking. She puts forward that none can call their power to account, but she is mistaken by the power of her own conscience. Her act of suicide indicates a personal trial and conviction. The irony underlies in the death of Lady Macbeth where the political structure is normalized with a return of male rule. Shakespeare reflects the culture of Elizabethan era through Lady Macbeth's tragic fall from her ambition leading to power. On the one hand, Lady Macbeth is the portraiture of the unnatural and ambiguous aspects of female political power and gender: hamlet, on the other hand, brings forward the issues of sovereignty and sexuality which again was very much prominent within the Elizabethan

world. Unlike Elizabeth, Hamlet's Gertrude, chose a new king for Denmark. By marrying Claudius the absolute power was also shifted to him by the Queen. The fate of the state and particularly of Gertrude depended upon her new husband. Claudius murdered his own brother and so he can never be the right heir to the throne. The woman was only a source and not the means. She was used as a tool and thus a distrust of males is shown who achieve power through marriage to the female monarch.

A historical and religious perspective will serve a comprehensive view on the topic and also help looking at as a great connect from past to present. In the history of every religion women have been adored but mostly from the perspectives of strengthening the men's power and position. It is not surprising to quote Aristotle saying that man is by nature superior to the female and so the man should rule and the woman should be ruled. Demosthenes wrote "we keep hetaerae for the sake of pleasure, female slaves for our daily care and wives to give us legitimate children and to be the guardians of our household. And to quote Meander, "A man who teaches a woman to write should know that he is providing poison to an asp."

We can see Subaltern within the Subaltern in Shakespeare's female characters. For example, Portia in contrast with Calpurnia, or Portia with Ophelia. The Subaltern within the Subaltern is a gyrating circle. There is a division of Subaltern on the basis of caste, and creed, and under this division on the basis of powered and empowered the male and female etc. The equation of relationship between Calpurnia and Caesar, and Portia and Brutus is similar. Both women are worried about their husband's health. Ivan Duthic means that Brabantio, the broken hearted father had sown the first evil seeds in the Moor's heart which might sink down in to subconscious mind and reappear in his conscious mind like a poison tree when Iago slandered Desdemona. Brabantio Says: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see, she has deceived her father and may thee? -*Othello*, Act 1, Scene III(292)

IV. CONCLUSION

Through this retrospective analysis of the Subaltern characters, especially women, I can able

to prove that these characters in one way or the other a product of exploitation from male ones. According to Carol Chillington Rutter, a feminist critic and author of *Enter the body: Women and Representation of Shakespeare Stage* (2001) focuses for instance on the body of Cordelia, as her father King Lear, carries her on to the state; on the body of Ophelia in the grave and on the bodies of the two women on the bed at the end of *Othello*, " a play that destroys women." So, this is what the condition of women as Subaltern. Every characters that analyzed here are the product of oppression and even subordinate to men. Shakespeare's plays often resurface with female characters which tell us not only his view of women, but also their status on Shakespeare's time. Ophelia, Lady Macbeth, Rosalind, King Lear's daughters, Margaret, Audrey and also viola in *twelfth Night* are all the part of that. The construction of female characters in Shakespeare's plays mainly reflect the Elizabethan image of women in general. In every plays, whether comedy, tragedy, or historical these people were considered as a marginalized one. So, they are the second category in a Male Dominated society. So, the women in Shakespeare's plays are mere Subaltern.

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