

Critical Paradigm of Women in Select Plays of Shakespeare

Dr.K.Lavanya, M.A.,M.Phil.,Ph.D.,
Assistant Professor & Head, Department of English,
St.Joseph's College of Arts & Science for women, Mookandapalli, Hosur, TamilNadu, India

Abstract: The historical records reveal that the position of women in the society was miserable. During Shakespeare's period women were bound to rules and convention of the patriarchal Elizabethan era. "**Women were to be seen, and not heard**" was the slogan of the era. Apart from the strictly regulated Elizabethan society, the representations of women have been depicted in diverse ways in Shakespeare dramas where he represents a controversial female figure of the Renaissance period.

According to Virginia Woolf, "**Shakespeare is the writer who made his writings transparent and free of any personal vices for delineating the women characters in his tragedies**". Shakespeare's women characters that in their richness transcend the limitations of time and so Shakespeare's theme become timeless.

Shakespeare was original in his portrayal of characters especially female characters. No writer before, with the possible exception of Chaucer had portrayed human characters in a realistic manner. In this respect he had none to imitate, though he himself was imitated by all succeeding writers. Whether life or nature is his subject he gives evidence of having seen things with his own eyes. Nothing in his work is second-hand.

In Macbeth, the ambient and circumstances in which men dominate and rule, female characters are not given importance. The women are in need of great strength, stability and flexibility to adapt and survive. The three witches live in their own world and rule by their own. They control and manipulate people without fear. They are mainly responsible to spoil the mind of Macbeth to become the king of Scotland.

Lady Macbeth is perhaps the most complex and the strategic of all the characters. She is feminine but ambition dominates her. This is seen when she speaks to the witches.

"I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it is smiling in my face
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this (7)

The role of Lady Macbeth is at that of a temptress or a witch but a devoted wife, who wants her husband to rise up the ladder and not wallow in the quagmire of military massacre. When the witches tempt him, the ambition enters his mind. They tempt him with evil intention because they are evil.

"A murderous woman and a murdered woman" – Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff are placed by their fate at opposite poles; and in their characters also they stand poles apart. The one a partner in madness of ambition, the other a wife in the strength of love; the one deep in the confidence of her husband in the compassion of crime, the other sharing with hers, the sweet happiness of hearth and home; the one childless and with a mother's love lying barren within her, the other surrounded by little ones on whom she could pour forth, the wealth of a mother's love.

Among the attractions of the play 'Macbeth' to a Reader-Critic is the characterization of the weird sisters. Their fascination is irresistible and Aristotle's methodology of tragedy as evoking a sense of pity and fear is fully manifest in this play. The witches being sinister, their impact forebodes evil and disaster and way they work, structures the plot.

It may sound odd that a weird creature, a metaphor for evil is a source of fascination. But studied as a metaphor, it has its own aesthetic existence and induces in the reader, a complex of emotions. It is in the sense that the witches constitute a source of aesthetic attribution for the play, one moral judgment is struck as a label on the forehead of these weird sisters riding a broom or sailing in a sieve; they evoke in a sense of fear and superstition.

Are these creatures moral or immoral? The Elizabethan belief made them agents of evil and temptresses of darkness. They are like the fiery dragons that Milton refers to in "Paradise Lost". In unquestionable terms, they are set to tempt us with the 'honest trifles' to betray us in the deepest consequence.

The witches control and direct Macbeth's will; Macbeth has no will of his own. The predictions of the witches call forth his ambition, which was latent in him and then Lady Macbeth's instigation drive him on to the crime.

Othello is one of the most pitiable plays of Shakespeare, not because of Othello's fall or misery of which he has himself been the architect. If the Lear is predisposed to madness, Othello is predisposed to suspicion. It is this mental position that makes him swallow every concocted tale of Desdemona's infidelity. Othello suffers from an inferiority complexity because of his colour. If she was able to win the heart, it was because of the immature girl's admiration of Othello's exploits.

She could perceive his greatness and forget his colour but Othello could never get out of complexional complex. As though adding fuel to fire, Brabantio insinuates him, asking him to be beware of the Venetian girl who had deceived her father and may not shrink from deceiving him. The intensification of his suspicious nature easily links up with the possibility of fair skinned Venetian girl desiring the hand of a Venetian gentleman; Brabantio's prejudice is strengthened by Cassio's announcement of Desdemona's elopement through a phrase that has a racial dimension and age dimension.

But Desdemona braves her father's displeasure in marrying Othello. With her modesty and gentleness are combined firmness of will and clearness of purpose. To her father's challenge, she answers:

"My noble father

I do perceive here a divided duty.

To you I am bound for life and education;

But heirs my husband;
And so much duty as my mother show'd
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that, I may profess
Due to Moor, my lord."

Desdemona, a charming, virtuous and devoted girl finds no words even to defend her in a moment of crisis, which ends her life.

Emilia a woman of practical intelligence and emotional resilience follows the footsteps of her husband. She speaks disparagingly of men, but until the last scene, she supports her husband when needed. Her dishonesty of stealing Desdemona's handkerchief turns out to have devastating consequences. Finally she sees the truth and abandons all loyalty to Iago and comes out to defend Desdemona's reputation. Both Emilia and Desdemona bond over husband trouble.

Shakespeare's scholar Harold Bloom points out that of all the people in the play, Emilia is the only one who ultimately can bring Iago down. That's an interesting irony. Iago, who is so good at predicting and manipulating other people's behavior, only falls to understand one person, the person he should have known best.

According to Emilia, husbands cheat on their wives and often physically abuse them. She recognizes their dual standard when it comes to gender and fidelity and she heartily objects. She happily sacrifices her life for the sake of Desdemona.

The old play "**King Lear and His Three Daughters**" performed at the Rose theatre early in April, 1594 and printed later in 1605 by Simon. The author of the play is unknown. The ante-Shakespeare Lear is a patient, simple, old man, who bears his sorrows meekly till Cordelia arrives with her husband, the king of France, and his victorious army, and restores her father, to the throne of Britain.

On the whole Shakespeare submitted the old play into a new tragedy by an entire originality in the spiritual portraiture of the personage. The real madness of Lear and the feigned madness of Edgar are well contrasted, so as to heighten the intensity of the former.

A lot of critical attention has fallen on King Lear because of its being a Christian play and a free Christian theme, the idea of good and evil, of confession and redemption were not pronounced before the Christian era. The Greek philosophy which called the God, the father made him kindles and retributive.

Shakespeare had no use for such a philosophy. Man is responsible for his actions. Psychological pre-disposition is what determines the character than the pre-ordination. The distinction between Goneril and Regan on one hand and Cordelia on the other is based on their character as in the case of Lear, character is destiny.

It is interesting to note that the tragedy of King Lear does not centre round the women characters. It is the King's ego and desire for exquisite confession of love leads to the tragedy. The climax is in the opening scene where the King divides his kingdom between his two daughters and disinherits Cordelia.

Cordelia's suffering is not imposed on her. It is a consequence of the king's irrational prejudice. Goneril and Regan are evil but only when Lear imposes on them the

condition that they should proclaim their love and what they would get would be dependent on their love for him.

The two sisters vie with each other in confessing their love so that they would draw the larger moiety, Cordelia believes that love is silent and she cannot leave her heart into her mouth and speak what she means not. She has not mastered the gilts and only art of flattery though the king is equally angry with all of them.

The two unnatural daughters appear to us no less than personifications of cruelty and ingratitude. Whenever they appear on the stage, "pure horror" reigns as from the presence of "gorgons, and Hydras and Chimaeras dire." Coleridge notes that Goneril and Regan do not appear often, so that the peculiar effect of horror which they produce is not mitigated, as it might be, by familiarity; and when they are present, "not a sentiment, not an image, which can give pleasure on its own account, is admitted."

Cordelia seems to bear the brunt "come not between the Dragon and his wrath; the bow is bent and drawn, make from the shaft" are his words of anger in the first scene, first act. It is only later in the play when he is slighted and driven out of the house with his entourage severely curtailed, that he realizes that his two daughters were pelicans that would draw blood from the smitten breast of the mother.

It seems neither good fortune nor ill stick to Cordelia herself; this is at once her strength and infirmity both. She falls into dumbness-into such dumbness as was her first undoing and passes, quiet, from our sight. Candidness and reticence are excellently blended in her. She has the magnetic charm of a loving heart.

What she speaks to her father is still insufficient. Presumably she does not find speech itself simple or genuine enough for the expression of her deep heart. "A virgin delinquency in genuine and deep feeling" make her shrink from verbal protestations.

The critics have not referred to the evil in the sisters causing the tragedy of Lear. In fact they are maligned by the king. Cordelia escapes even from that when in the last scene Lear carries the dead Cordelia in his arms asks the Almighty "Why a cat or a dog has life but not she?"

Criticism to-day looks at Cordelia as an example of ethical or moral injustice as she is the purest of the pure in spite of that she suffers. King Lear draws mere sympathy than Cordelia which is morally unfair. In spite of King Lear's suffering because of his predisposition to madness, he is sympathetically approached.

Female characters play an important role for the dramatic run of events in Shakespeare's plays. Feminist criticism appears to be the fastest growing and most widespread of all recent approaches to Shakespeare. There are several women personalities in his plays. It always seems that there is a tragic burden and guilt attached to their characters that ends in their deaths.

Bibliography

- [1] Eagleton, Terry. Shakespeare and Society: Critical Studies in Shakespearean Drama. 1967
- [2] Callaghan, Dymna, ed. A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare. 2001.
- [3] B.L.Samdani, Shakespeare's King Lear. Navrang offset printers, Agra.