

Feminism in Shakespeare's Plays: A Reflection of Renaissance Society

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ABSTRACT : The current study is on feminist-based comparison of women characters portrayed in Shakespearean plays [1]. Women characters represented by Shakespeare are of two kinds: one, who refuses to submit themselves to men and claim for equal rights. The second type is of submissive one, who carries out the roles of Elizabethan women who also felt that obeying the patriarchal rules does not assure cheerfulness for women. Most of the female characters though humble or not, underwent the influence of male authority as well as subjugation. This study is based on the comprehensive analysis of feminist theories and deconstructive approach of the selected plays of Shakespearean tragedies wherein the characters are often portrayed as physical and the psychological victimization. The Elizabethan period females were represented to be weaker than males and were said as "women are to be seen, and not heard." Shakespeare recognized that community boundaries towards the treatment of women were not considered fair and so the tool of cross-dressing was utilized to prove that women are as proficient as men and to hide the gender discrepancy. This also analyzes that the women as bold, independent and not submissive to men of that period. Shakespeare who lived way ahead of his time has identified the elements of feminism even before the concept of feminism emerged. Feminism is an idea that has been developed only after Shakespeare. Though the word feminism did not exist during the age of Shakespeare doesn't mean that there were no brave women during that era, or that Shakespeare didn't have an idea of women who were worth more than what the public allowed. Gender roles played a most important subject similar to modern day feminism that supports the study. The gender roles were implemented in the plays to reveal the spectators that a woman is competent of winning a man's role. Some of Shakespeare's competent female characters, who spend most of the drama as men were also discussed in this study, they include in 'The Merchant of Venice' Portia plays the role of an advocate, Viola in 'Twelfth Night', in 'As You like It' Rosalind take up the male lead role and Julia in 'The Two Gentlemen of Verona'.

Keywords: Feminism, Feminist Theories, Deconstructive Approaches, Shakespeare, Submissive Women, Cross-Dressing.

Introduction

Gender plays a significant role in defining the power, privilege and possibilities that some people comprise and some people do not in the society and it also affects the development towards fairness and liberty from bias. Theory of Gender is constituted for the study of what is unspoken as masculine gender and the odd behavior that are seen in any circumstance, community, the public, or in any area of study. Research on gender study is vital on all the basic dimensions of life that offers rationalized pragmatic knowledge about gendered practices, custom, and discourses in politically considerable ways [19]. The

early 21st century has witnessed the Ideas and notions concerning gender as the most important literary themes and many writers have ardently thrown themselves genuinely on social gender and biological sex in terms of life. Women were viewed as caretakers and homemakers and were discouraged from articulating their opinion about politics or any other contemporary issues during 17th century, so most of the literature that was created during this period centered on male characters. The educated women who were capable of writing were constrained from pursuing their talent [12]. The 18th century faced the same submissive women. Only

during the Cultural Revolution in Britain brought the changes in the roles of women by assisting their husbands in work and in education but still they were considered as victims of both economic and social discrimination [28], [29]. Even during 19th century women weren't given importance like men which was revealed by the first feminist American novelist Mary Virginia [30], [31]. The suppression and inferior public attitude towards women also reflected in her literature as the gradual uprising against the patriarchy. Movement of feminism made its presence during the latter half of the 20th century. It shed light on the gender construct and envisioned new theories and definitions and its impacts on human.

Feminist Theories

Feminist theory according to Wikipedia is the expansion of speculative, imaginary, or philosophical discussion aiming to comprehend and analyze the gender inequality that is prevailing in the society. It studies the roles of men and women in society, their experiences, and field of interests, their responsibilities, and feminist politics [5], [15] & [27]. Its idea often explores the theory of feminism like discrimination, objectification, domination, patriarchy, stereotype, art history and contemporary art, and aesthetics.

Deconstructive Approaches

The term Deconstruction means analyzing the words in a work of fiction or nonfiction to discover its true significance, which the author intended. Deconstruction in Shakespeare's work assumed a tone of far greater reservation exposing the contradictions and internal oppositions found. A feminist may deconstruct an existing novel to showcase the oppression of women. Shakespearean deconstruction's on literary criticism is an intensely human affair and its course is influenced by the chaotic forces. Everyone may not agree with deconstructionist elucidation, some may not agree with the idea of deconstruction, but still most of them recognize and realize it.

Women in Renaissance

Women of Renaissance period lived a life meant only for sex while on the other hand everything was ruled by men, even during half the century of Elizabethan era [16], [2]. They seemed to be prim and proper by playing a limited role. Women were believed to be seen and not to be heard. The ideal women are the one who probably are able to articulate their intellect but their opinion and feelings were controlled only by men. They were controlled by their parents until marriage, and then they become typical housewives once they legally belong to their husbands. These women had different roles in different classes. Women from the Low class were anticipated to take care of everything as housewives, the women of working class were expected to work for their husbands in business and to take care of the house hold activities and the women from the upper class had maids who help them in their household activities but still they were responsible for the rest of the house hold [13], [14]. Women can neither live alone if they were single nor can work by themselves. The women staying single were forced to move in with one of her male relatives or become a nun and to join a convent. The upper class women had the privilege of expressing themselves, but not sufficiently whereas the women who belong to middle class are permitted to come outside and they can hardly express and that too it was tainted by male influence.

Reflection of Renaissance Society in Shakespeare's Plays

Shakespeare used an obstinate character and the other one ultimate woman character of Renaissance in one play to portray that they are polar opposites [18]. Though half of a century was ruled by women during Renaissance period but men ruled in every other thing [17]. Women were not permitted to speak their minds and they were dealt as puppets as dictated by men. These women were supposed to be house wives and obey the commands of their husbands if not she would be termed as a shrew. In William Shakespeare's play 'The Taming of the Shrew' the main character Katherine, a shrew is a

stubborn woman. The term shrew utilized is not a positive connotation when concerning the women of Renaissance, people looked down at this type of female characters. These shrewd women were expressive and frank but still they were unheard. Only men were allowed to share their views and expressive. The character Katherine is portrayed as a shrew of extreme level, her expressions and actions are exceptionally aggressive, so everyone had a sense of strong disapproval for Katherine. The other type is the ideal woman quiet and respectful, controlled by men, and who enjoys the notice got by male characters as a graceful women. This perfect woman character in the same play is Katherine's sister Bianca. Handling the two contradictory characters is a great deal of Shakespeare's style in reflecting the renaissance era.

Shakespeare's Feministic Ideas

Shakespeare's female protagonists suggest that he was the 16th century feminist who started to recognize the societal restrictions that were not fair towards women [4], [8]. The characters of Shakespeare's are victimized both physically and psychologically [6]. Shakespearean plays portray male rivals cause destruction their egos influence decisions and attack their internal emotions to devastate righteous women who become the sufferers of political machinations and intrigues [11]. Shakespeare's women are of two type one the shrew and the other submissive of Elizabethan era. The Elizabethan submissive woman, also exhibit that obeying the patriarchal rules literally also will not assure happiness that might escort to victimization and male domination. Almost most of the female either obedient or not, experienced the domination of men during Shakespearian period. Struggle was more to the women who followed the roles of the Elizabethan era than the women fought against it [10]. Though feminism wasn't popular during his period some of his women characters opposed the rules of being a woman in the society of his period. The idea of Feminism existed during Shakespeare's time through the characters of women who were as sturdy, skilled and smart as men. It was revealed

through the description of the idea that women were worth more than the society permitted.

Shakespeare's Submissive Women

Insubordinate women of Shakespeare's plays seldom receive satisfying endings consider [22]. Lady Macbeth from Macbeth is responsible for Macbeth's setup and assassination of King Duncan and depart this life by killing himself. Katherine, despite being beautiful, refuses to surrender to become the possessions of man. Her sister Bianca is calm, passive, and gorgeous and so countless preferred to tie the knot, so the father plans to tame the shrew and court the lovely Bianca. Katherine is made obedient as a woman should be of Elizabethan era, by Petruchio and the fire inside her was quenched. Even the well-mannered women in Shakespeare's plays faced frightful ends [21]. In Hamlet though Ophelia was authentic in taking care and concern of Hamlet's welfare and very dutiful to her father's demands at last dies by being so sad that she drowns. The innocent Desdemona in Othello, in spite of being beautiful and loyal consent her husband strangle her to fatality because she believed that she is worthy of it. Juliet, a young and loyal woman to Romeo in Romeo and Juliet slay herself, because Romeo was too poignant to stay five more minutes for her to wake [20]. A sincere and fostering Cordelia, gets expelled by her father in King Lear proceeds to care for him when he was in the status of complete madness was hanged towards the end of the play. Even though these characters replicate much of admiration for women on Shakespeare's plays they are seldom rewarded.

Shakespeare's Use of Cross-Dressing

In order to highlight the idea that most of the women are in fact as proficient as men Shakespeare utilized the device of cross-dressing [9]. He gracefully handled this device to make the audience believe that even women are competent in accomplishing things like men. Some female characters of Shakespeare who were dressed as men to execute their duty are [25] the character of Julia in The Two Gentlemen of Verona performed liberally by

transforming herself into a young man to grab the attention of her lover [24]. The female character Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* masks herself as an attorney in order to enter the courtroom at Venice to save the hero of the play. Viola in *Twelfth Night* in order to conquer the mind of Duke Orsino becomes a eunuch [23]. The other character Rosalind in *As You Like It* flees from Duke Frederick to test the love of Orlando acts as a shepherd. The heroines who masked themselves as male take a compassionate view of cross-dressing as an approach used by their better half and girlfriends to get amalgamated with the person they loved most and to save them from the male sexual craving. Generally a cross-dressed man was more appreciated by the audience than a cross-dressed woman characters; in Shakespeare's comedies one can hardly come across men in women's clothes.

Conclusion

Shakespeare's play reflects the England's lexis and thoughts in general. Ben Jonson's words fit so well that he has always been concerned about the women as human life. The concerns of women as human life are portrayed in the tragedies *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and in the comedy [26] *Twelfth Night*, measure a guide of patriarchy. His comedies bring the fabricated world back to balance leaving their vibrant days behind and admit the influence of men. The heroines get what they deserved and that was the only option which conform that the Renaissance era ideal women of a unspoken and submissive wife [3], [7]. His plays are of the indication that women could be just as smart, brave, foolish, and funny as men and also as fully-formed human beings with full of thoughts and desires. William Shakespeare was a sixteenth-century feminist in all possible ways representing the virtues in relationship to the male which was considered to be the reflection of the Renaissance society.

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