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Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Credibility of Women Characters in the Selected Tragedies of William Shakespeare

Surajit Sen

Lecturer, Department of English and Soft Skills,
Faculty of Management
ICFAI University Meghalaya
India.

Abstract:

The study of English Literature is incomplete without a study of William Shakespeare. Credited to be one of the most successful playwrights of all times, Shakespeare's candid way of expressing the multi-dimensional facets of human personality is undoubtedly supreme. His characters are realistic, having myriad idiosyncrasies. Their words cannot be negated totally. A lot has been said and discussed about the male characters of his plays. They are said to be the backbone in all his plays. However, his women characters also play a significant role. They play a pivotal role in the overall development of the plot. They reflect the mind of their male counterparts and often act as a folly to the latter. They counter check the misgivings of the male characters and virtually lift the morale of everybody. It is with this idea that this paper discusses the credibility of Shakespeare's women characters in his select tragedies.

Key Words: women, credibility, role, society, tragedies

INTRODUCTION:

A modest woman, dressed out in all her finery, is the most tremendous object of the whole creation.

(She Stoops to Conquer – 2.118-120)

Indeed, these words of Oliver Goldsmith come as a truth in every sense of its comprehension. Women are always considered the best creation of the almighty. But still they are made to feel that they have no position in society. Right from the Biblical times, the position of women in society has been contentious. Women are seen to be the cause of all problems men face in this world and this perhaps started with Eve in the Paradise of Eden. But what is often forgotten is the fact that if there is the kind and compassionate side of women, then there is also the vicious and unsympathetic side too. If she is gentle, then she is courageous too. She is an amalgamation of all that comprises our world. No doubt why then it is difficult to ascertain what lies in the unfathomable depths of a woman's world.

Literature, as it is said to be the mirror of the society, has always tried to project and portray women in either real or imagined terms. There may be instances where women have been glorified to the extent that they may not be true, yet the credibility lies in who and how one sees them to be. The literatures of various ages have shown women perhaps in the same manner they in actual were at that time. Form these, which then become the major sources of understanding women, women psychology, and their position and status in society, we get a true picture of the lives of women. The role played by women then and now is perhaps the

same, with the distinction that women now are more educated and free. They do have a certain amount of say in their life, be it their home or workplace.

WOMEN IN THE ELIZABETHAN AGE:

Women in her greatest perfection was made to serve and obey man.

The protestant leader John Knox, in his *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, 1558, made the remark above to show beyond doubt that women are subservient to men and that they should always be at their beck and call. This, in a crux, was the life of the Elizabethan women.

Elizabethan age was the age of renaissance. But little did this renaissance bring a renaissance in the life of women. Their condition remained little less than good. The new learning and thinking ameliorated the conditions of the wealthy women, who seemed to have received some form of education, though only at home or perhaps in the grammar schools, but were certainly now allowed to go to the university or take up any jobs. They were formally trained in such chores as befitted the so called 'womenly activities' like those of painting, sewing, dancing and playing a musical instrument. They were taught to learn all those which would provide entertainment to the men folk.

However, the conditions of the women of the lower strata seemed not to have improved by those standards of the wealthy ones. They were deprived of any form of education. The only knowledge they perhaps gained was how to work in the fields or at home – cooking, cleaning, and keeping the men happy.

Marriage as an institution was very important. Unmarried women, especially of the lower strata of the society, were dubbed as witches and perhaps burnt to death. Those who remained spinster, sought to save themselves from being branded as witches by joining the nunnery. However, it was imperative that women should have the consent of the parents before marrying. Prior to her marriage, she was the responsibility of her father and after marriage she would be the responsibility of her husband and later her sons. She could not inherit property, neither of her father nor of her husband. All property rights were exclusively meant only for the men, except for the monarchy.

This status of the women in the Elizabethan age was further cemented by religion which thought that women were made to serve and obey men as it is divinely ordained. Elizabethan woman were raised to believe that they were inferior to men. The Church believed this and quoted the Bible in order to ensure the continued adherence to this principle.

The literature of the period is replete with instances which reflect beyond doubt the conditions of women.

SHAKEPEARE'S PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN CHARACTERS:

Frailty, thy name is women!

(Hamlet – 1.2.146)

Perhaps, this is what society deems of women! Being physically weak, incapable of any hard labour and always seen as an object of sensual and physical gratification, women have been considered as 'frail'.

But talking of the women characters in Shakespeare's tragedies, one will find it extremely difficult to come to their real terms. This is because Shakespeare has never been able to project the values pertaining to women as human values. His major problem lies in the fact that all his women characters are exceptionally courageous, blunt and scheming or totally meek, silent and dutiful.

Shakespeare's presentation of women shows his feelings about women and their roles in society. It is noticed that the 'upper class women' are presented as 'possessions' of their fathers and husbands. In most cases, they are socially restricted and unable to explore the world around them. These women are intimidated and controlled by the men in their lives.

Shakespeare shows the 'lower class women' to be more aware. They are given more freedom to explore their sexuality, perhaps because their low-status renders them socially harmless. However, women are never totally free in Shakespeare's plays. If not owned by husbands and fathers, many low class characters are owned by their employers.

Helen Zimmern, in the preface to the English translation of Louis Lewes's study *The Women of Shakespeare*, argued in 1895 that "of Shakespeare's dramatis personae, his women are perhaps the most attractive, and also, in a sense, his most original creations, so different are they, as a whole, from the ideals of the feminine type prevalent in the literature of his day"(vi). Lewes himself strikes a similar tone of praise in his conclusion: "The poet's magic wand has laid open the depths of woman's nature, wherein, beside lovely and exquisite emotion, terrible passions play their dangerous and fatal part"(369).

Nevertheless, on careful reading, one may notice that many of Shakespeare's female characters exercise a rather great deal of power and influence, and often do so in unusual and even subversive ways that challenge traditional gender roles. Although the male characters generally fail to notice or refuse to acknowledge women's authority and influence openly, they are undoubtedly affected by it.

WOMEN IN THE SELECT TRAGEDIES OF SHAKESPEARE:

Shakespeare's women characters in his tragedies show multiple idiosyncratic characteristics. They are but a whole gamut of binary oppositions. If there is the good, there is the bad; and with the heroine there is the villain. Again, they are mothers, wives, queens, daughters and lovers; needless to say that some of them are even mistresses. However, a differing stance taken by Shakespeare from the societal norms is that though he made the male characters the protagonist of his plays, yet the dominant role has been bestowed upon the females. They are the ones who shape not only the progress of the plot but also the fate of the men. They are cunning, calculative and enigmatic – they are bold and beautiful; they are beauty and beast!

To ascertain their credibility, the women characters of six tragedies of Shakespeare have been studied: *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. All the women characters have different temperaments and reveal different facets of women at large.

Portia, in *Julius Caesar*, is as noble as her husband Brutus. Among all those created by Shakespeare, there is not a relations between a husband and a wife purer, nobler and more worthy of reverence than that between Brutus and Portia. She has a marked and vigorous personality, unlike many other women characters in Shakespeare's tragedies. Not till she feels that she has put her powers of self control to proof, not till she knows herself worthy, does she claim her right to stand forth as her husband's counsellor and comrade; but when she does claim it, it is not as a favour, but as an incontrovertible right:

I should not need if you were gentle, Brutus.
 Within the bond of marriage, tell me, Brutus,
 Is it excepted I should know no secrets
 That appertain to you? Am I yourself
 But, as it were, in sort or limitation,
 To keep with you at meals, comfort your bed,
 And talk to you sometimes? Dwell I but in the suburbs
 Of your good pleasure? If it be no more,
 Portia is Brutus' harlot, not his wife.

(*Julius Caesar* – 2.1.280-290)

And then she says again,

If this were true, then should I know this secret.
 I grant I am a woman, but withal
 A woman that Lord Brutus took to wife.
 I grant I am a woman, but withal
 A woman well-reputed, Cato's daughter.
 Think you I am no stronger than my sex,
 Being so fathered and so husbanded?
 Tell me your counsels. I will not disclose 'em.
 I have made strong proof of my constancy,
 Giving myself a voluntary wound
 Here in the thigh. Can I bear that with patience,
 And not my husband's secrets?

(*Julius Caesar* – 2.1.291-302)

She is aware of her weakness when she says:

O constancy, be strong upon my side
 Set a huge mountain 'tween my heart and tongue!
 I have a man's mind, but a woman's might.
 How hard it is for woman to keep counsel.

(*Julius Caesar* – 2.4.5-8)

This makes her more prone to her love and devotion for Brutus. When the rumours of the confusion get wind, and also that Octavius and Antony have triumphed, she is unable to find relief of tears. She cannot speak out and her heart breaks forcing her to commit suicide by eating burning charcoal. She dies for the sake of honour, of being "Cato's daughter" and "Brutus Portia", thereby proving beyond doubt that she is the daughter and wife of stoics who can inflict wound on herself and bear it calmly as proof of her constancy. Such was her love and devotion to her husband, while Brutus adores her for being an ideal wife and prays, "O ye gods, / Render me worthy of this noble wife" (*Julius Caesar* – 2.1.303-304).

In sharp contrast to Portia is Calpurnia, the wife of Julius Caesar. If there is a perfect union, trust and confidence of true conjugal love between Brutus and Portia, there is no such refined reciprocity of love between Caesar and Calpurnia. She seems to be like a toy to Caesar, a favoured dependent to the master, Caesar. Though Calpurnia is devoted to Caesar, yet she seems to have no independent existence who makes no attempt to claim to be his true companion, unlike Portia. All that Calpurnia does is to allow her fears to make her importunate, not for trust and confidence, but to have her way.

Ophelia, on the other hand, is young and inexperienced. A.C. Bradley says that the play *Hamlet* depends upon her 'childlike nature' and 'inexperience'. Further Bradley says, "Ophelia, therefore, was made a character who could not help Hamlet, and for whom on the other hand he would not naturally feel a passion so vehement or profound as to interfere with the main motive of the play. And in the love and the fate of Ophelia herself there was introduced an element not of deep tragedy, but of pathetic beauty...." (129).

She has lost her mother and has only a father and a brother, affectionate but worldly, to take care of. Her brother, Laertes, names her 'Rose of May'. Upon her burial, Laertes says:

Lay her i' the earth;
And from her fair and unpolluted flesh
May violets spring!

(*Hamlet* – 5.1.231-233)

Ophelia's character is of simple unselfish affection. Her ignorance makes her father and brother jealously anxious of her. She later loses her reason. But what could a girl do whose lover is estranged from her, goes zany, and kills her father. "In her wanderings, we feel the tone of deepest sorrow, but never the agonized cry or fear or horror which makes madness dreadful or shocking" (Bradley, 132-3). Amanda Millibard in her essay, *Ophelia* writes:

She is not involved with matters of state; she spends her days no doubt engaged in needlepoint and flower gathering. She returns the love shown to her by Polonius and Laertes tenfold, and couples it with complete and unwavering loyalty... Even though her love for Hamlet is strong, she obeys her father when he tells her not to see Hamlet again or accept any letters that Hamlet writes. Her heart is pure, and when she does do something dishonest, such as tell Hamlet that her father has gone home when he is really behind the curtain, it is out of genuine fear...

Her frailty and innocence work against her as she cannot cope with the unfolding of one traumatic event after another. Ophelia's darling Hamlet causes all her emotional pain throughout the play, and when his hate is responsible for her father's death, she has endured all that she is capable of enduring and goes insane. But even in her insanity she symbolizes, to everyone but Hamlet, incorruption and virtue.

Queen Gertrude, on the other hand, can be seen as someone who cares none to satisfy her lust for carnal pleasures. It had hardly been a few months since her husband's death that she ties the knot once again. And the person whom she chooses as her second husband is

none other than her own brother-in-law, the younger brother of her deceased husband. Her son, Hamlet, finds this new relationship of his mother awkward. Shakespeare never mentions or justifies the reason why she does so. A possible interpretation to the action of Queen Gertrude could be her extra marital relations with Claudius, her husband's younger brother. Her action can also be seen from a political point of view too. Claudius had murdered her husband. Her son, Hamlet, was not in Denmark when the incident happened. She may have felt insecure of her life at that moment. To save herself and the life of her son, who would next be the King, she decided to risk all that she could and become the wife of her husband's murderer. Whatever may have been her reason to do so, yet she remains a dark character in the play and is remembered as an epitome of betrayal.

In *Othello*, Desdemona is really 'virtuous' both before and since her clandestine marriage to Othello. She is, as he father supposes her to be:

A maiden never bold,
Of spirit so still and quiet, that her motion
Blush'd at herself.

(*Othello* – 1.3.94-96)

Her tactlessness springs from her innocence and purity. She makes a capital blunder in engaging herself to solicit for Cassio. She has not the remotest idea that her action will be misinterpreted. Iago, in spite of his wickedness, says a simple truth about her:

She is of so free, so kind, so blessed a disposition,
she holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more
than she is requested.

(*Othello* – 2.3.312-314)

Othello calls her his 'soul's joy' until the arch contriver, Iago poisons their relationship. He now calls her 'weed', which is just 'so lovely fair' and which just 'smells so sweet'. He doubts and blights her virginal and married chastity, and addresses her as a 'public commoner' and a 'whore'.

Loveliness and sweetness, fairness and faithfulness, integrity and simplicity – the ingredients that constitute the virtue of virginity in women – are integral to Desdemona throughout her life, and even after she is strangled to death by Othello.

Desdemona dies a 'guiltless death' and desires to be commended to her 'kind lord'. However, Desdemona meets her tragic end because she is not assertive and spirited like Brutus's Portia, who claims her equality with her husband:

Which by the right and virtue of my place
I ought to know of: upon my knees
I charm you, by my once commended beauty,
By all your vows of loves, and that great vow
Which did incorporate and make us one.

(*Julius Caesar* – 2.1.269-273)

In contrast to Desdemona are Emilia and Bianca in the play *Othello*. Emilia is a typical wife who sees not through the folly of her husband and supports him in all actions against Othello, though she feels that whatever she is doing is for the good of Othello and

Desdemona. Little does she know or realize that her act of stealing Desdemona's handkerchief will ruin four lives in the process. But as a dutiful, honest and husband loving wife, she does whatever is told to her.

Bianca is lovesick. Her love for Roderigo makes her travel all the way from Venice to Cyprus. Though she has not much of a role to play, yet she is an integral part of the sub-plot of the play. She is a seamstress, whose most important role comes when she throws the handkerchief of Desdemona on the face of Roderigo while Othello and Iago are hiding behind to catch Roderigo of cuckolding Othello. She, thus, sets the climax for the great tragedy of Desdemona and Othello to culminate.

Cordelia, daughter of King Lear, is one of the noblest heroines of Shakespeare. Though Cordelia is little seen and less heard, yet she, by the impression left by her is ubiquitous. With all her sweetness and youthful elegance, she is as obstinate and as proud as her father.

The Earl of Kent seems to ask pity for her against the hot and hasty consequences of Lear's folly. His main aim is to emphasize as well as applaud her strength of mind:

The Gods to their dear shelter take thee, maid,
That justly think'st and hast most rightly said.

(*King Lear* – 1.1.181-182)

The integrity of her nature is linked with her innate dignity. She has no traffic with bargaining Burgundy, to whom she replies with acid sharpness, when her self-respect is put to defiance.

Candidness and reticence are excellently blended in her. That 'glib and oily art of flattery' is something extraneous to her nature. Her compassion, like that of Desdemona, seems to embrace all suffering. It, however, seems neither good fortune nor ill can stick to Cordelia. This at once is her strength and infirmity both. She says:

For thee, oppressed King, am I cast down;
Myself could else out-frown false Fortune's frown.

(*King Lear* – 5.3.5-6)

Thereafter she falls into dumbness – into such dumbness as was her first undoing – and passes, quiet, from our sight.

It is, however, not only Shakespeare's men who are vile and wicked. The women too are equally well versed in trickery and temptation.

Cordelia's sisters Goneril and Regan symbolize those children who forget the sacrifices their parents make. They are the ones who are only interested in their parents' wealth and once they inherit it, they look not back to shun their parents away forever. King Lear's fault is that he is blind in seeing through the mischievous ploys of his two daughters. He trusts them more than his own self. Little does he realize that his daughters would abandon him and leave him to become zany. Ambitious love can be dangerous and the consequences of which is rightfully faced by King Lear.

Of all the vile characters of Shakespeare, Lady Macbeth is the most intriguing. She is the 'fiend-like Queen' who chastises Macbeth by the 'valour of her tongue'. She is ambitious, and to fulfill her greed for ambition she says:

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctions visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th' effect and it!

(*Macbeth* – 1.5.41-48)

The witches have prophesized the crown for Macbeth and she is determined that he should have it. No obstacles, no hindrances, no thoughts of the future can deflect her from her purposes.

Lady Macbeth's lack of imagination makes her totally insensible to the consequences of the crime. Her want of imagination makes her exclaim:

A little water clears us of this deed

(*Macbeth* – 2.2.66)

This, in fact, is fatal to her. The realization of the hideousness of their crime comes to her soon after the murder with the shock of a sudden disclosure and at once she begins to ink. Disillusionment and despair prey upon her. She takes practically no part in the action, which culminates in the pathetic spectacle of the sleep-walking scene and her tragic death.

No façade can make the unchaste Cleopatra of *Antony and Cleopatra* chaste. After having husbanded twice, she snares Antony into her immoral, passionate love. She is artful and has been called a 'courtesan of genius', a 'triple-turned whore' and a vile seductress. Enobarbus says that the secret of her strange fascination lies in her 'infinite variety'. He says:

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety; other women cloy
The appetites they feed; but she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies.

(*Antony and Cleopatra* – 2.2.235-238)

Throughout the play, she is seen using her art and craft to keep Antony to herself. Even on her death, Octavius Caesar could not help but say:

She looks like sleep,
As she would catch another Antony
In her strong grace.

(*Antony and Cleopatra* – 5.2.344-346)

CONCLUSION:

Nevertheless, it can be said that be it Portia or Desdemona or Cordelia or any other, women in Shakespeare's tragedies do not enjoy the freer air and opportunities like their male counterparts. But the fact cannot be undermined that they are equally moral or immoral, sane or insane, honest or dishonest like their male counterparts. Truly they are those who rock the cradle and rule the world. They are extraordinary, who must have given and perhaps still give a great deal of inspiration to many who saw and have seen these characters perform on the stage. Dignified and remarkable as they are in their own rights, these women characters do represent the attitude society had had about the fairer sex since the times of Shakespeare. Nonetheless, it would not be wrong to state that they are the precursors of the independent, strong-willed women of today's world.

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