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Contact : 02382 -241913
9423346913 / 7276301000
9637935252 / 9503814000

E-mail :

interlinkresearch@rediffmail.com
visiongroup1994@gmail.com
mbkamble2010@gmail.com

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INDEX

Sr. No.	Title of Research Paper	Author(s)	Page No.
1	Effect of Mutagens on pod per Plant in Pigeon pea <i>Cajanus Cajan (L.) Millsp.</i>	Dr. M. G. Fawade, Dr. N. G. Kashid	1
2	Marketing Challenges for the new Millennium	Dr. Baljeet Kaur Oberoi	7
3	Use of Fertilizers and Sustainability of Indian Agriculture : Some Evidences	Girish M. Mayee	11
4	Portrayal of Women in Shakespeare's Literary Work	Dr. Anuradha S. Jagdale	17
5	Investigation of Before Competition State Anxiety of Baseball Players	Anil Patil	23
6	Analysis of the Role of Medico-Socio Worker and Nurse in Medical Sociology	Dr. Ananda B. Kale	28
7	Human Rights and Child Labour : Indian Perspective	Dr. S. P. Ghayal	31
8	लॉर्ड रिपनच्या विविध सुधारणा : एक आढावा	सचिन उत्तमराव हंचाटे	36
9	नैसर्गिक वार्षिक कालावधीचे विश्लेषण	रामकृष्ण महाकाळ	42
10	दलित आत्मकथन : संकल्पना आणि स्वरूप	डॉ. अशोक कांबळे	49
11	शारीरिक फिटनेसला मदत करणारे घटक	राजेंद्र माणिकराव सुर्यवंशी	57
12	राजकारणातील महिलांच्या नेतृत्वाचा चिकित्सक अभ्यास	डॉ. अशोक गोलकर	61

4

Portrayal of Women in Shakespeare's Literary Work

Dr. Anuradha S. Jagdale
Head, Dept. of English
Shankarrao Patil Mahavidyalaya,
Bhoom, Dist. Osmanabad

Research Paper - English

William Shakespeare and John Milton are generally considered anti-women by most of the people. However it is fallacious judgment. Great writers like Shakespeare and Milton belong neither to any particular time nor clime. Their approach has always remained universal. The infinite variety of characters in Shakespeare and their delineation in various contexts should not be presumed to be his own attitude. These authors are deeply objective. They attempt at making none of their characters their mouthpiece. Hence, to consider Shakespeare as anti-woman, simply on the basis of lines like 'frailty ! thy name is woman !' is not justified. This is Hamlet's opinion who, in essence, is not the mouthpiece of Shakespeare.

Shakespeare's female characters, in any way, are not inferior to males. His female characters like Rosalind (As You Like It), Olivia (Twelfth Night), Portia (Merchant of Venice) etc. are dominating over their male counterparts. Although his tragedies are termed after heroes, the heroines like Lady Macbeth work like boss. Similarly in 'King Lear', the old king fond of flattery, dividing his kingdom between Regan and Goneril asks Cordelia if she has to say something. She, adamant on her earlier view, says 'nothing' and cares nothing upon former's declaration.



In his History Plays, female characters are quite exalted and dauntless. In Richard II, the role of queen is far vital than the hero Richard II. In 'Julius Caesar', the remarks of Calpurnia and the valor of Portia are far from being quibbling of frail females. Even in his Romances, multifold plots speak volumes of female characters.

The measure to evaluate the mighty minded litterateurs must be capacious enough to inculcate critique of all the facts. Hence, frailty is not all the women; it may be a part of her. It is equally true in case of man too. Male characters are not altogether free from drawbacks. There are villains like Iago in Othello, Claudius in Hamlet, Sebastian in The Tempest and the bloody butcher Macbeth in Macbeth.

In the tragedy 'Othello', it can also be argued that the tragedy occurs from adherence to patriarchal rules and stereotypes. Gayle Greene summarizes this position in her claim that the tragedy of Othello stems from 'men's misunderstandings of women and women's inability to protect themselves from society's conception of them.' Certainly Desdemona's every much feminized qualities of passivity; softness and obedience is no match for Othello's masculine qualities of dominance, aggression and authority. After, Othello in his jealousy, has struck Desdemona and spoken harshly to her, she tells Iago, 'I am a child to chiding'. Protected by a system which makes women the weaker, dependent sex, Desdemona is unequipped to deal with such aggression; she is helpless against Othello. As Drether puts it 'following conventional patterns of behavior for wives and daughters, these women lose their autonomy and intimacy and do not achieve adulthood.' Desdemona, thus retreats into childlike behavior to escape from reality.

With regard to men's misunderstandings of women, Greene points out that Iago's manipulation of Othello - the cause of the tragedy - occurs only because of 'the wives of women, the moor already possessed.' This is certainly a convincing argument, for Othello too easily accepts a stereotypical view of his wife based on the authority of a male voice. He loses sight of the real Desdemona, allowing every action of hers, once his suspicion is stimulated, to reaffirm this stereotypical conception of her.

At the close of the play, Othello attempts to vindicate himself from intentional murder by claiming that he did nothing 'in malice' but is simply a man 'that loved not wisely but too well.' This speech illustrates the precarious position of love in a society

submerged in stereotypes. Othello's excessive, unwise love for Desdemona is tied up with his perception of her as representing perfect womanhood and his underlying fear of her-endorsed by society - as whore. Like Hamlet, who tells Ophelia 'get thee to a nunnery' in order to protect her chastity and remove his fear of women's infidelity, Othello too wishes to erase Desdemona's sexuality and potential for infidelity. His decision to kill her, he claims, is to prevent her from a further transgression - 'Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.' As Iago's insinuations build, gulf between this perception of Desdemona as angel and the fear of her as whore grows, leaving Othello in a void of confusion and doubt:

...By the world,

I think my wife be honest, and think she is not.

I think thou (Iago) art just, and then think thou art not.

In Othello's refusal to hear Desdemona's own protestations of innocence, Othello is very much a tragedy in which the female is subordinated by the male.

In 'Antony and Cleopatra', Shakespeare again explores the idea of the victim within a patriarchal society. However, in this play the gender roles are inverted and it is Antony who is the true victim. Stifled by the rules of patriarchal society of Rome, which expects him to retain a masculine side only, and not to adopt the feminine qualities of passion, emotion and love, Antony's control over his life diminishes. Within such patriarchal confines, the role of lover must be subordinate to the male's political role. After finding an extraordinary and powerful love with Cleopatra - which Shakespeare establishes to perfection - Antony is unable to accept the 'business first' principle of the patriarchal laws. Like the typical female heroine of a tragedy, Antony's plight escalates when he is rushed into an arranged marriage of convenience. He cannot remain away from Cleopatra and faithful to Octavia who symbolizes Caesar and the power of patriarchal Rome. He says "though I make this marriage for my peace, I 'th' East my pleasure lies'. Inevitably he returns to Egypt and Cleopatra, and causes a rift which can never again be cemented between himself and Caesar, which ultimately results in war.

The first words of the play, spoken by Philo, illustrate the growing condemnation of Antony's untraditional behavior, which is not confined within the measure of patriarchy.

'nay but this dotage of our Genera's / O'erflows the measure'. The patriarchal males' view Antony's devotion as shameful - 'His captain's heart ... become the bellows and the fan / To cool a gipsy's lust.' Surprisingly, in modern day readings of the play, this attitude still exists. In W. Baker's view of the play - 'throughout the play (Antony) is suffering from a disease, his passion for Cleopatra, which obsesses his mind and which causes him to desert his public responsibilities' It is true that the play is ultimately concerned with the conflict between love and politics; Egypt and Rome; but to simply reject the former as wrong, is to miss the nuisance of the play and succumb to a view of the polarities of masculine and feminine as separated and distinct, which the play itself undercuts.

Although Antony occasionally lapses into judging himself by the standards of the patriarchy - for example, towards the end of the play, dejected and shamed by his diminished political power, he becomes jealous and irrational and claims that Cleopatra has emasculated him: 'O thy vile lady, / She has robbed me of my sword!' In the conflict between love and politics - love wins. Ultimately, Antony is not debased by his loss of power, but rather, through his love of Cleopatra envelopes a manhood of stronger parameters - an 'alternative masculinity' as Woodbridge puts it. The end of the play can be seen as a tribute to love; a celebration rather than a downfall. Antony does not cease to be a valiant Roman by choosing Egypt over Rome; love over politics, but becomes vanquisher of himself in his suicide. By dying simultaneously in the Roman fashion, and with Cleopatra and for Cleopatra (he kills himself when he believes she is dead), Antony combines the two polarities which have been evident and separate throughout the play: the masculine Rome and the feminine Egypt.

Cleopatra's masculine qualities counterbalance the play. So Shakespeare provides us with a relationship of surprising equality. Neither Cleopatra nor the relationship can be stifled within the confines of the patriarchy of the seventeenth century. The distinctions between masculine and feminine are blurred - in a sense, Antony and Cleopatra swap roles, continually embracing both their masculine and feminine selves and thus experiencing a full bonding of souls. As Woodbridge says, 'Antony and Cleopatra can cross gender boundaries without losing their sex roles as man and woman. This swapping of gender roles is rather shockingly portrayed in the scene in which Cleopatra puts her 'tries and

mantles on (Antony) whilst / (she) wore his sword Phillipan. Shakespeare evidently recognizes the existence of both masculine and feminine qualities within female and males.

Cleopatra, unlike Othello and Ophelia, is the dominating force of the play in terms of theme and also her personal presence. Novy claims that Antony and Cleopatra is the only tragedy that 'glorifies woman as actor'. Through his treatment of Cleopatra, Shakespeare provides us with a 'real' woman rather than a stereotype. Velma Richmond claims further that in Cleopatra we can find Shakespeare's 'finest embracing of the feminine'. Cleopatra, through the combination of sexual and political power, is a force to be reckoned with.

Cleopatra's sexuality, despite condemnation by the patriarchal men - she is referred to as 'strumpet' and 'whore' on various occasions throughout the play - is unhidden and unrestricted. Her sexual power over men is conveyed boldly. For example, in her descriptions of her former conquests 'great Pompey' and 'Broad-fronted Caesar'. Cleopatra's sexuality is not a thing to be locked up, as in Hamlet and Othello, but is celebrated as a positive force. Surprisingly, even Enobarbus, despite his patriarchal views, does on occasions present her as positively sexual, as his unforgettable description of her indicates :

Age can not wither her
Nor custom stale her infinite variety.
Other women cloy the appetites they feed,
But she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies. For vilest things
Become themselves in her, that the holy priests
Bless she is priggish.

Refusing to adhere to the stereotypes of patriarchal society, Cleopatra transforms her natural sexuality into part of her power, rather than as a diminishing of her goodness.

So too, Cleopatra insists on fulfilling a political role against the wishes of the patriarchal men: when Enobarbus attempts to prevent her from doing so she replies in enraged determination :

A charge we bear i'th'war,

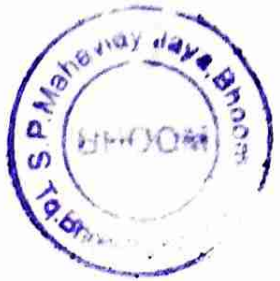
And as the president of my kingdom will
Appear there for a man. Speak not against it.
I will not stay behind.

Cleopatra thus forces her access into the male arena.

The fact of conjugal life, indeed serves as a strong evidence of dramatist's attitude to man and woman relationship, which holds good universally and eternally and can be exemplified from the lowest rung of any society; to the bed-chamber of royal palace e.g., queen Isabella of Edward II and recently late fair princess Diana doing tit for tat to crown Prince Charles. It is however, extreme retort to 'frailty thy name is woman' and establishes that a man is himself the cause of this frailty, Shakespeare is neither anti-woman nor anti-men. He has the finery and frailty of both the sexes. If he has his frail women, he has his sweetest innocent Desdemons too and if he has upright heroes, he has his lags too. So to speak, fatal flaws are in all the great tragic heroes. What wonder is then, if we get some frailty in female characters of Shakespeare? Ipso-facto, 'frailty thy name is woman' is, not attitude of Shakespeare towards the womankind. In fact, he has, in almost all his works, portrayed humanity as a whole a fine mixture of good and evil.

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