

## SHAKESPEARE'S CONCERN ABOUT WOMEN: ELEMENTS OF FEMINISM AND MISOGYNY IN SELECTED PLAYS FOR COMPARISON

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### ABSTRACT

This study provides a feminist analysis and comparison of female characters in Shakespeare's plays. Although drawn from a feminist standpoint, the reading is not a fully fledged feminist interpretation of Shakespeare's works. The study's focus is on the male characters' social conditions and sexist acts, as well as how they affect the lives of the female characters. The male and female characters' interactions are frequently marked by physical and psychological victimisation, as well as their sentiments. Men let their egos influence their actions, assault their own feelings, and destroy decent women forced to become victims of political intrigues and manipulations.

This study also attempts to analyse Shakespeare's portrayal of women as courageous, independent, and not subject to men's patriarchal behaviour at the time. He appreciated the aspect of men and women cross-dressing to mask the gender gap. As a result, the study attempts to conclude that Shakespeare was a writer who recognised feminism in his works long before the concept of feminism became popular in Europe. He truly was a man of his time.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, Misogyny, Subservient women and Cross-dressing.

### INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare was often regarded as being ahead of his time. "He was not of an age, but for all time!" declared Ben Jonson in 1623. (The Author, 1.43) He was correct, for people continue to read his plays and adapt and appropriate his works to this day. "What arguably most differentiates Shakespeare's language from daily current usage is its richness, depth, and flexibility; the cumulative effects to open up resonances and connotations in such a manner that the options for interpretation appear infinite," says the Introduction to King Lear. This assertion is supported by the fact that there are hundreds of Shakespeare adaptations from throughout the world.

This study provides a feminist analysis and comparison of female characters in Shakespeare's plays. Although drawn from a feminist standpoint, the reading is not a fully fledged feminist interpretation of Shakespeare's works. The study's focus is on the male characters' social conditions and sexist acts, as well as how they affect the lives of the female characters. The male and female characters' interactions are frequently marked by physical and psychological victimisation, as well as their sentiments. Men let their egos influence their actions, assault their own feelings, and destroy decent women forced to become victims of political intrigues and manipulations.

Throughout his plays, Shakespeare depicts two types of women:

1. Women who refuse to submit to males and seek equal rights, and
2. Submissive ladies who fulfil the roles of Elizabethan women.

Those who took on the roles of an Elizabethan lady, which was to be obedient to males, also demonstrated that adhering to patriarchal standards did not ensure women happiness. It may even lead to their dominance and oppression. Furthermore, whether subservient or not, all female characters experienced the effects of male authority and victimhood. Females who lived according to patriarchal society's expectations of women suffered more than women who battled against male authority.

The current research is founded on a thorough examination of the chosen plays in light of Feminist ideas and deconstructive techniques. The study's main point is that Shakespearean tragedies portray and project women as lower creatures and negative stereotypes.

The research questions listed below are intended to simplify the study:

1. Are women portrayed as inferior to men?
2. Do women and men have an equal social and economic standing?
3. Are women portrayed as crazy and passionate beings?
4. Is it OK to portray women as immoral, devoid of human values (evil), and bad stereotypes?
5. Do Shakespeare's tragedies strengthen or weaken patriarchal society?
6. Are women depicted as fully grown human beings capable of making their own decisions?

### **Women in Hamlet**

Hamlet contains just two female characters. Both of these individuals are portrayed from a patriarchal and masculine standpoint. Ophelia, Hamlet's adored, is a good daughter and sister to her brother. She represents the 'in-law' element of the feminine, which Marilyn French (1982) associates with the divine. Ophelia is completely obedient to her father and brother, even if it means sacrificing her own feelings. Laertes exemplifies the double standard that existed for men and women in the sixteenth century. A man's honour is not jeopardised by extramarital encounters. But such such relationship will damage Ophelia's honour. She promises Laertes that she will remember his orders and that he will keep the key to it. This eliminates any dispute about the brother's superiority over the sister. Ophelia's father likens her to a helpless woodcock. Polonius makes it apparent that because Hamlet is a man, he may walk with a longer leash than Ophelia. She loves Hamlet but avoids and abstains from him when his brother and father ban it. Following that, Prince Hamlet accuses Ophelia, and through her the entire woman, of deceit and lie.

Gertrude, Hamlet the King's wife, is depicted as a negative stereotype of a woman. According to French (1982), such women represent the criminal element of the feminine. Darkness and eroticism are linked with such ladies. They're prostitutes and scumbags. Within days following her husband's death, she remarries Claudius, the brother of King Hamlet. Her actions have led Prince Hamlet to contemplate suicide. She mourned like Niobe at her husband's funeral, but she marries again within a few days. She is represented as a treacherous and disobedient lady. She abandons the memories of her loving spouse and marries Claudius in defiance of societal and religious laws and consequences. Her son, Prince Hamlet, is astounded by her behaviour and declares, "Frailty, thy name is woman." Even Prince Hamlet considers her mother as his father's property. He acts like a normal guy, upholding patriarchal rules. He makes a broad and general judgement on women. The right of Gertrude to remarry is denied. Her mother is described as the most insidious lady, a cursed laughing wicked, by Prince Hamlet. Such titles and designations are not awarded to a man for re-marriage following the death of his wife anywhere else. This is just the double standard that patriarchy maintains and enforces.

Prince Hamlet later blames her mother for re-marrying. Previously, a father and a brother ruled over the lives of a daughter and a sister, but now a son rules over her mother. The re-marriage of Prince Hamlet's mother is an affront to humility and elegance. It is the dishonour of virtue and love itself, he believes. He challenges a grown woman's right to make decisions regarding her own life. He does not respect her mother's decision and wants her mother to see things through his eyes. He calls it a heinous trespass. He makes his mother refuse to see her spouse. This is the unadulterated patriarchy.

### **Women in King Lear**

Shakespeare's King Lear is a great tragedy. Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia are the three female characters of King Lear. They are all King Lear's daughters. Cordelia is presented as a noble woman and a loving daughter. Despite her goodness and piety, she is portrayed as a woman who, in text and spirit, supports patriarchy and patriarchal principles. She is not free to choose her marriage. Her lack of subtlety harms her chances. She walks out of her father's palace without a fight. She returns to England to assist her father. Monsters are shown for Goneril and Regan. They are deceivers, hypocrites, greedy, and self-centered. They are ethically bankrupt and have no loyalty to anybody. Even Cordelia, who appears to be the practically ideal daughter with all the excellent characteristics, is in some ways the source of everything's devastation. The ageing king surrenders his realm and authority to his daughters at the start of the play. Before handing over their different areas, he asks his daughters to convey their feelings for their father. The eldest, Goneril, is the first to comply. Goneril, the hypocrite, the crafty, and the deceiver, swears that she loves her father more than everything else in the world, including life, liberty, and sight. When Cordelia is banished by their father for saying nothing and therefore insulting the elderly adoring father, she shows no sympathy or says any good things to her. Instead, she injures her much more by claiming that she deserves her current state of dowerlessness and any future unpleasant treatment from her husband since, in her perspective, Cordelia asked for it. Instead of being thankful and obedient to her father, as she said in her previous speech, Goneril emphasises his rashness, unstable character, poor judgement, and terrible temperament (I—i—290). Now she sees not just the flaws of her father's long-engrafted disease, but also how his age and choleric years have exacerbated them. She is the one who advises her sister to form a united front against their father. She is exceedingly unpleasant, discourteous, and ungenerous to her father-king after receiving her one-third of the realm. She criticises the monarch for the lack of discipline among his

knights, who she claims are often complaining and quarrelling. Her knights are labelled as disorderly and debosh'd by her. She accuses her father's knights of breaking the class system's etiquette and precedent. She so offends her father that he flees her palace and goes to live with her other daughter Regan. Regan also displays her actual nature by pronouncing her father to be infirm and unaware of his own decent self, capable of numerous surprising behaviours (I—ii—300). Goneril is so self-centered that she criticises every action of her father, whom she previously adored more than sight, life, and liberty. Her evenings are wild, and King Lear's behaviour is abhorrent to her. She urges her servants to be disrespectful to the King. Goneril sees King as little more than a lazy, old idiot (I—iii—20). Goneril is also shown to be disobedient to her husband Albany, whom she blames for his compassion. She has an affair with Edmund, Gloucester's illegitimate son, and insults her own husband, Albany. She wishes for Edmund to murder her husband and then marry him (IV—VI—265). Albany describes Goneril as disgusting, filthy, a beast (tiger), the most barbaric, degenerate, worse than a head-lugged bear, a demon, and eventually says Hamlet fashion:

Proper deformities does not manifest in the fiend.

As heinous as in Woman (IV—ii—60).

"However thou are a devil, a woman's form doth conceal thee," he adds. Edgar, after discovering Goneril's plot against Albany's life, again mimics Hamlet when he says, "O in distinct space of woman's will! " (O the infinite variety of a woman's passion!) Goneril eventually poisons her own sister Regan and commits suicide out of jealousy.

Regan is not in the same league as her sister in terms of brutality, selfishness, and deceit. She appears to be a monster. She helps her husband Cornwall humiliate Kent, the King's envoy. She is disrespectful to her father. She supports her sister Goneril in her fight against their father. She has the audacity to taunt her father while he begs for food and shelter on his knees (II—iv—151). She refers to his requests as obnoxious pranks. She closes the door on her elderly father on a rainy night, with no guilt. Both Regan and Goneril race to come up with the most heinous punishment for their host, Gloucester. Regan wants him executed right away, whilst Goneril wants him blinded. Before he is blinded, Regan takes the hair off his beard. She is dissatisfied with Gloucester's one-eyed blindness. She implores her husband to remove Gloucester's second eye as well. Then she has Gloucester evicted from the palace. Regan is also competing with her sister for Edmund. She hopes to marry Edmund now that her husband has been slain. However, as previously stated, she has been poisoned by her sister. "This judgement of the skies, which makes us tremble, affects us not with sympathy," Albany says of the deaths of these two sisters.

### **Portrayal of Women in Macbeth**

The drama begins with three witches in the midst of casting a spell. Witches are warped and exaggerated versions of women who have been transformed into monsters with specific magical abilities. But for their beards, Macbeth believes they should be ladies (I—ii—45). Later, the witches adopt the moniker "Weird Sisters" (the goddesses of destiny). Banquo refers to them as "Weird Women" (III—i—2). The witches are depicted as wicked doers who are greedy, nasty, vengeful, and inhuman. The fact that they have a specific plan to meet Macbeth shows that their spell is directed at Macbeth and that they have other plans for him. They get control of Macbeth with their spell and charms. As a prisoner to such animals, Banquo proposes that the victim abandon his reason. Macbeth repeats the witches' earlier comments while commenting on the terrible weather, revealing his vulnerability to their control. Witches make predictions. The messengers of the King deliver word of Macbeth's promotion to the extra honour of Thane of Cawdor, which partially confirms the forecasts. In Macbeth, this is the time for the birth of evil, as he mulls over the possibilities and ramifications of the prophecies and their partial fulfilment. Leaving aside his own ambition, the function of witches (women) as manipulators and temptresses cannot be overlooked. This leads us to the study's key thesis: female characters are depicted as negative stereotypes (as evil beings). Lady Macbeth, who is presented as the fourth witch and a monster, learns about these occurrences from Macbeth. Macbeth is ambitious, but her ambition has neither moral or temporal boundaries. Her words (I—iv—45) proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that she is the fourth witch's sister. She desires the spirits to fill her from head to toe with the most heinous malice. She begs the killing ministers and the invisible demons of hell to fill her womanly breasts with gall and to deprive her of all human emotions, guilt, or pity. She begs the spirits of hell for strength to carry out her evil plan. She declares that King Duncan will never return from the palace alive. Lady Macbeth instructs Macbeth to be a snake while seeming like a flower. She wants to be trusted with the events of that night (the murder of Duncan). She chastises Macbeth for his hesitancy. After some study and contemplation, Macbeth reins in his "vaulting ambition" and advises his wife that they will not pursue this matter (murder of Duncan) any further (I—vii—31). He emphasises that this is neither a good nor a sensible move. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, insults, reprimands, and questions his manhood. Then, like her strange sisters, she says that she can kill her own baby with her own hands by hurling it to the ground while it is still feeding on her breasts. This is how she forces Macbeth to kill Duncan. Women, both natural and supernatural, are represented as monsters, illogical beings, and the personification of evil in Macbeth. It is apparent that women are portrayed negatively.

### **Shakespeare as a Feminist**

Many of Shakespeare's plays feature cross-dressing, with either a man or a woman dressing as the other. Gender disguises may be found in around one-fifth of Shakespeare's thirty-eight known plays. The fact that women's parts were portrayed by young male performers during Elizabethan times surely added to the effect of gender confusion. While no one knows why Shakespeare was so fascinated by the notion of cross dressing, there appear to be two basic theories: Shakespeare either appreciated the humorous element of a guy dressing up as a woman dressed up as a man, or he was a closet feminist. While the scenario is amusing, the fact that many of Shakespeare's female heroines are strong, intellectual, capable women who defy convention implies that he was the 16th century's version of a feminist.

William Shakespeare wrote during the Elizabethan Era, sometimes known as the "Golden Age," which lasted from 1509 to 1603. Because the citizens of England were not focused on waging battles during this brief era of peace, theatre, art, and music blossomed. Women played distinct roles. Girls from aristocratic households were well educated and instructed by the elder ladies in their homes, but they were not allowed to pursue careers. Women were supposed to stay at home and raise their children. Everything in a family was passed down to the boys, and girls were married off to partners chosen by their fathers. The royal crown, which may be passed down to a daughter, was the only exception to these succession regulations. Due to her gender, the Queen urged dads to educate their daughters and hoped that all men would endeavour to educate the women in their life.

Shakespeare grasped the concept of bright, capable women and seemed to know that cultural constraints were not always equitable. He utilised cross-dressing to demonstrate that many women are just as capable as males. Viola in 'Twelfth Night,' Portia in 'The Merchant of Venice,' Julia in 'The Two Gentlemen of Verona,' and Rosalind in 'As You Like It' are some instances of female Shakespeare characters that spend much of the play as males. In each of these performances, the ladies disguised themselves as males in order to undertake a work that they would not be able to do as women.

Viola dresses up as her twin brother after they are separated at sea in Twelfth Night. It was extremely hazardous for a woman to be alone, so Viola disguises herself as her brother in order to obtain employment and support herself. She kept her deceit going since she had fallen in love with Duke Orsino and wanted to be close to him. Dressing as a guy appears to empower Viola, allowing both she and the Duke to reveal their true personalities as they fall in love.

Portia dresses as a man in The Merchant of Venice in order to go to Venice and join the courtroom as a lawyer in order to save her husband's best friend, Antonio. While this is a brave step, Portia's adoption of a masculine identity changes her and empowers her to choose her own fate. She begins as a lady ruled by her late father's desires, but by the conclusion of the play, she has seized charge of her own fate by challenging Bassanio's devotion to her. Julia initially disguises herself as Sebastian in The Two Gentlemen of Verona in order to travel alone to Milan to pursue the love of her life, Proteus, who was scheduled to study there. However, rather of disclosing her true identity when she arrives, she accepts a position as a pageboy for her boyfriend Proteus. She, like Portia, likes the freedom to play a part she could never play as a woman, as well as the measure of control she obtains by pretending to be a male. By pretending to be a pageboy, she is able to obtain a position that she would not have been able to obtain as a woman, and so has power over her lover's pursuit of another woman because of his father.

Rosalind flees to the forest to escape Duke Frederick in As You Like It, exemplifying the comedy of gender confusion. Because it is frightening to be alone in a wilderness, especially as a girl, she disguises herself as a guy named Ganymede. She later falls in love with Orlando, but the farce continues. Rosalind will go to any length for her love, even dressing up as a female for Orlando to hone his wooing skills:

Were it not preferable,  
Because I am taller than average,  
That I fit me in all areas like a man?  
On my thigh, a valiant curtle-axe,  
I've got a boar's spear in my hand and in my heart.  
What concealed woman's dread lies there,  
Outside, there will be a swashing and a martial.  
As did many other mannish cowards before them.  
With their resemblances, they outface it. (Scene 3 of Act 1)

Despite cultural constraints on women during Shakespeare's day, the ladies in his plays were just as capable as the men. The cross-dressing comedy appears to be a byproduct of Shakespeare's larger topic. Women were able to perform the same duties as males, if not better. Portia, for example, not only effectively defended her case in court, but also taught Bassanio a lesson. Despite their power, Shakespeare's cross-dressing heroines never lose sight of their femininity. Despite the fact that they all exhibit masculinity through their clothing and actions, they all have the physical and emotional traits of a woman. This is occasionally an issue. For example, when Viola is challenged to a fight with Sir Andrew Aguecheek, she is concerned that her lack of strength may prevent her from matching him. Each lady also possesses a sensitivity that is generally reserved for female characters, as shown in Portia when she pleads for Antonio's pity.

Cross-dressed women are usually independent, powerful, and resolute rather than meek. Each woman takes the actions necessary to achieve her goals.

They go alone and put themselves in circumstances that most women would not, especially if it is for love. They are able to do so without sacrificing their basic femininity, which is certainly the strongest evidence for Shakespeare being an early feminist. He knew that women were governed by males and had a tough status in society. His plays demonstrated that, without the cultural constraints of the Elizabethan age, women might compete with males in any field.

### **Conclusion**

The investigation also discovered solutions to the initial research questions. According to the study, these books portray women as lower and inferior to males. Women do not have equal social, political, and economic standing as males. If they are in such situations, it portends doom. The ladies are represented as crazy and passionate animals. Women are incapable of dealing with major difficulties and challenges and, as a result, cannot be real leaders. Women are portrayed as immoral and bad stereotypes in the literary evidence. In these tragedies, women do not have actual independence and liberty, and males make all key choices regarding their life without ever consulting them consulted.

Even if the ladies in Shakespeare's plays broke the boundaries of being a woman in his day, is it acceptable to label him a "feminist" given feminism didn't exist during his lifetime, and it didn't emerge until hundreds of years later? Should we examine Shakespeare's work through the prism of contemporary feminism? In the end, males were still performing the roles, and technically it was a guy pulling off a woman acting like a man, thus some critics may argue that seeing William Shakespeare as a real feminist is not fair. The difficulty is that it is practically impossible for us to view a play through the eyes of someone who saw the identical performance during the Elizabethan period. We can try, but we can't erase the last 350 years and ignore what we've learned and now know. We view almost everything through the eyes of a modern individual. As a result, because it is practically impossible, we must examine his plays through the lens of underlying racism, feminism, or some other important concept common in our current society.

The essential term associated with feminism is concept. Feminism is only a notion that we have created. Just because the term "strong woman" did not exist during Shakespeare's time does not indicate that there were no strong women before, or that Shakespeare did not consider that women were worth more than what their society permitted. Perhaps he believed that women were just as competent, powerful, and clever as males. Gender roles are such a big issue in practically all of Shakespeare's writing that it's tempting to suppose he subscribed to a modern-day feminism. Rather of speaking out against a woman's place in society, he used gender roles in his plays to demonstrate to the audience what a woman is capable of conquering a man's role.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I express my deepest gratitude to my Research Supervisor, Dr. Anurag Agrawal, J.S. University, Shikohabad, Firozabad for her never ending guidance and direction through valuable suggestions along with enthusiastic encouragement through-out the period of my work and preparation of this research paper.

I pay tribute to My Parents for lifting me up till this phase of life. I thank them for their love, trust, patience, support and bearing all kind of stress to make me what I am.

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