

Shakespeare's Cleopatra – A Post-Feminist Woman in a Pre-Modern Era

M. Adeline Udhaya Theresa

M.A. English Literature

Madras Christian College, Chennai, Tamilnadu, India.

ABSTRACT

“Femininity is not a fixed identity...but a constantly renegotiated set of alliances and identifications”, says Myra Macdonald. With the second wave feminism turning radical and resulting in unhappy women, there emerged the need to take another evolutionary step, which resulted in Post feminism. It also differs from Feminism in that, here sexuality was not negated; in fact Post-feminist women glorified their sexuality. They searched for their individuality and were happy in it. Shakespeare's Cleopatra is clearly such a unique and unparalleled figure. Though she is no bra-burning radical feminist, she is in no way inferior to Antony. In fact, it is Cleopatra who holds us enthralled until the very end and whom we will never forget. In this way, this paper aims to analyze Cleopatra as a Post-feminist woman in a Pre-modern era.

KEYWORDS

Antony and Cleopatra; Post-feminism; Character analysis

“Femininity is not a fixed identity . . . but a constantly renegotiated set of alliances and identifications” (22), says Myra Macdonald. Today we live in a world of ‘Posts’ – Postcolonialism, Post-modernism and Post-structuralism. Here at present the boundaries are blurring, centres are being subverted and ambiguity is the norm. Hence, Feminism with its male - female binaries seems to be outdated and we have come to the era of Post feminism. Post feminism does not have a single frame of definition for this would be restricting, like the earlier Feminisms. The forgoing of the hyphen in it itself signifies its cultural independence. Here there are diverse manifestations, which highlight the multiplicity and thereby establish connections.

Post-feminist does not mean that feminism is over. It signifies a ‘shift’ in the feminist theory. As Linda Hutcheon

remarks about the post, “...it marks neither a simple and radical break...nor a straightforward continuity...it is both and neither” (17). Post-feminist is both a journalistic buzzword as well as a theoretical stance. It does not stop with the women as Feminism does, but includes men as well. As Patricia Mann points out, Post-feminist goes, “...beyond the boundaries of a feminist audience” (207). The Post-feminist woman is in fact a complex interconnection linking the three separated qualities of feminism – femaleness, feminism and femininity – thereby embodying them as a whole.

“Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world / Like a colossus...” (JC I ii 134-135).

The name ‘Shakespeare’ rings familiarity into the minds of every soul, crossing all boundaries. Even after four centuries, the Bard's genius and fame only

keeps on increasing. One of his supreme characters is Cleopatra, the unrivalled queen of Shakespeare's kingdom. She with her charm, wit, grace, contradiction of qualities, multiplicity of moods and passionate love is indeed the paragon of Shakespeare's female creations. Though she was created in an era that was pre-modern, the genius who created her was so extraordinary that, even today she is relevant, representing the postmodern condition - a Post-feminist woman.

Second wave feminism distinguishes women into two strict compartments, as Simone de Beauvoir puts it, "the feminine woman" (who makes herself into a 'thing') and "the emancipated woman" (who refuses the passivity man means to impose on her) (727). Femininity was seen as a proof of subjugation and victimization, while forgoing everything feminine and morphing into a male was seen as the truly liberated woman. The two qualities were seen as incompatible and a woman's independence and success was believed to be in contradiction with her femininity, which made her 'weak'. However, today women are born inheriting their right for equality. As Janet Lee points out, "...feminism taught us that we are equal to men. We don't need to prove it anymore" (168). Post feminism however blurs the borders between the binaries of Feminism and depolarizes them. Cleopatra, the sovereign ruler of Egypt and a political force, signifies the power of women. But then she is also the beloved of Antony, the feminine temptress whose charm and beauty has captured the heart of great conquerors. Now these two aspects cannot be viewed in separation, for in her there is a beautiful blend of the female, the feminine and the feminist. She is the crafty ruler, the charming lover and the jealous companion - all rolled into one. She is both feminine and masculine. As Caesar says, "... [Antony] is not more manlike / Than Cleopatra; nor the queen of

Ptolemy, / More womanly than he; .." (Ant. I iv 5-7).

Feminism stresses the woman's transformation from the passive object to the active subject, which is usually credited to the male. In Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* we see that it is Cleopatra who is the active subject. She is the one who leads the action of the story that causes the twists and turns. Trouble erupts between the triumvirates when Antony caught in

Cleopatra's magic neglects them. It is she who makes Antony's fortunes as her retreating makes him retreat and her support encourages him. Antony himself knows this as he says,

Egypt, thou knew'st too well
My heart was to thy rudder tied by
the strings,
And thou shouldst tow me after:
o'er my spirit
Thy full supremacy thou knew'st...
(Ant. III xi 56-60).

And again when he is brave he mouths, "...thou art / The armourer of my heart:..." (Ant. IV iv 78). Here Cleopatra is not a sexual object but a sexual subject. She makes herself to be desired, she uses her physical attractions to make Antony do what she wishes. Her personality is unique and can never be reduced to an object. "The Post-feminist woman actively demands her sovereignty - not as an object and prey - but as a feminine subject" (85), says Stephanie Genz. Another important and radical difference between Feminism and Post-feminist is that while Feminists wanted equality, Post-feminists preferred the 'Difference'. They did not want to ape the male but celebrated their femininity. As Sophia Phoco and Rebecca Wright point out, "We do not seek equality because we valorise the feminine" (13). In this light, one can visualize both Antony and Cleopatra as a "mutual pair" (Ant. I 36), each a titan on their own, different but great.

Subversion is an integral part of Post-modernism and so Post-feminist as well. The qualities that were earlier termed, as 'chains' now became 'tools'. As Delombard points out, "...feminism (sic) is using the master's tool to dismantle the master's house" (22). Earlier, women were sexually exploited, and hence physical beauty was given importance, as it was the point of the 'male gaze'. Antony falls madly in love with Cleopatra on the very first meeting as she comes in her golden barge. To quote Enobarbus:

...For her own person,
 It beggar'd all description: she did lie
 In her pavilion – cloth-of-gold of tissue-
 O'er picturing that Venus...(Ant. II ii 198-201).

Here Cleopatra's astounding beauty makes a worshipper out of Antony. Her femininity gives her power over him. She self-consciously uses her charm and beauty to sway him to her side.

Empowerment and Agency are two important watchwords in Feminism. Post-feminists too seek empowerment but it differs from that of the Feminists. They use the Agency who is the men. Stephanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon characterize a Post-feminist woman thus: "She consciously employs her physical appearance and sexuality to achieve personal and professional objectives and gain control over her life" (92). Cleopatra, though she loves Antony, uses him to empower herself. Through him being her lover, she gains more provinces, security and freedom to rule as well. Caesar angrily notes thus:

His sons he there proclaim'd the kings of kings:
 Great Media, Parthia, and Armenia,
 He gave to Alexander; to Ptolemy he assign'd
 Syria, Cilicia, and Phoenicia: she
 In the habiliments of goddess Isis

That day appear'd;.. (Ant. III vi 13-18).

She uses her beauty charm and sexuality too as agencies of subversion. In the words of Schwichtenberg, it is 'feminine masquerade' wherein femininity is used as a vehicle to empowerment. This parading of femininity actually gives Cleopatra power over all the men.

Enobarbus describes her in the highest terms. Even after Antony's death, she holds her own as she makes Dolabella another agent to know the truth of what Octavius Caesar has planned for her. Her beauty dazzles Octavius himself. As he looks upon her body, he says, "...she looks like sleep, / As she would catch another Antony / In her strong toil of grace"(Ant. V ii 344-346). This Empowerment and Agency give her the 'choice' and 'self-rule' of Post-feminist. Cleopatra can do what she pleases through them and she cannot be subjugated. Every other character in the play can be controlled by another character, but not Cleopatra. She is her own mistress. She obeys no rule but hers. She is a giver, not a taker; a winner, not a loser. This is what Elspeth Probyn calls 'choiceoise'. Instead of the 'collectivism' of Feminism, there are the individual choices where the woman chooses what she likes ignoring the culturally determined ones.

Cleopatra does not conform to the reductiveness of culture and its rules. "She is neither trapped in femininity nor rejecting it, she can use it" (85), says Brundsdon. Power feminism and Victim feminism are two weapons that a Post-feminist woman uses to gain power. As Wolf defines them, the former is "...free-thinking, pleasure-loving and self-assertive" (180) while the latter is "...when a woman seeks power through an identity of powerlessness" (147). Cleopatra cleverly uses both. Mostly, it is power feminism that she employs using her charm, wit and sexuality. She does not even allow Antony to be distracted from

her as she taunts and goads him in the first scene where the messengers arrive. And so Antony gushes forth his famous verses, "Let Rome in Tiber melt and the wide arch / Of the ranged empire fall! Here is my space / Kingdoms are clay:.." (Ant. I i 32-34). The mighty warrior becomes a complete pleasure dweller as he says, "There's not a minute of our lives should stretch / Without some pleasure now..." (Ant. I i 46-47). She exhibits victim feminism when Antony, hearing Fulvia's death thinks of Rome and also of leaving her. She bemoans her powerlessness over Antony, "I have no power upon you; hers you are -" (Ant. I iii 25). Antony once again falls and comes fully under her control as he says, "...I go from hence / Thy soldier, servant; making peace or war / As thou affect'st" (Ant. I iii 70).

"The next phase in feminism's evolution will entail a politics of ambiguity, not identity" (53-4), says Rebecca Walker. Who better embodies this ambiguity, this variety, this contradiction than the mercurial temperamental queen, Cleopatra? As Enobarbus 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:.. (Ant. II ii
35-38).

Everything becomes her, even imperfection, that Enobarbus says, "That she did make defect perfection,.." (Ant. II ii 231). Stephanie Genz calls this "contradictory wholeness" (117). As Jean Railla says, "Being crafty means living consciously and refusing to be defined by narrow labels and categories" (Para 23).

"I have a head for business and a body for sin. Is there anything wrong with that?" calls out Tess, the 'sheroe' from the film *Working Girl* (1998). This sort of 'Having It All' syndrome is a characteristic

of the Post-feminist woman where she is unwilling to sacrifice "...either her feminist or feminine, her public or private aspirations"(Bridget Jones's Diary 71). Similar is the case with Cleopatra. She is the lover of Antony but still the sovereign queen of Egypt. One can see her love when she says that she wishes to "...sleep out this great gap of time / My Antony is away" (Ant. I v 5). Even Enobarbus says, "...her passions are made of nothing but the finest part of pure love: we cannot call her winds and waters sighs and tears; they are greater storms and tempests..."(Ant. I ii 126-130). Her love for Antony is apparent as she herself confesses that he and he alone was her true love. This is why she remains true even after his death as against Julius Caesar and Pompey. She dies quoting her memorable lines, "...husband, I come: / Now to that name my courage prove my title!"(Ant. V ii 286-287). She dies his lover, but not merely that, for she also dies Egypt's queen. She could have begged pardon and have spent her life mourning Antony. But no, she, the queen would never do that, never allow to be ruled over. That is why she says, "Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have / Immortal longings in me:.." (Ant. V ii 279-280).

A common feature between third wave Feminism and Post-feminist is the use of sexuality as a powerful weapon. Helen Gurley Brown talks of sex as a strategically bargaining tool and "...powerful weapon for a single girl in getting what she wants from life, i.e., a husband or steady male companionship"(Sex and the Single Girl 70). As we know, Cleopatra clearly flaunts her sexuality. Her physical charms capture any man or for that matter even any woman who comes in contact with her. She knows how to keep him in a moderate mood, which she calls, "O well-divided disposition!"(Ant. I v 43). Antony's pleasure lies only with Cleopatra. He says, "And though I make this marriage for my peace, / I the east my pleasure lies,"(Ant. II

iii 38-39). Cleopatra has him fully in control as she too says, "I laugh'd him out of patience; and that night / I laugh'd him into patience..."(Ant. II v 19-20). Even after he has lost a battle due to backing down and following Cleopatra, Antony just cannot blame her. He says, "Fall not a tear, I say; one of them rates / All that is won and lost: give me a kiss; / Even that repays me..."(Ant. III xi 69-70). Throughout the play we get multiple words for her sexuality – "enchanting queen"(Ant. I ii 110), "Egyptian dish"(Ant II vi 123), "Salt Cleopatra"(Ant. II i 21) are few examples.

Finally, Post-feminist stresses upon the importance of relationship more than anything else. This may be the relationship between man and woman and between women. As Stephanie Genz points out,

This resolution relies on a romantic egalitarian fantasy where men and women jointly abandon their excessive career ambitions in favour of an all-embracing partnership (130)

Where can an exact example be found but in Antony, one of the triple

pillars of the Roman Empire and Cleopatra, the queen of Egypt, both of whom abandoned their ambitions and even sacrificed themselves for their love? Indeed Dryden rightly titles his play, *All for Love – The World Well Lost*.

Shakespeare takes a flesh and bone Cleopatra from history and breathes into her a life of immortality. "Endurance is not just the ability to bear a hard thing but to turn it into a glory"(web), says William Barclay. Here it is both Cleopatra and the Bard who take new forms. Therefore, we see how the enchanting Cleopatra of Shakespeare transcends time from her Pre-Modern era and becomes relevant today as a Post-feminist woman. The Bard does it again, proving his greatness and genius.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

This research paper was presented in the one-day students' national seminar on "Shakespeare in the 21st Century" organised by Cuckoo, an international literary magazine, V. O. Chidambaram College, Thoothukudi on 20 September, 2014.

WORKS CITED

- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. 1953. London: Vintage, 1997. Trans. of *Le Deuxième Sexe*. 1949. Print.
- Brown, [Helen Gurley](#). *Sex and the Single Girl*. New Jersey: Barricade Books, 2003. Print.
- Brunsdon, Charlotte. *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes*. London and New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- Delombard, Jeannine. "Feminism". *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*. Ed by Rebecca Walker. London: Anchor Books, 1995. Print.
- Fielding, Helen. *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*. London: Picador, 1999. Print.
- Genz, Stéphanie. *Postfemininities in Popular Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Print.
- Genz, Stéphanie, and Benjamin Brabon. *Post-feminist: Cultural Texts and Theories*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009. Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London and New York: Routledge, 1989. Print.
- Lee, Janet. 'Care to Join Me in an Upwardly Mobile Tango? Postmodernism and the "New Woman."' In *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*. Eds. Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment. London: Women's Press, 1988. 166–72. Print.
- Macdonald, Myra . *Representing Women: Myths of Femininity in the Popular Media*. London: Edward Arnold, 1995. Print.

- Mann, Patricia S. *Micro-Politics: Agency in a Post-feminist Era*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994. Print.
- Phoca, Sophia, and Rebecca Wright. *Introducing Post-feminist*. New York: Totem Books, 1999. Print.
- Railla, Jean. "Feminism and the New Domesticity." 30 November 2005
<http://getcrafty.com/blogs.php?user-jean&entry-598>
- Shakespeare, William. *Antony and Cleopatra*. Chennai: Macmillan Publishers India Limited, 2012. Print.
- Walker Rebecca. Qtd. in "The Legacy of the Personal: Generating Theory in Feminism's Third Wave." *Hypatia* 12.3 (1997): 46–75. Print.
- Whiteley, Sheila. *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity*. London: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Wolf, Naomi. *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century*. 1993. London: Vintage, 1994. Print.
- Working Girl*. Dir. Mike Nichols. Harrison Ford, Melanie Griffith and Sigourney Weaver. 20th Century Fox, 1998. Film.