

Women in the plays of Shakespeare

Dr. Lalita Pandey
(Lec. Panchayat)
Govt. Hr. Sec. School, Dharampur
Pratappur, Distt.-Surajpur.

ABSTRACT

The greatness of Shakespeare is universally recognized. The supreme gift of Shakespeare is his universality. He is not of an age but of all ages because not only his men but also his women are true to the eternal facts of human life. His women play a significant and an important role in his tragedies as well as in his comedies. The present paper analyses the role of women in the plays of Shakespeare. Women in the plays of Shakespeare belong to the Elizabethan age when they were subject to home, domestic affairs and had to look after their husband and children. Yet Shakespeare uses them in many significant ways. Women appear as supporting and central figure in his works. There are several types of women characters in his works. Even some time they play the leading role. They are attractive, lovely, emotional, passionate and sometime dangerous also. The dramatist has created them beautifully and originally and he himself was not aware of it. The women characters are not only good but some are wicked also. The analysis done by me is a modest attempt to bring into light his women characters.

William Shakespeare, the great dramatist belonged to a period when there was reign of Elizabeth in England. Although during this period England was ruled by a woman Elizabeth but the women of this period did not enjoy so much liberty. They were educated but their education was not for any profession. It was for domestic affairs. Women had to get marry and have male heir to get dowry for financial stability. Women were not given political, economic or social power and it was only in the hands of men. They had to obey their father before marriage and husband after marriage. They had to remain silent and submissive either to their father or husband.

The women in Shakespeare's plays are affectionate, attractive and original creation of the dramatist. 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. (Zimmern: 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. (Lewes: 369)

Women play a very significant and important role in Shakespeare's plays. There are many kinds of women in his

plays. He gives so much importance to them although they are over looked. He sometimes gives them leading role and sometimes supporting role. They are not the main character but play the main part beside male character. Although they play main part but even in a play they are never completely free and treated with distrust. Most of the men of his plays were surrounded by women either by grandmother or mother, or a sister or a daughter or a wife who, he knows is strong. They are stronger than man and put an effect on the play. Sometimes they defeat the male character of the play.

Some of the most interesting female characters in Shakespeare's oeuvre are Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Viola and Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, and Gertrude, the Queen of Denmark and Hamlet's mother, in *Hamlet*. All these women play different role in different social position and differs from each other.

With characters such as Goneril and Cleopatra, Shakespeare demonstrates the devastating effects of female rebellion against social order. He invokes sympathy in the audience by creating characters of extreme feminine virtue such as Cordelia, Miranda and Ophelia. However, Shakespeare often creates ambiguous emotions in the audience by introducing an element of intelligence and boldness in the case of Isabella and Desdemona.

I am here going to describe what role some of the women characters of the dramatist have played in his plays. Let me start from Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* who without telling her father the reason, refuses to marry the count of Paris. This is spectacularly brave for the time and her father Capulet swears at her, threatens her and even strikes her, She does not give way, and desperate for a way out without giving up her love for Romeo. She is a female of enormous determination and courage. Perhaps the passionate Juliet appeals, a hormone-addled adolescent whom love transforms into a full-blooded

woman aware of her sexuality and not afraid to express it.

Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* thought of as a very strong woman and has the dubious talents. She employs power over her husband and encourages him to murder Duncan. She appeals to his sense of obligation towards her. She comes in more strongly as he wavers and finally he goes ahead with it.

Rosalind in *As You Like It* is in the central in the play, She flees persecution in her uncle's court accompanied by her cousin Celia to find safety and eventually, love, in the Forest of Arden. She is disguised as a man (Ganymed) throughout, until the end, and is able to organize everyone to fit in with her needs and desires. Her aim is to turn the man she wants to marry into someone who can match her qualities and be as strong as she is.

Beatrice in *Much Ado about Nothing* is an independent woman, seen by all those around her as such. She would be regarded as a feminist in our time. She wants to marry according to her desire. Her white-hot wit, combined with her vulnerability, arguably makes her the play post fleshed out character. She sees the absurdity of the world and instead of being melancholy; she chooses to laugh at it Which is sure sign of wisdom.

Viola in *Twelfth Night* lost her twin brother in a shipwreck. Her first instinct is not to appeal for help as a helpless woman but to disguise herself as a man and find a job as a servant in the household of the Duke. Her ability to adapt herself to her circumstances, in spite of, her female upbringing where she has been protected by men and all decisions about her have been made by men, is an indication of her strength.

Cordelia in *King Lear* stood up to her father showing great courage. When the King was defeated and imprisoned in a dungeon, she is with him, also imprisoned

while her sisters left him. She comforts her father and raises him up. She has helped him to learn what the bond between a father and daughter is. She has shown great strength throughout.

Desdemona in *Othello* demonstrates her strength at the beginning of the play when her father asks the Duke of Venice to stop her marriage to the Moor, Othello. The Duke asks her to give an account of herself and as an independent woman who has been a good daughter but is now ready to ally herself with her husband. If her father doesn't like that then it's just too bad. It isn't his business anymore. It required enormous strength to say things like that in a room full of powerful men at that time.

Like other strong female characters in Shakespeare. Hermia in a *Midsummer Night's Dream* stands up to her father, and even the most powerful man in their world. She does this with logical argument and remains calm while doing it. She then courageously runs away with her lover. Her strength lies in her calm assertiveness and her determination to control her own destiny rather than hand it to the men around her.

One of the major figures in the plays of Shakespeare is Imogen in *Cymbeline*, who is very important and remarkable example of feminine constancy. She is beautiful, resourceful and, most importantly she is honest. She stands up for herself to her dad and norms for the banishment of her husband. She is faithful and keeps her vows to her hubby. Unlike her husband Imogen trusts in her marriage and vows and won't break them. In disguising she goes after what she wants. She doesn't wait around for someone to convince Posthumus that she is innocent. She hops a boat to Rome to get the job done herself. Throughout it all she remains true to her love and almost everybody lives happily even after.

Gertrude in *Hamlet* is a woman without character and individuality. She

seems to be partly responsible for the happenings in the drama. According to Hamlet his mother's conduct has upset his faith in womankind and nothing can restore it. Hamlet says,

"She would hang on him,
As if increase of appetite had grown,
By what it fed on."

Banarjee and Thomas has quoted H. Granville Barker's words, "..... We know that this shallow, amiable, lymphatic creature was an adulteress, cunning enough to deceive her husband" (Banarjee and Thomas: 80). She is the unfortunate wife of her first husband, unreliable mother of her loving son and dissatisfied queen of her second husband.

Ophelia in *Hamlet* has no will of her own. She is of a passive and non-resisting character and submits to hectoring by her brother and father. Ophelia is used as a decoy by the king and Polonius. *Hamlet* is aware of the game. Banarjee and Thomas have quoted Morton Luce words, "she plays the spy upon her lover; he knows it, and with loving pity pronounces her doom." (78) We may note Ophelia's reaction at the end of the scene;

"O, woe is me
To have seen what I have, see what I see".

Ophelia is innocent itself. Banarjee and Thamos have quoted Morton Luce words, :

A maiden innocent as innocence,
childhood as childhood, yet a very
woman of a very woman, whom a
queen would gladly take to her as a
daughter, whose bride-bed a queen
would have decked with flowers;
who was importuned with the love
of Hamlet in honorable fashion,
besmirched with no soil, no cautel :
who returned his love with such
maiden modesty that the selfish
warning of her brother, the coarse
injunctions, the impertinent
inquires of her father, the fantastic
insinuations of her half-frenzied
lover, could not convict her of one

evil thought ; she in whose grave that brother and that lover contended for loving martyrdom ; she from whose fair and unpolluted flesh may violets spring. (79)

Ophelia seems to have no individuality of her own and the meddling of her father, her brother, the king and the queen in her private affairs brings on her suffering and tragic fate.

Miranda in the *Tempest* is considered as the best among all the heroines created by Shakespeare the kind which Shakespeare considered as a perfect woman, although she is beautiful and innocent but we find mental void is her existence. The result of this mental void Praveen Bhatia has quoted Mrs. Jameson words says that:

The character of Miranda resolves itself into the very elements of womanhood. She is beautiful modest and tender and she is these only; they comprise her whole being external and internal. She is so perfectly a sophisticated, so delicately refined that she is all but ethereal. (Bhatia: 270)

Miranda has tenderness and sympathy in her nature. As the shipwreck occupies in her mind she has tears in her eyes continuously. She is so simple. In her elemental simplicity, "She is similar to the yet sinless Eve of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the ideal child of nature that Wordsworth gave us with such regularity in her poem." (275)

Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* comes disguised as a famous young judge and shows extraordinary qualities in delivering her judgment. Her power lies in her wisdom, recognized by all those who do not know that she is a woman. In a real sense she exercises power over everyone present.

Cleopatra is a character who is dominated by love. She's forever waiting for the man, and even though she's a queen,

her kingdom is limited to her love. She embodies the feminine eternity. The wars outside are nothing as compared to the wars inside her soul. She takes control over life through love's strings but when something happens and she loses control over these strings, she becomes heartless, cruel. She's both an angel and a demon in the same time. Tenderness and cruelty mingle in her soul and these two keep inter-reacting all the time under different shapes. Shakespeare also emphasizes on how, by acting in such an aggressive manner, Cleopatra upsets the natural order of a male dominated society. By encapsulating in one person what all men want, sex and power, Shakespeare created a character that can direct men even if they are not aware that they are being used for her selfish goals.

Another important female character in *Othello* is Emilia. She is a brave and respectable character. However, she is not naïve like Desdemona. Emilia repeatedly attempts to teach the innocent Desdemona about the evils of life. She has to convince Desdemona that there are women who betray their husbands. Carefully watching over Desdemona, Emilia constantly tries to warn her that jealousy is a 'monster'. She is not at all afraid of men and does not think twice about defending Desdemona's honour to the raging Othello. Emilia is confident, calm, and rational when dealing with the men in this play. When Iago mocks at her uncontrollable 'tongue', Emilia does not overreact to his insults. She mostly ignores his comments and says just enough to defend herself. She knows that her husband is just trying to make himself look better, showing off for the people around him. Emilia is a loyal wife to Iago and helps him unknowingly carry out his evil plans. However, when she discovers the truth behind his lies, she fearlessly exposes him and all of his schemes. Emilia is a stout-hearted woman who will do anything to defend innocent Desdemona and the truth.

The analysis of the women in the plays of Shakespeare is, by far, incomplete. I have made a modest attempt to bring to the light only some of the most significant women in Shakespeare's plays. I am well aware that I have not discussed all the female characters. At the same time I also

know that I have only drawn the good qualities of female characters while I left the bad qualities, the demerits of them. Only I want to focus that they have an important role and value in his plays.

WORKS CITED

- Lewes, Louis; Helen Zimmern (trans.) (1895). *The Women of Shakespeare*. Holder. P. vi.
The Women of Shakespeare, (1895), p. 369.
- Banerjee, S.K. and Thomas, T. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Lakshmi Narain Agrawal Edu. Pub.
2011, p. 80
Opcit, p. 78
- Bhatia, Praveen. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, UBS Publishers' Distributors Pvt. Ltd.
2011, p. 270.
Opcit, p. 275