

Contemporariness of Female Characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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ABSTRACT

The 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth in 2016 is being celebrated with readings, performances, exhibitions, and academic conferences around the world. Shakespeare's masterpiece, *Hamlet*, which is written 400 years ago, remains relevant to the contemporary world due to its universality of themes and characters. The issues of revenge, treachery, incestuous relationships, suicide, etc. are widely prevalent and in some cases incurables by safe means. *Hamlet*, which supposedly deals deeply with human psyche, does not reveal much at all about two major female characters. Gertrude and Ophelia – the only two female characters -- act either as theatrical balances to the male characters or as an audience to their speeches and actions. In the play of *Hamlet*, the female characters have been under the shadows of the male characters by being used for their possessions, status and lust. The female characters of Shakespeare are generally said to be portrayed as powerless to influence the outcome of events; they are presented more as types than characters. The present paper deals with the contemporariness of female characters in *Hamlet* and their significance in the play.

KEYWORDS:

Contemporariness; universality; female characters.

Introduction

There is no denying the fact that Shakespeare's women are great characters. At the time when female actors were practically non-existent and female parts were played by men, nothing deterred the Bard from writing great roles and speeches for female characters. Shakespeare's representation of women, and the ways in which his female roles are interpreted and enacted, have become topics of scholarly interest. Several traditional texts of Western literature have been rediscovered and revisited by many feminist scholars and critics to bring into light the various shadowy female

characters who deserve special attention. Earlier, authors were mostly men, and their voice were considered by many to be domineering and biased in favour of a male point of view. This was so during the time of Shakespeare also. This is apparent in Shakespeare's masterpiece, *Hamlet* which supposedly deals deeply with human psyche, does not reveal much about two major female characters. Ophelia and Gertrude are given demoted opinions and roles within the play. Ophelia and Gertrude – the only two female characters of the play – act either as theatrical balances to the male counterparts or as an audience to their speeches and actions. Earlier, most of

the critics and scholars gave full attention to the portrayal of Hamlet as an attractive character while ignoring the female characters as they did not consider them 'important' characters. But recently, scholars, especially feminist scholars have regarded them as important for their varied positions, and have discussed how by the help of these women characters the play has raised in its value. The present paper discusses the importance of the female characters in Shakespeare's acclaimed play, *Hamlet* and their contemporariness in the modern society.

Feminism was a largely debated issue in the context of sixteenth century literature specific to many Shakespearean texts. Early criticism of female characters in Shakespeare's drama focused on the positive attributes the dramatist bestows on them and often claimed that Shakespeare realistically captured the "essence" of femininity. Recent critics take a variety of approaches to the topic. According to Ross Murfin:

Feminist criticism comes in many forms, and feminist critics have a variety of goals. Some are interested in rediscovering the works of women writers overlooked by a masculine-dominated culture. Others have revisited books by male authors and reviewed them from a woman's point of view to understand how they both reflect and shape the attitudes that have held women back.

Elaine Showalter believes that the changing face of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a result of feminist response and not merely a patriarchal ideology as expressed by her as:

...in exposing the ideology of representation, feminist critics have also the responsibility to acknowledge and to examine the boundaries of own ideological positions as products of our gender and our time. (Showalter 238)

Virginia Woolf, a well-known feminist writer, offers a perfect bridge between the Renaissance and the modern age. In her most famous essay, *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf asks, what would have happened if Shakespeare had had a sister who was every bit as brilliant as he? Woolf answers that the sister would have found it impossible to become a playwright due to the anti-feminist oppression of the sixteenth century. If for Shakespeare, the great plays were veritable miracles, they would have been impossible for this imaginary sister. (46)

Virginia Woolf's statement in this essay suggests that any woman who held a promising talent during the Renaissance age was born to live an unhappy life. Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* establishes the basic notion followed ever since by feminist literary critics. To many scholars Shakespeare fails at representing the feminine perspective in his *Hamlet* and thus demotes Ophelia and Gertrude into mere theatrical balances to the male characters. So, there is no surprise if some scholars have presented Ophelia and Gertrude in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as weak and victimized characters. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet* Ophelia and Gertrude have been portrayed as 'incestuous' and 'vulnerable' characters respectively. This is relevant to modern society as the kind of relationship between Gertrude and King Claudius is still considered 'incestuous' and girls like Ophelia are still vulnerable to the abuses of men. Both Ophelia and Gertrude find themselves in a patriarchal society that is the main reason why they are often torn apart by orders and suggestions proposed by the male characters of the play – Polonius, Laertes, the Ghost, Claudius, and Hamlet. Ophelia and Gertrude are the victim of their society and male power politics as the women of present day society. To understand the contemporariness of the female characters in *Hamlet*, it is important to analyse the

characteristic features of Ophelia and Gertrude and discuss how they are shown as weak and victimised in their society.

Ophelia has been garnering constant attention from critics and revisionists since Shakespeare wrote her. She is one of the most interpreted and represented characters of Shakespeare, though the interpretations of her character vary depending on the artists who have depicted her in their piece of work. The sheer number of contemporary interpretations of Ophelia emphasise the fact that she is still very much alive in modern society who has transversed time in a way few characters have.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet* the character of Ophelia has been shown as the quintessential obedient daughter, emphasised through her name which means 'serving woman'. She is one of the two women of the play who is vulnerable to the abuses of men. She is forced to choose between her lover, Hamlet and her role as the obedient, submissive daughter to Polonius, and sister to Laertes respectively. Ophelia seems to have no control over her body relationships or choices as evident in the line, "I shall obey my Lord". To some extent, the responsibility of women is still encompasses in society through the choice women must make as seen in *Hamlet*.

Ophelia's importance in the play is often viewed in relation to Hamlet and the effect she has on him. But her importance can also be viewed in respect to what she tells us about the society we live in today. In an essay Elaine Showalter opposes Jacques Lacan's interpretation of Ophelia as "an object of Hamlet's male desire". Showalter along with other feminist scholars have protested the analysis of Ophelia she has been subjected to. Feminist criticism of Ophelia's character has given Ophelia meaning beyond relationship with Hamlet, Polonius and Laertes. Despite the fact that feminists may not agree with Shakespeare's depiction,

the relevance of modern society's pressure on girls that Ophelia has to struggle against, cannot be ignored. No doubt, Elizabethan women were not as free as women today and Shakespeare's ideas about women were merely representations of the culture she was living in. Young women today shadow many of the problems Ophelia had and many adolescent girls identify themselves with her. Nevertheless, girls today are dealing with the pressure of the society better than they were 400 years ago.

The relevance and contemporariness of Ophelia's madness and death are evident from so many paintings, plays, photographs, poems, stories, dances, and movies that the depictions have become fact. For example, Jane E. Kromm discusses "The Feminisation of Madness in Visual Representation", citing Ophelia as the prime example. In Franco Zefferlli's 1990 version of *Hamlet*, Ophelia has been depicted as obedient but begrudgingly so. Her obvious displeasure is reflected by her expressions when she tells her father that she will obey his wishes. Bonham-Carter presents an intelligent Ophelia who is well aware of everything going on around her. Her death is not shown in Carter's version. Rather, the news of Ophelia's death is reported by Gertrude, which is faithful to the original text. (Ruther 299-319)

*Queen: There is a willow grows
aslant a brook,
That shows his hoar leaves in the
glassy stream;
There with fantastic garlands
did she make,
Of crowflowers, nettles, daisies,
and long purples
That liberal shepherds give a
grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead
men's fingers call them.
There' on the pendent boughs
her coronet weeds*

*Clambering to hang, an envious
sliver broke;
When down her weedy trophies
and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her
clothes spread wide
And mermaid like, awhile they
bore her up;
Which time she chanted snatches
of old tunes;
As one incapable of her own
distress,
Or like a creature native and
indued
Unto that element; but long it
could not be
Till that her garments, heavy
with their drink,
Pull'd the poor wretch from her
melodious lay
To muddy death. (Hamlet, Act
IV, Scene VII 166-183)*

Virginia Woolf opines that the member of the male sex generally feel that they have an "innate superiority" over women. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia is configured as inferior to male characters, particularly to Polonius and Laertes. She has been made so dependent on her father and brother that she cannot think or act for herself and it appears that she does not have an identity. "I do not know, my Lord, What I should think," Ophelia tells her father during their first conversation about Hamlet. Polonius' authority over Ophelia as decision-maker even on crucial matter of her life is reflected in his response:

*Marry, I'll teach you: think yourself a
baby;
That you have ta'en these tenders for
true pay,
Which are not sterling. Tender
yourself more dearly;
Or--not to crack the wind of the poor
phrase,
Running it thus--you'll tender me a
fool. (I.iii.114-18)*

Ophelia is ready to sacrifice her love for the obedience of her father and brother

without realising that she has been pawned for their own benefits rather than for her welfare. Polonius is ready to "loose" Ophelia to improve his relationship with the King Claudius. Laertes also warns Ophelia to distance herself from Hamlet. When Laertes and Claudius are plotting Hamlet's death, Laertes expresses all eagerness for action even though he knew Ophelia's love for Hamlet.

Ophelia in *Hamlet* is often surrounded by Polonius, Laertes, and Hamlet and she does not have any choices apart from behaving according to rules of three men. Ophelia's identity in *Hamlet* is mostly identified as Polonius' submissive daughter, Laertes chaste sister, and Hamlet's honest lover and her identity disappears along with the disappearance of male dominance over her. When Laertes has gone to France, Polonius has been killed and Hamlet has rejected Ophelia, saying "...I loved you not./.... Get thee to a nunnery." (III. i. 119-21), she loses her identity and becomes mad. After the death of Ophelia, Hamlet claims that "I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers/ /Could not, with all their quantity of love,/ Make up my sum," (III. i. 257-59), and later Hamlet and Laertes engaged in a duel not to honour her memory but to 'outface' each other. This further asserts Woolf's claim that women "are essential to all violent and heroic action". (A Room of One's Own 36) On different occasions Ophelia's conversation with Hamlet, Polonius, and Laertes reveals that she has been denied a voice of her own and thus Showalter has rightly observed her as "the object Ophelia".

In the play, *Hamlet*, Ophelia appears only in five of the twenty scenes but she becomes more prominent within the past four centuries and has become an obsessive figure in Western cultural mythology. Whatever their social status, women suffered new constraints as life began to transition from the medieval society to modern state. However, a

renaissance did happen to women in modern era and women began to voice their own views and opinions by declaring “female dependency” as inappropriate. Nevertheless, women to this day still strive to achieve true equality with men in the world and have to fight on a daily basis to prove their worthiness to the world.

The other female character in *Hamlet* who attracts the attention of modern scholars and critics is Gertrude. Although Gertrude has limited speech throughout the play, she, like Ophelia, has been studied by many critics and scholars. In the play, Gertrude is the mother of the hero, the widow of the Ghost, and the wife of the King of Denmark. Gertrude acted a crucial role in the play as the mother of Hamlet and the previous wife of the early King Hamlet. Her overhasty marriage in a month or so after her husband’s death and the summoning of Hamlet back to Denmark from the University of Wittenberg set the action of the play in motion.

Gertrude is usually described as a sensuous woman. Critics like H. Granville-Barker inferred that Gertrude entered into adulterous relations with Claudius while her husband was alive and also had a hand in the murder of Hamlet’s father. Barker writes, “...we know that this shallow, amiable, lymphatic creature was an adulteress, cunning enough to deceive her husband” (*Preface to Hamlet* 228). Even though there is no proof of her part played in the death of king Hamlet, Gertrude is believed to be the source of the problems which come up in Denmark. This belief is so wide that it is often accepted without question, without further inquiry into why exactly Gertrude is understood in this way” (Graf, 2013:16). Neither her deeds nor her attitudes confirm this claim. There is no hint of her role in the King Hamlet’s death as evident in the words of the Ghosts when he speaks to Hamlet:

Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate
beast,

With witchcraft of his wit, with
traitorous gifts,--
O wicked wit, and gifts that have
the power

So to seduce! (Hamlet I.v.42-5)

In the above lines, the Ghost condemns Claudius and not his Queen. Again, the Ghost warns Hamlet not to harm his mother: “... leave her to Heaven / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her.” (I. v. 85-88) However, the Ghost claimed the marriage of Gertrude and Claudius as incest and unfaithful because of the negative stereotypes of women prevalent in the sixteenth century England. Hamlet accuses Gertrude by saying that, “she cannot state her relationship with Claudius as love because she is too old” to fall in love with a man. Hamlet cannot accept and feel his mother’s feelings because his mother should not have these strong emotions to fall in love with a man. (Graf, 2013:22) This shows his possessiveness for his mother. Further, Hamlet accuses his mother for his father’s death by saying “A bloody deed – almost as bad, good mother,/As kill a king and marry with his brother”. (III. iv. 27-28) To this accusation Gertrude immediately replies: “As kill a king!” (III. iv. 28) Gertrude’s surprise expressed in the given line clearly states that she has no knowledge of Claudius’ responsibility for her first husband’s death and she is not guilty thereof. Hamlet’s and the Ghost’s description of Gertrude as “wanton widow and lustful woman” is mostly because of the general canons of that time. However, women are still seen guilty in the contemporary patriarchal society for their hasty marriages as Gertrude did in the play. The study reveals that Ophelia and Gertrude are often misjudged because of the actions and words of other characters. Like Ophelia, Gertrude speaks very few lines in *Hamlet* and mostly male characters in the play describe them and shape their behaviours. As Ophelia seems to have no identity without her father, Polonius,

brother, Laertes, and lover, Hamlet; Gertrude's identity seems to depend on her son, Hamlet, her first husband, the dead King Hamlet, and her current husband, Claudius. Nevertheless, the play, *Hamlet* might not have been as popular and successful without these two female characters – Ophelia and Gertrude.

Conclusion

Women in Shakespeare's plays are put in challenging situations whether they create the main conflicts and base of the plays, or bring up interesting moral and cultural questions. In this regard it is worthwhile to discover how Shakespeare has shaped the image of women from Renaissance to the modern age. According to many critics, Shakespeare fails at representing the feminine perspective in

his *Hamlet* and thus demotes Ophelia and Gertrude into mere theatrical balances to the male characters. These two female characters of *Hamlet* not only illuminate our mind about the undeserving suffering of women in the patriarchal society of the Elizabethan period but also remind us the victimization of women in the contemporary society where they are the victim of their society and male power politics. Despite many critics' opinions to the contrary, William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* remains relevant in today's society. The play touches on themes such as suicide, revenge, the frailty of women, murder, fate, and destiny that are as prevalent today as they were in Shakespeare's time.

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