

Modern Interpretations of Shakespeare's Female Characters

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Abstract - William Shakespeare's prominent tragic plays at the time of Indian imperialism and postcolonial interventions depicted four fundamental dimensions of human existence: social, moral, political, and spiritual. These similarities between the Indian dramatic tradition and Elizabethan drama facilitated the reception of the geographical, historical, ethnic, and ideological differences between the two cultures, countries, and contexts, resulting in remarkable favourable transformations in the Indian response to Shakespeare's plays. Indeed, Shakespeare is unquestionably the most influential poet and dramatist in the world. A multitude of scholars have extensively examined his works, and his plays have been adapted into films and even staged in live productions. Within every one of his plays, we encounter the sombre truth of human conscience. The portrayal of women in Shakespeare's plays serves as a manifestation of his perspective on women and their societal position. Although women are not the main characters in his plays, they play a significant subordinate role. Societal and temporal influences are evident in the portrayal of feminine characters in his plays. Women during the Shakespearean era had minimal power, independence, and acknowledgement. The plays of Shakespeare have received acclaim for their portrayal of clever, attractive, and astute female characters. Across all of his plays, the proportion of female characters is below 16% of the overall number of characters. Out of the total of 981 characters, 826 are male and 155 are female. Numerous influential women are featured in Shakespeare's plays. They possess a keen political acumen. The salient characteristic of Shakespeare's portrayal of female protagonists in his plays is his forceful presentation of women. The objective of this research paper is to highlight the immense importance of women characters in Shakespeare's plays.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Women Characters, Literature, Feminism, Feminist Criticism, Patriarchy, Femininity, Masculinity, etc.

I. INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare was an eminent figure in English literature. He is a renowned author who has highly

influenced numerous contemporary writers. His life was replete with erudition, dedication, and resolve. He imparted to us the true essence of literature. Empirical study has shown that Shakespeare's depiction of women in his plays mirrors the prevailing perception of women during his day. The play by Shakespeare provides us with a profound understanding of the female characters as portrayed in Elizabethan society. Their duty was to exhibit virtue and obedience. William Shakespeare portrays two distinct categories of women: one characterised by submissiveness, obedience, and morality, and the other by independence, dominance, and evil.

Shakespeare's portrayal of female characters remains a subject of ongoing exploration. "Portia, Macbeth, Desdemona, and Emilia are prime examples of women breaking free from societal expectations. 'Contemporary reinterpretations allow audiences to value these characters' intricate nature and significance in gender discourse." Shakespeare's female characters defy gender labels and patriarchal norms by rejecting traditional roles, employing feminist views to emphasize struggles for agency, and embracing intersectional perspectives to acknowledge complex identities and experiences.

II. SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES: MOTIFS

The two tragedies that I have analyzed in my essay can be considered to have three main motifs (these, in turn, leading to sub-motifs or sub-themes):

1. Life: good versus evil
2. Love
3. Death: tragic end and final relief.

The symbol of life is employed to depict and elucidate the behaviour of the primary characters, which is influenced by their environment such as culture, society, and family. Notable instances of this are the dominance of patriarchal authority over Juliet during

her childhood, or the autonomy of Cleopatra as a formidable queen. These examples serve as credible portrayals of the possible personalities that individuals can possess.

According to contemporary standards, Shakespeare comprehends and fulfils the necessity of having heroes, leaders, and dignitaries as the central focus of a tragedy. Nevertheless, the dramatist surpasses and delves into the core of these apparently highly traditional norms and recognises that the brilliance of the protagonist or heroine resides not only in their physical appearance but, most importantly, in their inner essence. Once more, the humanistic perspective of the Renaissance is evident: "Knowledge of our own selves and the human condition' (Wells, 2005, 4)."

Conversely, love is a significant component of the tragedies, although not the paramount one. This essay endeavours to establish a causal relationship between love and death. Love significantly influences the entire play, but, death is the fundamental element. The love between the two main characters in both examined tragedies is the cause that ultimately leads to their deaths. Finally, when the protagonist and heroine take their own lives, the recurring question that arises in every tragic narrative is - What is the reason behind that untimely demise? Furthermore, the response becomes far more precise when the reader and/or observer perceive this character as irreplaceable. Such is the precise moment of relief that Shakespeare fervently sought to discover and convey in his tragedies.

III. SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES: WOMEN'S ROLE

The tragedies of William Shakespeare are widely recognised for their careful examination of intricate characters and profound themes. "Within several of his theatrical works, women assume substantial roles that enhance the overall tragic nature of the narrative." This essay aims to examine the depiction of women in three renowned tragedies by Shakespeare, namely 'Macbeth,' 'Hamlet,' and 'Othello,' with a specific emphasis on the characters of Lady Macbeth, Ophelia, and Desdemona, respectively. By analysing these characters, we will investigate how Shakespeare depicts women's autonomy, power relations, and the devastating outcomes of their behaviours.

In the play 'Macbeth,' Lady Macbeth is depicted as a strong and ambitious woman who plays a crucial role in persuading her husband to commit regicide. She defies conventional gender norms by assuming a more proactive and commanding position in the relationship, encouraging Macbeth to manifest the appearance of an innocent flower while embodying the nature of a serpent (Act 1, Scene 5). Lady Macbeth's fierce ambition and relentless pursuit of power finally result in her descent into insanity, as she is overwhelmed by guilt and tormented by the crimes she and her husband have perpetrated. Her untimely demise serves as a warning about the debasing impact of authority and ambition.

Ophelia in 'Hamlet' is depicted as a submissive and compliant victim of manipulation by the men in her life, in stark contrast to Lady Macbeth's assertiveness. The utilisation of Ophelia's relationship with Hamlet as a strategic tool in the political manoeuvring of her father, Polonius, and her brother, Laertes, ultimately results in her tragic downfall. Ophelia's insanity and ultimate suicide are attributed to her failure to establish her own autonomy and skilfully negotiate the intricate power dynamics of the surrounding world. The portrayal of her character underscores the constraints imposed on women in Shakespeare's society and the devastating outcomes of their absence of autonomy. Within the play 'Othello,' Desdemona is depicted as a morally upright and faithful spouse who falls prey to her husband's envy and lack of confidence. Notwithstanding her innocence and purity, Desdemona is incapable of defending herself against the allegations of adultery made against her by Othello, finally resulting in her tragic demise. Desdemona's character exemplifies the tragic outcomes of male insecurity and the constraints imposed on women in a social structure dominated by men.

The depiction of women in Shakespeare's tragedies is intricate and diverse. By examining characters such as Lady Macbeth, Ophelia, and Desdemona, he delves into the concepts of power, agency, and the devastating outcomes of their decision-making. The characters in the play reflect the prevailing social norms and expectations of Shakespeare's day, so emphasising the difficulties encountered by women in a world predominantly controlled by men.

IV. PATRIARCHAL NORMS, GENDER STEREOTYPES, FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES AND EMPOWERMENT

Shakespeare's feminine personalities have often defied traditional gender stereotypes and challenged masculine rules. For instance, Portia reclaims authority and social power over male characters, challenging gender rules by using Bassanio and her servant Nerissa to defy societal hopes (Shahwan 2022, p. 162). Portia is a character in the story 'The Merchant of Venice' who emphasizes her strength, intelligence, and ability to subvert traditional gender roles within the context of the play. Additionally, Emilia asserts her right to be heard by her husband, defying his attempts to silence her, which mirrors the subdual women face in society (Shahwan 2022, p. 162). By stating her right to be heard, Emilia, in the tragedy 'Othello,' challenges the patriarchal norms that seek to restrict women's voices and agency. Modern interpretations of Portia and Emilia showcase their autonomy, intellect, and rebellion against masculine curbs, allowing audiences to spot their intricacies and weight in talks on gender consent. Hence, women in the present day, like in Shakespeare's books, challenge gender typecasts and customs by fully grasping the nuances and worth of these characters in debates about gender roles and liberation.

A significant development in modern interpretations of Shakespeare's female characters is the application of feminist perspectives. For example, Lady Macbeth's willingness to forsake her femininity to support her husband's ambition contrasts with her self-centeredness, as Hecate's critique emphasizes (Cheng 2023, p. 4). These reinterpretations illuminate the underlying patriarchal systems in the play, exploring the characters' quest for empowerment and independence. Through a feminist lens, the reevaluation of characters, like Lady Macbeth, exposes women's broader societal obstacles, stimulating discussions on power, gender, and identity. Thus, gender equality views shed light on women's struggles, power, gender, and identity in Shakespeare's characters.

Modern interpretations also embrace intersectional perspectives to explore women's experiences beyond their gender. In the book 'Othello,' Othello's interracial marriage to Desdemona challenges patriarchal order and social norms through their non-

compliant elopement (Sassi 2020, p. 51). In this case, Desdemona has been reimagined through an intersectional lens, considering race, class, and ethnicity factors. These nuanced portrayals recognize the complexity of identity and how different aspects of a woman's life shape her experiences and interactions, fostering a more inclusive understanding of Shakespeare's female characters. 'Therefore, intersectional reinterpretations of Shakespeare's female characters uncover the complexities of identity, fostering a more inclusive understanding of their experiences.'

V. WOMEN IN SHAKESPEARE'S TIME SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS

In the time of William Shakespeare, the prevailing societal expectations for women were firmly established in patriarchal standards that determined their roles and conduct. Traditionally, women were anticipated to exhibit obedience, submissiveness, and devotion towards their husbands and families. In addition, they were anticipated to possess chastity, modesty, and virtue, which constituted their principal responsibilities as wives and mothers. By depicting his female characters, Shakespeare's plays both mirror and defy these expectations, so providing valuable insights into the intricate gender roles prevalent in Elizabethan England.

Within Shakespeare's tragic plays, such as 'Macbeth' and 'Othello,' women are frequently depicted as targets of male ambition and envy. Lady Macbeth, for instance, challenges conventional gender norms by inciting her husband to commit regicide, but ultimately succumbs to insanity as a consequence. Her character exemplifies the perils of women deviating from their designated roles, implying that society norms were inflexible and uncompromising. Furthermore, in the play 'Othello,' Desdemona personifies the idealised portrayal of a morally upright and compliant wife. Notwithstanding her lack of guilt, she is incapable of mounting a defence against Othello's doubts, so emphasising the susceptibility of women in a society predominantly controlled by men. Desdemona's tragic destiny functions as a warning, strengthening the cultural norm that women should exhibit submissiveness and passivity in their marital relationships.

Conversely, Shakespeare's comedies frequently showcase female characters who intentionally challenge conventional gender roles and expectations. The characters Viola in 'Twelfth Night' and Beatrice in 'Much Ado About Nothing' exhibit wit, intelligence, and assertiveness, so defying the prevailing expectation that women should cultivate meekness and submissiveness. Viola, assuming a male identity, moves through the world with autonomy and self-assurance, while Beatrice participates in lively conversation with the male characters, demonstrating her independence and cleverness. These characters imply that although society norms imposed strict expectations on women, there was also an acknowledgement of their intellectual abilities and desire for autonomy. William Shakespeare's plays provide a sophisticated perspective on gender roles, recognising the limitations imposed on women by society while also emphasising their tenacity and capacity to defy these conventions.

The representation of women by Shakespeare exemplifies the intricate and frequently conflicting character of cultural norms during his era. Although women were required to adhere to specific prescribed roles and behaviours, there was also recognition of their physical power, intellect, and ability to take action. "Contemporary audiences are still deeply affected by Shakespeare's female characters, which serve as a poignant reminder of the ongoing battle for gender equality and the intricate nature of women's societal lived realities.'

VI. MODERN INTERPRETATIONS OF SHAKESPEARE'S FEMALE CHARACTERS

Shakespeare's female characters have been interpreted differently in modern times, reflecting shifts in societal perceptions of gender, power, and identity. These interpretations highlight the agency, struggles, and limitations placed on these characters by patriarchal structures, as they delve into the depth and complexity of these characters.

Empowerment and Agency: Modern interpretations of Shakespeare frequently highlight the female characters' empowerment. Strong women who challenge conventional gender norms are viewed as role models, such as Cleopatra and Lady Macbeth. For example, Lady Macbeth is no longer just a cunning

character; instead, she is frequently seen as a woman questioning her subservient role in a society where men predominate. In a similar vein, Cleopatra is presented as a multifaceted leader whose political savvy and intelligence are on par with those of her male counterparts.

Victimization and Resistance: Ophelia and Desdemona are two examples of characters that are frequently seen through the victimization lens, highlighting how they are oppressed by men's actions and societal expectations. Modern interpretations, however, also delve into their nuanced modes of resistance. For instance, Ophelia's insanity is occasionally read as a protest against the limitations placed upon her, and Desdemona's unwavering love and honesty are perceived as acts of defiance in a cruel and deceitful world.

Shakespeare's female characters are increasingly being examined from the perspective of the intersection of gender and power. In dramas like 'The Taming of the Shrew,' characters like Katherine are explored as people negotiating and questioning the power dynamics in their relationships, in addition to being women who are subdued by men. Katherine's wit and intelligence could be highlighted in contemporary productions, implying that her last speech can be read as ironic or as a kind of calculated compliance.

Identity and Performance: Another important component of contemporary interpretations is the notion of gender as performance. We examine how characters like Viola from 'Twelfth Night,' who poses as a man, highlight the performative aspect of identity and the fluidity of gender. Viola's experiences raise concerns about the nature of gender and the limitations it imposes, and her cross-dressing helps her navigate a world that is dominated by men.

Postcolonial and Feminist Readings: Feminist readings frequently highlight how Shakespeare's female characters either defy or comply with the standards of their day. These readings might question the restricted roles that are open to women and emphasize how these characters overcome and work around those restrictions. In the context of empire and colonization, postcolonial readings could look at figures like Cleopatra and how her identity as an

Egyptian queen is shaped by and resists Roman imperialism.

Complexity and Ambiguity: Contemporary interpretations steer clear of one-dimensional depictions of Shakespeare's female characters by embracing their complexity and ambiguity. The complex personalities, motivations, and interpersonal and societal conflicts of characters like Gertrude in 'Hamlet' or Portia in "The Merchant of Venice" are examined.

In general, contemporary interpretations of Shakespeare's female characters aim to reveal the nuanced meanings hidden within their deeds and speech, presenting them as unique people who must contend with the limitations placed on them by society. These interpretations take into account current issues with identity, gender equality, and power dynamics in relationships.

VII. CONCLUSION

Academic study has increasingly centred on the female characters appearing in William Shakespeare's plays. Each of Shakespeare's plays features a diverse range of heroines. One notable aspect of Shakespeare's female characters is their exceptional intellect, vitality, and unwavering self-determination. Analysis has indicated that Shakespeare was a champion of women's rights and a trailblazer who deviated greatly from the conventional and unchanging portrayals of female characters by his peers and previous playwrights. Some scholars argue that even Shakespeare's most favourable depictions of female characters have inherent flaws. Some critics argue that this demonstrates that he was not impervious to the deeply ingrained misogynistic tendencies prevalent during his era. In Shakespeare's works, female characters defy traditional gender roles and patriarchal conventions. Contemporary perspectives empower women by incorporating feminist ideologies and embracing the concept of intersectionality. In defiance of societal expectations, Portia and Emilia assert their autonomy and sagacity. Indeed, the struggle of Lady Macbeth for autonomy and the interracial marriage of Desdemona shed light on the obstacles imposed by traditional gender expectations.

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