

# Shakespeare's women characters as a mirror of society

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**Abstract**— *Shakespeare is undoubtedly the world's most influential poet and dramatist. His works have been studied by many people and his plays have been made into movies and even live performances. In each of his play we find the grim reality of human conscience. Shakespeare's presentation of women in his plays demonstrates his feelings about women and their role in the society. In his plays women do not constitute main character, yet they play an important part. We can see the impact of society and time on the feminine characters in his plays. During Shakespearean age women had very little authority, autonomy and recognition. They gained their status based on the position of their father or husband. They were expected to be a silent observer. Under those circumstances, Shakespeare created such a beautiful and memorable characters like Beatrice, Cleopatra, Juliet, Rosalind, Hermione, Lady Macbeth, Helena & Hermia, Olivia and Viola etc. all these unforgettable characters act as a mirror to Shakespearean age. Thus the main aim of this research paper is to highlight the correlation of his women characters with the time and society and in what ways they act as a mirror or reflection.*

**Keywords**— *undoubtedly, demonstrates, authority, autonomy, recognition, unforgettable, correlation, and reflection.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare was a star of the English literature. He is an author who has inspired many writers of our time. His life was full of knowledge, devotion and determination. He taught us the real meaning of literature. According to the research carried out, it has been observed that Shakespeare's portrayal of women in his plays reflect the conception of women in his era. What we see throughout Shakespeare's play is an insight into the female characters as perceived by Elizabethan culture. They were to be virtuous and obedient. Shakespeare presents two types of women one those who were submissive, obedient and moral

and second those who were independent, dominating and evil counterpart.

Many critics claim that the portrayal of Ophelia and Gertrude reflect the human nature and society of that time. Shakespeare has attributed both strength and weakness both to make them real. In the renaissance age, majority of women had been uneducated unless they came from a wealthy family. In most of his plays heroines seems to be emotionally weak, inferior compared to men and dominated by men. The oppression of women in society is seen in his play *Midsummer Night Dreams*, in this play Hermia is forced to marry Demetrius, according to her father's wish, although she is in love with Lysander. She must obey her father and cannot revoke his decision. Demetrius is regarded rich and noble as compared to Lysander so according to her father, he is considered to be the best husband for Hermia. Egeu says: "As she is mine, I may dispose of her: Which shall be either to this gentleman, or to her death; according to our law, immediately provided in that case." <sup>1</sup>Egeu's ownership towards his daughter clearly shows the attitude towards female gender in renaissance.

Shakespeare's another play *Taming of the Shrew* shows the domination of a husband over his wife; Katherine is manipulated to the will of Petruchio and is deprived of food and sleep. She is tortured in a cruel way. Petruchio tells Katherine "women are made to bear and so are you".

Shakespearean time, women have been regarded as weak human beings. For example in *Hamlet*, Ophelia symbolizes a vulnerable woman, who acts according to her fathers and brothers wish and order. Her dutiful role is taken advantage of and Polonius uses her to spy on Hamlet. Although Ophelia loves Hamlet, she rejects him as an act of obedience towards her father. Once she says that:

And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,  
That suck'd the honey of his music vows,  
-----o, woe is me,

To have seen what I have seen, see what I see! <sup>2</sup>

Another character is Gertrude, in Hamlet who is weak. Gertrude basically depicted the type of woman who is somewhat immoral. Hamlet has low opinion about her mother when she soon marries her husband's brother; hamlet regards this act of marriage as sign of Gertrude's weakness and is considered immoral by the church. He refers to her as *frailty; thy name is women*. Some critics claim that Shakespeare successfully portrays Gertrude as poor mother and lustful lover most likely reflecting the human nature of that time.

Shakespeare also presents the powerful woman as wicked in Macbeth, Lady Macbeth. She is portrayed as a very strong character that influences Macbeth to kill the king Duncan. Shakespeare portrays her as an ambitious woman, greedy for power.

"Glamis thou art, and coward; and shalt be what thou art promised:

Yet do I feel thy nature; it is too full o' the milk of human kindness to catch the

Nearest way: thou wouldst be great; art not without ambition but without the Illness should attend it"<sup>3</sup>

Readers state that though most of Shakespeare's female characters are vulnerable and dependent, Lady Macbeth breaks the mold. Lady Macbeth as a negative character is justified by her attribution of strength, not accepted by the society during Elizabethan era.

Shakespeare also presents the empowerment of women through the characters like Olivia and Viola in *Twelfth Night*. He permits some of the female characters to exist fully outside of conventional norms. Olivia and Viola are very strong characters who true to their convictions. Shakespeare empowered both the female characters as independent; he has been trying to change the conception about women during 16<sup>th</sup> century.

One of the famous characters created by Shakespeare is Cleopatra. She is portrayed in much more sympathetic way in Shakespeare's play. She receives less blame and more compassion. Cleopatra is reminiscent of Elizabeth I. She is queen, loved and respected by many, but despised by many as well, in the same way that Elizabeth was. Shakespeare's Cleopatra and Elizabeth both had a strong will and were not easily controlled by others. In Shakespeare's play Cleopatra says:

Sink Rome, their tongue rot that speak against us! A charge

We bear I 'th' war, and as president of my Kingdom well

Appear therefore a man. Speak not against it.

I will not stay behind.<sup>4</sup>

This quote sounds very much like something Elizabeth could have said. Shakespeare also emphasis on how by acting in such aggressive manner, Cleopatra upsets the natural order of a male dominated society.

## II. CONCLUSION

In Shakespeare's tragedies and his plays in general, there are several types of female characters who represent the society of that time. Shakespeare's dramas have been bound to rules and conceptions of the patriarchal Elizabethan era. For all that, Shakespeare supports the English renaissance stereotypes of genders, their role and responsibility in society. There are several different female characters in Shakespeare plays, who assert themselves in very different ways. *Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth, Viola, Rosalind, Desdemona, Ophelia, Gertrude* etc. according to Virginia Woolf, Shakespeare is the writer who made his writings transparent and free of any personal vices for delineating the women characters in his tragedies. Shakespeare with his extraordinary genius for portraying human behavior depicts the condition of women in a patriarchal society and his women characters who in their richness, transcend the limitations of time and Shakespearean theme becomes timeless.

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