



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 1. Issue.2.,2014

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
ISSN-2 3 4 9 - 9 4 5 1

PORTRAIT OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

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Article Received :21/08/2014  
Article Revised:26/09/2014  
Article Accepted:29/09/2014  
Published online:30/9/2014

**ABSTRACT**

Shakespeare's representation of women, and the ways in which his female roles are interpreted and enacted, have become topics of scholarly interest. Shakespeare's heroines encompass a wide range of characterizations and types. Within the gallery of female characters, Shakespeare's women characters display great intelligence, vitality, and a strong sense of personal independence. These qualities have led some critics to consider Shakespeare a champion of womankind and an innovator who departed sharply from flat, stereotyped characterizations of women common to his contemporaries and earlier dramatists. Contrastingly, other commentators note that even Shakespeare's most favorably portrayed women possess characters that are tempered by negative qualities. They suggest that this indicates that Shakespeare was not free of misogynistic tendencies that were deep-seated in the culture of his country and era. William Shakespeare lived during the Elizabethan era and wrote all his works based on the society of that time. The Elizabethan era was a time when women were portrayed to be weaker than men. During that time, it was said that "women are to be seen, and not heard." In this article an attempt has been taken to explore Shakespeare's presentation of women in his tragedies demonstrating his feelings about women and their roles in society.

**Key Words:** Patriarchy, Femininity, Monarch, Masculinity, Stereotypical

**Introduction**

The Renaissance is a vast cultural phenomenon in fifteenth century Italy with the recovery of Classical Greek and Latin texts that had been confined to the middle Ages. The scholars who had gone through the text had been motivated by an educational and political ideal called 'humanities' – that all the virtues and capabilities pertained to human beings should be studied and developed to the maximum extent. Renaissance humanism, as this movement was called, generated a new interest in human experience. As the movement spread to other countries in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a more skeptical strain of humanism developed stressing the limitations of human understanding. For example, the sixteenth century French humanist, Michael De Montaigne was no less interested in studying human experiences than the earlier humanists were, but he maintained that the world of experience was a world of appearance and that human beings failed to see the 'realities' that lie beyond the appearance. This was the world in which Shakespeare placed his characters.

A study of human behavior and their relationship with one another is quite essential in order to achieve a progress in the personality development of individuals. As early psychologists have mentioned that the situational behavior of an individual is affected by the psyche. One should probe into the innate intellect of an individual to maintain perfect human relationships.

Women play a vital role in the domain of family as well as society Since ages past, they have been known for their modesty, simplicity, servitude intelligence and innocence. Their role in the private and public lives of men is highly remarkable. Yet, they remain passive and unidentified. They act as a life-giving force. Yet, patriarchy ignores the contribution of women to the society. The uniqueness of portraying such devastating characters is attributed to Shakespeare nearly four hundred and fifty years ago. This paper is an attempt to throw focus on a few of such women characters in Shakespeare's plays and their universal and contemporary appeal.

#### **Gentle, modest and compassionate lover**

Just under fifteen years old, Miranda is a gentle, compassionate and relatively passive heroine. From the beginning she displays meek and emotional nature.

'O I have suffered/with those that I suffer' She says of the shipwreck. (Act1 scene ii 5-6) and hearing Prospero's tale of her narrow escape from Milan, she says, "I not remembering how I cried out then/will cry out again (Act 1 scene ii 133-134)

She is passive in many ways. When Prospero sends Ariel to fetch Ferdinand and arranges things so that the two will fall in love with each other, she meekly obeys her father's precepts (Act 3, scene I 58). During her father's conversation with Ferdinand with utmost frankness about her virginity and pleasures of the marriage bed she stands quietly by her father.

Despite her passivity in several ways, she has at least two moments of surprising straightforwardness and strength of character that twists the reader's imagination of her as naïve, young girl. In Act I scene iii, when Prospero alludes to the fact that Caliban once tried to molest her and Caliban rudely agrees that he intended to violate her, Miranda responds with impressive vehemence, clearly appalled at Caliban's light attitude towards his attempt. She goes on scolding him for being ungrateful for her attempts to educate him. The second surprising moment comes in Act III scene I in her proposal to Ferdinand. "I am your wife If you will marry me/ If not I'll die your maid" Her proposal comes shortly after she has told herself to remember her father's precepts forbidding conversation with Ferdinand. She is willing to speak up for herself regarding her sexuality. She takes up the theme of servitude in her proposal to Ferdinand. Shakespeare completes this theme by depicting another kind of servitude in which Ferdinand wholly gives himself to Miranda.

Ferdinand goes on flattering his beloved. Miranda, of course, being modest points out that she has no perception of a woman's face other than hers. She goes on to praise Ferdinand's face. She seems to have been unconcerned with his wealth and status. She only asks whether he really loves her. His assurance of true love for her opens the way for her proposal of marriage.

Shakespeare delineates the philosophy of the utopian society in which no one could work, all people would be equal and all women would be innocent and pure. Miranda tells Ferdinand to take a break from his work, or to let her work for him. She is indeed pure and innocent and the most admirable woman characters of Shakespeare as her very name suggests. Miranda in Latin means 'admiration'.

In the play's final scene, Miranda is presented with Ferdinand almost as a prop or piece of a scenery when Prospero draws the curtain aside to reveal them playing Chess and gently talking of love and faith .She does justice for the role of a pawn in Chess as the object of Chess is to capture the King and this was attained by her father as he was able to catch and reprimand King Alonso for his treachery.

#### **Women and Wives (Julius Caesar)**

One could try to analyze Calpurnia and Portia as full-length characters in their own right. Yet, they do not function primarily as sympathetic personalities or sources of insight or poetry but rather as symbols for the private, domestic realm. Both these women plead with their husbands to be much aware of their private needs and feelings (Portia in Act ii scene I, Calpurnia in Act iii scene ii). Caesar and Brutus rebuff the pleas of

their respective wives; however, they not only give priority to public matters, but actively disregard the private emotions and intuitions. As such as other women in general, Calpurnia and Portia remain powerless figures, willing though, unable to help and confront Caesar and Brutus.

Calpurnia invests great authority in omens and portents. She warns Caesar against going to the Senate on the Ides of March, since she has had terrible nightmares and heard reports of many bad omens. Nevertheless, Caesar's ambition ultimately drives him to disregard her advice. He contradicts with her by saying 'only cowards imagine their death frequently, whereas, brave men refuse to dwell on death die only once'. Calpurnia begs Caesar to send Antony on his behalf to the Senate, but he relents. She asks him to plead illness; but he refuses to tell a lie.

Portia, wife of Brutus and daughter of a noble Roman take's sides against Caesar. Portia enters the garden when Brutus was seriously discussing with Decius and others about inspiring Caesar to ignore his superstitions. She observes his strange behavior and wonders what has been worrying him. She pleads with him not to hide his concerns from her and insists that as his wife she should be told about his problems. She further assures she will keep his secrets. He expresses his content to have had such an honorable wife. On hearing a knock at the door, he sends her away with a promise to talk with her later.

Portia, accustomed to being Brutus's confidante is upset to find him so reluctant to seek to her, when he is in trouble. Later she kills herself out of grief that Antony and Octavius have become very powerful.

#### **Clever, intelligent and wistful woman**

The portrayal of Portia in 'The Merchant of Venice' shows much of Shakespeare's insight into the intelligence and clever determination of woman. Portia is a world-famed woman, endowed with beauty and intelligence. Her basic intelligence is her most distinctive characteristic feature.

The relationship between Portia and Bassanio is apparently a stainless romantic relationship. Does Bassanio want to marry Portia for her wealth, or is it just a sublime love at first sight still remains controversial. The three caskets scene creates anti-materialistic context for the kind of love he has for Portia. Bassanio also gives back her ring when she was in the guise of a lawyer. Thus, their relationship seems to commence on a betrayal as it were. Looking at it from Portia's side, it is not a neutral relation either. Cunning has a greater role to play in her relation than passion and emotion. The way she makes Bassanio financially dependent, accepting the opportunity of clearing Antonio's debts gleefully, shows her intelligence. She turns the situation on its head assumes all power on her own.

At the court scene, her clear intellect, disguised as a lawyer dominates the court. Her procedure in the trial is by reason or by persuasion, to get Shylock to relent. She appeals to his mercy, and then to his business sense, and to both at once. She adds reflections. She delays in order to give him time to change his mind. Finally, she calls on Antonio to speak for himself. When Shylock does not soften, she releases her bolts, one by one. Initially, she offers him the payment of his money as he likes. As he refuses, she proposes to deliver the judgment that his bond is forfeited and legally the Jew can claim a pound of flesh and the law allows it. She tells Antonio to prepare for a pound of flesh to be cut off from nearest his heart. Shylock, appreciates Portia's knowledge as a lawyer. But he cannot anticipate the final verdict.

The ironical twist is that Portia has sprung upon him. She tells him that he may cut the pound of flesh. But he must not shed even a single drop of blood as it was not mentioned in the bond. He should take neither less nor more than one pound. Thus, she turns the tables against the Jew. He is utterly defeated. As a penalty for plotting against the life of a Christian, he is made to change his religion and become a Christian. All his property is confiscated by the Senate. He leaves the court disappointed, dejected and downcast. Portia's sharp instinct enjoys the dramatic reversal at Shylock's expense and the opportunity to twist his demand for justice to bring about his own ruin. Her first speech on mercy is wonderful and remarkable of the Christian virtue. She pleads that mercy is a divine quality. It blesses the person who bestows it and also the person who receives it. It is much powerful than the powers of Monarchs and Kings. It is an attribute of God himself. She insists the Biblical concept that everybody is a sinner and everybody in this world needs mercy for the salvation of his/her soul. The adamant Jew who does not pay heed to his words had to face the consequences at the end.

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