

Women Empowerment in Shakespeare's Selected Plays

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Abstract

Literature entertains, educates and inspires the readers. In a way it leads to positive evolution in social norms to bring about freedom, equity and fraternity. In changing constructively the position of woman in the male-dominated society, literature has contributed considerably. William Shakespeare creatively presented universal themes in his celebrated works. He has portrayed women in multifaceted roles in society. This paper searches the theme of women empowerment in Shakespeare's selected plays, examining how his female characters challenge patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles, assert their power and autonomy negotiate their positions within a male-dominated society and influence the course of events. The analysis will focus on the key figures such as Cleopatra in 'Antony and Cleopatra', Lady Macbeth in 'Macbeth', Emilia in 'Othello' Portia in 'Julius Caesar', Beatrice in 'Much Ado About Nothing', Portia in 'Merchant of Venice', Rosalind in 'As You Like It', and Viola in 'Twelfth Night', exemplifying how Shakespeare presents a subtle perspective on women's strength, intellect, and agency.

Introduction

The relationship between literature and human development is considerably significant. In fact emergence of literature is a key stage in human development. Literature (poetry) is considered as the 'mother of all knowledge'. It is not just the mirror of the society but it projects society as an amicable habitat. It is not just a work of creativity produced in fits of imagination and fancy but presentation of nude social reality with its cooperation and equalities, and oppression and inequities. Actually, literature is used as a means to spread and establish the social ideologies. Probably it might be produced with the purpose to safeguard the interests of the dominant class in the society. However, literature is, to a great extent, used to give voice to the victims of exploitation and oppression at all levels. Since ages woman is enslaved in the male-dominated society. She is supposed to be a thing of beauty, worldly pleasure. She is deprived of many opportunities. And she is considered a baby-producing means and a slave for kitchen chores. Her existence outside the threshold is restricted. However, it is literature that brought ray of hope to change this attitude towards women. And there emerged the movement of women empowerment which is a very recent development as an outcome of humanitarian attitude towards life. This paper is an attempt to study the glimpses of woman empowerment as reflected in selected plays of Shakespeare.

Though it was the rule of the Queen Elizabeth, in the Elizabethan Society the role of women was largely subordinate to men. The Age is named after her and called the Elizabethan Age. It is also called the Age of Renaissance of English literature. It gave the world the prolific and esteemed writers like William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, Sir Philip Sidney, John Donne, Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlow, Thomas Wyatt, and many others. The age was marked with inception of modern principles in life and it was a new era in all the genres of literature. William Shakespeare, the greatest writer and pre-eminent dramatist of the world is often referred to as England's National Poet or 'the Bard'. Shakespeare could not go completely against the patriarchal norms of his times. His plays and poems depict the male-dominated Elizabethan life. Still Shakespeare is known for the innovative treatment to the theme and creative handling of the social,

familial, historical, and political issues of the times. His plays are famous for their complex characters, and subtle themes. They explore the human condition. His heroes doubtlessly dominate the plays. They are at the centre. Naturally Shakespeare's plays are often criticized for their patriarchal undertones. However, his plays often feature female characters who challenge the societal norms. He presents some empowered female characters who assert their agency. While his works were created within a patriarchal context, many of his women display remarkable intelligence, wit, and influence. This paper discusses the ways in which Shakespeare's female characters embody empowerment, either through direct action or subversive means, thereby challenging societal constraints.

Shakespeare's Female Characters Displaying Empowerment:

Simone de Beauvoir has rightly observed, 'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine'. It is applicable to the general state of women in the society. However, there are some women, who possess extraordinary intelligence and wit that influence even the male-dominated world around them. William Shakespeare's plays also delineate some empowered female characters. Let's consider some of such Shakespeare's angels:

Cleopatra in 'Antony and Cleopatra'

Cleopatra is one of Shakespeare's most powerful female characters. She is a symbol of female empowerment in the ancient world. She has the ability to control and direct the complexities of Roman politics that enables her to maintain her power and autonomy in the midst of devastating odds. Her intelligence, wit, and determination are so influential that she can impress the male-dominated world around her. She is a woman of power.

Lady Macbeth in 'Macbeth'

Lady Macbeth from Macbeth is ambitious. She wishes to be in power. She is one of Shakespeare's most compelling female characters. With her ambition and a ruthless determination to achieve power she challenges gender norms. Her illustrious appeal to "unsex me here" highlights her awareness of societal expectations for women. Still she actively defies these expectations by arranging Duncan's, her husband's murder. No doubt she meets a tragic downfall, but Lady Macbeth's assertiveness and influence over her husband underscore her strength as a character. She is often seen as a symbol of feminine evil, but she is also a powerful symbol of woman empowerment. Her ability to manipulate her husband and drive him to commit regicide is an evidence of her intelligence, cunning, and ambition. She goes with the principle, 'Everything is fair in love and war'.

Emilia in 'Othello'

In fact, Emilia is a minor character in 'Othello'. Her character is mostly ignored in favour of the more prominent female characters in the play. She is an example of early feminist ideals and women's empowerment. She exemplifies early feminist ideals and women's empowerment. She boldly opposes societal norms and ultimately stands for truth. She is Iago's wife and Desdemona's maid. In the beginning she looks obedient but gradually develops as a voice of reason and justice. She challenges male authority, particularly when she speaks out against her husband's manipulation and exposes his treachery, despite the personal risk. Her famous speech on gender equality in Act-IV, Scene-iii of the play: 'I do think it's a husband's fault if their wives do fail'. She

further protests. 'Let husbands know their wives have sense like them'. This highlights her awareness of women's oppression; she asserts that women have the same desires and emotions as men. Finally, she courageously exposes Iago's schemes, though it leads to her own death. All this makes her a symbol of empowerment.

Portia in 'Julius Caesar'

Like Emilia in 'Othello', Portia in 'Julius Caesar' is a minor character. But she displays the potentials of an empowered woman. She is the wife of Brutus who is engaged in schemes against Julius Caesar. Portia is not told about her husband's political dealings. This makes her restless. She challenges her husband. She asserts that as his wife, she has the right to share in his problems and difficulties:

“Dwell I but in the suburbs of your good pleasure?

If it be no more, Portia is Brutus's harlot, not his wife.” (Act II, Scene i)

Here Portia demands that a wife should be treated as a true partner and not just a possession of husband. This shows her sense of equality in marriage empowered attitude.

Beatrice in 'Much Ado About Nothing'

Beatrice in Much Ado About Nothing is also an empowered female character of Shakespeare. She is witty, outspoken and independent. She boldly criticizes marriage system. She denies to follow the traditional gender roles stands against the expectations of submissive womanhood during the Elizabethan Age. It shows her frustration with the restrictions imposed on women, when she says, 'O that I were a man'. She herself chooses her partner, Benedict and creates relationship with him based on equality. She is one of Shakespeare's most modern and empowering female characters.

Portia in 'The Merchant of Venice'

Portia in The Merchant of Venice is the heroine of the play. Being the daughter of the merchant, Shylock, she is wealthy. Further she is intelligent and resourceful, that shows her empowerment. She disguises as a male lawyer and outwits the male lawyers in the court and finally saves Antonio. She has command of the law and rhetorical skill which enables her to control and direct a male-dominated society effectively.

Rosalind in 'As You Like It'

Rosalind is the heroine of Shakespeare's As You Like It. She is one of the most empowered and dynamic female characters in the Elizabethan drama. She has control over her destiny. She is not passive in love and life. She actively shapes her own fate. She makes a plan to escape to the Forest of Arden. She takes freedom and authority to disguise herself as Ganymede, a young man and controls Orlando, her lover. Wit is one of her greatest strengths. She has a deep understanding of human nature with which she instructs and guides others. In the Elizabethan Age women were expected to be submissive and obedient. However, in love Rosalind's role is proactive. She dictates the rules of love to Orlando showing both leadership and independence. So her character is a celebration of female empowerment. She challenges traditional gender norms, uses her intelligence to her advantage, and actively shapes her own destiny.

Viola in 'Twelfth Night'

Like Rosalind, Viola in Twelfth Night disguises herself as Cesario, a young man and moves freely in a male-dominated world. Her disguise offers her agency and influence, controlling

events that lead to the play's resolution. She has the ability to steer social structures. She is an empowered woman who asserts herself.

William Shakespeare, a writer of timeless significance, has presented themes of women's empowerment in his plays. His female characters challenge patriarchal structures. His women characters are autonomous to choose their life partners and control the life. They assert themselves by using their wit and intelligence.

Conclusion

To conclude, though Shakespeare wrote in a male-dominated society, his plays show a progressive approach to women empowerment. He presents a complex and multifaceted portrayal of women empowerment. His women characters take the courage to challenge patriarchal norms and assert their agency in a patriarchal society. He appreciates women's intelligence and capability. His female characters are strong, intelligent, and independent, which shows his timeless significance as a dramatist who presented the ideas ahead of his time.

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