



From Margins to Center: Female Protagonists in Shakespearean Select Tragedies

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Pages No: 61-64

Abstract

In the Elizabethan era women are treated inferior to men, they are considered as a commodity by the society. During the age, "Women are to be seen, and not heard" but Shakespeare's women characters are intelligent and they play a crucial role to strengthen the plot. As John Ruskin says "Shakespeare has no heroes; - he has only heroines". Especially in his major tragedies Shakespeare treated heroes in the prime position while the heroines spin around the heroes. They could never occupy the mainstream and they dwell in a secondary position. The paper attempts to explore the female characters in the tragedies, Othello and in King Lear. Desdemona in Othello is portrayed as being passive and subordinate. Meanwhile, Cordelia in King Lear are depicted as lovable daughter in the play. The paper shifts the center from the heroes to the heroines in the above-mentioned plays.

Keywords: Female Protagonist, Shakespeare, Tragedies. Margin

INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare the greatest playwright lived in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. The period was recognized as the Golden period of the English history. The era noted the voluminous growth in music, art, and literature. The country was economically healthier and had internal peace. Though the kingdom was ruled by an unmarried Queen, the spaces of women are restricted. John Knox the Scottish protestant leader wrote in his book *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558) "Women in her greatest perfection was made to serve and obey man". The Elizabethan society was essentially patriarchal, men were considered as supreme and women played a major role only inside the household, to marry and bear children was a significant part of their life. The outside world was solely for men. Women are subjected to be dependent on men.

SHAKESPEARE'S VIEW OF WOMEN

Shakespeare was born and lived his lifetime during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. He witnessed that England was ruled by a powerful female monarch. She chose not to marry, this was against the period's social constraint yet she independently ruled the country. Shakespeare models the heroines of his comedies like Queen Elizabeth. They are bold and courageous enough to handle the societal pressures. For instance, Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* disguises as a clever young lawyer and delivers a great speech "A quality of mercy". She saves Antonio from the case and thus gives a happy ending to the play. Rosalind in *As You Like It* admired for her intelligence, quick wit and beauty. She disguises as a man and she is smart in

making decision. After coming to the Garden of Arden, she is seen to be entwined with masculine attitude but finally, she embodies the plot by uniting the lovers Silvius and Phebe, Oliver and Celia, Touchstone and Audrey. At length, she reveals herself as Rosalind to her lover Orlando and to her father. Viola in *Twelfth Night* is very practical, resourceful and skilful to act according to the dangerous situation, she disguises as a man to overcome her struggles strange land. Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, is a woman of wit and words, extremely talkative and self assertive. Shakespeare shows intellectual wordplay and through Beatrice and her lover Benedick who are against marriage becomes a pair.

SHAKESPEARE HAS NO HEROES ONLY HEROINES

Though in Shakespeare's comedies women occupy a forefront position, in tragedies heroes are the ultimate power. Aristotle says Tragedy is the purest dramatic narrative which cleanses the emotions of a human. Tragedy claims a fatal tragic flaw or Hamartia, a tragic hero ends in this furthestmost quality and tops to death. The audience are accustomed to experience this flaw in the hero and then the tragedy ends in pain yet purifies the emotion of the viewers. While leaving the theatre, the audience experience the Catharsis which comes as a result of witnessing the calamity and misfortune of the hero. The spectators are made to accept the tragic hero in the supreme position whereas the other characters especially the heroines and minor characters, those who support the hero are not given the same importance. The paper aims at this thought that heroines are equally responsible and highly significant in the tragedy. The crux is that, the heroines are liable for the tragic flaw of the great tragedies *Othello* and *King Lear*.

John Ruskin says Shakespeare in his comedies has only heroines and no heroes. The paper counter argues this statement by decentring the heroes from the center and brings the heroines in the main light.

DESDEMONA IN OTHELLO

Othello is one of the greatest tragedies of Shakespeare, written in 1623. The story ventures around the love between Othello and Desdemona. Desdemona leaves her father and elopes with Othello, but as days pass on the jealousy of Othello is set on fire by the cruel villain Iago, thus their love life is ruined. The play ends with Othello killing Iago and himself because he killed Desdemona. Shakespeare portrays Othello as a symbol of courage and masculinity. He becomes the center of the play by undergoing tragic flaw. This is widely accepted by the audience. But Desdemona is shown as a passive female, who looks at her husband and stays in her innocence. The argument of the paper develops here with a question that, if Desdemona is not there will the drama achieves its tragic end? She is the root cause for the tragic flaw. Her innocence is the key for Iago to trigger Othello's jealousy. Desdemona is extremely flexible and she increases the tension in the plot with her innocence.

In the beginning, if she is clever enough to sense the change in Othello, then the plot will not be tragic. It is her innocence and trust towards her husband which brings the disastrous end to the play. She is unknowingly supporting Othello to get into the tragic flaw. Shakespeare makes Othello shine as a tragic hero. This is only because of Desdemona's support to be innocent and loving. As Shakespeare says:

He found it then;
I never gave it him: send for him hither;...
What, my lord?...
How? unlawfully?...
He will not say so....
O! my fear interprets: what, is he dead?...

Alas! he is betray'd and I undone....
O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!...
Kill me to-morrow: let me live to-night!...
But half an hour!...
But half an hour!...
O, falsely, falsely murder'd!...
A guiltless death I die....
Nobody; I myself. Farewell
Commend me to my kind lord: O, farewell! (654)

[This is the conversation of Othello and Desdemona (quoted only Desdemona's dialogues)]

When Othello tries to kill Desdemona, she submits to him to be killed. She passively says she never loved Cassio and did not offend Othello. But Othello neglects to listen to her words. Whereas in a comedy like *As You Like It*, Shakespeare provides more space to Rosalind and the hero and other male characters stand aside giving space to the female venture. This power of self-assertion is not given to Desdemona; if she has this power she would have punished Iago and made things clear for Othello. Then she would have been the center of the play. In another case, Othello is not a tragic hero because; tragedy happens to Desdemona, she is killed by the love of her life. This is Othello's mistake to kill her, Desdemona obviously suffers the tragic end and so she is the center of this tragedy.

CORDELIA IN *KING LEAR*

King Lear is one of the major tragedies of Shakespeare, which is performed in St. Stephen's Day on 1606. It is the story of a Father who trusts and loves his daughters immensely then betrayed by his two daughters Goneril and Regan. Cordelia, his younger daughter who loves him lot, but not interested in taking part in love test of her father. It expresses in Cordelia's aside as "What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent." (Act I, scene 1) Owing to his tragic flaws he could not realize the love, Cordelia has on him and this leads to his fatal fall. They are arrogance, ignorance, and misjudgment that bring him death. As by contextual meaning, King Lear considers as a tragic hero because of his tragic flaw.

This analyze is going to reposition the tragic hero to tragic heroin, which is Cordelia. Cordelia has suffered a lot than King Lear in the play without any mistake on her. She genuinely loves her father, but her denial of flatter him leads to the calamity that unfolds. Her virtue and purity show she is described as Christ-like or depictive of God's goodness. Her response to her father's arrest and her own arrest induces the stoicism of kings and reveals that Cordelia is as royal as her father is. This is expressed here as

are not the first
Who with best meaning have incurr'd the worst.
For thee, oppressed king, am I cast down;
Myself could else outfrown false Fortune's frown.
Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?(Act V, scene 3)

These all shows how Cordelia is pure and her love for her father. But, Lear couldn't recognize it at beginning. When he came to recognize it, it is tardy. Because that time he suffered a lot and became half mad. All mistakes in the play done by King Lear and other characters, but the result of it is the death of Cordelia who is the innocent who made to leave her homeland and happen to marry a French King. She loves her father deeply but because of Lear misjudgment, she happens to disinherit from her father. The tragedies around the play mostly happen to Cordelia, so she has to be the tragic heroine of *King Lear* play.

CONCLUSION

As John Ruskin says Shakespeare has no heroes only heroines in his comedies, there are much evidence for it. As Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Viola in *Twelfth Night* etc. The above statement explains that in Shakespeare's comedies Heroines play a prudent role than the Heroes. At the same time, in tragedies, Heroes play a major part and Heroines are secondary. In the motive of redefining this idea as even in tragedies, women are in the crucial part than the heroes. Heroines are the real source of the tragic experience of the plays. Tragic heroes are significant because of their tragic flaws, but the tragic flaws are caused by the heroines of the plays. To explain this *Othello* and *King Lear* has taken as the application of the redefinition of the center of Shakespeare's Tragedies. As mention above Desdemona and Cordelia are the real victims in the plays who have to be called as the tragic heroines.

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