

Shakespeare's Negative Attitude towards Women in Hamlet

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Abstract

In the history of English literature, William Shakespeare is remarked as the giant of the Renaissance and history of the world dramas. The greatest dramatist Shakespeare was really better at portraying the female characters than the other dramatists in that period. When creating Hamlet, Shakespeare indeed tried his best to reflect the life truly, but the period when he lived in and the personal sexual identity creates under the influence of that period decided his view of male power. It is just the times in which females were realized narrowly and the fact that Shakespeare was a masculine gender that the female images in Hamlet suffered a lot, and they have been represented as one kind of slaves in the history since they did not have any choice to do for their own shake. In the play Hamlet Gertrude and Ophelia are the two significant women characters in which the attitude of the dramatist explores. The central female character Gertrude married Claudius (murderer) second time after only two months later of king's death, she cannot win the heart of his first husband King Hamlet as well as the heart of second husband Claudius, even she is hated by her own son prince Hamlet. The study is a comprehensive analysis on the tragedy of Shakespeare's Hamlet focusing on deconstructive Feminism. The main hypothesis of the study is that women in Hamlet are represented as less important and negative labels and it has reinforced and toughened the patriarchy and patriarchal principles.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Negative Attitude towards Women, Hamlet.

1. Introduction

It is evident that, in writing Hamlet, Shakespeare to some extent adopted the dramatic tradition of the Revenge Tragedy. This play is one of his successful, perfect and best plays ever known. Hamlet centers on the problems arising from love, death, and betrayal, without offering the audience a decisive and positive resolution to these complications for Hamlet himself is ambiguous and the answers to these problems are complex. In Shakespearean tragedies, the characters are presented with abnormal state of mind though Shakespeare does not allow this abnormal state to be dominant action. It provokes the suffering to the protagonist. Obviously the story from which Shakespeare drew his material for writing Hamlet had a dominating revenge theme, but it further highlighted the relevance and justification of this Feminist reading of Shakespearean tragedies. The reason why the revenge theme came to have some importance in the writing of dramas was that this theme offered much scope for the display of passion, for rhetorical speeches (that is, ranting), and for violence actions. This analysis provided the results of the attitude of Shakespeare on women characters in Hamlet. The findings on the play are presented in different sections and at the end the overall findings are presented in the conclusion chapter. The following research questions are designed to streamline of the study-

- How did the women characters play role in Greek and Latin literature?
- Are women socially and economically equal with men?
- Did women characters take decision by own?
- Do Shakespearean tragedies strengthen or weaken patriarchy?
- Are women presented as fully developed and independent human beings?

2. Literature Review

Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* in 1600 or 1601, when he was 36 years old. It was his first major tragedy, although *Julius Caesar* may have been written slightly earlier. As a working member of a commercial enterprise, Shakespeare did not hesitate to use in his plays whatever source material lay at hand. The play *Hamlet* existed prior to Shakespeare's own. It was a revenge play by Thomas Kyd, and employed the familiar contrivances of this popular tradition: ghosts seeking revenge, 'mouse trap' plays, the antic disposition of the avenger, and a bloody finale. Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, in the late 1580's, set a standard for the genre, and Shakespeare had made a clumsy attempt at revenge tragedy in *Titus Andronicus*. Also at hand were the non-dramatic legends of *Hamlet*, especially the twelfth-century *Historia Danica* of Saxo Grammaticus.

The early years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth saw an intellectual revival of interest in the Greek and Latin classics, and the drama found three things that it could profitably imitate or adapt, the revenge tragedy being one. Dramatists reflected the highlights of Senecan drama, not only in the matter of bloody action and the ranting, but also in the larger-than-life stage figures, and the madness brought on by desperation. However, Renaissance drama is not generally a drama of motivation, either by psychological character or moral predetermination. Rather, the Renaissance tendency is to present characters with well-delineated moral and ethical dispositions that are faced with dilemmas. It is the outcome of these conflicts, the consequences rather than the process that normally holds center stage. What Shakespeare presents in *Hamlet*, Prince of Denmark is an agonizing confrontation between the will of a good and intelligent man and the uncongenial role that of avenger and that fate calls upon him to play. A. C Bradley (1904) also is more interested in deriving a sense of "some vaster power" than focusing on other aspects which might distract our attention from this issue of prime importance.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet* the women in the play are driving factors for the actions of many other characters. Both Gertrude, *Hamlet*'s mother, and Ophelia, *Hamlet*'s love, affected many of the decisions and actions done by *Hamlet*. The brief review of literature presented here establishes the context and the ample justification for the present study.

3. Objectives of the Research

The objectives of this research are-

- To bring out the psycholinguistic features that exhibits the Shakespearean female character.
- To conduct an analysis on monologues and dialogues of Shakespearean female characters compare with patriarchal principles.
- To examine the differences between strong and powerful characters.
- To confer the authority of men on the power and acquiescent approach of the female characters.

4. Methodology of the Research

This research work has based on the secondary data, comprehensive analysis of the tragedy focusing on Feminist theories and deconstructive attitudes.

5. Data Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Women in *Hamlet*

Gertrude and Ophelia are the only two female characters in the tragic play *Hamlet*. Both of these characters have been presented from the male and patriarchal perspective. These early experiments in the play-writing are of great importance historically, because they did much to prepare the way for the regular drama. It was, however, under the direct influence of the Renaissance, the English comedy and tragedy alike passed out of these preliminary phases of their development into forms of art. In *Hamlet* both Ophelia and Gertrude are very much representative of women in the Renaissance. The writing on feminism in the revenge tragedy *Hamlet* would definitely argue that the female characters of the play are really existed only in the play to show us more about *Hamlet*. They always help to show us how *Hamlet* responds when in love and to show us his relationship with his family and friends. Gertrude, the significant female character in the play was an unselfconfident lady who married Claudius perhaps to protect her own status in the Court. Ophelia, the beloved of prince *Hamlet* is immensely under the control of her father Polonius and she (Ophelia) is expected to obey him for every matter, even any personal relationship to *Hamlet*, a man she by all accounts loves.

Hamlet's remark "Frailty, thy name is woman", means that women is a personification of weakness, that woman is helpless and weak-willed, that woman has no strength of character. Even we can say the remark about frailty is in one sense true for *Hamlet* himself, though he is a man, because he keeps indecisiveness about his revenge for a

long time. However, the remark is fully and intentionally imposed to both the female characters in Hamlet.

Hamlet had already expressed his dislike for his mother when she asked him why he seemed to have taken his father's death so much to heart. Hamlet, replying to his mother's question, had said that he did not merely seem to have taken his father's death to heart but that he had actually taken it to heart. Hamlet deplored the fact that his mother Gertrude has entered into an incestuous relationship by having married the brother of her first husband. Such behavior, he says, cannot lead to any good results. In his opinion his mother's is getting remarried so soon after the death of her first husband is a proof of her frailty. Hamlet does not respect the choice of her mother and wants her mother to view things from his perspective. He declares it as shameful and a gross trespassing. He forces his mother to withhold herself from her husband. This is the presentation of patriarchy in its undiluted form.

There is no 'true' Ophelia for whom feminist criticism must unambiguously speak, but perhaps only a Cubist Ophelia of multiple perspectives, more than the sum of all her parts. - Elaine Showalter, "Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism" (Susan Wofford (ed.), Hamlet, St. Martin's Press, Boston, 1994. p. 238). Speaking to Ophelia, Hamlet again refers to the fact of the mother's hasty remarriage. This time he says that his mother had got remarried only two hours after the death of her husband. Ophelia, however, corrects him by saying that 'not hours but two months' had passed after the death of Gertrude's first husband when Gertrude got remarried. Hamlet's quest for revenge interferes with his relationship with Ophelia. There is much evidence to show that Hamlet loved her a great deal, but his pretense of madness drove her to her death. Ophelia drowned not knowing what was happening to her. This can be deduced by the fact that she flowed down the river singing and happy when in truth she was heartbroken. Ophelia is easily persuaded to stop seeing Hamlet. She lacks the strength that would enable her to stand up for her lover or help her endure the murder of her father later on in the play.

5.2 Two Major Male Characters

The two major male characters are prince Hamlet himself and his uncle Claudius. Shakespeare here shows Claudius as a politic, wise and gentle king in all the early scenes though he is the King Hamlet's murderer. He shows a genuine anguish at Polonius's death and Ophelia's madness. His words are those, not of a Shakespearean villain, but of a kind-hearted and good king. Having gained his throne and his queen by the blackest of crimes, he now passionately and genuinely longs for peace and order and all the harmonious decencies of life. And Shakespeare decorates prince Hamlet as the hero of the play though his dilemma last long of the drama. He never had the right decision in right time. Hamlet's indecision is therefore not an indication of weakness but the result of his complex understanding of the moral dilemma with which he is faced. He is unwilling to act unjustly, yet he is afraid that he is failing to exact a deserved retribution.

So the two characters are not perfect setting in a famous play, but the only two female characters Gertrude and Ophelia have been presented in a most vulnerable manner. Though Claudius is the murderer of Hamlet's father, prince Hamlet always blamed his mother for the misdeed in the play. Ophelia is the true beloved of Hamlet but she also has been ignored by Hamlet as well as in his family.

5.3 Status of Women in Hamlet

The only two major female characters are described in the tragic play Hamlet as more neglected than male characters even than the registered villains. Not only in a single play Hamlet but also many other plays of Shakespeare and other play-writers of that period women have not been shown as socially or politically strong. They never take decision by their own choice though we can see many famous queens were running state better than male counterpart. In Hamlet the responsibility for the political turmoil of Denmark went on the side of Gertrude. Claudius is the murderer of King Hamlet but Gertrude was the sufferer and she had no choice but marrying Claudius. Her decisions always been ignored by new king Claudius.

Ophelia, another female character was a motherless daughter had no will of her own; she was always obedient to her father and brother in the play. Ophelia's submissiveness becomes evident when she first appears in the play. Her brother Laertes tells her that Hamlet's apparent love for her is merely lust and that she should be on her guard against it. She readily agrees to do so. When he has gone and her father speaks to her on the same subject, she puts up a feeble resistance which collapses in an instant. When her father expressly forbids her to see Hamlet again, she yields without any struggle.

6. Conclusion

Hamlet presents the dramatization of the helplessness of the "feminine" qualities in the context of a patriarchal society. The two main female characters in Hamlet are Ophelia, Hamlet's lover and daughter of the lord chamberlain, Polonius and Gertrude, Hamlet's mother who is now in an incestuous marriage with Claudius, the present king of Denmark and is the widow of the old king Hamlet. Throughout the play, these two female characters are portrayed as weak, vulnerable and powerless. The men in their lives have complete control over them as is shown by the actions in the play, their willingness to do exactly what they're told and to agree to everything that is said to them. They do not appear to have a mind of their own and if they did they would certainly have more control over their lives. Once we analyze the female images in Hamlet with the spirit of succession and criticism, we can find that they have already been stamped deeply with times and natural flow of Shakespeare's own emotion without any difficulty. The above analysis of Hamlet's women characters has demonstrated the major intentions of the study that the theme is encumbered with the ideology of patriarchy and it reinforces and perpetuates the principle.

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