

WOMEN IN THE PLAYS OF SHAKESPEARE

Abstract

The legendary playwright William Shakespeare is the greatest English dramatist in the world. His plays are widely read and enacted all over the world. In Shakespeare's plays women are well etched and reflected the universal human nature. In the plays of Shakespeare we come across many strong, resourceful and self confident women who, at times are stronger than men, and they create their own space and represent a spirited independence. The construction of female characters in Shakespeare's plays reflects the Elizabethan image of women in general. Women of that era were supposed to represent virtues like obedience, silence, sexual chastity, humility, constancy and patience. There were several women in Shakespeare's plays who assert themselves in very different ways, like-Cleopatra, Portia, Desdemona, Juliet, Lady Macbeth, Miranda, Olivia, Rosalinda and Viola. In 'King Lear', Cordelia embodies all the angelic and nurturing qualities that the other two Regan & Goneril lack. Regan & Goneril, King Lear's two monstrous daughters, are archetypal villains from the onset of the play and although they serve well their purpose, they are not as developed as other Shakespeare "Villains", such as Lady Macbeth.

Women in the plays of Shakespeare are the most individualistic heroines and displays a certain poise and maturity even in the tough times and saddest scenes. Women show the "feminine" virtues of love, sacrifice and piety. Few heroines show a loving nature, a tender heart, resolution and dignity like Portia in the merchant of Venice. Evil is the disruptive force and the tragedies show the hellish consequences, which always lead to deaths of the innocent and good. Women appear as supporting and central character in Shakespeare's play, and

Author

R Ragalatha

Assistant Professor of English
Sreyas Institute of Engineering and
Technology
Hyderabad, Telangana, India

these characters, as well as the so called “Dark Lady” of the sonnets, have elicited a substantial amount of criticism, which received added impetus during the second-wave feminism of the 1960s. Early criticism of female characters in Shakespeare’s drama focused on the positive attributes the dramatist bestows on them and often claimed that Shakespeare realistically captured the “essence” of femininity.

Keywords: humility, resourceful, chastity, hellish

I. INTRODUCTION

“Is Shakespeare alive now? “

Yes! Indubitably he is alive even today through his plays. Generally Epics are professed as immortal. Likewise, the plays of Shakespeare are claimed as eternal! He’s the only person in the world of English literature, who is eminent to every reader including a scholar to a school going kid, through his Poems and Dramas. Indeed his works are lessons to comprehend well by everyone for a better understanding of life. He is a legendary playwright, gigantic genius in his treatment of themes, delineation of characters and an expert in “word play”.



Figure 1: Shakespeare

Shakespeare represented many facets of love, relations and human frailties in his various plays. He represented the characters on the “Screen of Imagination” of the reader. Shakespeare endowed the characters with depth and intensity. His stories hold a universal appeal that has endeared their charm over the years. He wrote 37 plays during his active career, at the average rate of two plays a year.

It is very difficult to confine William Shakespeare within a predefined parameter. Effortlessly, one can make others to agree upon “Women in the plays of Shakespeare”. At this juncture, there can be four plays of Shakespeare described.

- Portia, the wife of Brutus in “Julius Caesar”
- Portia, the magnificent lady in “The Merchant of Venice”
- Cleopatra in “Antony and Cleopatra”
- Desdemona in “Othello”

II. PORTIA’S CHARACTER IN JULIUS CAESAR

Portia is Brutus's devoted wife. She doesn't get a whole lot of stage time but she's an interesting figure, especially when it comes to the play's concern with gender dynamics. When Brutus refuses to confide in Portia, she takes issue with his secrecy: as a married couple, she says, they should have no secrets.

*Dear my lord, a
Make me acquainted with your cause of grief.
Within the bond of marriage, tell me, Brutus,*

*Is it excepted I should know no secrets
That appertain to you? Am I yourself
But, as it were, in sort or limitation,
To keep with you at meals, comfort your bed,
And talk to you sometimes? Dwell I but in the
suburbs of your good pleasure? If it be no more,
Portia is Brutus' harlot, not his wife.*

In other words, Portia is sick and tired of being excluded from her husband's world just because she's a woman. She also suggests that, when Brutus keeps things from her, he's treating her like a "harlot [prostitute], not his wife."

Portia's desire to be close to her husband seems reasonable enough. But Portia also has the annoying habit of talking about women (including her) as though they're weaker than men.

*I grant I am a woman; but withal
A woman well-reputed, Cato's daughter.
Think you I am no stronger than my sex,
Being so fathered and so husbanded?
Tell me your counsels; I will not disclose 'em.
I have made strong proof of my constancy,
Giving myself a voluntary wound
Here, in the thigh. Can I bear that with patience? And not my husband's secrets?*

Here Portia affirms that she recognizes herself as a mere woman, but since she's the daughter and wife of two extremely distinguished men, she proclaims herself as a better feminine than any other common woman.

To prove her point, she stabs herself in her thigh without flinching and demands that her husband should treat her with more respect. As a result of the wound, she suffers from violent pains, chills and fever. As soon as she overcomes her pain, she returns to Brutus and says:

*"You, my husband, though you trusted my spirit that it would not betray you, nevertheless were distrustful of my body and your feeling was but human. But I found that my body also can keep silence. Therefore fear not, but tell me all you are concealing from me, for neither fire nor lashes nor goads will force me to divulge a word; I was not born to that extent a woman. Hence, if you still distrust me, it is better for me to die than to live; otherwise let no one think me longer the daughter of Cato or your wife.
Brutus says about Portia:*

*".....Though the natural weakness of her body hinders her from doing what only the strength of men can perform; she has a mind as valiant and as active for the good of her country as the best of us."
Yikes! Later she kills herself by swallowing "Fire" or hot coals .This is interesting because it's
Usually man who are prone to violence in the play?*

History Snack: Although Portia considers that she is just as a mere woman, she convicts herself as a psychologically much stronger and persistent personality than many others. Indeed, she sounds a lot like Queen Elizabeth - I who famously said:

“I know that I have body of a weak and feeble woman but I have the heart and stomach of a king” [Speech to the Troops at Tilbury-1588]. Queen Elizabeth –I, like Portia, buys into the idea that women are weaker than man but also presents herself as the exception to the rule.”

III. PORTIA IN “THE MERCHANT OF VENICE”

Shakespeare described Portia's character as young, beautiful, magnificent, dynamic, Modest, shrewd, loving, caring and merciful in the story of "The Merchant of Venice”.

Here is the description of Portia's above mentioned qualities through a few scenes.

Scene -1: In this scene it can be clearly observed Portia’s endurance towards her late father's “Will”, in which he had mentioned how she should choose a husband. He had made three caskets, one of gold, the second of silver and the third of lead. People who came to marry her had to choose one of the three caskets.

If a man choose the right casket, in which Portia's portrait is kept, could marry the beautiful young lady. If he lost he should swear three things:

- He will never trouble Portia or any other woman with a proposal of marriage.
- He must promise that he will never reveal to anyone which casket he had chosen and what it contained.
- He must leave Belmont immediately without second thought

Portia was not very happy with this arrangement because she is concerned about the failure of the suitors regarding the vows .She beholds her father's words. In this scene she can neither choose the man she likes nor refuse the man she dislikes. Here we can observe the fate of a living daughter which is sealed by the will of a dead father. Here she has shown utmost patience towards her luck.

Scene-2: The following paragraph stands as the evidence of grace and wisdom of the young lady Portia. The young prince of Morocco travels all the way from North Africa to Italy, to try his luck in winning her hand. He is a dark skinned person and is worried that Portia might not like him. So, as soon as he meets Portia, he appeals to her:

“Fair Portia, please do not abhor me for my colour. Being neighbor to the sun, my skin gets brown. But in love I am behind none, in fact, if you cut my skin as well as that of the fair princes who have come to marry you, you will find that my blood is more red than theirs. I am a brave prince and I have come to seek your hand in marriage “

Then Portia replies, “My dear Prince! My choice is not decided by my wishes. As you know, my father has devised a kind of lottery for the young men who come to marry me. So I am not free to choose anyone on my own. But I certainly do not dislike you because of your

complexion. If I had the freedom to choose a husband, then I must say that you stood as good a chance as anyone else who have come here.” With this answer we can estimate Portia's wisdom and dignity of her nature

Scene – 3: This scene portrays Portia’s mesmerizing love and modesty to win the heart of her lover Bassanio which is quite agreeable and fascinated even today.

Portia was very happy when Bassanio arrived in Belmont. She was in love with him and wanted to marry him. But unfortunately she was not free to marry the man she loved. She was bound by her oath to marry the man who chose the right casket.

Portia was worried whether Bassanio would make the wrong choice. If that happened she would miss the chance of marrying him; Bassanio would have to leave her house immediately, and that would deny her the pleasure of his company. So she requested him to wait for a day or two before making his choice. That way she could have his company for some more time. Bassanio, however, did not want to wait. He wanted to try his luck immediately .Going nears the caskets he studied the words carefully which were written on the caskets.

The Gold Casket – “He who chooses me shall gain what many men desire”

The Silver Casket – “He who chooses me shall get as much as he deserves.”

The lead Casket – “He who chooses me must give and hazard all he has”

Bassanio was not attracted by the glitter of the gold or the shine of the silver. He chooses the lead casket and found a lovely picture of the beautiful young lady.

Portia delighted and said, “Lord Bassanio! I wish I were much more beautiful, and much richer for your sake. Till now, I was the lady of this home, these servants and all the wealth. But from this moment, all my riches, all my servants and myself are yours. In ten of that, I give you this ring. Keep it safe. If ever you lose it or give it away, it will mean that you no longer love me”.

Her warm depiction of the above words wins the heart of Bassanio. Indeed, every woman can win her fiancée’s heart with this kind of lovely appellation after her engagement ceremony.

Scene – 4: An insight to Portia’s caring nature towards her fiancé’s best friend Antonio is given in the following paragraphs.

After hearing the bankruptcy of Antonio’s ships and the cruel bond of shylock; she supported her fiancé by these words.

“We will pay shylock six thousand ducats and destroy the bond. We may even double or treble six thousand before such a nice man as Bassanio’s friend is put to any harm. But first let us go to the church and solemnize our marriage. After that you may go quickly to Venice and to your friend. You can take with you enough gold to pay that money lender twenty times the amount he gave Antonio. And when it is paid, you may bring your friend to Belmont”.

Scene-5:



Figure 2: Trial Scene

In this scene the courage, shrewdness and mercy of Portia is observed. Soon after Bassanio had left to Venice, she disguised herself as Balthazar, young lawyer with the help of Dr. Bellary, a learned lawyer of Padua and the cousin of Portia. In the court of the Duke of Venice, Shylock was eagerly waiting for the trial and the judgment.

Shylock was growing impatient, as he sharpened his knife to cut “a pound of flesh” from Antonio’s chest according to the bond.

Portia appealed to Shylock to show mercy on Antonio by taking thrice of the sum instead of malice penalty as provided in the bond and told the quality of mercy.

“Mercy is not forced on anyone. It comes as the gentle rain from heaven. It is twice blessed. It blesses the man who gives it and the man who receives it. Therefore, Shylock, remember this. You are asking for justice, but justice will not give you salvation. All of us pray to God for mercy. So it is our duty to show the same mercy to our fellowmen. I’ve appealed to you to soften justice with mercy.”

But Shylock denies showing mercy and asks justice according to the bond. Then Portia says "Shylock will have only justice, as he has already rejected the offer of money. So, Shylock, prepare yourself to cut off the flesh. But do not shed any blood. And take exactly one pound of flesh. If the flesh you take from Antonio’s body weighs more or less than one pound even by the weight of a hair, you’ll be put to death and all your properties confiscated.”

By the shrewdness of Portia, proved that Shylock has been plotting against the life of a citizen of Venice. According to the law, half of his wealth goes to the person against whom he was plotting; the other half goes to the state of Venice. And Shylock’s life is at the mercy of the Duke.

IV. CLEOPATRA IN “ANTONY & CLEOPATRA”

Making a mention of Shakespeare’s written famous and tremendous character ‘Cleopatra’ would be quite apt here. One cannot deny with the struggle encountered by the queen Cleopatra to save her country and power from her adversaries. But, at the same time it

is quite evident that she had chosen wrong ways to save them. This Character of Shakespeare gives a clear message that women should not fall the prey of wrong strategies to fulfill their desires, for their own welfare.

Cleopatra is the Queen of Egypt. Her's is one of the notorious, most superior and difficult characters to play compare to the rest of Shakespeare's female characters. Her charisma, strength and indomitable will make her one of Shakespeare's awe-inspiring female characters. She is deeply erotic, theatrical, volatile, temperamental and generally unclassifiable.

She seems to seduce every man she meets, leading her to be considered both an enchantress and a whore. An emblem of Oriental decadence, she is contrasted to the puritanical Romans, especially Octavius Caesar and Octavia and it is her drawing Antony into her net that brings about his downfall, as he "goes native" under her influence, giving Caesar a handy excuse to cast Antony as a traitor to Roman principles. She may or may not have a genuine sentimental attachment to Antony; that is a matter of interpretation. If she doesn't, then she is using her erotic wiles to subjugate him so as to keep herself in power.

She was once the lover of Julius Caesar, whom she claims as next to nothing compared to Antony. When war comes between Caesar and Antony, she insists on joining in the war in person, despite being a woman and argues for the battle at sea. In the middle of the battle, however, she takes fright and runs with all her fleet and Antony follows. Despite this disgrace to him, she is able to apologize and remain in his good favour. When Thidias comes to convince her to switch to Caesar's side; she speaks flatteringly of Caesar and offers her subjection. She attempts to help arm Antony before the next battle, despite not knowing how the various bits and pieces of armor fit together.

When Antony is convinced that she has betrayed him during the battle, he turns on her in rage, and she runs from him, afraid for her life. She locks herself in her monument and at Charmin's suggestion sends him word that she has killed herself, to find out how he will take the news. When he bungles his suicide and is brought to her, she refuses to exit the monument, out of fear but helps to lift him in. She faints at his death. She speaks kindly to Proculeius, but on being seized by the Romans enters into a rage and threatens to kill herself, if need be by starving. When Caesar comes to her, she offers her submission, including giving him a scroll containing a list of all she possesses. This list it turns out is incomplete.

All of this is done to make Caesar believe that she wishes to live, just as he speaks kindly to her to keep her from killing herself. But knowing that Caesar intends to lead her in a Triumph, she dresses herself in her finest robes of state, and having had asps brought her by a country fellow, she allows him to bite her on one of her breasts and her arm so that he dies.

With the reference to the above paragraph, One can easily understand that an exceptional ruler like her never gives a chance to somebody to stab her effortlessly. Moreover, bad thoughts and means always give bad results, which leads to ruin and death.

V. DESDEMONA IN "OTHELLO"

Desdemona is a virgin, adorably bold, adventurous and positive. She is a beautiful,

young, white, Venetian debutante. And she's a total Daddy's girl... until she falls head over heels in love with Othello. She refuses to marry any of the rich, handsome Venetian men that everyone expects her to marry. Instead, she elopes (gasp!) with Othello—an older black man, an outsider to Venetian society (gasp!).

Turns out, this is a pretty gutsy move—Desdemona not only defies her father's expectations (that she marry a white man of his choosing); she also thumbs her nose at a society that largely disapproves of interracial marriages. In this way, Desdemona's relationship with Othello speaks to the play's concerns with 16th century attitudes about sex, gender and race.

Desdemona says to her father when he complained in front of Senate about her marriage-

*".....And so much duty that my mother showed
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much challenge that, I may profess Due to the Moor my lord*

Calling her a whore in public. But because she is a virgin, she considers herself as a pure soul and keeps herself pious and inerrant in nature. By the end of the play it is clearly observed that Desdemona is so beaten down by the Othello's physical and emotional abuse but never accused him for anything. At the same time she never loses her devotion towards him since she loved him to the core of her heart. When Othello strangles her, she, at her last breath also, blames her own self, and believes that the fact of her sacredness towards her husband surely unfolded one day and her dedication and commitment towards him will be revealed to him. Thus, she bore everything patiently. By this play one can learn that patience is a great quality which is expected everyone to adapt in order to make life as noble and a set example.

Desdemona says this to her father when he is complaining that she has been tricked into marrying Othello with a magic spell. She tells her father that she now owes her loyalty to her husband (Othello-the Moor) just like her mother was loyal to her husband (Brabant). Basically, she is doing the same thing her mother did when she got married, so why should her father be angry? When discussing her love for Othello, Desdemona states,

"That I did love the Moor to live with him, My downright violence and storm of fortunes May trumpet to the world Desdemona has an adventurous spirit-when her new husband is called away for military duty in Cyprus, she begs to go with him and can't stand the thought of remaining at home where there isn't any action.

This is not so surprising, given that Desdemona seems to be drawn to Othello's exciting past. We learn that Othello wooed Desdemona by telling stories of action, adventure and danger and that Desdemona consumed these tales with a "greedy ear" Desdemona has also pretty frank about her sexual desire for her husband, which is part of the reason she wants to go with him to Cyprus.

Desdemona said again:

That I did love the Moor to live with him
My downright violence and storm of fortunes May trumpet to the world. My hearts
subdued Even to the very quality of my lord.
I saw Othello's visage in his mind,
And to his honor and his valiant parts
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.
So that, dear lords, if I be left behind,
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
The rites for which I love him are bereft me And I a heavy interim shall support
By his dear absence. Let me go with him.

Desdemona totally drools over Othello's "valiant physical features in this play. Her love and lust for his appearance is clearly seen. But at times, Desdemona also seems a bit naïve, especially when it comes to marital relationships, because she asks Emilia who she believes as an incredulous woman, if it's possible that a woman would ever cheat on her husband. This gives us a hint that Desdemona doesn't seem to have a clue that Othello suspects her of her infidelity—for Desdemona, the idea is simply unthinkable.

VI. CONCLUSION

In essence, Shakespeare's feminine characters stand as embodiments of love, affection, responsibility, modesty etc. He clearly portrays the desired and undesired and vivid characteristics of women through his female representations in his plays. He undeniably gets the accolade as the 'mirror of the society' by his critics too. Due to his extra-ordinary imaginative power of his distinguished characters, his name resonates around the world whether in the world of literature or in the love of theatre or let it be the mass media or else the movie. He is one bard who has continued to enthrall readers and audiences across the globe long after he bid adieu to the world.

REFERENCES

- [1] The complete works of Shakespeare, Fifth Edition, Belington, ed. Longman, 2003
- [2] Lewesn, Lovis; Helen Zimmern, The women of Shakespeare. Hodder.
- [3] Books by Shakespeare, Project Gutenberg
- [4] Rutter, Carol Chillington (2001). "Enter the body: Women and Representation on Shakespeare's stage". Routledge
- [5] Reul, Philipp (2007). "The Relationship between Performance Space and production of Shakespeare's Romanplays.