

A Glimpse of Feminine Psyche in Shakespearian Tragedies

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Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind."

- Virginia Woolf.

Female, the unique creation of God has always enchanted as the subject of art and artists and there is a rich collection which abound her where her physical charm enchants but in veil and enriched in the frame of masculine mind. When one goes into the historical events there also feminine held her prominence and had been the reason of major wars where her beauty and elegance became the reason of disaster.

Though being subdued and suppressed since centuries in the patriarchal society fair-sex holds a powerful place in art and her physical beauty claims indelible effect but there are a handful of writers who deal with feminine psyche where in English Literature leaving Charlotte Bronte and Virginia Woolf the only name which depicts female psyche is William Shakespeare who was an ardent student of women and the way he portrayed women can never be surpassed though they be of all ranks and ages i.e. from queen to maid or from fifty to fifteen. Though Shakespeare's plays are a record of Elizabethan practices, values and traditions but the way he created his characters are the largest number of living characters who live not only on stage but off it also in the memory of the reader or spectator forever. He was a creator who pulled up stakes from common stereotyped characters of women of his era and portrayed unforgettable characters in the form of Lady Macbeth or Ophelia and many more.

In a unique manner in which Shakespeare constructed his female figures vividly depict the position of female of his period. In Elizabethan age male ego was deeply rooted in the society and female had to be under the control of patriarchy and they had to lead their lives as per the willingness of their father or husband or son. This practice and feminine mental condition is very well portrayed in his famous plays where women had to navigate their existence under the male dominance.

In the memorable play *Hamlet*, Gertrude is a shadowy character with little substance on which to hang a characterization. She is "the imperial join tress" to the throne of Denmark indicates that she wields some power and suggests that Claudius' decision to marry her had political ambition.

She exhibits apparent sincerity in her concern for Hamlet, and yet, even after Hamlet has told her

what he knows about Claudius, even after he has shared his fears of the trip to England, even after Hamlet has clearly proven that something is rotten in the state of Denmark, she never opposes Claudius to protect Hamlet. When Hamlet says to Gertrude, his mother "Frailty thy name is women" we see through Hamlet the picture of a woman who one day lived obediently and in the shadow of one king to whom she was devoted. The next day she allies herself in love and politics with the polar opposite of the man she formerly called husband. It is an indication of his mental frustration and male ego as he did not try to know whether her mother is actually a partner of his Uncle Claudius who assassinated the King. The most haunting questions about Gertrude's character revolve around whether she knows that Claudius is a criminal. Is she merely a dependent woman who needs to live through her man? Is she a shrewd temptress who used her power to conspire with Claudius to kill King Hamlet and usurp Prince Hamlet's ascendancy?

Later if Gertrude has overheard Claudius and Laertes plotting, she would know all. If she is in Claudius' confidence, she would be complicit with all his conspiracies. Though Claudius professes love and admiration for Gertrude, he never confides to anyone the extent of their relationship. Gertrude describes her love for Hamlet when she asks him not to return to Wittenberg. When she shares with Ophelia her hope that the young woman would have married her Hamlet, she divulges her wish for his happiness. Ultimately, Gertrude's character remains malleable.

Hamlet did not realize that after her husband's death she lost her queen ship, reverence and admiration in her son's eyes and later in the play she had a nameless death having unknowingly drunk of poison which was placed for Hamlet.

On the very hand the heroine of the play innocent Ophelia tormented of his father's death by her lover and Hamlet's diabolic actions drawn herself in the river. She got the punishment of her tender and passionate feelings for her lover Hamlet and her father Polonius. When drawn she was singing sad love songs of her love and relations with Hamlet which clearly shows that she wanted to lead her life with Hamlet whose ego caused Ophelia to believe that Hamlet loved her no more and her unselfish love for him could not protect him to stop the bloodshed and finally committed suicide.

Desdemona, the bearer of same fate, who refuses to obey her father and marries to Othello who was a moor by birth, against the trend of society and general practices of marriage. Though she had high status and royal hierarchy, she stood constant for her love for a man, who was neither of her status nor equal to her beauty and elegance. That was only her passionate love for Othello that she could stand against everyone that came in way but later on when she was trapped in the conspiracy framed by Iago to take revenge and to ruin their marriage. When Desdemona tried to prove her innocence to Othello he did not believe her and *'all smiles stopped together*. 'Was it the fault of Desdemona that she deeply loved her husband? Or her loyalty for her husband depended

upon the decree of someone else? If Othello would not have suspected his wife and had trust on her then Iago would not become the winner in his conspiracy.

As Shakespeare is objective and indifferent creator of his characters as when he created innocent Ophelia and haughty and bold Beatrice he is also a creator of immortal figure of Lady Macbeth and Cordelia who are masterpieces of Shakespeare's gallery of creation. Lady Macbeth is studied as an ambitious and ruthless woman who lusts for power and also treated as 'the fourth witch' who persuaded her husband Macbeth to murder King Duncan when Macbeth shared with her the prophesy of the witches though Macbeth hesitates to murder she manipulates him with remarkable effectiveness to overcome of his fear and played an active role in the murder. But this is the one side of the coin that the seed of King's murder rooted in the mind of Macbeth though watered by Lady Macbeth. So it is not appropriate to blame only her for the crime and defining her as greedy. She is taken as having masculine aptitude but be it so, then she would not have gone insane after murder of Duncan (that she was plagued with fits of sleepwalking and bloodstains on her hands) and lastly would not have committed suicide.

An epitome of kindness and virtues, Cordelia, is a true example of King Lear's loyal daughter opposite of her other two sisters Regan and Goneril. When Lear tested his daughters' love for him Regan and Goneril buttered their father but she expressed her love and affection for her father by saying that she loves him to the extent where a daughter should love her father and after her marriage her love will divide for her husband also which reveals that she is a virtuous and practical lady who plainly but politely able to reveal her heart. It was just because her pure heart that Duke of France married her. Moreover even bearing rude behavior and banishment from the kingdom by her love and affection for her father did not affect and remained unselfish which shows her devotion and kindness. Later in the play Lear's reunion with Cordelia marks triumph of selfless and forgiveness of Cordelia over hatred and egoism of Lear. But in the end this personification of virtue and kindness becomes a literal sacrifice to the heartlessness of unjust world.

The depiction of these characters show that in Elizabethan era women were expected to be meek and subordinate and men's property and did not have legal independence to express themselves freely.

The popular and prominent lady characters of Shakespeare reveal the feminine psyche exposed by Shakespeare in different aspects of human life. Though female is an enigma in her that it is quite difficult to understand exactly what she is because she is a multi faceted creation of Almighty but Shakespeare tried to solve this riddle and her psyche and to personify sin and saint, virtue and vice, Demon and Devine in his feminine figures.

Shakespeare's Characters are not temporary or transitory in nature but unique, static and permanent and have everlasting effect on readers' and spectators' mind. He practiced Aristotle's

theory of Imitation, which meant to imitate Nature including intention of creation. That is why even four hundred years after his death the feminine and her psyche is significant and relevant.

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