

FRAILTY THY NAME IS WOMAN - SUBORDINATING WOMEN IN A PATRIARCHAL SOCIAL ORDER: SHAKESPEARE'S EARLY TRAGEDIES

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Messenger: What makes this woman think she can speak among men?

Queen Gorgo: Because only Spartan women give birth to real men.

The dialogue above in the film *300* speaks volumes on the very texture of woman's role and existence in an overtly male dominated society of the Greco-Roman civilization that theorizes the socio-political milieu of many Shakespeare's tragedies. Gayatri C Spivak uses feminist theory to argue that gender difference aggravates the marginalization of the colonized both within the European literary tradition and in contemporary culture. She says while critiquing the subaltern studies historians: "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow."ⁱ

The dialogue quoted above shows not only a mindset of the male that has fixed a persnickety place for women to live and act but also articulates that a woman's voice in power politics is considered a 'noise'. Even what queen Gorgo says is only glorifying the manliness of the male dominated society. Portia, for example, in *Julius Caesar* generates the whole literature of the reserved roles of even privileged women in the patriarchy. That even those who are so well 'fathered and husbanded' echoes only the subsidiary importance of the 'made' in relation to those of the makers. So it is the brand that is supreme, not the product. Women in Shakespeare are the products of the brand patriarchy whether it is Portia or Calpurnia, Ophelia or Gertrude and so on. Under such impressions this paper would like to read the depiction of women in Shakespeare's some of the early tragedies.

Shakespeare's presentation of women in his plays does not deviate from the historical 'order of words' what Northrop Frye would say. He, of course, looks more lively and elegant in the presentation of super women characters but the deformity of their existence with reference to their noble male counterparts is as wide and glaring as could be seen in case of any literary period and any other writer. These high-born women are presented as "possessions" to be passed between fathers and husbands. In most cases, as Lee Jamieson points out, they are socially restricted and unable to explore the world around them without chaperones. These women are coerced and controlled by the men in their lives. Women in power are treated with distrust by Shakespeare.ⁱⁱ They have questionable morals and therefore 'frailty thy name is woman' specifically is not limited to Gertrude in *Hamlet* who marries her husband's murderous brother rather to Lady Macbeth also who coerces her husband into murder for voluptuous power, and Calpurnia too who, for all good reasons, tries to stop Caesar from going to the senate.

A historical and religious perspective will serve a comprehensive view on the topic and also help looking at it as a great connect from past to present. In the history of civilizations whether Hinduism, Greco-Roman, Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, women have been adored but mostly from the perspectives of strengthening the men's power and position. Greco-Roman women who are mostly the heroines in Shakespeare's tragedies shine not beyond this. It is no surprising to quote Aristotle saying that man is by nature superior to the female and so the man should rule and the woman should be ruled.ⁱⁱⁱ Demosthenes wrote "We keep hetaerae for the sake of pleasure, female slaves for our daily care and wives to give us legitimate children and to be the guardians of our households."^{iv} And finally to quote Menander, the Athenian 4th century BCE playwright, "A man who teaches a woman to write should know that he is providing poison to an asp."

The deformity of a woman's position comes pretty clear when Portia pleads before Brutus to partake his worrying mind. The thing which Brutus feels comfortable and profitable discussing with Cassius or Casca, he does not think profitable sharing with his wife. Portia has to exhort him 'by the right and virtue' of her 'place' (2.1.28).^v Jacob Bronowski rightly puts it that certain conventions have been put in place simply for convenience. "In a society like ours which practices the division of labor there are of course specialized functions, as a matter of convenience".^{vi}

History of politics and governance is full of political alliance such as wedding alliances of giving/taking one/someone's daughter/sister to safeguard the patriarchal interests. Ophelia in *Hamlet* has been made a sacrificial goat not only by her father and king Claudius, but by the most noble Hamlet and her dear brother Laertes. Polonius and Laertes ask Ophelia not to have any relation with Hamlet as the later has now no prospect in the kingdom. Their motive can be established that they must have promoted Ophelia to have closeness with Hamlet when his father was alive. Polonius says, "I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth have you so slander any moment leisure as to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet. Look to't, I charge you; come your ways." (1.3.137-140).^{vii} Polonius even presses hard on her to disclose the letters between the two lovers. Her agony can be understood in such revelations: "No, my good lord; but, as you did command, I did repel his letters and denied his access to me." (2.1.118-120.) Ophelia has been simply used as stooge to configure the powers of a male oriented political power.

Shakespeare's depiction of women such as Portia and Calpurnia or Ophelia and Gertrude disrobes the entire saga of nobility in which the noble male is superior and the noble female is a subaltern. Even the noble female has to secure a 'commanding position to interfere in the politics beyond her bedroom service. So why does Portia address herself as Brutus' 'half'? Why is a woman better half of a man? The axiom has a dubious manifestation of the 'Producer' and the 'Product'. Why not man a better half of woman even when she is biologically capable of retaining and delivering the generations? For such displacement, the genesis of woman in all religions may be referred to. Portia has the plainness of asking the bitter reality of the state of womanhood in male socio-political governance: 'Am I yourself / But, as it were, a sort or limitation/' (2.1.28). So how many women enjoy that audacity to come across the rigidity of male mindset and confront them as Portia confronts Brutus. Are women in all possibility equally wives to their husbands or something that sort of 'harlot' as Portia says? What is the state of other women other than Portia who do not command that dignity and respect which Portia does? The society probably has less of Portias than the opposite.

De Beauvoir puts it “Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being”. She further quotes Julien Benda: ‘The body of man makes sense in itself quite apart from that of woman, whereas the latter seems wanting in significance by itself . . . Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man.’ And she is simply what man decrees; thus she is called ‘the sex’, by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex - absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other.”viii

Spivak argues that the postcolonial attempt at retrieving lost voices from historical archives and restoring them to history is a complicated issue, as even when the subaltern does speak, her words are interpreted by scholars from within a patriarchal and imperialist model of discourse. As John McLeod sums it up, “Their muteness is created by the fact that even when women uttered words, they were still interpreted through conceptual and methodical procedures which were unable to understand their interventions with accuracy. It is not so much that subaltern women did not speak, but rather that others did not know how to listen, how to enter into a transaction between speaker and listener. The subaltern cannot speak because their words cannot be properly interpreted. Hence, the silence of the female as subaltern is the result of a failure of interpretation and not a failure of articulation”. ix

Portia’s ‘real’ confessions throw a lot of undercurrent meanings on the ‘limitation’ of being a woman- “I grant I am a woman, but withal /A woman that Lord Brutus took to wife.” Her eloquent speech unravels layers of paradigms that have suppressed women under muscles. “Think you I am no stronger than my sex, / Being so fathered and so husbanded” (2.1.28). Even a woman of Portia’s repute has to prove her ‘constancy’ by giving wound on her thigh. However, Portia secretly confesses the age-long inherited weakness of women passed on to them by the patriarchs: “Aye me, how weak a thing / The heart of woman is” (2.4.36).

Shakespeare is keen to contrast subaltern within the subaltern, for example, Portia in contrast with Calpurnia, or Portia with Ophelia. The subaltern within the subaltern is a gyrating circle. There is a division of subalterns on the basis of cast and creed, and under this division, on the basis of powered and empowered, the male and female etc. The equation of relation between Calpurnia and Caesar and Portia and Brutus is similar only. What changes is their personal conduct to each other. Both women are worried about their husband’s health. Even their approach to persuade them to keep out of danger is suitably commensurate to their personality and temperament.

Throughout the social dimension of such characters in Shakespeare, there is an attribute of showing magnanimity in the relation of superior and inferior. “you are my true and honorable wife;/ As dear to me as are the ruddy drops.../” (2.1.28). If one reverses the sentence the meaning will have disastrous consequence on the character of a woman. It seems that there is an accepted code to allow men to be promiscuous, but if a woman takes this liberty none of the sexes seem to enjoy that in society.

When we come to Ophelia we find her protected and perished under three different layers of male protectionism. She has to carryout the duties of a daughter, a sister, and lover to Polonius, Laertes, and Hamlet respectively. Her love towards Hamlet can be termed as pure, innocent and reciprocal, but there is more of element involved in that. She grew up knowing that Lord Hamlet will really be ‘Lord’ someday, and so did Polonius and Laertes had thought. So, it

is the power equation which brings love and relationship between and among them. The moment father and brother came to know that under the circumstances presently where the king has been murdered and the queen remarried, they understood that the prospect of Ophelia as Hamlet's wife would bring no gain.

“Frailty thy name is woman”, despite Shakespeare having an acclaimed sense of ‘negative capability, is more of a sweeping generalization of women as weak and palpable; it can not be accepted merely as an expression of the troubled mind conditioned by time and place. History is full of such men who have acted even more meekly, and conspiringly than these ‘frail women’. What emanates after this statement is a validation of women's weakness, though, they are spoken in reference to a dull and moronic Gertrude. But his notion of women as weak, selfish, opportunistic, infidel etc goes to apply to all women as a whole. It drives the general male egotistical mindset in continuation of literature as such that men are superior. Portia's painful admittance “O Constancy, be strong upon my side, / Set a huge mountain 'tween my heart and tongue! / I have a man's mind, but a woman's might. / How hard it is for women to keep counsel! (2.4.35) is a prelude to such frailty.

Going through the entire semiotics and literary word order, vertically and horizontally, a system has been created by the male litterateurs that projects women as weak. In terms of hero and heroine the later will be saved / rescued by the former; in terms of father and mother, she will be guided by them; in terms of lover and beloved she will be won by him. The entire texture of women's emotions under the above paradigms has been expressed by variety of authors.

Shakespeare may be excused from having a misogynist approach in *Hamlet* but he can not be excused from placing women as dormant, subsidiary play-types under the broader designs of their male counterparts. Both of the women in *Hamlet*, Gertrude and Ophelia, die because of the selfish nature of Claudius and Hamlet respectively. Although both women are sacrificial victims, the importance of their death in developing the plot is varied. Ophelia is the ultimate sacrificial victim in *Hamlet*. She is presented by Shakespeare as an innocent, uncorrupted character whose death is used as a method of eliciting sympathy from the audience towards Laertes, and animosity towards Hamlet. She appears as a “Sacrificial victim” particularly when analyzing her relationship with Hamlet, because of Hamlet's varying attitude towards her through the course of the play. Ophelia turning insane, singing bawdy songs in presence of her father and brother, and later drowning herself show the acute enslavement of such characters who despite their noble birth have little share to decide their own fate progressively. Hamlet's comments towards Ophelia: “Wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery go” (1.1.140) has a deep sexual connotation of contemptuously mocking the sexual liberties of women. It also has a connection with ‘Frailty thy name is woman’ which is expressed less towards not observing considerable condolence on the murdered husband than towards the hastily settled marriage with the murderous uncle. It only projects the patriarchal mindset that likes to see young widows either burning with their dead husbands or resigning from the colorful world of consummate life. It is her sexuality that turns Hamlet so violently against her. He even evaluates Ophelia too on his mother's sleeping with Claudius: “In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, / Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty” (3.4.94-96).

The most despicable scene, in which an innocent Ophelia is made to act as seductress, is the nunnery scene. Polonius uses her to seduce Hamlet so that the root of his insanity could be unearthed. However, this turns only to make Ophelia suffer as Hamlet draws a conclusion that

women are two-faced and have secret designs and denounces his love for her “I loved you not” (3.1.119). But at the same time his extremely harsh remarks that god has given you one face and you make yourselves another. “You jig, you amble, and you lisp; you nick name God’s creatures and make your wantonness your ignorance (3.1.144-149)” ruins her life.^x Without any protest she allows herself to be used by Polonius and Claudius as a ‘decoy’ against Hamlet. To his acute disappointment, Hamlet painfully perceives it. That is why he rushes to Ophelia’s private chamber in a frightful appearance, to inspect her face closely, just to authenticate his perception. Certainly, it contributes a lot to intensify his already negative attitude towards women, formed by the way his mother behaves. Here Ophelia is much like Gertrude who surrendered to Claudius’s ‘importunity’ without ever questioning his motive.^{xi} Peter comments: “The resemblance between Ophelia and Gertrude confirms Hamlet’s tendency to generalize about feminine weakness ‘frailty, thy name is woman’ and prompts his misogynistic outburst against Ophelia...”^{xii}

However, for such vulnerability of the other sex, Shakespeare may not be blamed alone. Perhaps it is the design of the Nature itself which brings out such configurations of power where a patriarch is more visible in the overt display of power politics. It may be that the mothers who give birth to ‘real men’ might be playing a role, which human interpretation that, many a time, is a perpetuation of the time-honored or a reaction against the time-honored has yet not been able to unearth. That under the evaluating degree of the under currents of power, woman’s power has yet not caught that narrative of imagination, and that perception of the written that could wreck the boundaries of merely feminine or masculine, matriarch and patriarch, the subaltern and the superior. It is pertinent to mention that Shakespeare’s depictions are the requirement of the *mythos* that the high-mimetic tragedy would love to adopt for the sake of commercial survival and emotional victory of the audience. Probably the understanding continues that art unlike philosophy describes the delight of the familiar and not the far fetched.

i Spivak Gayatri C "Can the Subaltern Speak?" from Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg's *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* Macmillan Education Basingstoke(1988).

ii file:///H:/subaltern/Shakespeare%20Women%20-%20Introducing%20Shakespeare's%20Women.htm
21 Aug 2011.

iii Aristotle, *Politics*.

iv Demosthenes, *Apollodorus Against Neaera*, III, 122.

v *Julius Caesar* ed. AW Verity Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England, UK, 1966.

vi “Science and Sensibility” *Perspectives* By Vasudevan, S. A. & Sathya Babu, M. (eds.) Orient Longman Pvt Ltd Kolkata 1972, P5.

vii *Hamlet* ed AW Verity Cambridge : The University Press, 1950.

viii Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H.M Parshely. London: Vintage 1997.

ix McLeod, John. 2000. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p.195.

x [http://www.angelfire.com/nm/nighttime/shakespeare/hamlet essay.html](http://www.angelfire.com/nm/nighttime/shakespeare/hamlet%20essay.html) 15 Aug 2011.

xi “Frailty, Thy Name is Woman’ – How Frail are Women in the World of Shakespeare?”

Muhammad Safiur Rahman IIUC Studies ISSN 1813-7733 Vol. – 3, December 2006 (p 31-44).

xii Peter D. Holland. University of Notre Dame. Hamlet, Prince of Denmark —. *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. ed. David Bevington 5th edition, New York: Longman (2003) p. 1101.