

Shakespeare – A trio: Feminist, Humanist and Dramatist

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to celebrate Shakespeare as a trio of feminist, humanist and an outstanding dramatist. This paper comments on the way by which Shakespeare designed his plot and made his female characters. Analysing various works of Shakespeare. This paper projects his plays are nothing but a portrait-gallery of characters. Thus, this paper tried its best to present Shakespeare as a feministic dramatist and humanistic writer.

Keywords: Feminism, characterization, strong, emotions, humanistic writer, imagination.

Shakespeare is one of the greatest natural geniuses “who by the mere strength of natural parts, and without any assistance of Art or learning, have produced works that were the delight of their own times and the wonder of posterity” (Gupta 44). It is not the Elizabethans alone but also the posterity that delighted in the sound of the spoken words of the plays of Shakespeare. The Elizabethans had a lively visual imagination. And, therefore, poetry had an irresistible appeal to them. Shakespeare’s poetic dramas, like all other forms of poetic literature, have revealing properties. They go beneath the surface of the human story, and evoke, and isolate or distil from the stage action whatever elements of timeless beauty and truth it may possess. So imaginatively aware was Shakespeare of the multiplicity of man’s mental and emotional reactions to every conceivable situation in life. Shakespeare is at once a dramatist, poet and actor.

Shakespearean tragedies are distinctly on a higher plane. The great tragedies are the glories record of man’s unconquerable mind. They suffer intensely, they fall, they die. And yet death is not the last word in a Shakespearean tragedy. Love and life survive, and it is Death that is dead. The heroes must accept responsibility for their action:

“In tragic life, God not,
No villain need be Passion spin the plot;
We are betrayed by what is false within”.

We do feel sad when we watch a tragedy of Shakespeare. To Shakespeare, love and life are Synonymous terms and love is the keynote of his romantic comedies. It is love that transports young men and women to the enchanted world. Juliet in her exuberance cried out:

O, I have bought the mansion of a love,

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Kasi Viswan. R., Shakespeare – A trio: Feminist, Humanist and Dramatist

But not possessed it and thought I am sold,
Not yet enjoyed.

In Shakespeare's comedies, there is always congenial climate for woman, in which they "can be happy and come to flower, in which the masculine element drops its voice". Men are there, but they do not normally act but are acted upon. They are handsome and devoted, but they appear pigmies beside their female counterparts. Women are clever, intelligent, level-headed and resourceful. They make the plans and they execute them as well. Rosalind turns the tragedy into a gay comedy where she plays a decisive role. Portia shines like a luminary amidst the pale gentlemen of Venice, who talk so much and yet talk so helplessly. Mistress Page and Mistress Ford make a fool of even Falstaff, who once dominated the stage. Helena in *All's Well that Ends Well* is the root and heart of the play and like an exacting mistress boxes the ears of the truant boy and converts him to a docile husband. Gordon has not exaggerated when he says that, "of all the angels of approach to Shakespearean comedy, the master angle is and must be, the angle of femininity". Marlowe, who has created a galaxy of superman, has failed miserably as a painter of women. "Shakespeare's plays, particularly his comedies are a portrait – gallery of women" (Gupta 103). In the words of Praveen Bhatia, "No dramatist can create live characters save by bequeathing the best of himself into his work of art, scattering among them a largesse of his own qualities, his own wit, his comprehensive cogent philosophy, his own rhythm of action and the simplicity or complexity of his own nature" (P 2).

Bernard Shaw's estimate about Shakespearean women is absolutely correct. "It is the women who take the initiative". They are shrewd, clever, intelligent and resourceful and still they are so much womanly that heightens their charm and attraction. They can always make a synthesis of the head and the heart, reason and emotion. The only woman who is excessively sentimental is Julia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Women certainly understand that they are better than men. Mrs. Jameson, Helen Fancit, Mary Coleridge, Miss Agnes Mure Mackenzie and Miss Ellen Terry have written on Shakespeare's women with an ability, peculiar to their sex. Ellen Terry, for example, is the first to point out that the romantic heroines of Shakespeare are so much mature. That they become self-confident and can face the problems of life with hope and courage. Mrs. Jameson has grouped the Shakespearean women under three distinct groups – characters of intellect, characters of passion and imagination and characters of affection. The heroines in the tragedies also contribute to their husband's happiness. Portia in *Julius Caesar* wanted to share her husband's sorrows. And Brutus, not easily swayed by emotion, examined.

O ye gods
Render me worthy of this noble wife.

The confirmed bachelors in *Love's Labours Lost* turned from books to women who alone could make life worth living. The Roman women have a character and integrity of their own. In Antony and Cleopatra, we have two women – Cleopatra and Octavia. Cleopatra, Hamlet and Falstaff are the greatest creations of Shakespeare. Cleopatra, as Enobarbus says, has "infinite variety". According to Mrs. Jameson, "She dazzles our faculties, perplexes our judgement, bewilders and

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bewitches our fancy; from the beginning, to the end of the drama we are conscious of a kind of fascination against which our moral sense rebels, but from which there is no escape” (107). Desdemona is a martyr to the cause of love.

“Soul of the age!
The applause! Delight! The wonder of our stage!”

What a glowing tribute Ben Jonson does pay to William Shakespeare, the legend and as Ben Jonson himself says, Shakespeare’s genius is unlimited and his greatness as a dramatist is ever lasting. Shakespeare stands peerless in all English literature, nay, in the literature of the whole world”. Things become old and worn out with age and usage, but with the passage of time and thought, Shakespeare is growing younger and even brighter-surely an abnormal and paradoxical phenomenon worth saying says Laxmikant Mohan in his introductory lines to Shakespeare. Shakespeare was the man who cared more for life and humane fellowship and was conscious of the powers, some beneficent, some evil and conscious above all, of the Divinity that shapes our ends commenting on the mystery of Shakespeare’s relation to his work, Allardyce Nicoll remarks:

“Many years ago the German Scholar Tieck, searching for an explanation of Shakespeare’s genius, hit on the peculiarly fortunate theological simile. He said that just as God in relation to human beings is both immanent and transcendent, so the poet is immanent and transcendent in relation to the characters of his imagination. We sense Shakespeare’s presence beyond the actions of his plays, godlike presence often shrouded in a mystery beyond the reach of reason and nevertheless potently appreciated; and at the same time, we feel his vitality and strength identified with, and expressing itself through the individual characters” (63)

Thus, the vitality and strength of Shakespeare takes roots in his characters. His women characters no doubt, display strength of character. In our present day society, even if we witness woman braving the odds in life, keeping up with the ebb and tide, they can be peaceful, maintaining equanimity. Shakespeare in his treatment of women, appears to be a feminist even when the word “Feminism” was alien to the society or to the world as a whole. Even though the word ‘Feminism’ takes its roots far back before 18th century, the seeds of the Feminist movement were planted during the latter portion of that century. The earlier works on the so-called “woman question” criticized the restrictive role of women, without necessarily claiming that woman were disadvantaged and men were to blame. Feminist thought began during “The Enlightenment” with the feminist thinkers

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demanding equal rights for women in every sense. This is the case with Feminism prior to 1850. The works of Shakespeare testify him to be a staunch supporter of women.

Shakespeare's women leave a beguiling impression on every one. Whether Shakespeare like the modern Feminists fought for equal rights for women or not, is a matter of little importance. He projected women in such a way that they loomed big dominating the very action of the play. Though it is an established fact that Shakespearean tragedy centers round the hero and Shakespearean human in comedies with their wit and charm excel their men. No doubt, Desdemona's endurance, Lady Macbeth's ambition and Cleopatra's majesty – these qualities produced in them captivate the readers. If Desdemona's endurance evokes sympathy and awe in the reader, Lady Macbeth's ambition and Cleopatra's majesty set the readers on fire evoking awe and pity. Shakespeare's works are not confined to a period or a place as it is learnt from the thorough study of his characters. It is really a marvel how Shakespeare could delineate women in their varied emotions say love, passion, compassion, ambition and make them valiant through these emotions. One can find a number of Desdemona, Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra often in the present day society.

Shakespeare was one of the greatest men of genius the world had ever produced. Commenting on Shakespeare's genius, Gladys D. Willock remarks:

“There is one aspect of Shakespeare's genius about which I am completely bardolatrous and that is his wisdom in getting himself born in 1564 and emerging at the Elizabethan spring-tide. Environment did not create genius but It provided rain and sunshine” (P 117).

Shakespeare's greatness is such that G.B.Harrison sets the Bible and Shakespeare on the same pedestal. From layman to the intellectual, everyone cries in astonishment:

“Nothing like Shakespeare!”

The 'man' Shakespeare, his inner life, his mind, his soul, his glassy essence gets unmistakably revealed in his work and so Shakespeare is considered to be a man with a woman's heart which is evident in his sensitive and sentimental approach to women. It is right in calling him a feminist – cum – humanist. His strength lies in his characterization and commenting on the human character of Shakespeare's plays, Peter Ure has affirmed thus:

“Shakespeare's plays are great images of supreme artistic strength and brilliance, among the most complex and wonderful artifacts in the history of the word but

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their substance is the human character” (42)

To conclude, Marlowe who has created a galaxy of superman, has failed miserably as a painter of women. Shakespeare’s plays are nothing but a portrait-gallery of women. In a word, he is a feministic dramatist and humanistic feminist writer.

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