

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

ANALYSING WOMEN IN POWER IN SHAKESPEARE'S
TEMPEST, ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA, HAMLET

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Abstract

Paper explores polarities in roles assigned to Shakespeare's women characters in context to societies. Feminism as a strong genre in feminist literature emerged much later than Elizabethan period. Shakespeare brings forth lesser number of female characters as compared to roles assigned to male characters. The dramatist chose men to deliver more dialogues than their female counterparts. An attempt has been made to explore power politics as brought forth through female gender in Shakespearean plays.

Keywords: Tempest, Antony & Cleopatra, Hamlet, Elizabethan, Women

Article Received: 18/11/2021

Article Accepted: 27/12/2021

Published online:31/12/2021

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.9.4.254](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.9.4.254)

Elizabeth's England was clear on roles assigned to male and female genders in the society. While men were to earn and move in the outer realm of world at large, women were to take care within the inner realm of the home space. Though childbearing was the main function assigned to women, Shakespeare does not say much in this regard. Sycorax, **Cleopatra** and Gertrude are at the forefront who are the mothers mentioned in plays under discussion, i.e. *The Tempest*, *Hamlet* and *Antony & Cleopatra*, and here also one sees that they are not truly **Elizabethan women** who bore lot of children as part of their duty. Cleopatra does not even fit the role of ideal wife as she has children out of wedlock. Hence there is no honour connected to this as it is not to be taken as blessing of lord. On the other hand the vicious invisible character of Sycorax is always mentioned in regard of Caliban and his deformed personality.

The lesser gender in Shakespeare's plays

There is variety to be seen in women characters in plays under lens of discussion. Ophelia, Miranda, Gertrude, Octavia, and **Cleopatra** belong to higher strata of society while Iras and Chariman belong to lower strata of those in service. Sycorax belongs to no strata as she is considered as a witch. Marked difference can be seen in the five high class **women** due to their circumstances. Shakespeare is not unfair to his women characters as nowhere are they physically mistreated by the menfolk. His **women** characters are strong in their assigned spheres. Lives of women are equally problematic as those of men connected to them. Both genders struggle to survive in their own manner. The scales however do not always weigh the same.

Miranda and patriarchy

Miranda is epitome of pretty and naïve young **women**. She represents freshness of guileless innocent girlhood. Prospero's daughter grows under

loving and strict care of her father. All bookish knowledge is inculcated in her through diligent efforts of her father who does not want her to lag in anything while in the wilds. Here Shakespeare brings out Elizabeth's encouragement to men of high order to get their daughters educated. Miranda loves her father like a dutiful daughter. She is a dainty character unlike masculine-woman that one comes across in the character of **Cleopatra**. Prospero as a true **Elizabethan** takes his role seriously towards the "weaker sex" and mothers in absence of a mother figure. She is compassionate and does not think twice before asking her magician father:

Miranda: ... you have Put the wild waters in this roar, allay them.

Though women during Elizabeth's reign were neither allowed to vote, act on stage, enter any profession or inherit father's titles, yet girls like Miranda did not hesitate in wanting to lend helping hand to those in need.

Miranda: Had I been any god of power, I would Have sunk the sea within the earth or ere It should the good ship so have swallowed, and The fraughting souls within her.

Prospero not only rears his daughter in physically fit manner, but also allays her emotional fears in hour of need as he does when he plans the shipwreck with help from Ariel. Miranda had freedom to speak her mind. Though her marriage is contrived by her father, Prospero never forces her into it. He manipulates a lot of things, but Miranda's final decision is because of her own emotional leanings towards Ferdinand. This is unlike Olivia's marriage to Antony in **Antony and Cleopatra**. Both Miranda and Olivia are married off to men of high ranks. Politics are in the mind of Octavius Caesar when he arranges her marriage even though Antony was having a torrid love affair with Cleopatra. Prospero does not want to use his daughter, but simply wants her to be happy with someone who would take care of her. He waits and watches love bloom between the two before finally consenting to the nuptial. Prospero is depicted as a fair person who forgives King of Naples for his part in getting Prospero overthrown by his

own brother; this is done through allowing marriage bond between his precious daughter and Alonso's son. **Elizabethan** times laid stress upon role of man as protector of wife and daughter. Prospero protects Miranda from only other inhabitant of the magical island, i.e., deformed Caliban whom he turns into a slave for all sorts of daily tasks for misbehaving with Miranda:

Prospero: In mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate The honor of my child.

Miranda is just like modern woman who exercise power over their husbands after marriage. She is not to be a doormat or a simply a child bearer for Ferdinand for Prospero wishes:

Prospero: The Duke of Milan And his more braver daughter could control thee, If now 'twere fit to do 't.

As a father, Prospero also ensures that his daughter should not fall to Ferdinand's passion and before their marriage ceremony. Elizabethans thought highly of chaste **women**. Marriage vows were sacred, and divorce was not in vogue. Single women were not looked upon with benign eyes. Miranda thus stands for female chastity in universal context and as fertile woman who would bear children to carry forward her husband's name.

Octavia vs Cleopatra

Widow of Gaius Marcellus with three siblings was married off to Mark Antony to reduce rising tensions between Octavius Caesar and Mark Antony. Marriage of political alliance had taken place after the death of Fulvia on advice of Agrippa.

Agrippa: To hold you in perpetual amity, To make you brothers, and to knit your hearts With an unslipping knot, take Antony Octavia to his wife, whose beauty claims No worse a husband than the best of men; Whose virtue and whose general graces speak That which none else can utter. By this marriage All little jealousies, which now seem great, And all great fears, which now import their dangers, Would then be nothing. Truths would be tales, Where now

half-tales be truths. Her love to both Would each to other and all loves to both Draw after her. Pardon what I have spoke, For 'tis a studied, not a present thought, By duty ruminated.

She brings money and power to **Antony** and tensions are reduced after signing of Treaty of Tarentum. Shakespeare portrays her as a woman who is highly regarded for her womanly qualities of beauty, virtue and above all docile and amicable nature. She is epitome of **Elizabethan** womanhood who quietly serves one husband after another, who unquestionably agrees to marriage on her brother's behalf. She is soft spoken but for **Cleopatra** she has a dull tongue, and her gait is like that of a person who "creeps". **Cleopatra** does not see a competitor for herself in "plain" Octavia. Fulvia the formidable wife of Antony was already dead. Octavia goes on to be a mother to not only her own children, but also of those borne to Antony by Cleopatra even though Antony had divorced her. Octavia is not vociferous in the play. If one takes Sycorax from *The Tempest*, then the witch too does not speak. Postcolonial criticism takes Sycorax to represent **women** from African and under privileged communities who suffer silently.

Cleopatra is exact opposite to fair beauty, Octavia. Contrast between East and West is complete when one comes across passive natured Octavia from the West and fiery and passionate representative of the Eastern world, **Cleopatra**. Tragedy of Octavia is tragedy of simple woman who silently suffer due to atrocities of men in their lives. Cleopatra is a tragic heroine who triumphs in death after having lost all during her lifetime. While one pities Octavia, one cannot still pity **Cleopatra** as she also stands as example of extreme selfishness. She has little regard for other women in **Antony's** life who happen to be his wedded wives at different times. She even tries to kill the messenger who brings news of Antony's marriage. Cleopatra's fascination is in her intelligence. Historical records reveal her to be a highly educated individual of her times. She was a good orator and impressed upon all with her powerful speeches. Egyptian Queen is a marvellous actor who changes her stance according to need and person in front of her. She had schemed and

inveigled herself into the presence of Julius Caesar to get back her lost throne. She is revealed by historians as product of Ptolemaic culture where marriage between brother and sister was not considered to be a sin. **Cleopatra** had married her younger brothers for the throne. She is shown as heartless woman who got her own siblings murdered for usurpation of power. Her death by poisonous asp from Nile befits her lifestyle and her end is glorified as she initiates her own death to escape being enslaved by Octavius Caesar. She also expresses her wish to join her "husband" in death.

As with most women in power, **Cleopatra** was not averse to thinking of herself as goddess on earth. This sheds light on her being conscious of her own importance. But Horace calls her "A crazy queen...plotting...to demolish the Capitol and topple the [Roman] Empire". Like Antony, Octavius Caesar, and others in the play, many call her dangerous harlot who used sex and witchcraft to grasp power that was not meant to be hers in this manner. Lucan labels her "the shame of Egypt, the lascivious fury who was to become bane of Rome." **Cleopatra** continued to play the card of being patriotic to stay in power. Plutarch says, "Her actual beauty...was not so remarkable that none could be compared with her, or that no one could see her without being struck by it, but the contact of her presence...was irresistible... The character that attended all she said or did was something bewitching." Her sexiness according to him lay in "the charm of her conversation."

Cleopatra, Octavia and Fluvia are shown as experienced and worldly women. They have been married more than once. Yet it is Miranda from *The Tempest* who seems to triumph over them in game of love with her simplicity.

Sexualized Queens and plays of Shakespeare

Hamlet's grief is private as he sees his mother making merry with the new husband who once was her brother-in-law.

Hamlet: But two months dead—nay, not so much, not two ... With such dexterity to incestuous sheets! It is not, nor it cannot

come to good. But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.

He remembers how loving his father had been towards his queen. His mother was always hanging on to his father for both physical and moral support. Just two months after her husband's death she had married Claudius, and this was certainly not acceptable for the son. Thus, he remarks, "frailty, thy name is woman." Hamlet suspects that his father had been killed and to some extent it was probable due to the new king and his newly wedded wife.

Ghost of old king Hamlet too comments upon hasty marriage and asks Hamlet to:

Ghost: If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not. Let not the royal bed of Denmark be A couch for luxury and damnèd incest.

Though the ghost does not want Hamlet to harm the queen, yet he wants her to suffer:

Ghost: Leave her to heaven And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge To prick and sting her.

Hamlet calls his mother a pernicious woman and continues to belittle her throughout the play. Apart from what is said about her by her son, Gertrude is not shown as highly sensuous woman who cannot stay away from Claudius for even few minutes. Apart from their marriage, the new king and the queen are hardly shown together in intimate situations. They even have separate chambers as is revealed during the acts. Claudius prays alone in his chamber and Hamlet kills Polonius while he goes to visit his mother in hers.

Cleopatra shares a totally different kind of relationship with men in her life. She had already been queen to her brothers. Julius Caesar had been bowled over by her charm when she had secretly entered his chambers. Antony cannot stay without her and makes himself the laughingstock of all who admired him. Cleopatra is not ashamed of taking away Antony from his wife. Cleopatra goes to extreme lengths to win over men to her side. She is not beautiful but uses her articulatory skills to charm men. While there is nothing exotic about Gertrude's attire or her lifestyle, everything about **Cleopatra**

evokes carnal desires in those around her. Gertrude's sexuality is more in Hamlet's mind, and Cleopatra carries it along with her. Cleopatra flaunts her affair in brothels and marketplaces, but Gertrude is presented simply as a wife who hangs on to her husband in loving manner while in public. While Gertrude still commands respect, of Cleopatra it is said that:

Agrippa: She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed; He ploughed her, and she cropped.

Shakespeare's language for **Cleopatra** is indecent and makes her vulgar.

Enobarbus describes her in perfect manner when he comments:

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale Her infinite variety. Other women cloy The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry Where most she satisfies. For vilest things Become themselves in her, that the holy priests Bless her when she is riggish.

As compared to **Cleopatra**, Octavia is a lottery for Antony. While Gertrude is respectful towards her husband till the time of her death, **Cleopatra** always seems to insult and mock Antony. She even discusses him with her maids and does not mince words. Antony is bewitched by Cleopatra but still knows what she is:

Antony: I found you as a morsel cold upon Dead Caesar's trencher; nay, you were a fragment Of Gneius Pompey's, besides what hotter hours, Unregistered in vulgar fame, you have Luxuriously picked out.

Conclusion

Shakespeare brings to his readers every aspect of womanhood. Though protagonists in the plays mostly belong to royalty or well-off families, women of low class serve them. Common women could work for rich families, this was the only profession that they were not debarred from. Women in Shakespearean plays can be soft to the core with motherly feelings or hard enough to get others killed for power. Dainty girls like Miranda attract readers with their purity and with their

intelligence, such kind of femineity is extolled. But one also gets a glimpse of what love can do to pure souls like Ophelia. Both Miranda and Ophelia are good and obedient daughters. While Miranda gets respect from menfolk in her life, Ophelia is oppressed by her strong father and brother. Hamlet continues to speak to her in harsh manner.

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