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The construct of the 'Other' in Shakespeare's The Winter's Tale

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Abstract

Female characters play an important role in Shakespeare's plays. Just as in reality, women of Shakespeare's dramas have been bound to rules and conventions of the patriarchal Elizabethan era. Therefore, it was very common in Elizabethan England to compel woman into marriages in order to receive power, legacy, dowry or land in exchange. The construction of female characters in Shakespeare's plays reflects the Elizabethan image of woman in general. Hermione, the heroine of The Winter's Tale is taken here for analysis. She is a beautiful woman and dutiful wife. But she suffers from patriarchy. She is the Queen of Sicilia, wife to King Leontes, and the mother of Mamillius and Perdita. She fulfills her roles with a tender dignity and grace that is not found in the opposite sex. She goes through her tumultuous journey of experiencing shame, degradation and grief. Hermione suffers inexplicably because of the irrational behaviour of her husband. Common topics of feminist studies of Shakespeare include examinations of patriarchy, gender and sex roles and relationship between gender and power. The Elizabethan society of Shakespeare's day was completely dominated by men. Such a male-domination greatly constrained Shakespeare's female characters. Women of Shakespeare's dramas are bound to rules and conventions of the patriarchal Elizabethan era. The construction of female characters in Shakespeare's plays reflects the Elizabethan image of woman in general. Shakespeare's words and phrases construct characters closely gendered as male and female. The heroes are given a free 'voice' whereas the women remain only their 'echo'.

Keywords: Shakespeare's, Elizabethan England, characters, *The Winter's*

Introduction

In the words of Simone de' Beauvoir men fundamentally oppress women by characterizing them, on every level, as the other, defined exclusively in opposition to men. Man occupies the role of the self, or subject; woman is the object, the other. Simone de' Beauvoir in her *Second Sex* says, "The Other is posited as Other by the One positing itself as one ... the Other has to submit to this foreign point of view". In the words of Simone de' Beauvoir, domination is the patriarchal prerogative in which women are complicit in their own oppression. Hermione is doing whatever is entreated by her husband. She is innocent in understanding his character. She receives the first intimation of her husband's jealous suspicions with incredulous astonishment. When he accuses her more plainly, she replies with a calm dignity :

Should a villain say so,
The most replenish'd villain in the world,

He were as much more villain; you, my lord.
Do but mistake. (WT 1.2. 119- 122)

She pathetically cries, "You speak of a language that I understand not" (3. 2. 80). Nothing can be more affecting than her calm reply to Leontes, who, in his jealous rage, heaps insult upon insult, and accuses her before her own attendants as no better "than one of those to whom the vulgar give bold titles"

How will this grieve you,
When you shall come to clearer knowledge, that
You have thus published me ! Gentle my lord,
You scarce can right me throughly then to say
You *did* mistake. (154 – 158)

In this study Hermione, the heroine of *The Winter's Tale* is taken for analysis. She suffers because of her marginalized place in the structure of power in relation to the male characters. The dramatist himself considers Hermione as the 'Other'. Shakespeare's language is highly phallogocentric associated with a particular gender.

Discussion of Hermione as the 'Other'

In the opening of *The Winter's Tale* Leontes compels his wife Hermione to persuade Polixenes, "Tongue- tied our queen? Speak you" (1. 2. 28) when he announces his return to Bohemia. As Gayatri Spivak says, Hermione, the margin is at the service of Leontes, the centre. The women are treated as margins 'the Other'. Spivak says, "Margin is at the service of the centre. The centre wants an identifiable margin, claims for marginality assure validation from the centre" (qtd in Leela Gandhi 84). Both Leontes and Hermione try to encourage Polixenes to extend his stay. When Hermione's entreaties work, he becomes unaccountably suspicious and flies into a jealous rage that shatters the rest of their collective lives. When she is suddenly attacked by an irrational Leontes accusing her of adultery, she had first believes this to be a misunderstanding, but on realizing that he is in earnest she submits to his will, though refusing to speak any word that might suggest her guilt.

In the male dominated society "there are not two genders. There is only one, the feminine, the masculine not being a gender. For the masculine is not the masculine but the genera" (Sara Mills 45). Men are the norm and women are defined in relation to them. "Man thinks himself without woman. Woman does not think herself without man." (Beauvoir 6)

Venom in heart, he outwardly praises Hermione for making his friend stay back. She too in her innocence says, "Our praises are our wages. You may ride's with one soft kiss" (WT 1. 2. 94-95). She does not understand the real character of her husband. "She is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the 'Other'. (Beauvoir 6) As in the words of Virginia Woolf these words are 'made by a man', the dramatist. Feeling cuckolded the male dominance imprisons Hermione. The male ego does not allow space to voice forth her side. As a king, not as a husband, he commands imperiously, "Away with her, to prison" (WT 2. 1. 103). He snatches Mamillius, the prince too. The man in him generalises, "many a man there is (even at this present, now while I speak this) holds his wife by the arm, that little thinks that she has been sluic'd in 's absence"(1. 2. 191-193). She gives birth to a daughter in prison and is willing to trust Paulina with her, but this is the last time she sees the child. She is not fully recovered from childbirth when she is brought to court to answer the charges against her.

Dowden says, "Hermione is suspected of a sudden, and shameless dishonour"(Dowden 407). Leontes' 'comet- like jealousy' affects both Hermione, the living and Perdita, the yet to be born. The women's loyalty is questioned by using 'honour', a male- centered construct, as a term of reference to keep the 'female' under subjugation. Taking 'honour' as an inviolable

norm Hermione is considered as a deviant by being branded as 'an adulteress' and a 'bed-swerver'. While commenting upon the man-woman relationship Simon de' Beauvoir says, "A man enforces chastity upon woman" (Beauvoir 221). When Leontes charges Hermione with adultery she helplessly cries, "You speak of a language that I understand not" (WT 3. 2. 80). Hermione is totally shattered by the violent language used by Leontes. Hermione being a woman is denied an opportunity to refute the charges against her and vindicate her honour. When the oracle comes Leontes fixes on it the construct that he has in mind. "There is no truth at all i' th' Oracle" (3. 2. 140), he shouts. He goes in for reconciliation because he thinks Hermione is the agent through which his lineage will be perpetuated. Paulina's words to prevent him from kissing Hermione in the form of a statue, "you will mar it if you kiss it" (5. 3. 83) is symbolic of Leontes' power in deciding, to make or mar Hermione's future. Towards the end of the play the dramatist has given her only one speech of seven lines; the first two and a half lines are a prayer to the gods to bless Perdita, to whom she then addresses the rest of her words. She has, she says, only lived to see her child again. She has no words for Leontes. Being a woman words are not needed for her. In *Othello* when Othello suspects Desdemona he smothers her to death. But Shakespeare brings reconciliation here with Leontes and Hermione. He has made her come down from the pedestal she stood on and embraced him. It is written in such a way that her acceptance of him, and the way in which 'she hangs about his neck', show that she knows this is the king she loved, and to whom she had said as they courted, 'I am yours forever'.

Conclusion

Feminism reveals and challenges the cultural shaping of gender roles in all social institutions like family, work, politics, religion, and, of course, in literature and drama. Feminist criticism examines how female experience is portrayed in literature and drama. It tries to expose how, in plays, in novels and other writing, patriarchal ideology often stereotypes, distorts, ignores or represses that experience, misrepresenting how women feel, think and act (Gibson.30-31). The analysis of Hermione in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* shows how Hermione, the virtuous and beautiful queen of Sicily is portrayed as a satellite orbiting around her man, having no existence apart from her husband. Her identity is erased in the male centered world. She is cast into a submissive role by the dramatist himself in keeping with the gender role accorded by the social pattern then prevalent. In this play the male is privileged in terms of trustworthiness and strength, the female is marginalized in terms of unreliability and weakness. Besides, the female is not given equal space in the discourse scripted by a male. This uneven, lop-sided, biased treatment forces us to brand Shakespeare as a sexist in his use of language loaded against women.

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