



Hamlet: A Discourse in Gender Marginalization

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Abstract

The sociological dimensions of literary production have been a major inquiry for critics. Literary texts emerge from specific ideological, socio-cultural, and political contexts. Writers either represent social realities or challenge dominant structures and norms. Through their works, they may attempt to create a rupture within established systems. A literary text embodies multiple layers of meaning shaped by historical and cultural forces. This research article examines gender issues in *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare from a sociological perspective. It argues that Shakespeare, as a product of his socio-cultural and political milieu, reflects and reconstructs the gendered tensions of early modern society within the play. By analyzing the representation of female characters and the dynamics of power, authority, and patriarchy, this paper seeks to uncover the socio-cultural conflicts embedded in *Hamlet*. Ultimately, the study positions the play as a significant site for understanding the intersections of literature, society, and gender marginalization.

Keywords: Structures: meaning, milieu, patriarchy, conflicts, marginalization, ideological.

Introduction

William John Shakespeare is a milestone in the world of literature. His plays and poems display his incomparable genius and craftsmanship as a playwright and poet. Literary works he produced mirror the then Elizabethan society. He portrays socio-cultural and gender politics of the period realistically. If analyzed, one finds his commitments as a writer towards societal issues. Female characters in his plays are found to be fighting against patriarchal norms set by a male-dominated society. Ophelia and Gertrude in *Hamlet*, Desdemona in *Othello*, and Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* etc. are controlled and operated by their male counterparts. They seem to have lost their subjectivity. They have been silenced. They possess innate potentials yet restricted by social norms and patriarchal power. Through these characters, Shakespeare reflects the gender inequalities of his time while also revealing the pressures placed on women to obey, remain silent, or sacrifice their desires. As a result, his plays offer powerful insights into how women were viewed, controlled, and sometimes misunderstood within early modern society.

The relation between literature and society is as old as human life and literature itself. Literature and society are deeply interconnected, with each shaping and reflecting the other in complex ways. Gender has been a very crucial issue in the literary studies. Sex is a biological concept while gender is social and cultural product. It involves politics in it. As Raymond Williams argues, "Culture, including literature, is 'a whole way of life,' inseparable from the social conditions that produce it" (Williams 4). Literary texts record the values, conflicts, and aspirations of the communities from which they

emerge, offering insight into social realities that might otherwise remain hidden. At the same time, literature challenges dominant ideologies and stimulates social awareness by presenting alternative viewpoints, a function emphasized by Terry Eagleton states: Literature reveals ideological tensions of its time (Eagleton 45). Through this dynamic exchange, literature operates both as a mirror reflecting society's truths and as a lamp that illuminates new possibilities for social change. In this way, literature contributes to the ongoing formation, critique, and transformation of society. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* discusses the fundamental causes of marginalization of woman in society. Her foundational feminist theory provides a crucial lens for understanding the construction and suppression of female identity in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Beauvoir argues "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 330). This concept is central to analyze the ways Ophelia and Gertrude are positioned within the patriarchal structures of the Danish court. Throughout the play, both characters exist not as autonomous subjects but as figures defined by male expectations, echoing Beauvoir's observation "He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (Beauvoir 26). Their limited agency demonstrates how Shakespeare's text reflects and critiques the mechanisms through which patriarchal societies create and constrain female identity. In this regard Ashraf and Khan's article *Feminism in Shakespearean Literature: Role of Women in Shakespeare's Play*, *Hamlet* explores how Shakespeare portrays women within patriarchal structures (Ashraf and Khan 51). They argue although *Hamlet* contains only two

major female characters Ophelia and Gertrude. Their roles reveal important aspects of gender inequality, social expectations, and the suppression of women's voices. The article highlights how Ophelia is shaped and controlled by the men around her like Polonius, Laertes, and Hamlet. In Act I, Scene 3 wherein Polonius instructs Ophelia: Polonius: "I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth, have you so slander any moment leisure with your young prince" (Hamlet, 39). Ophelia: "I shall obey, my lord" (Shakespeare 1.3.136). There are many instances in the play where Hamlet insults Ophelia. He considers that woman is responsible for destruction. He blames women for men's faults. This shows how women were seen as responsible for men's behavior, and how their sexuality was controlled or shamed. Hamlet's words reflect a patriarchal mindset where women are judged, silenced, and blamed for sin. Hamlet crosses all limits when he utters: "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (Shakespeare 1.2.146). This is the typical mind set of the Elizabethan society towards women. It shows that in that society a woman is considered to be weak in character and man to be very faithful and strong. This binary opposition is very evident throughout the play. This kind of negative societal approach towards women down the centuries across the world has marginalized women. Woman is projected negatively as if she is an abuse. This reflects the patriarchal belief that women are emotionally unstable, unreliable, and morally fragile. The process of gender marginalization was a universal phenomenon and this reflected in the play dominantly. William Shakespeare in his plays especially in his tragedies demonstrates.

The study ultimately shows that *Hamlet* provides valuable material for feminist literary analysis because it exposes the tensions between female agency and patriarchal power. In her essay "Hamlet's Battle with Patriarchal Gender Identity," Sarah E. Riggs argues "Hamlet's actions and anxieties are shaped by the rigid expectations of patriarchal masculinity" (Riggs 127). Riggs argues that the play presents masculinity not as a stable identity but as a role Hamlet feels pressured to perform, especially in relation to his father, Claudius, and the social demands of vengeance. She suggests that Hamlet's hesitation and emotional turmoil reflect his struggle to reconcile personal sensitivity with the aggressive, authoritative model of manhood imposed by the culture of the Danish court. According to Riggs, this tension reveals Shakespeare's critique of patriarchal values, showing how strict gender norms can damage both male selfhood and relationships with others. Ultimately, Riggs positions Hamlet's internal conflict as a broader commentary on the destructive nature of patriarchal gender identity. In *Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism*, Elaine Showalter explores "Ophelia has been historically marginalized in criticism" (Showalter 220). Showalter demonstrates that Ophelia has often been marginalized in literary criticism, treated primarily as a reflection of Hamlet's emotional crisis rather than as a character with her own psychological or social depth. She traces how patriarchal frameworks from Renaissance medical theories to modern theatrical productions have shaped perceptions of Ophelia's madness, frequently reducing her to a symbol of female fragility or erotic disorder. For Showalter, Ophelia becomes a powerful site for feminist inquiry because her silence, suffering, and fragmentation expose the ways in which female experience is erased or distorted by male-dominated interpretive traditions. She concludes that reclaiming Ophelia's voice is essential for

understanding how literature constructs—and constrains—women within patriarchal culture. *Hamlet* operates not merely as a tragedy of political corruption and psychological conflict, but also as a text that exposes the destructive impact of patriarchal ideology on female identity. Ophelia's collapse and Gertrude's misrepresentation demonstrate how patriarchal power constructs femininity as subordinate and voiceless. Shakespeare's play thus becomes a powerful site for feminist inquiry: it reveals the pressures placed upon women to conform to male-defined roles while simultaneously showing how those pressures distort, silence, and ultimately break female subjectivity. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf observes, "In imagination she is of the highest importance; in reality she is completely insignificant" (Woolf 43). Virginia Woolf in her *Shakespeare's Sister* imagines if he had a sister and if given liberty and love and societal approval as Shakespeare got, she could have been much greater and better than Shakespeare. Her sociological insights definitely question the then Elizabethan andro-centric society. This piece of literature explores the historical suppression of women's talent and creative sensibilities not only in England but throughout the world.

Conclusion

Literature projects women as submissive and men as aggressive this kind of politics is to be questioned. In connection with *Hamlet*, Shakespeare projects factual social order which favors patriarchy. It does not mean that he favors patriarchy. As a writer, he brings forth the Elizabethan ethos to the noticed of the reader. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* provides a rich terrain for examining sociological dimensions such as class, gender, and ideology. Through its portrayal of Ophelia and Gertrude, the play reveals how patriarchal systems restrict women's agency and silence their voices. At the same time, Hamlet's own crisis exposes the burden of patriarchal expectations on male identity. By engaging with the theoretical frameworks of Beauvoir, Williams, Eagleton, and contemporary feminist critics like Showalter, Ashraf, and Khan observe, "Shakespeare portrays women within patriarchal structures (Ashraf and Khan 51). Ultimately, the play underscores literature's powerful role in reflecting, questioning, and transforming social values. This research paper ultimately shows that during the Elizabethan era, women held a low and dependent status in society. They were expected to obey men, first their fathers and later their husbands. Their roles were limited to household duties, marriage, and motherhood. Education for women was minimal, and they had no political or legal rights of their own. A woman's reputation depended heavily on chastity, modesty, and obedience. Women were often seen as weak, emotional, and inferior to men, and their behavior was strictly controlled by social expectations. Public roles were restricted, and even in theatre, women could not act on stage. Overall, women lived under a strong patriarchal system that limited their freedom, choices, and opportunities.

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