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The Absence that RRESENTS: Critical Analysis of Shakespearean Woman

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ABSTRACT
This study examines, with critical insight, the gender portrayal in the plays of William Shakespeare. These plays were written under the Elizabethan patriarchal regime, in which women were legally, socially and culturally constrained; yet Shakespeare's female characters frequently possess a degree of genius, agency and emotional complexity. This study relies on the qualitative research approach that draws from the interpretive analysis of language, dialogue, and dramatic structure, particularly the construction, challenge, and/or subversion of gender roles. The research focuses on the means used by Shakespeare to achieve female empowerment through cross-dressing, wit, negotiation of social expectations and conscious enactment of femininity as well as the harshest penalties met out to women in male dominated societies. The researchers analysed the sample of six plays (including comedies and tragedies) and observed that the comedic characters use disguise as a means of asserting autonomy and influence; while the characters of the tragedies expose the perils of patriarchy. The findings indicate that Shakespearean woman is an offspring of patriarchal era where female victimization, though sometimes invisible, is pervasive in political hierarchies. The only source for salvation is combating with the male patriarchy by achieving their own stature, though in disguise. Hnece, Shakespeare's attitude towards women is complicated but progressive by adjusting the patriarchal noms of Elizabethan era and proposing for adoption of an innovative technique/strategy for survival. This research highlights the continued importance of Shakespeare's works in modern debates on gender, providing a glimpse into how literature can capture, challenge, and influence the cultural norms.

Keywords: Shakespeare, gender roles, Elizabethan era, comedies, tragedies

1. INTRODUCTION

To understand Shakespeare's plays, it is commendable to understand the world he lived in. Shakespeare wrote during heavily patriarchal era. The women of that era were not permitted to vote; they couldn't own property; they had no legal rights over their own bodies or money (Al-Wazir, 2025). It was their primary duty in life to obey their fathers; marry the man chosen for them; and then obey their husbands. Women also faced strict restrictions even in the realm of the theatre. A woman showing up on a public stage was

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illegal (Mulcahy, 2013). Because of this rule, all of the female characters in Shakespeare's plays were originally played by young boys wearing women's outfits. When Shakespeare wrote about women, he wrote elements that men performed on stage, making the study of gender roles in his plays interesting in late 1500s and early 1600s in England, a period known as the Elizabethan and Jacobean era. The historic framework was so strict that so many strong and vocal women in Shakespeare's works are seen (Makhdoom, 2025). This brings us to our main research question: Did Shakespeare support the patriarchal rules of his time, or he secretly challenge them by giving his female character's power and freedom. This research paper endeavours to address this query and examine how does Shakespeare handle women differently depending on the type of the play as comedies and tragedies.

1.1. Research Questions

1. How does Shakespeare depict women in comedies and tragedies?
2. How do the female characters engage or subvert the patriarchy of Elizabethan England?
3. Do Shakespeare's image of women portray him as a proto- feminist?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior to the development of contemporary feminist theory, early critics such as Anna Jameson (1832) saw Shakespeare's women mainly as psychological depictions, frequently separating them from the plays' structural politics. Jameson divided female characters into two categories: intellectual characters and passionate characters. The intellectual characters, such as Portia, are marked by reason, wit, and principles, with their intellect generally regulating their passions. On the other hand, the passionate female characters, such as Juliet, possess deep feelings, imagination, and unyielding devotion overriding their heads. This classification of female characters provided by Jameson is comprehensive; However, numerous dimensions of Shakespearean female characters were yet to be discovered by later critics.

As modern feminism emerged, criticism concentrated on rescuing Shakespearean female characters from misogynistic misinterpretations, emphasizing their agency, and revealing how the plays' conclusions punish or subjugate women. Dusinberre (1975), in her scholarly study 'Shakespeare and the Nature of Women', asserted that "proto-feminist" atmosphere in Shakespearean plays was shaped by the existence of a female queen (Queen Elizabeth I). Shakespeare's plays, according to her, were essentially progressive since they used drama to refute outdated medieval notions about women's inferiority. In 'Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays', Neely (1985) examined the theme of marriage in both comedies and tragedies. She contended that, although, women constantly workd to have balanced and healthy relationships, yet male erraticism, envy, and social anxiety frequently thwarted their attempts.

With the advent of psychoanalytic and historicist approaches in the 1980s and 1990s, important critical texts shifted their focus from assessing whether Shakespeare was "anti-woman" or "pro-woman" to examining how his female characters were shaped by early modern concerns about the maternal body and state power. According to Coppélia Kahn (1981), one of those female authors, Shakespearean men is seen combating emotional fragility perceiving it as "feminine" and impose their ingrained masculinity on women in their immediate vicinity. In 1992, Janet Adelman investigated the horrifying, unseen psychological burden of the "absent mother" in Shakespearean plays. She contended that

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male protagonists, who see the mother's womb as a place of contamination, bodily degradation, and castration, are motivated by a profound fear of their maternal roots.
Contemporary Queer and Intersectionist Criticism focus on the material reality of the early modern stage where young boys portrayed all female roles and the ways in which gender interacted with race, class, and empire. Shakespeare wrote exceptional roles for women, but real women were prohibited by law from performing them. This historical paradox is discussed by Dympna Callaghan (2000) who treats "womanhood" as a solely political performance created by male writers and boy actors, analyzing how the text is influenced by the physical absence of female bodies on stage. Following Callaghan's (2000) lead, the current study seeks to determine if Shakespeare upholds the patriarchal norms of his era or he subtly challenges them by granting his female characters autonomy and authority. The study is intended to get a clear picture of Shakespeare's views on gender construction for making her female characters still real and human to us even today. The goal of the study is to have a comprehensive understanding of Shakespeare's perspectives on gender creation in order to make her female characters seem genuine and relatable to us in modern era.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research approach to examine how gender is portrayed in a few of William Shakespeare's plays because qualitative research focuses on interpreting meanings, analysing social and cultural constructs, and investigating the complexity of human behaviour (Lim, 2025), especially appropriate for literary studies. Shakespeare's portrayals of masculinity, femininity, power, identity, and social expectations through his characters and dramatic tales can be thoroughly examined using a qualitative approach because gender is a socially and culturally produced notion (Butler, 1990). In order to comprehend how gender roles are created and questioned within the chosen plays, the research focuses on language, characters, conversation, and narrative development rather than depending on numerical data.

Data Collection/Sample

The researchers took a sample of six plays of Shakespeare originally written in approximately 1589 and 1613 in the era called English Renaissance, encompassing the Elizabethan era and the Jacobean era. His original scripts were posthumously published by his colleagues in the definitive 1623 First Folio. These six plays are selected following purposive sampling technique. These selected plays belong to genre of comedy and tragedy being the foundational pillars of classical drama. They represent opposite sides of the human experience: comedy moves from chaos to order; while tragedy moves from order to ruin (Burke, 1937). The number of the selected comedies and plays is not equal (2 comedies and 4 tragedies), yet this uneven selection does not interfere in the findings of this study. The objective of the study is to get insights into the views Shakespeare held for women rather than comparing comic female characters with the tragic ones in his plays. The selection of plays from both the genres is helpful for gaining a comprehensive picture of the women painted in Shakespearean plays.

Textual Analysis

This study applies Textual Analysis research method to deconstruct text and its underlying themes, messages, and symbols to understand the intentions, motivations, and

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perspectives of its creator (Arya, 2020). Moreover, close reading technique for sake of 'productive attentiveness' in textual analysis (Ohrvik, 2024) is followed. This technique of close reading focuses on both what is said in a text and how it is said. The literary work is examined in detail and systematically, taking note of words, phrases, interactions between characters, images, and dramatic situations in order to understand what a passage means. The study identifies segments revealing gender assumptions, social expectations, power dynamics and character transformations in the repeated readings of the selected plays where historical and contextual considerations can lead. Special emphasis is given to:

i. The language that both male and female characters employ
ii. The roles that men and women are allotted in society
iii. Conflicts that occur because of gender norms
iv. actions and behaviours in respect to gender norms

Close Reading also enables the researcher to discover nuances in the text, as well as analyse how Shakespeare's crafting of the dramatic elements and techniques helps to create gendered identities.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Women depiction in Comedies

4.1.1 Rosalind in *As You Like It*

The universe is frequently flipped upside down in a playful and enjoyable way in Shakespeare's comedies. Shakespeare's usage of cross-dressing, in which a female character dresses up as a man, is the most popular method to empower women in comedies. Rosalind from the play *As You Like It* (1623) is the greatest illustration of this. Rosalind is a young lady who lives in a perilous court. She learns that it is perilous for a woman to wander through the woods after her evil uncle banishes her. Beauty draws robbers more quickly than riches, according to her. She chooses to dress like a man and adopts the name "Ganymede". Rosalind's entire personality transforms as she enters the Forest of Arden dressed as a male. She becomes very chatty, self-assured, and humorous. She may talk freely without anyone ordering her to shut up because everyone believes she is a little boy. She (as Ganymede) treats Orlando, her lover, as a friend when he comes to the woodland sobbing over his love for Rosalind. She informs him that real women are complex, not flawless angels, and that men do not actually die for love. She places absolute trust in Orlando, and demonstrates to him how to be a good partner. Shakespeare shows that if society will only allow her to express herself, woman can be more intelligent and logical than man, as evidenced by Rosalind.

4.1.2 Viola in *Twelfth Night*

Viola from the play *Twelfth Night* (1623) is another excellent example of a cross-dressing woman. After a terrible shipwreck, Viola thinks her brother is dead and she is alone in a strange land called Illyria. To protect herself and get a job, she poses as a young man named Cesaris and begins working for Duke Orsino, feels trapped in this costume and calls it an evil because it causes so much confusion. The disguise enables Viola to have profound, sincere discussions with Duke Orison about love and feelings. Viola exposes that gender roles are like costumes that are played out depending on the clothes we wear, but underneath our true human feelings are exactly the same.

4.2 Women Depiction in Tragedies

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4.2.1 Ophelia in *Hamlet*

When we shift our focus from comedies to Shakespeare's tragedies, the atmosphere transforms entirely as the funny masks are gone. These losses show how dangerous a male dominated society can be for a powerless woman. The saddest illustration of this is Ophelia in *Hamlet* (1623). Ophelia is a young, innocent girl who has no control over herself. She is surrounded by influential men - her father Polonius, her brother Laertes and the man she loves Prince Hamlet. Each of these men controls her behaviour. Her brother tells her to preserve her virginity, and her father tells her to stop speaking to Hamlet. But Ophelia does not object; she merely replies, "I shall obey, my lord" (Act I, Scene, III: 132). She has to make herself feel nothing, merely to please the men around her. Ophelia mistreats Hamlet severely when he starts acting crazily. He yells at her; tells her that she is lying and sends her to a convent. Ophelia is completely confused and saddened. Later, Hamlet mistakenly slays her father, Polonius. As Ophelia has never been allowed to think for herself or stand on her own. She is unable to cope with the absence of her father and lover. She goes crazy, roams around singing some strange songs and eventually ends up in a river and drowns. Shakespeare's plea for Ophelia's situation is be a woman entirely silent and subservient to her husband is conveyed vehemently.

4.2.2 Desdemona in *Othello*

In the play *Othello* (1622), Desdemona emerges as another tragic casualty of male dominance and envy. At the outset, she exhibits considerable bravery. She falls for Othello, a valiant African general, and elopes with him, defying her father's wishes. When her father reacts with anger, she boldly addresses the city's leaders, confidently defending her love for Othello. But once the story moves to a remote military island, Desdemona loses her power. The villain Iago hates Othello and decides to ruin him by telling a whopper of a lie. He tells Othello that Desdemona is unfaithful to him with a young soldier named Cassio. In Elizabethan times, a man's entire honour was a wife's purity. Othello believes in the lies of Iago because he is insecure about his race and age. Othello turns into a jealous monster. Desdemona is innocent but she is a good and loyal wife. She tries to be sweet and patient with her angry husband being unaware that her innocence can't protect her from a man who believes that he authorizes all her rights. In the final Act, Othello finds Desdemona in their bedroom and suffocates her to death with a pillow. Even in dying, when someone asks her who hurt her, she tries to protect her husband and claims she did it herself. Shakespeare shows us, through Desdemona, how in a male-dominated culture, love can be a dangerous form of ownership where an innocent woman can be killed based on a rumour.

4.2.3 Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*

Shakespeare also examined the effects of a woman's refusal to be a victim and her active search for political power. The most famous character to do this is Lady Macbeth, in the play *Macbeth* (1623). Lady Macbeth is a very ambitious woman. She hears a prophecy that her husband will be king and she would kill the current King, Duncan, straight off. Nevertheless, she recognizes that societal norms dictate that, as a woman, she should embody qualities such as softness, gentleness, and kindness. She worries that these feminine characteristics might prevent her from taking the decisive actions needed to secure her position on the throne. As a result, she recites a famous prayer, imploring the spirits to strip her of her femininity. She wishes to have her compassionate nature

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replaced with a more ruthless disposition. Lady Macbeth assumes complete authority over her marriage. When Macbeth is overwhelmed by guilt and fear and hesitates to commit murder, she derides him as a coward and questions his manhood. She insists that he can only be considered a true man if he follows through with the act of killing. At first, her plan works and they become the King and Queen. However, Shakespeare shows that it has serious repercussions when one suppresses their innate nature. Finally, the guilt of the murder gets to her. She starts to lose her reason; she sleeps, walks and repeatedly tries to wash away blood from her hands, saying, "Out, damned spot!" (Act V, Scene I: 27). Finally, due to her madness, she ends her own life. In this character, Shakespeare shows that women can be as strong and ruthless as men but when they rebel against God's moral system, they have gone absolutely insane.

4.2.4 Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra*

In contrast to Lady Macbeth who had to pretend to be a male in order to gain power, Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* (1623) uses her femininity to control a whole empire. The Queen of Egypt, Cleopatra, is portrayed as a woman of extraordinary charm, wisdom, and beauty. Cleopatra is seen by the Roman authorities as a serious menace. They believe she has destroyed their great general, Mark Anthony, by making him a helpless lover who disregards his military responsibilities. According to the Romans, women are merely a diversion and males should be rational, cold, and warlike. Cleopatra is adamantly against this notion. She uses her charisma, political savvy, and theatrical disposition to subdue Antony and defend her nation against the Roman Empire. Cleopatra will not allow a man to defeat her, even if she loses the war against Rome. She arranges her own spectacular demise rather than being apprehended and humiliated by Octavius Caesar, the next Roman emperor. She dons her crown, dons her regal robes, and allows a venomous snake to bite her. She passes away with the appearance of a strong, independent queen. One of Shakespeare's most sophisticated female characters is Cleopatra who demonstrates that a woman can have great political authority without acting like a man.

Themes emerged from Women Characters

The close reading analysis of the texts of the six selected plays of Shakespeare lead us to discover some threads on the basis of which the text is woven. These are the following threads:

i. Freedom through Disguise

Shakespeare’s usage of cross-dressing, in which a female character dresses up as a man, is the most popular method to empower women in comedies. Cross-dressing bypasses the societal restrictions placed on women in Elizabethan England. By disguising themselves as men, these female characters gain freedom, intelligence, and agency, allowing them to manipulate their own destinies and outsmart the men around them.

ii. Masculinity and Political Power

women adopt typically male behaviours when seeking political power. The female characters defy gender norms by being bold and ambitious leaders having political influence rejecting conventional femininity.

iii. Depression/anxiety for fleeing from patriarchal oppression

This theme accentuates the role of the patriarchal system that frequently puts women in precarious situations where their reputations are left to male judgment and where a woman's identity is dependent on it.

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iv. Female Victimisation

The theme of victimization is about how innocent women are affected by the male authority, suspicion and jealousy. Shakespeare frequently paints a picture of women who have been hurt due to men trying to control their sex, actions and reputations. Consequently, women's voices are not heard due to insecurity and possessiveness of men.

5. CONCLUSION

Shakespearean plays provide us with a profound understanding of the female characters as portrayed in Elizabethan era and Jacobean era. His portrayal of female characters remains a subject of ongoing exploration. Their eminence drove the feminists to view their struggle for agency a cause for labelling them complex identities and experiences. The deep analysis of the six comic and tragic plays reflects that Shakespeare portrays two distinct categories of women: one characterised by submissiveness, obedience, and morality, and the other by independence, dominance, and autonomy. This analysis leads to reinterpretations allowing contemporary audiences to value female characters' intricate nature. Overall, the views held by William Shakespeare on gender can be described as exceedingly complex unable to be expressed in one word. He often proves in his plays that there is much more behind women than people get at the time; yet at the same time, he caters for an audience that considered women second-class citizens. His tragedies depict the terrible reality of his world punishing females for their ambitions and desires. The story of Lady Macbeth illustrates the mental collapse that occurs when a woman attempts to use violence to attain power; while the murders of Ophelia and Desdemona demonstrate how a male-dominated system crushes innocent and silent women. Finally, Cleopatra serves as an example of a strong, independent woman in power facing a tragic end. The question set in the beginning of this study 'whether Shakespeare supported the patriarchal rules of his time, or he secretly challenged them by giving his female character power and freedom' has got answer as Shakespearean female characters are not portrayed dull or flat remining inactive through the plays; rather they are full of life, exuberant, and enthusiastic demonstrating that gender is more complex than a straightforward biological principle. It is evident that Shakespearean woman is an offspring of patriarchal era where female victimization, though sometimes invisible, is pervasive in political hierarchies. The only source for salvation is combating with the male patriarchy by achieving their own stature, though in disguise. Hnece, Shakespeare's attitude towards women is complicated but progressive by adjusting the patriarchal noms of Elizabethan era and proposing for adoption of an innovative technique/strategy for survival. He questioned the conventional wisdom of the Renaissance by developing female characters with profound emotions, deep thoughts, and keen intelligence. If his ambitious female characters suffer from tragic end, the female characters in comedies achieve pinnacle getting at the same stature equal to men. To sum up, it can be concluded that Shakespeare conveyed a universal truth that both men and women are complex human beings deserving of recognition.

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