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Silenced Women and Male Authority: Gender, Power, and Misogyny in *Hamlet*

Adheena S
Assistant professor (Guest faculty), Department of English, Sanatana Dharma College, Alappuzha, University of Kerala

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Abstract:

William Shakespeare's Hamlet is frequently examined by the themes of revenge, madness, mortality, political corruption and moral ambiguity. But the play also offers a complex web of gender relations in which women are located within structures of male authority, surveillance, obedience and sexual judgment. This paper examines the portrayal of women in Hamlet with special reference to Gertrude and Ophelia. It explores, through a feminist reading, the way in which patriarchal authority operates through language, family relationships, sexuality, obedience and the control of women's voices. Hamlet's treatment of Gertrude and Ophelia is particularly important because his personal disillusionment with his mother takes on the form of a generalized condemnation of women. His claim "Frailty, thy name is woman!" turns a personal grievance into a judgment on female nature (Shakespeare 1.2). Similarly, his treatment of Ophelia in the 'nunnery' scene shows how female sexuality is open to male suspicion and regulation. Ophelia's relationship with Polonius, Laertes, and Hamlet also demonstrates the male direction of her choices. Gertrude, in addition to occupying the social power position of queen, also functioned within a male-dominated political and domestic order. Ophelia's madness and death are also seen as moments when a controlled female voice becomes partly freed from conventional forms of obedience. This study, using feminist criticism, particularly the works of Elaine Showalter and Judith Butler, argues that Hamlet presents women as being both trapped in patriarchal structures and able to reveal the instability of those structures. The tragedy thus offers important opportunities for studying misogyny, female agency, silence, sexuality, and gendered power

Keywords: Hamlet; Feminist Criticism; Patriarchal Authority; Female Agency; Gender and Power.

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Introduction

William Shakespeare's Hamlet is a major text in English literary studies and deals with complex issues of revenge, political power, madness, death, morality and human uncertainty. Written about the start of the 17th century, the tragedy is about Prince Hamlet's attempts to revenge the murder of his father, the previous King of Denmark. Thus, the main action is dominated by male characters: Hamlet, Claudius, Polonius, Laertes, Horatio, Fortinbras and the Ghost of Hamlet's father. Similarly, the political world of Elsinore is largely structured around male authority. Two major female characters, Gertrude and Ophelia, are set against this male-centered structure. Both women are vital to the development of the tragedy, but men around them continually silence their voices and restrict their choices.

In view of this, a feminist interpretation of the play Hamlet poses interesting queries regarding the connections between gender and power. Who gets the permission to speak? Who gets the power to interpret things? Who gets the power to control the behavior of women? How do they depict female sexuality? What if women don't meet the requirements made by society from them? All the above-mentioned questions assume great significance in context of the way Hamlet treats the women in the play. His statement, "Frailty, thy name is woman!", is not merely a sign of his grief over the remarriage of his mother. Rather, it signifies the disappointment he felt at his mother into an attack on women as a group in general (Shakespeare 1.2).

"Misogyny," on the other hand, generally means hostility, contempt, bias, or highly negative beliefs about women. Nonetheless, it needs to be clarified whether it is misogynistic beliefs of the characters that are in question or Shakespeare being misogynistic. Literature is capable of depicting oppressive notions without necessarily approving of them. Therefore, Hamlet may be analyzed as a dramatic arena where patriarchy is portrayed and criticized through its repercussions.

It is especially significant due to the fact that this reveals the connection between silence and power. Even though Gertrude is a queen, she is defined in terms of the male figures in her life; she is the widow of King Hamlet, she is married to Claudius, and she is the mother of Hamlet. The same pattern can be seen for Ophelia who is surrounded by male figures as well; she is the daughter of Polonius, the sister of Laertes, and the lover of Hamlet. Her wishes are continually sacrificed for the sake of her father, her brother, her lover, and her king.

According to Kang Kim, Gertrude and Ophelia conform to the traditional norms of the Renaissance period when women were supposed to obey their husbands and fathers.
The feminist approach taken by Elaine Showalter is especially helpful for the purpose of this research. Showalter states that in the history of Ophelia's character, there has always been an approach according to which the significance of Ophelia is determined by the relationship

of Ophelia with Hamlet and not by her own experience. According to Showalter, feminism should challenge this approach and consider the cultural significance of Ophelia as a woman (77-94).

The notion of gender performativity proposed by Judith Butler can be another relevant theoretical framework. According to Butler, gender is not some kind of innate identity, but a set of repetitive social practices and norms (Butler). In terms of this concept, the behaviour required of Gertrude and Ophelia in the play (obedience, modesty, sexual repressiveness, mourning, silence, and submission) could be regarded as performative roles expected of them by their social surroundings.

In accordance with the ideas put forward above, this essay suggests that Hamlet demonstrates the gender structure in which male dominance controls the women's sexual behaviour and actions and deprives them of the freedom of speech and action. Nevertheless, the depiction of Gertrude and Ophelia by Shakespeare is not just an illustration of this confrontation. Gertrude shows signs of political consciousness and independence, while the madness of Ophelia gives her an opportunity to express herself in a certain way. However, the final exclusion and death of both of them proves the disastrous effects of the patriarchal order, which does not provide women with enough legal agency.

1. Patriarchal Power and the Gendered World of Hamlet

The world of Hamlet is hierarchical. Authority is mainly with men, while the identities of women are defined through their relations with men. For example, Claudius rules the kingdom in place of King Hamlet who is dead. Polonius rules his house and tries to control his daughter's affair with Hamlet. Laertes takes the role of a protecting brother. Even Hamlet is ready to pass judgment on women's morality.

It starts with the very first scene. Gertrude is presented as a Queen of Denmark; however, her position is complicated with the fact that she is married to Claudius, and her remarriage is the main reason of Hamlet's indignation. In other words, instead of regarding Gertrude's decision as a personal or political one, Hamlet sees it in the light of a woman's sexual morality.

And here is how Hamlet reacts: "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (Shakespeare 1.2)

It is interesting how his statement evolves. Hamlet talks about Gertrude at first, but then quickly turns this particular case into the statement about "woman." It is interesting how the structure of the phrase works. "Woman" becomes "frailty," which makes a specific woman's decision into a general characteristic of female nature.

It is one of the most prominent instances of misogyny in the play. Instead of accepting Gertrude as a person whose reasons can be quite different from Hamlet's ones, he constructs her as an embodiment of the flawed female nature.

There was recently a feminist research on this issue. The authors identify Hamlet's attitude towards Gertrude and Ophelia as one of the most productive ways to discuss the question of gendered power and misogyny in the play (Sajid *et al*.).

It is supported by the political structure of Elsinore. Women lack any independent power; even Gertrude, who is Queen of Denmark, gets this title due to her marriage. And her position changes with the change of the king.

2. Gertrude: Motherhood, Sexual Power and Male Criticism

Gertrude is probably one of the most controversial characters in the plays by Shakespeare. The marriage of Gertrude to Claudius is regarded as betrayal by Hamlet in relation to his dead father.

The first soliloquy is full of negative associations and the image of the shoes in particular makes Hamlet say:

"A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father's body..." (Shakespeare 1.2)

It means that Gertrude had just finished the ritual mourning period before getting married again. This quickness of action shows Hamlet's attitude as Gertrude is seen in a very negative light by Hamlet who thinks that she was too fast in her decisions.

Sexual and degraded language is used by Hamlet during the confrontation with Gertrude. Hamlet speaks about differences between his mother's relationships with Claudius and her previous marriage and he expects Gertrude to see the moral distinctions between these two characters.

Confrontation scene is very important because the attempt of Hamlet to manipulate his mother's view on her sexual life shows how powerful patriarchy can be. Even though Gertrude is not physically constrained, her sexuality is under constant surveillance and criticism.

However, a feminist analysis cannot turn Gertrude into a passive victim of the patriarchal world. It is possible to see that Gertrude can criticize her son. During the confrontation Gertrude asks Hamlet to stop his insults and it can be said that her answers show that she is not without power at all. In addition, she takes part in politics being queen and is present at the most significant moments of activity in the royal court.

The complexity of Gertrude is very important because although her actions can be criticized in the play it is possible to understand how differently actions of men and women are perceived. For example, Claudius gets married to his brother's widow and becomes king, but Hamlet's strongest sexual criticism is directed to Gertrude.

This double standard shows that female sexuality is more dangerous than male one and male sexuality is political as well.

3. "Frailty, Thy Name Is Woman": Individual Anger at Woman to Disrespectful Generalization about Women

The expression "Frailty, thy name is woman" used by Hamlet requires a closer look since it is possible to see the way in which the process of the construction of misogyny occurs.

In fact, Hamlet does not say that Gertrude's behaviour is weak. He says: "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (Shakespeare 1.2).

This sentence associates femininity with frailty and makes the word "woman" almost synonymous with "frailty". Thus, Hamlet goes beyond individual criticism and makes a generalization that involves an entire gender.

This generalization can be seen in Hamlet's attitude to Ophelia since the impression of Hamlet caused by his mother affects him generally and makes him think that Ophelia has the same moral qualities as his mother.

It is particularly noticeable in the "nunnery scene" when Hamlet says to Ophelia: "Get thee to a nunnery." (Shakespeare 3.1).

Since the word "nunnery" could mean both a convent and sexual intercourse, the language of Hamlet works in the field of religion, sexuality and insult simultaneously.

Hamlet's behaviour shows his doubts regarding the sexuality of women because he suggests to Ophelia that she cannot rely on marriage because women deceive and corrupt men. He asks: "Are you honest?" (Shakespeare 3.1).

It is important because the term "honest" can have sexual meaning too, so the sexual reputation of Ophelia becomes the subject of interrogation.

This scene shows how the male authority defines the identity of woman through language because Hamlet does not let Ophelia defend herself. His speech predominates in the conversation whereas her replies are very short.

It is possible to use Showalter's analysis of Ophelia because she draws the connection between femininity, sexuality, representation and silence in relation to the position of Ophelia in the play.

4. Ophelia and the Question of Obedience

Ophelia's tragedy is wholly linked to the expectations of obedience which were imposed on her; in fact, she was already under control by both her father and her brother before Hamlet rejected her.

Laertes cautions Ophelia not to believe Hamlet's promises; although his advice appears to be protective, it in fact sets up a situation where her romantic decisions are open to being supervised by men.

He says that since Hamlet's position has been taken up, he is not necessarily free to choose his own wife. Ophelia is therefore to understand her relationship with Hamlet in light of the political and social expectations that surround him.

Polonius goes a step further by questioning Ophelia regarding Hamlet's behaviour and instructing her to shun him. Ophelia replies: "I shall obey, my lord." (Shakespeare 1.3)

The line is short but its importance is great; Ophelia's obedience becomes incorporated into the social system which regulates her life.

She doesn't openly rebel against Polonius and instead submits to her father, which is exactly the kind of behaviour expected of daughters in a patriarchal home.

Kim's examination of the characters of Gertrude and Ophelia contends that these characters are influenced by the traditional roles assigned to women, namely that Gertrude is expected to act as a wife and Ophelia is expected to function as an obedient daughter (Kim 197–223).

Ophelia's problem is therefore not merely that individual men mistreat her; her tragedy arises out of a wider structure in which obedience is regarded as a virtue for women.

5. Female sexuality and male surveillance

Female sexuality is one of the main concerns in Hamlet; Hamlet criticises Gertrude's sexuality while Polonius, Laertes, Hamlet and Claudius keep an eye on Ophelia's.

The fact that surveillance is carried out repeatedly implies that women's bodies and desires are seen as things which should be under male control.

In Ophelia's situation, Polonius sees her relationship with Hamlet as a threat to her virginity and to the family's honour; Laertes also cautions her regarding the dangers of becoming involved romantically.

Hamlet, on the other hand, turns his concern into open hostility; he links women with sexual corruption and constantly accuses Ophelia of dishonesty.

This is important since those who control Ophelia say that they are looking after her; patriarchal authority often appears in the form of protection, such as the father looking after his daughter, the brother looking after his sister, the lover asserting that he understands female sexuality, and the king protecting the state. Protection can likewise be used as a means of control.

In feminist criticism the difference between protection and control becomes especially significant since women can be denied agency in the guise of keeping their safety, honour, purity, or social reputation.

It is Butler's theory of gender performativity that helps to explain this kind of structure. Gender norms gain power when people carry out behaviours which are expected by society repeatedly. In Hamlet, femininity is constantly linked with obedience, modesty, chastity, mourning, and silence. The social system thus encourages conformity and penalises deviation (Butler).

6**. Gertrude and the Issue of Women's Agency**

Even though Gertrude is frequently seen as passive, a more careful analysis shows that she has instances of taking initiative.

She is seen in a political capacity throughout the play; she takes part in court activities and can talk to both Claudius and Hamlet. She is also capable of drawing her own conclusions about events.

The scene in which she is in the closet is especially significant. Although Hamlet tries to impose his view of her marriage on her, Gertrude does not stay completely quiet, and the way she responds indicates that his accusations have had an effect on her.

It can therefore be seen as a clash between two kinds of authority—that is, Hamlet's moral authority regarding his mother and Gertrude's authority in relation to her own experience.

Gertrude's importance becomes even more complicated since Shakespeare gives no detailed account of her motives. It is impossible for the audience to be certain about the reason why she married Claudius so quickly. Hamlet's version is influential because he has such control over the dramatic language associated with her, but his version does not necessarily represent objective truth.

This point is important since Hamlet's hatred of women is in part based on the way he interprets them.

It is reasonable to expect him to be angry given both his sorrow and his feeling of being betrayed, but the fact that his emotion is understandable does not mean that his generalisations about women are valid.

As a result, the play encourages readers to tell the difference between Hamlet's view of women and women in reality.

7. Ophelia's Silence

One of the key aspects of Ophelia's character is silence.

In the first few acts Ophelia speaks rather less than Hamlet and the other male characters. Her conversations are often preceded by instructions from men, for it is Polonius who speaks to her, Laertes who gives her advice, and Hamlet who questions and insults her.

This shows a significant difference between the way men and women speak.

Soliloquies are given to Hamlet through which he is able to express his private thoughts. The audience is given direct access to his mind. Ophelia, on the other hand, is not given a similar extended interior monologue.

This difference is of great structural significance since Hamlet is able to address the audience directly while Ophelia is mostly interpreted by other people.

Showalter notes that Ophelia's cultural image has frequently been shaped by interpretations which make her significant mainly in relation to Hamlet (Showalter 77–94).

Her silence therefore exists at two levels:

1. In the play, men frequently take control of the conversation.
2. In the history of critical interpretation Ophelia has frequently been seen as a reflection of Hamlet rather than as a figure in her own right.

A feminist approach seeks to reverse the process by examining what Ophelia's experiences tell us about the society in which she lives.

8. Madness as an Alternative Voice for Women

Ophelia's madness is a dramatic change in the way she relates to language.

Ophelia uses formal language, the kind expected of a daughter, so long as she is obedient and under social control. But when she goes mad, her speech becomes fragmented, symbolic, lyrical and unpredictable.

Strange as it may seem, this apparent lack of reason actually provides her with more freedom of expression.

The songs that she sings deal with death, sexuality, betrayal, and unfulfilled love; likewise, her language is no longer in the same way under control as it once was by Polonius, Laertes, or Hamlet.

The play Hamlet by Shakespeare offers a complicated depiction of gender, power, and misogyny. It is characterised by male authority, and both Gertrude and Ophelia are in situations where their behaviour is constantly regulated, interpreted and judged by men. The remark Hamlet makes — "Frailty, thy name is woman!" — is a clear instance of the way in which personal disappointment leads to broad generalisations about women (Shakespeare 1.2). His treatment of Gertrude shows the gendered control of female sexuality, and his

treatment of Ophelia illustrates how misogyny interacts with romantic relationships, chastity and male authority.

Ophelia's position in relation to both Polonius and Laertes shows once again the limitations placed on women by the patriarchal structure of the family. The fact that she constantly obeys proves that femininity is based on submission and on maintaining social respectability. It is different, though, when she becomes mad; for once she is no longer able—or does not want to—carry out the usual expectations of femininity, she gains a peculiar kind of expressive freedom, and it is through her songs and flowers that she is able to express her grief, sexuality, memory and sense of betrayal in ways which conventional social language had forbidden.
Gertrude does just as much to challenge a straightforward view of women as being powerless. Even though she is subjected to Hamlet's moral and sexual criticism, she has political status and there are instances of her speaking independently. The way she is portrayed shows that female agency can exist within patriarchal systems even if those systems limit the choices open to women.

A feminist interpretation thus shows that the misogyny in Hamlet is not merely made up of isolated insults; rather it functions within a wider system of expectations regarding female sexuality, obedience, marriage, family honour, and emotional behaviour. Although men are also bound by gender norms, this is illustrated by Laertes' way of linking emotional vulnerability with femininity and by Hamlet's constant difficulty with action, masculinity, and emotional control.

It is still relevant to distinguish between the way Shakespeare portrays misogyny and his own personal beliefs. The fact that misogynistic language appears in the play does not mean that Shakespeare accepted those views. On the contrary, the tragedy may be seen as illustrating a society in which patriarchal beliefs lead to suffering and a lack of understanding. Gertrude and Ophelia show the effects of a social system in which women's voices are suppressed and their identities are often determined by men.

The women in Hamlet are at the same time seen and kept silent. Gertrude is a queen whose sexuality is judged by her son, and Ophelia is a young woman whose identity is shaped by her relationships with her father, brother, and lover. The way their lives are portrayed shows that power is not exercised only by means of physical or political authority but also through language, interpretation, surveillance, and the control of representation. When Hamlet is read through the lens of feminist theory the emphasis is shifted from the tragedy of the Prince alone to the gendered structures that influence the lives of the women surrounding him.

The fact that Gertrude and Ophelia experience suffering or die is not the whole story; rather, it is due to the fact that the social environment of Hamlet offers them very few

legitimate means of defining who they are. The fact that they remain silent, obey, have sexual relationships, go mad, and die shows how unstable and costly it is for a patriarchal system to claim authority over women's bodies and voices. Hence, by adopting a feminist interpretation, these characters can be seen not simply as minor figures in the tragedy of Hamlet but as essential elements through which Shakespeare's play examines the connection between gender, power, authority, and human vulnerability.

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