

William Shakespeare: Feminist Strains

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Abstract

In the Elizabethan era women faced huge barriers in their path to asserting their individual identities in society. This trend of an oppressive patriarchal society inhabited by 'correctly' submissive women was reflected in literature of that time.

Feminism is much later idea than Shakespearean time. Feminism is very recent movement that encourage women in every sector of their life. Feminism is not just about being women. It is about political movements, ideologies and beliefs that establish every rights for women. It seeks the opportunities of equal rights. It is really not easy to mention Shakespeare as a feminist writer in terms of writing Shakespeare in that sense can be looked at as an author who was way ahead of his times.

This thesis argues that while Shakespearean plays mirror his contemporary society, they also take a step forward and talk about powerful women asserting their position in society very cleverly. Shakespeare portrays strong women in such way that they do not seem to be in conflict with the values of that era

This paper will explore how Shakespearean plays have noticeable feminist influences. Different feminist theories will be used to make a strong argument. The focus will be on three selected texts, namely, *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *As You Like It*.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Women are seen as an equal and serviceable asset in today's world. With the growth and expansion of civilization, women gain the authority and the capability to exceed the boundaries that once restricted to them. Women are now able to explore their own identity in the society. In contrast to present time, the scenario of Elizabethan women was different. That era was marked by the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603). That era was considered as a golden era because it was the witness of expanding music, literature and poetry. Though that era was enriched in many sectors, women's position was very vulnerable. The throne of Elizabethan England was conquered by an unmarried woman but it did not light up women's future. Elizabethan society had restricted expectation and action towards women. Women were not allowed to go to school or to university. Even women from the upper classes had limited opportunities. They only can be tutored with the knowledge of ancient language, ancient literature, mathematics, classics etc. But this knowledge did not permit them to explore the outside world or their career. Even women had no legal right like voting. An Elizabethan woman always ran up against the one unchallengeable fact that she is a woman. All Elizabethan women had a common path of life and that was marriage. This marriage leads them to run the household and helped their husband in whatever they did. The traditional belief was that women could only be fulfilled by marriage and motherhood. However, from Peter Reynolds's book *As You Like It: A Dramatic Commentary* we get to know that, "In Shakespeare's England, women did ultimately have the right to refuse a marriage, but they had little practical alternative other than to live a life of seclusion in a convent or at home" (90). This statement clears that refusing marriage was a worst option than marriage. So the narrow image of patriarchal society always controls the flow of women's position, power

and identity. Lois Tyson points out in her book *Critical Theory Today* that, “Patriarchy is thus, by definition, *sexist*, which means it promotes that belief that women are innately inferior to men” (85). The presence of patriarchy presents women as a weaker sex. Weaker is not just in term of physically but also mentally. Kate Millett explained this passivity as, “patriarchy has colonized women's minds by cultivating stereotypically feminine thought and behavior in them” (49). The systems, moral values and religion were the pillars of that society which were in the favor of the patriarch. Thus, Elizabethan women never went beyond these images of patriarch.

William Shakespeare is the most recognized writer in English literature and the most prominent writer of Elizabethan era. He was born on April 23, 1564. It was just six years later the Elizabethan era started under Queen Elizabeth I. This thesis paper is totally based on William Shakespeare’s plays which were written in this particular era. *Merchant Of Venice* was written in between 1596-98. Again *As You Like It* was written in 1599 and *Twelfth Night* was around 1601-02. So, it is quite clear that William Shakespeare’s writing should be influenced by the social customs of Elizabethan Era like other writers. His tragedies and romantics have men influences but comedies are different. He showed respect to the values of Elizabethan Era where he also placed his heroines on the high point to control the flow of the plays. They achieve the heroic quality through their actions, intelligence and mental power. In this way William Shakespeare challenges the traditional image of a hero. Mills Perry suggested that Shakespeare’s comedies provide new avenues to consider from a feminist perspective. He said, “Shakespeare’s comedies hold a special curiosity for feminist critics. Unlike the tragedies or Histories, women characters have the major parts, and speak as many words as men. They are witty and intelligent...and their actions powerfully influence or direct the development of plot (97)”. William Shakespeare took one step forward through his writing for women’s betterment.

“A feminist is anyone who recognizes the equality and full humanity of women and men” (Steinem, 1). Perhaps there are no better words to explain ‘feminism’ in a simple way. Now-a-days feminism is much common term to understand. It is one of the most remarkable movements from early 20th century to now on. If we look four hundred years back, the idea of feminism was beyond our expectation. The time when women were not a piece to recognized, women protection was hard to believe. Feminism is not any unique concept of movement. It is mixture of many ideas, beliefs, motives etc. “The dictionary definition of the word “feminism” is: the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities and the theory of the political, economic and social equality of the sexes” (Steinem, 1). “Simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (Hooks, 1). So, for feminism one can provide the ideas in a way that prefer to their way of thinking. Feminism is very recent movement that encourages women in every sector of their life. Feminism is not just about being women. It is about political movements, ideologies and beliefs that establish every right for women. It seeks the opportunities of equal rights. Feminism is a new century movement. Now-a-days, feminism is a common aspect for women. “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (Beauvoir, 276). The famous feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir explained a woman in such way which presents the barrier and difference towards a woman from her birth. Different feminist theories are developed based on different feminist movements. These movements are concerned with the issues of gender equality, social and political. Feminism is very much modern movement. These ideas were not much useful till 1970. On other hand these ideas came into light much earlier but not in an effective way. Simone de Beauvior was a prominent writer of 15th century.

Feminists and scholars have divided the feminist movement’s history into three “waves”. First feminism wave refers the period of feminist activity during the nineteenth century and early

twentieth century. Different feminist writers like Voltairine de Cleyre and Margaret Sanger were active for female's sexuality, reproductive and economic. Political rights also came into light. The second wave feminism is followed by the period of early 1960s to late 1980s. It sustained the issues of first wave largely. This wave was concerned about all the inequality in every sector. It was like ending discrimination. The scholar Estelle Freedman compared these two waves. "The first wave focused on rights such as suffrage, whereas the second wave was largely concerned with other issues of equality, such as ending discrimination" (Freedman, 274). The famous book *The Second Sex* by the famous feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir belongs to this wave. This book gives a bigger perspective of feminism. *The Feminine Mystique* is a work of this wave. The third wave feminism started at early 1990s. This wave works on the failure issues of second wave. This wave takes challenges to explore and establish proper rights for all classes' women. Feminist theories are the extension of all the aspects of feminism. It varies from different disciplines including anthropology, sociology, art, physiology, women's studies, criticism, philosophy etc. These theories have the aim to make people understand the social position, rights and gender inequality towards women. Despite of social barrier and criticism these theories open different views. Throughout these years many movements and ideologies have been established.

Different Feminist Theories

There are many feminist theories that enrich the values of feminist movement. Anarcha-feminism is about the social view of patriarchy. This theory believes that the struggle against patriarchy is always a barrier for women. They have hired it. The morals of patriarchy or patriarchal society do not allow women to gain the rights properly.

Socialist feminism refers that inequality stands in both domestic level and workplace. This feminism sees every level of works like prostitution, corporate works, domestic levels, marriage or childcare; are essential for women. The value of their works was discouraged by patriarchal system of the society. It effects not as an individual but as a whole society. Marxist feminism points out if the class affliction has finished, gender discrimination will vanish also. This idea is not much relevant to socialist feminism. According to socialist feminism class affliction and gender inequality are two different issues to concern.

Radical feminism explores the view of male dominance society. It believes that patriarchal society has the power of male authority and society has gain it through hierarchy. Radical feminists feel as long this dominating patriarchal system and its power structure are in the society, women's position and values will be inconsiderable. This feminism believes that society needs to reform in a significant way to establish women's position. Many radical feminists do not want to find any alternative rather than just reconstructing the society. Separatist feminism is a form of radical feminism. It believes that male dominated society cannot offer a better contribution to women's life. This feminism feels the relation between a man and women is unresolvable. "Separation of various sorts or modes from men and from institutions, relationships, roles and activities that are male-defined, male-dominated, and operating for the benefit of males and the maintenance of male privilege – this separation being initiated or maintained, at will, by women" (Frye, 189). Liberal feminism is an individualistic form of feminism. It shows the inequality between genders through political and legal form. It believes that every woman has their own potential power and she can make her own place by her deeds and actions. It claims that the interaction between man and woman are equal to build up a society. Women have the power and courage to explore their qualities to remove inequality from

the society without changing the structure of the society. Black and post-colonial feminism both argue that the gender inequality are related to colonial experience, sexism, class and ethnic oppression and racism. These issues are inter-connected to each other. It argues against the idea of gender oppression is a major face of patriarchy. It compares the moral difference between non-western and western women. Stand point and multiracial feminists also support the idea of black and post-colonial feminism.

While reading these three particular plays, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, I found Portia, Viola and Rosalind as a feminist character. Though the idea of feminism is far away from Elizabethan time, these heroines bear feminist elements. The thesis paper will present the feminist sight of William Shakespeare. In Shakespearean time female were not allowed to work as an actor. A female can be a real hero, was an illusion of Elizabethan people. Shakespeare has portrayed the strong side from this 'weaker sex'. This whole paper will argue that Shakespeare's plays give us a scope to have an understanding of how the society was still not an equal place for women. This thesis paper will totally focus on bringing out the feminist qualities of William Shakespeare's writing. Without being a feminist writer, how William Shakespeare explores the ideas to put women in a high standard. Different feminist theories can be related to his works. This paper is divided into five chapters to explain Shakespeare's view towards women. Each chapter will explore new ideas of Shakespeare's writing.

Chapter Two

Feminist Aspects in Shakespeare's Writing

This thesis paper is working with three Shakespearean Comedies where the three strong female characters Portia, Viola and Rosalind hold the flow of the plays. It is not easy to take stand for William Shakespeare as a feminist writer but the characters contain the ideas of feminist theories. While reading these plays, it comes into point that every character has some common background and problems. The three characters share same floor as they belong to noble and royal family. Portia from *The Merchant of Venice* is the daughter of a rich Venetian noble man who has arranged a casket game to marry his daughter off before his death. Viola is the daughter of another noble man whose death unleashes predicament to his daughter and Rosalind is the daughter of the Duke senior who is usurped and banished from his own court. Every character portrays the actual condition of Elizabethan's women. At the same time they stand as a strong character.

Portia as Balthazar in *Merchant Of Venice*

The Merchant of Venice is a perfect example of male dominated society. Every male character is much involved to one another. The main conflict of the play is between Shylock and Antonio. Portia is only a female character who has some influence in the play. She is less talked or considered in the play. Rob Smith in his critical analysis of the play stated that, "The Merchant of Venice reflects the subordinate position of women in Elizabethan England" (70). From the play we come to know about Portia who belongs to a rich family. Her father is not alive. She is the head of the house and takes decisions to run her family. But in her own life is controlled by her dead father. Her father made a marriage agreement and she is abide by the values and doctrines given by her father. She loves Bassanio but cannot brake her barrier. Her

nameless father is controlling her. We find Portia uttering her true state to Nerissa that, "... yet a maiden hath no tongue, but thought" (III.ii.8). This line shows that Portia is aware of the truth which she is learning from her childhood. A woman can have courage and wisdom but she is not permitted to express them. Her fate is farmed by her father and she gives proper respect and importance to her father's will regarding her marriage. She says to Nerissa, "If I live to be as old as Sibylla, I will die as chaste as Diana, unless I be obtained by the manner of my father's will" (I.ii.98-99). Here she is expressing her wish that she can accept a life like the mythical character Sibylla and Diana but she (Portia) will not marry against her father's will. Portia's father had planned three caskets - gold, silver and lead and only one contained Portia's portrait. The suitor, who would choose the proper casket with Portia's portrait, would become her husband. As per the idea of male dominated society, Elizabethan society will praise the idea of Portia's father but there is no one who can understand the state of Portia. This agreement of marriage takes Portia's free will far away. Here Portia is like a puppet who is played by others. Portia says to the Prince of Morocco, "Besides, the lottery of my destiny/ Bars me the right of voluntary choosing" (II.ii.15-16). Portia herself is mentioning it a lottery of her destiny where she is unable to choose her husband. This reflects that Portia is aware of the fact but she is helpless in front of the society. She has no power to brake the authority. As radical feminism argues that male authority and social stature create gender inequality, Portia's life reflects that in a proper way. She is the head of her house but is not able to take any decision for herself or for her people. To Portia the act of choosing her mate is an unfamiliar experience. Portia is regretting about this to Nerissa and says, "O me, the word 'chooses!' I may neither choose whom I would nor refuse whom I dislike—so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa that I cannot choose one nor refuse none" (I.ii.17-19). Portia cannot choose anyone

whom she likes or cannot deny the one she dislikes. She is confined in the barrier of society mentally and psychology. She likes Bassanio but is not able reveal the secret about the box. Even it is quite interesting to see that Portia is not just confined to her father but also to her husband. When Bassanio wins the marriage agreement, she will be under her husband's control. There is no scope for her independency and she is happy about that. Being an ideal Elizabethan woman, she says to Bassanio, "This house, these servants, and this same myself/ Are yours, my lord's" (III.ii.175-176). This line of Portia shows that she not only gives her house and servant to Bassanio but also devotes herself to him. Hence, she represents an ideal Elizabethan woman who has to surrender herself completely to her husband. William Shakespeare does not raise his voice against the barrier or inequality of women but he figures out the social problems that an Elizabethan woman has faced during that period of time.

It is noticeable that Shakespeare has planted the knowledge of patriarchal society and its barrier in the character of Portia and they express it by themselves. William Shakespeare expressed the ideas through the character so that people do not judge women in a wrong way. At the same time like a feminist writer Shakespeare gives the scope to this character to show her ability of knowledge and wisdom.

Portia says to Balthazar,

As I have ever found thee honest-true,
 So let me find thee still:take this same letter,
 And use thou all th'endeavour of a man
 In speed of Padua. See thou render this
 Into my cousin's hand, Doctor Bellario:
 And look, what notes and garments he doth give thee

Bring them, I pay thee, with imagined speed. (III.iv.46-52)

Portia from Merchant Of Venice is the most 'ideal Elizabethan woman' as well as the most 'powerful heroine' among all the female characters that are discussed about in this paper. She is an obedient daughter and an obedient wife too. When she hears about Antinio, she wants to help him at any cost. She remembers how Antinio has stuck in this position because of helping her beloved husband, Bassanio. So, no matter how many lies she needs to say, she will protect Antinio. She says that she would never forgive herself if she fails to save Antinio. She says to Nerissa, "And I wished for all that,/ that I had not kill'd them;/ And twenty of these puny lies I'll tell"(III.iv.73-74).

Again being an Elizabethan woman, Portia is aware of social barrier. Being a royal woman, she is not allowed to go to court as a lawyer to defend Antinio. To save Antinio's life Portia has to do something with her to enter into the court. In this situation taking male disguise is the only option for her. She knows that court is the world of male figure and only a lawyer can defend a case. In the beginning of the play Portia was just a woman whom Bassanio loves but as soon as she changes her female attire, she becomes a pseudo hero from a heroine in the play. She presents herself as the most important character and controls the flow of the play. In a word, she leads the play.

Portia succeeds in the court by her intelligence. The conflict regarding the bond is resolved only by her. In the bond history, Antinio's fate is dependent on Portia's intelligence. She challenges Shylock's clever bond. She defeats Shylock by in his game. She says,

"The words expressly are 'a pound of flesh'

Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh

But in the cutting it, if thou dost shed

One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods

Are (by the laws of Venice) confiscate

Unto the state of Venice. (IV.i.303-308)

No one in the court thinks about the matter that the bond is only talking about one pound of flesh. There is no mention of blood. It is obvious that while cutting of human flesh, blood will be shed. No one ever thinks that this little trick can save Antonio's life. Even the Duke of the court could not think anything to save Antonio's life. He says to Shylock, "Forgive a moiety of the principal" (IV.i.26). Duke could only requests and asks for forgiveness to Shylock but could not think of any other solution. Here Portia, being Balthazar is reminding Shylock that if he goes against his own bond and shed one drop of Christian blood of Antonio then his wealth must be seized by the law of Venice. At this point, male authority is under the threat of Portia's intelligence. Before being defeated Shylock himself was praising Portia on her wisdom and intellectual judgment. He mentions Portia as the 'most rightful judge' and the most 'learned judge'. It indicates that Portia played a lawyer's role so perfectly. No one could find out a single flaw on her.

Radical and liberal feminism are related to here. Radical feminism talks about the limitation of women. Male authority does not allow women to do a lot of works. Women are not allowed to step in the male society. Portia is also aware of that. As she is a woman, she will be not allowed to go to the court. Having a royal blood, she has no power over it. Moreover, no one will listen to her. As a result she disguised herself as a man to go to the court. Thus she faced no problem. William Shakespeare present Portia as a match maker. She gets authorities power. Shakespeare gives her a chance to challenge the stereotype patriarchy through her intelligence and wisdom. Portia gets an opportunity to save a man in the male oriented society. William

Shakespeare makes her sex free and gives priority to her intelligence. Shakespeare does not hurt Elizabethan men's ideas but places Portia at the top. He claims if opportunity comes, a woman can turn the table. That is why the little trick of blood does not come in any man's mind. It is quite significant to consider. Liberal feminism talks about opportunity in work place to show wisdom and intelligence. Women are capable of creating their own place in the society. They are as equal as men. Socialist feminism also talks about the equal rights in works place. Even William Shakespeare states that too. Portia stands in the equal line with male characters. She succeeds to prove that intelligence does not depend on gender. As men gain power and authority by their intelligence, women can also gain that because they are not less intelligent than men.

Chapter Three

Viola as Cesario in *Twelfth Night*

Presence of father figure or male domination in *Twelfth Night* comes in light in different way. Again the heroine of this play is fatherless. Moreover, she also loses her brother in a shipwreck. So, in that moment she is not under the support or authority of any male figure. Cristina Malcolmson's findings about *Twelfth Night* is that it was "written during a period before a woman's place was imagined as a separate sphere, since, for the Renaissance, a woman was considered to be analogous to other social inferiors in a hierarchical society" (161). According to the traditional idea of that period, women were inferior to men and without any male authority a woman cannot live her life independently. For that reason, the image of patriarchal society pushed her to hide her feminist to survive.

Viola in the play *Twelfth Night* is a good example of Elizabethan women. In the beginning of the play we come to know that she loses her brother in a shipwreck. Moreover, she has no father figure to take care of her. At this point she has no male authority upon her. In that era without the support of any male person, living life was very difficult. Like a common Elizabethan woman she has no economical support and it happens because of the absence of a male protector in her life. Moreover, being a woman she cannot play her economical role. It is mentioned before in Chapter two that Elizabethan woman were not allowed to have their own economical state. So, to protect her economical state and her dignity, she has to marry someone to take shelter. The play shows that she prefers to cross-dress herself to gain gender equality in the male dominated society. Like other characters, she also steps in her own way to protect her dignity. Howard said about Viola that, "Viola adopts male dress as a practical means of survival in an alien environment" (33). So, the environment of the society is alien in that sense, it is not

quite welcoming for woman. If we do a close study of the play, we can understand the sexual politics were hidden in that society. As a result, cross-dressing is the best option for Viola. She says to the sea Captain,

Conceal me what I am, and be my aid
 For such disguise as haply shall become
 The form of my intent.
 I'll serve this duke. (I.ii.53-55)

Viola asks the captain to help her choosing disguise and expresses her desire to work in Duke Orsino's court. She is well known to the fact that being a woman, she is not allowed to work in the court. As it is mentioned in chapter two, Elizabethan women were not allowed to do any kind of job. In Viola's case for security and living a better life, this work becomes more essential for her. Via cross-dressing she manages to enter Duke Orsino's court with a new identity and with a new name, Cesario.

In this particular play, we have found Viola as an extremely strong character who controls the flow of the play as well as she never gives up. She is intelligent and strong enough to control or to maintain herself as well as the surrounding around her. Even she carries the courage to protect herself. Though she struggles to survive as a free woman without any male shadow over her, she overcomes everything. It is not that as a woman she has not all these qualities but the stereotypical patriarchal society never allows her to do so though she belongs to a high class family. A single word 'woman' forbids everything for her because it is not easy for a woman of that era to protect her and to be stronger in the cultural domain of the society. As a perfect Elizabethan woman, Viola has played her role. She could choose to marry anyone and be dependent on him but she does not do that. Her decision is rebellious for any Elizabethan

woman. She risks her security. She risks consequences and still pursues an independent life for a female and context. She challenges the in her time stereotypical role of Elizabethan women. Through cross-dressing Viola becomes self-dependent in the male dominated court and competes with other men. Even she increases her position from a spectator to an active participant which is unexpected for Elizabethan women. Like other characters, she needs to change her social attire to establish what she is capable for. Viola finds that she has got the power to subvert the common and fixed boundaries. Gradually, she becomes Duke's trustworthy employee and it shows her potential of working. Duke is impressed by her dedication in work. A gentleman attending on the Duke named Valentine says Viola that, "If the Duke continue these favours towards you/ Cesario, [Viola] you are like to be much advanced" (I.iv.1-2). Moreover, she successfully handles her male attire that for Olivia thinks her as a male and starts to love her strong personality. She successfully prove that being a woman she is capable of doing all the tasks that a man can do. Maybe through her character William Shakespeare also delivered the same message to Elizabethan audiences. William Shakespeare does not relate his ideas with any feminist theory but the theories given by modern feminist writers are relevant to his work. The theories of socialist and liberal feminism can be used over here. The potential and courage; liberal feminism always talk about, goes with the character of Viola. Socialist feminism prefers the rights in work place for woman. Viola assures her wisdom, potential bravery through her work which encourages the moral values of "feminism".

Chapter Four

Rosalind as Ganymede in *As You Like It*

In *As You Like It* father figure has become a curse for Rosalind. Her father Duke Senior has been banished from kingdom by his brother Duke Frederick, father of Celia and this act has become threat for Rosalind's life. Duke Frederick also wanted to banish Rosalind or to kill her. He says, "Within these ten days if that thou be'st found/ so near our public court as twenty miles/ thou diest for it" (I.III.39-41). These lines point him as a merciless figure. When Rosalind asks what is her fault then he replies, "Thou art thy father's daughter, there's enough" (I.III.54). So, the only fault of Rosalind is being the daughter of Duke Senior and this fault can end up her life. Even father figure cannot protect her life. To sum up, every female character has some basic side of the influence of patriarchy. Patriarchal society has the power to control women's intelligence, wisdom, independency, economic state and so on. During the second wave these ideas came into light. Radical feminism works on these issues. William Shakespeare gives values to the doctrines of Elizabethan era but places her heroines in a way that people can recognize their hidden state.

Rosalind says to Celia,

Alas, what danger will it be to us,
 Maids as we are, to travel forth so far!
 Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold.
 Were it not better,
 Because that I am more than common tall,
 That I did suit me all points like a man? (I.iii.104-9)

Rosalind from *As You Like It* is another important character who represents Elizabethan Era perfectly. She is not much different from Portia or Viola. It is about 'patriarchal society' and the matter of 'protection'. Rosalind's father Duke Senior was banished by her uncle Duke Frederick and also Rosalind was not loveable to him. He always wanted to banish Rosalind from the court. Even he gives Rosalind a fix time to leave otherwise his actions can end up her life. The only reason behind this act is that Rosalind is the daughter of Duke Senior. When Rosalind asks what is her fault then he replies, "Thou art thy father's daughter, there's enough" (I.III.54). Her uncle always underestimated her as she is a maiden. It would not probably happen if she was man. So, Rosalind wants to fly away from the kingdom as her life is in threat over there. Celia is very fond of Rosalind and wants to company her. Rosalind wants to follow her father in the forest Arden. Now, as an Elizabethan woman, Rosalind is fully aware of all the rules and obstacles of a woman. She clearly knows that as a woman they cannot travel alone. It is dangerous and forbidden for them. There should be man power with a woman while travelling. When Celia informs Rosalind that they must escape from the court, then Rosalind says, "Alas, what danger will it be to us/ Maids as we are, to travel forth so far/ Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold" (I.iii.104-6). These lines points towards the society where Rosalind and Celia live. The line as "Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold" exposes the pathos that women were insecure everywhere, in palace, out of palace. By comparing beauty with gold, Rosalind points to the danger that a beautiful girl can face while travelling alone.

At this moment, another important question comes why Rosalind does not take Celia's suggestion to disguise themselves as poor or why Rosalind prefers to cross-dress herself as a man; not Celia. Rosalind suggests, "Because that I am more than common tall/ That I did suit me all points like a man" (I.iii.111-12). This line gives all the answers. According to her physical

feature, she must take the outfit of a man rather than disguising as poor. If they disguise as poor, still they are women and society will not permit women to move alone and it is dangerous too.

Physical feature is also a matter to concern. Rosalind shows her courage and intelligence to make her life free in the male dominated society. Moreover, they get liberty to fly away from the kingdom and can travel alone in the male dominated society. In addition Rosalind can protect herself as well as Celia. It is said by Stephen J Lynch in the book *As You Like it: A Guide to the Play* that,

In the boyish attire of Ganymede, Rosalind will control and direct much of the subsequent action in the play. Fleeing the corrupted artificial world of the court, Rosalind and Celia seek 'Liberty' (1.3.136) in the more natural world of the forest liberty in the broadest sense, including political, social, and gender liberty. (49)

The reason of Rosalind being Ganymede is different from Portia and Viola. Rosalind and Celia seek freedom to fly away from their dominating father. This liberty is not only about travelling alone but also it is related with some other essential issues. This liberty gives Rosalind the opportunity to survive, to take her own decision, to feel safe and self-independent. Since, living life in that dominant court was becoming impossible for them as Duke Fredrick can kill Rosalind, they flee away from there and thus they get a political liberty. Rosalind enjoys a gender liberty when she flees away in male attire and does everything that she could never do in female attire. Rosalind is an example of ideal feminist character. Her bravery, courage and intelligence are more than enough to praise her. She is the perfect example of liberal feminist. This feminism particularly talks about women's ability, actions, choices, courage, bravery, social rights, liberty and so. Liberal feminist believes that with these qualities women can build a parallel society. William Shakespeare has built Rosalind's character in this way.

These three characters are very strong creation of William Shakespeare. They acquire liberty and freedom. They acquire financial, political and gender liberty. William Shakespeare maintains a justified relation between his characters and the real women of Elizabethan era. As he belongs to 16th century, his writing has not the highest support of feminism, but her each character contains a perfect element of feminist aspects.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

“William Shakespeare was in many ways a sixteenth-century feminist. Shakespeare hides pro-woman philosophies especially in his comedies, writing in a time period when speech was heavily censored” (Bateman, 7). It is quite clear that William Shakespeare belonged to a era which was male dominated. Elizabethan society did not traditionally value the freedom of women. So William Shakespeare cannot be considered as a perfect feminist writer by modern interpretation. The era where women were prohibited from every right, it was not easy to raise voice against the gender inequality. There are many writers or critics who do not consider William Shakespeare as a feminist writer comparing to Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Wolf, Mary Wollstonecraft etc. Feminism is very much modern movement. It is far behind the imagination of William Shakespeare’s time. Feminist movement starts in early 20th century. It is also mentioned before that in Elizabethan time women were not allowed to act. Having a queen, Elizabethan era was always under the shade of patriarchal society. So, William Shakespeare had no issues to think about women. Moreover, in these three plays William Shakespeare has used a powerful element to portray female character. It is the idea of “Cross-dressing”. Every heroine uses Cross-dressing as a shield to perform their work. Richard Gill said that, “This ‘cross-dressing (literally, a transvestite is one whocross-dresses) has a central place in *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*”(98). So, it is a matter to think whatever the female characters have gained through the male attire. They get masculinity within themselves. Like this there are many reasons not to consider William Shakespeare as a feminist writer.

While reading about Elizabethan Era and feminist movement, it is quite clear that these two particular times are not direct related to each other. Each time has different principles. The

era where women have no individual and social rights, it is not easy for any writers to play strict role against gender discrimination like a prominent feminist writer. Though William Shakespeare uses cross-dressing as a shade, he explores the inner qualities of a woman. Cross-dressing works as a layer in front of the audience of Elizabethan era which makes them to believe that women carry social values properly. At the same time Shakespeare points out the qualities of a woman. "Although William Shakespeare reflects and at times supports the English Renaissance stereotypes of women and men and their various roles and responsibilities in society, he is also a writer who questions, challenges, and modifies those representations" (Dusinberre& Juliet, 10). Maybe a woman can carry male attire but she has also the same courage and wisdom like a man. She has power to protect herself. She has the intelligence to save someone. She has proper ideas to take right decision for herself as well as for others. Comedy is such kind of work that makes people laugh. William Shakespeare delivers message through his comedies that women can do anything if they want. His heroines control the flow of the plays standing behind the men. It is not about the male attire but about the courage of women. His three heroines hold the values of feminism very high.

Ideas do not need proper time to grow up. It needs proper time to express. The famous feminist writers raise their voice for women's rights. There works, ideas, values break the barrier of the male dominated society. But it is not an easy task to maintain social doctrines and to bring bigger changes at a time. This what William Shakespeare did through his heroines of his comedies. He made his audience understand the power, wisdom, values of a woman but also took care of social values of that era. So, it is obvious that William Shakespeare is not a prominent feminist writer but his ideas and writings carry all kind feminist elements and views.

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