

## Marginalized Ladies: Ophelia and Gertrude

Rafia Mir

P.HD Scholar,

Dept. of English, Sant Baba Bhag Singh University, Punjab.

### Abstract:

Hamlet, the most significant play both in English and world literature, Shakespeare's masterpiece. Because of Shakespeare's genius, Hamlet has become the source or subject for many studies and works going on the present since the 17th century. Other than students of English literature people do not read Shakespeare but they have still knowledge, even though little, about Hamlet. The play has got much attention as being the masterpiece. Critics have done much on the main character of the play: Hamlet, but our focus will be upon characters are victimized/marginalized by the other, 'important' characters. Two victimized/ marginalized women characters are involved in Shakespeare's play. These women characters are Gertrude and Ophelia: as they have raised the value of the play. The purpose of this paper is to explain the power of males' effects over these characters, and analyze victimized Gertrude's and Ophelia's characteristic features.

**Key words:** Feminism, Patriarchy, Oppressed, Suppressed, Marginalization.

### Introduction

Shakespeare, all time honored, wrote great deal on the social relationships. He is the most read and cited writer, which is the chief reason of translating his plays into many languages. His plays are the most performed plays and most probably will be also most performed plays in future. *Hamlet* is believed to be, both in English and world literature. As McAlindon rightly notices about the play, "Hamlet is at once the most expensive and the most reticent of Shakespeare's tragedies: full of digression and contradiction, amplification and ellipsis" (102). The play is intermingled with many themes: tragedy, revenge and victimization of women. The play deals with Hamlet's intention to murder Claudius because Hamlet believes that Claudius has killed the King Hamlet. After the death of King Hamlet, we come across a little change in the ceremony of enthronement. The change is that Gertrude (Hamlet's mother and victimized woman) marries Claudius which results in Claudius' getting the throne instead of King Hamlet. Other lady Ophelia, similarly as Gertrude, gets victimized and marginalized, although being the noble ladies, they are grinded in the patriarchal society.

#### (I) Victimized Ophelia:

As the play opens and moves on, we steadily and randomly interpret about Ophelia: on the one side a dynamic lady and on the other side a suppressed, and a marginalized lady. She is the daughter of Polonius, Duke of Lumbridge and sister to Leartes. She is an obedient daughter, loving sister and an ardent lover. In the play *Hamlet*, which has an Elizabethan tone and touch, we comprehend it all by ourselves that women in this Era were ruled by men. Being a patriarchal society, women were mere 'objects' and 'sex toys'. The western world in Shakespeare's time was obviously male dominated and men only had regards to women when it was related to their fulfillment of desires. Ophelia being part of this patriarchal society had to endure it all. Her ordeals and endurance were unending. She is being portrayed as weak, sleek and meek. Ophelia is a sweet, innocent lady who obeys to both, father and brother. She is a smart young lady that is overtaken by dramatic fate, madness and death (Berensmeyer 38). Ophelia had no control over her body, her relationships or her choices. She was just a puppet; a robot at the hands of her father, brother and the hero of play Hamlet.

She is an Innocent maiden, marginalized, victimized and betrayed by her father, brother, Hamlet and society. She had no feelings, no life, and no world of her own. She is unaware of the nature of her own feelings, these feelings are developing without getting permission from Ophelia, and so she does not have the strength to control them. That Ophelia lets others construct is Obvious (Finkelstein 6). In Act 1, Scene 3, Laertes warns her about Hamlet's approaching attempts of love towards her and she obeyed her brother without uttering a word and without any protest.

Laertes: Farewell Ophelia; and remember well what I have said to You (1,3,84-85)

'Tis in my memory lock'd, And you yourself shall keep the key of it. (1,3,86-87).

Ophelia: I shall obey my Lord (Scene).

Das says,

"Shakespeare shows, however that it is this obedience of Ophelia that leads to her own destruction and illustrates that when the guiding male is like cynical Polonius or hypocrite Laertes, the fate of the subordinate female is considerably threatened" (39). To her father and brother, Ophelia is the eternal virgin, the vessel of morality whose purpose is to be a dutiful wife and steadfast mother. To Hamlet, she is a deceitful lover. "Of all characters in Hamlet, Bridget Lyons had pointed out, Ophelia is most persistently presented in terms of symbolic meanings"

Hamlet and other male characters such as Ophelia's father and brother scold Ophelia as if she were a child. They disrespect her as if she is less of a person than they are. At one point, Ophelia was told that she should be in a brothel instead of being a "breeder of Sinners" (Floyd-Wilson, 1992).

"Get thee to a nunn'ry"

Why would'st thou be a breeder of Sinners. (Act 3, 1, 16-17)

In this scene the hate towards women is more potent. As the play progresses, Hamlet keeps showing his feelings of hatred and dissatisfaction towards women altogether. The word, "nunn'ry" does not mean to have a religious connotation but is used to insult, disrespect and lash out on simple, submissive, sober and innocent Ophelia. She holds a storm of so many things in her heart, in a way, we can say that 'she was sailing through storms'. Ophelia was torn between two worlds, one which includes her father and brother and the other where her love resides. "She cannot understand that she is a plaything in the hands of these men" (Rahman, 33). "Shakespeare made the decision to reduce Ophelia as insignificant" (Romanska). Shakespeare portrayed Ophelia as insignificant, inferior. She was given a demoted, discouraged and a submissive role to play. In a way Shakespeare portrayed an Elizabethan daughter, who was less of a human and more of a robot. Shakespeare portrayed Hamlet's tragedy with much hype than Ophelia's. His tragedy was moaned and he was sympathized by every character and every reader as well but, Ophelia's tragedy was "subordinated". She appeared in only 5 scenes out of 20" (Elaine Showalter). There was even no stage presentation of her death. Shakespeare has reduced her to mere object like. Lacan in his speech referred her "as Object Ophelia"

In the play, we checked it out that Shakespeare has beaten the drum regarding the tragedy of Hamlet and yet we also saw that Ophelia's tragedy is "as silent as Ophelia herself". Her songs represent female madness. Her madness is more disheartening, depressing and unexpected when compared to Hamlet. Her madness consists the loss of her father and Ophelia proved herself obedient, ideal daughter of Elizabethan period.

Ophelia:

He is dead and gone, lady,

He is dead and gone;

At this head a grass-green turf,

At his heels a stone. (iv, v, 29-32).

About Hamlet's betrayal

How should I your true love know

From another one?

By thick cockle hat and staff,

And his scardalshoon (iv, v, 24-27).

It is through Ophelia's madness that she breaks the rules of society, social norms and restraints and inner feelings but at the same time it shows Ophelia's victimization, her sufferings, her ordeals and her betrayal. "Her madness has exactly the same effect that can be produced by the spectacle of real insanity, if brought before us, we feel inclined to turn away, and veil our eyes in reverential pity, and too painful sympathy" (Vanderlyn 92). Thus, the character of Ophelia may be portrayed in two senses through her maddening song as an expression of female opposition to male dominance or merely as an insignificant sexual object. "The female character in Hamlet, Ophelia and Gertrude have only little or no power or autonomy" (Gibson 72). Ophelia has to learn to behave according to customs of her society. She has followed her father and brother's power unconsciously since her childhood. Also, Ophelia can never feel her love; as her life, has been forbidden by the males. Power of patriarchy steals her pure love from her like her life and victimizes her for the sake of cannons of society. We found out Hamlet, primarily about male superiority and male dominance and Ophelia's ordeals, endurance and her insignificant character and presence clearly portray a view that Shakespeare wrote Hamlet as an "Anti-feminist text".

## (II) Victimized Gertrude:

In this section we will explore another marginalized and exploited lady: Gertrude. She is a character studied by as many critics but at the same time neglected by many. "None of the critics of course has failed to see Gertrude as vital to the action of the play; she is the mother of the hero, the widow of the Ghost, and the wife of the current king of Denmark" (Heilbrun 201). Gertrude is the mother of Hamlet and wife of early King of Denmark and hence she plays an important role in the play. Although we find very few speeches made by Gertrude, although she did not give much account of her character, behavior etc. yet we find her as an important 'subject of study' to many researchers and critics especially to feminists. In the play, Gertrude like Ophelia is represented as the 'Other', unknown, unwanted object. "The words of other characters both affect negatively and make awry our interpretations about her character and choices" (Graf 16) but "the essential Gertrude can be properly recognized from an analysis of the words she herself speaks—rather than the things said about her by the ghost and by the Hamlet" (Sharon 89). It's not Gertrude herself who takes us into the depth of her character, who reveals her feelings but it's Hamlet and her Ex-husband, both of them lead us into the character of Gertrude. In the play, we don't have any of Gertrude's soliloquy, with the help of which we could have come to know about her inner feelings and her state of mind. In the play, Gertrude is presented as an incestuous woman, lustful lady, who only cares about fulfilling her lustful desires. Hamlet too claimed that her mother is lustful and that's the only reason she married her brother-in-law immediately after the death of King Hamlet.

It is not in her words that we find evidence of her sexuality or betrayal of her husband. It is through the speeches of Hamlet and ghost, that readers receive a negative, suspicious image of Gertrude, image of sensuous and disloyal. I believe, portrayal of Gertrude as a sensuous mother is inaccurate and contrived perhaps because Gertrude speaks so little and has no chance to defend herself against the accusations surrounding her, she is often portrayed in an unfavorable and exaggerated way. As Richard Levin notes in "*Gertrude's elusive Libido*", Gertrude is often misunderstood due to the actions and words of other characters. Levin writes, "... while many (male) critics have accepted without question Hamlet's and the Ghost's statements about Gertrude's lustful nature, she herself never gives us any sign of it" (322) "We cannot say that "We find evidence of her sexuality or her betrayal of her husband in her words" (16-17). Her own words should be taken into consideration because she is shown as a guilty in a patriarchal society. On the other hand, this society considers that Gertrude is guilty of not exactly grieving Hamlet but getting married with Claudius. She is tried to view as a guilty because of two 'Unreliable characters': Hamlet and Ghost. These unreliable characters try to form "an image of Gertrude as sensuous and disloyal" (17). We see a negative image of Gertrude all through the play.

In the play, we can see that Ghost (King Hamlet) concentrates much more on the deprivation of Gertrude rather than concentrating on the deprivation of throne of Denmark. "The Ghost's grievance obviously is Gertrude's adultery and his agenda is... to explain it in a way that will completely condemn her role and Claudius's and valorize his own" ... (Levin 309). In the play, Ghost and Hamlet tries to show Gertrude as bad as possible. Though the Ghost tells Hamlet;

Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive  
Against thy mother aught: leave her to heaven

And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge.  
To prick and sting her(1.5.85-88)

As Graf has rightly said, "Hamlet accuses Gertrude, too." She cannot state her relationship with Claudius is love because she is too old" (Graf 22) to fall in love with a man. Although Hamlet detests Claudius, he has put the blame on Gertrude because of her faults against the Ghost. Hamlet appears to blame Gertrude instead of Claudius, although Claudius was much more responsible for the tragedy of Hamlet than Gertrude. The lines in the play, "A bloody deed-almost as bad, good mother/as kill a king and marry with his brother"(3,4,27-28) reflects Hamlet's implied accusation, but Gertrude immediately replies "As kill a king"(3,4,28). Here, we can easily notice that Gertrude has no knowledge about Claudius's responsibility for the first husband's death, so there is not guilty on her own.

Both the Ghost and Hamlet proposes prejudiced perceptions for Gertrude's guilty. Apart from the Ghost and Hamlet; Gertrude has also been confirmed as guilty because of general canons in her time. According to patriarchal canons, Gertrude's role to Hamlet is to defend his heirship, to protect Hamlet until he can get the kingdom but Gertrude decides to marry Claudius because she believes the love and instead of Hamlet, she chooses to create a new heirship with her husband. This explains Hamlet's anger and her obsession with Gertrude's sexuality (Graf 28). Ruth Stevenson points out that "Hamlet's disgust of his mother's sexuality may not be the consequence of his mother's lewdness but the result of his apprehensions concerning his mother's giving birth to a new heir, this implies that it is the possibility of loss of Kingship which has enraged Hamlet"(448). Hamlet thinks that Gertrude betrays him because her mother can breed a new inheritor for Kingship. To Hamlet, Gertrude is responsible for ignoring her son completely on the side of her new husband.

We can observe Gertrude's developed responsibility to her son because she struggles to protect her son as a mother; and tries to talk with her son. While trying to talk with Hamlet we witness Gertrude's independence in the backroom scene (Gertrude and Hamlet) because she shapes her choices in the following parts of the play. About this private scene Jardine explains: "...Gertrude embarks on her audience with her Son in the full knowledge that they are deliberately overheard.... By summoning her son to her most private quarters she formally signals to him that their meeting will be in the strictest confidence. Here, then, are grounds for accusations of betrayal: from the outset Gertrude connives in misleading Hamlet...(150). In this explanation, Gertrude invites her son to her personal place, Gertrude. This place also has a different importance that Gertrude promises Hamlet to tell lies to her husband Claudius." "Be thou assured, if words be made of breath/And breath of life, I have no life to breathe/what thou hast said to me"(3.4,190-192). In here, we see Gertrude's own decision and this decision represents her ability to make choices and carry out promises, a feature of a character that is free and honest. Because of Gertrude's lines, we can mention that Gertrude is able to take her decisions by herself and therefore, we can say she is an independent moral being, but the men around her do not want to accept this independence (Graf 40). Gertrude has to be subject to the men around her.

Unfortunately, Gertrude is oppressed by the male power surrounding her. She is ignored and suppressed. She is often the victim of oppression and surveillance. She cannot be interpreted related with her own utterances. She has been the victim of males' words in the play. She should not be taken only as a sensual woman. She is being considered as a puppet by male characters in the play, they intend to make her dance on their own tune. She too is suffering in her own world, suffering like anything. Her society, her own people are not aware of her sufferings, her own actions, her own words. Her society, her people make many interpretations about Gertrude without needing to ask Gertrude herself. There is more to Gertrude than these sloppy interpretations. Her life, her inner world is much more than these lame and malicious reasons and slanders made by Hamlet and Ghost. In a way, we can say that Shakespeare failed in portraying the character of Gertrude and gave his support and full authority to the Elizabethan men.

The descriptions of Ophelia and Gertrude in Hamlet illuminated our minds about which situations women have to face in Elizabethan period and how cruel and merciless men can be and how they sacrifice their daughters, sisters and wives. Through this study, we can understand that women are shown as dependent to men. These men use their forces, customs and even religious. These men force Ophelia and Gertrude to do everything whatever they want. Elizabethan society thinks that women are weak so they should follow what the men tell them and obey the men's rules. This characteristic feature (weakness) is significantly represented in the play by women characters in Hamlet; Ophelia and Gertrude. The behaviors to women in the play obviously consist of

distrust, prejudice, disdain and negative stereotypes. The major negative stereotypes are Hamlet's, Polonius' and the Ghost's perceptions towards Ophelia and Gertrude. Finally, both Ophelia and Gertrude find themselves in a patriarchal society that is the main reason why they are often torn apart by orders and suggestions proposed by Polonius, Laertes, the Ghost, Claudius and Hamlet. Their personalities are torn to pieces by some commands as the need to obey men's rules and the voice of the heart that belongs to men. It is very sorrowful that when these orders do not succeed or when these orders disappear they do not know what to do, and they are lost in the society. Ophelia goes mad and dies; Gertrude dies because of poison given by a male. Going mad and death are the only way for them to rescue themselves from patriarchy. They have been supposed to be invisibles although they have a unique place in their societies. They are the victim of their society and male power politics unfortunately; this victimization still goes on in contemporary society. It is an egregious fact that many wives, daughters and sisters are silenced or murdered in today. We witness contemporary Shakespeare and we observe victimization of contemporary Ophelia's and Gertrude's.

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