

Nimble Negotiations: A Study of Shakespeare's Sagacious Female Characters

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Abstract

This study aims to examine Shakespeare's female characters as timeless in disposition. It is significant to observe the strong and intelligent women in plays of Shakespeare who know how to negotiate with patriarchal oppression that blur the line of time and space in depicting innate female nature. In this paper I argued that women are intelligent to manoeuvre the hostility of patriarchal society to her ease for which I examine Taming of the Shrew. It is significant to find parallels in Kandiyoti's theorization of patriarchal bargains with reference to women in Shakespeare's plays. The onstage female characters demonstrate prodigy and prudence that enables them power in male dominated society. His female artifice is beyond the stereotypical notions of defiance and deference, obedience and disobedience. These characters appear to be realistic and natural in the situations they have put in. His female antagonist is as sympathetic as admirable his protagonist. This study perceives his plays as suggesting contemporary women who are living in strong patriarchal constraints to devise strategic negotiations by using their inherent wit and intelligence for creating ease and comfort in the hostile ambiance.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Women, Patriarchy, Patriarchal Bargains.

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1. Shakespeare and Women

Shakespeare's remarkable exhibition of royal kings from European histories and his wise fools, his tragic heroes struggling with the pains of hamartia, and his intrusion in magical affinity with witches, sylphs, and fairies altogether demonstrate Shakespeare's inimitable artistic florescent to carve his timeless characters. He produced the "imaginary *real* people" in his plays who were, before him, inflexible in the world of literature (McEvoy, 2000, p. 3). With this accuracy for presenting the "real" characters, Shakespeare prodigiously unfolds the uniqueness of each of his characters by allowing them to "*overhear* themselves talking" or to others (Bloom, 1998, p. xvii). Harold Bloom perceives this self-overhearing as an impetus towards "individuation" (1998, p. xvii). This individuation distinguishes each of his characters from Shakespeare's plagiarized adaptations of the previous literature.

His inordinate creativity becomes more visible in his creation of female characters. Rackin (2005) studies Shakespeare's female characters as epitome of "unchanging, universal female nature" (2005, p. 112). Tamora's vengeful ire seems relevant beyond the contingencies of time and space, Lady Macbeth's initial obsessiveness and her sleepwalking to wash "damned spots" of Duncan's blood from her hands (5.1) render similiarity with all women. Shakespeare created his female characters in a time when women were considered physically and intellectually inferior to men but Shakespearean women, Virginia Woolf claims "do not seem wanting in personality and character" (2000, p. 44). His women exposit wit, nobility and gallantry that do not necessarily appear to conform the social norms of a male-dominated society. Renaissance women was subordinate to

the men of society and confined to the domestic sphere whereas men used to deal with the public dynamics. Being socio-economically dependant upon the men, women were considered as the possession of their fathers and husbands. They remained dispossessed of any rights to claim autonomy and independence in public space. In this context, Shakespeare's female characters do not exhibit weakness and inferiority that is usually theorized through their specificity in private space. They are strong and witty though they remain in private sphere as Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* is an intelligent and strong character who rescues her husband and his friend at a turning point. Portia though shows her helplessness being fully controlled by the will of her dead father that she cannot choose her husband. This peculiar situation demonstrates the extent of women's control and docility. Dusi contends that though women were subjects of male dominance "they also had their own modes of challenging that authority" (2003, p. xli). In such a proscribed and confined space of immobility, sagacious Portia manipulates her suitors of high rank and wealth with her cagey suggestions that finally allows Bassanio to be her worthy suitor.

Shakespeare wrote his plays for English audience and the role of women onstage was usually played by men. This dramatic enactment was centralized and concentrated by a male oriented perception of human experience rather than the embodiment of women's experiences. The women are portrayed in relation to men. The presence of young women is usually dramatized as moving toward their marriage and in this frame the role of fathers is very significant with the *rule of father*. Most often the narratives develop out of disagreements and conflicts between fathers and their daughters. For some daughters the absence of fathers though permanent or momentary can provide space of independence and autonomy particularly for those who are socio-economically privileged as Rosalind in *As You Like It* and Olivia in *Twelfth Night*. These women enjoy liberty to choose their life partners. However, women are usually dominated by their uncles as in *Much Ado about Nothing* Margaret and Cressida by Pandarus in *Troilus and Cressida* who cannot have the freedom in absence of their fathers. Being fully dominated by men, Shakespeare presents the accuteness of his female creations as controlling the action of the plays. Rosalind is innately wise and sagacious protagonist, who displays feminine generosity in frame of her relationship to Celia and Orlando. Portia and Beatrice do not conform to the ideal figures of femininity. They represent masculine attributes either in disguise or being inherently out-spoken. Though Portia is donning male attire but her defense of Antonio does not exhibit her acquired knowledge, it serves as an evidence of her innate prodigy.

Though captivated in confines of domesticity, the female characters from Ophelia to Lady Macbeth to Cleopatra to Desdemona unfold their autonomy and wit with realistic zeal of passion and compassion before audience. This portrayal usually dismantles the historical and theological construction of women as *inferior* sex and exhibits their innate independence as the prevarication of generalized stereotypes. His artistic maneuver is excogitated by Hazlitt as "the scale by which we can best ascend to the true knowledge and love of him", and asserted that adoration of them "increased and confirmed" our inclination towards him (Hazlitt, 2009, p. 232). While criticizing his contemporaries, Hazlitt speaks of relevancy of Shakespearean character both men and women to all ages because of the naturalized imagination. True accuracy of his female characters lies in his beauty of carving "depth and precision" that even if these characters might exist in reality "they would so conduct themselves" (Hazlitt, 2009, p. 13). It is this truth that inspires authors to bring into life the characters that appeal human instincts. This unique portrayal offers adaptations and transformations of his plays all around the globe that remarkably makes him universal and relevant to all times. This study aims to examine Shakespeare's female characters as timeless in disposition. It is significant to observe the strong and intelligent women in plays of Shakespeare who know

how to negotiate with patriarchal oppression that blur the line of time and space in depicting innate *female nature*. In this paper I argued that women are intelligent to manuevre the hostility of patriarchal society to her ease for which I examine *Taming of the Shrew*. It is significant to find parallels in Kandiyoti's theorization of patriarchal bargains with reference to women in Shakespeare's plays that reinforce the timelessness of Shakespeare's characters across spatio-temporal affinities.

2. Shakespeare's Sagacious Females:

Shakespeare's endearing characterization of witty females indicates their struggle for their social stability while living in a male dominated society. These women exposit their sagacity and prodigious wit that is not dependent upon their confined domesticity and lacking education. Their prodigy appeals modern audience when Shakespeare's contemporaries were engaged in portraying stereotypical women as scapegoats to patriarchy; while his females were exhibiting their knowledge of social dynamics to turn over the situation for their settlement.

Taming of the Shrew is a comedy play wherein Katherina's shrewish behavior is a great obstruction in arranging her marriage while Bianca her younger sister cannot court until Katherina marries. I contend that Katherina in *Taming of the Shrew* is not the conventional figure of the shrew. Shrewish behavior refers to the petulance that is exhibited through ferocious unkindness. She displays her irascible shrewish attitude by assaulting Bianca verbally and physically, infuriating Petruchio; her would-be husband, enrages at Baptista her father. By highlighting a fine line between "witty mistress" and a shrew wife with reference to Renaissance, Charles Brooks explicates that "mistresses had to set an eloquent tone for court" to manifest heir wit, however "the difference between wit and shrewishness is a difference of degree, not kind; both result from the same power of speech, so that it is but a step from the witty mistress to the shrewish wife" (Brooks, 1960, p. 353). The remarkable characteristic of Shakespeare is to give human nature to even his utmost evil characters has also contributed in giving reason to the shrewish attitude of Katherina. The play from the very beginning determines the institutionalized differences between obedient and disobedient women through the characterization of Bianca and Katherina. These gender differences promulgated by patriarchal practices are scrutinized as man-made which only legalized *the rule of father*. In *Taming of the Shrew* Shakespeare shows parental concerns of wealthy Baptista Minola to find husband for his elder daughter Katherina who is "renowned ... for her scolding tongue" (I.2.99) before arranging marriage for Bianca, his younger and beloved daughter. To arrange weddings for daughters usually dominate most of the Shakespearean narratives that indicate to father rule in the lives of his daughters. According to Frederick Engels (1940) this rule is strengthened owing to the materialistic concerns when men transfer their inheritance to men by alienating women from their parental confines to the domestic confinements of their husbands as their permanent locality. Baptista is not as worried about looking for a good husband for Katherina instead he is more inclined to remove obstacles in Bianca's way to contentment. Coppelia Kahn (1977) contends that Baptista assumes his daughter as a commodity. He puts it that Baptista is adamant not to marry Bianca "until he gets an offer for the unpopular Kate, not for the sake of conforming to the hierarchy of age as his opening words imply, but out of a merchant's desire to sell all the goods in his warehouse" (Kahn, 1977, p.87). At the beginning of the play, Shakespeare implies that the two sisters Bianca and Katherina are completely different from each other as Germaine Greer (2008) expositis this opposition as:

Kate is a woman striving for her own existence in a world where she is a stale, a decoy to be bid for against her sister's higher market value, so she opts out by becoming unmanageable, a scold. Bianca has found the women's way of guile and

feigned gentleness to pay better dividends: she woos for herself under false colours, manipulating her father and her suitors in a perilous game which could end in her ruin. (Greer, 2008, p.234)

Baptista's suggestion to "court" Katherina means for Gremio as "to cart her rather. She's too rough for me" (1.1.55). Shakespeare in his play describes the difference between "court" and "cart" even after Katherina gets married with Petruccio the audience remains inquisitive about the illusion or reality of "court" or "cart". Cart refers to taming of the "curst and shrewd" (1.1.175) who challenge the smoothness of social dynamics. Her ill-tempered attitude is not considered to be acceptable by society therefore she needs to change herself. Bianca on the other side manifests seemingly docile behavior that appears to be the reason for attracting men towards her. Elisabeth Hutcheon examines Hortensio's castigation of Katherina as an "outspoken woman, she must consort with the devil; she must be a witch" (Hutcheon, 2001, p. 323). Patriarchal conventions of the society perceive her indifferent manners in terms of an "ideological figure of a shrew, whose only function is to manifest the reality of their primary fantasy—the ideal of female virtue associated with Bianca" (Crocker, 2013, p.145). The indifferent attitude of Katherina and her tamed and obedient turnover is open for the audience's plausible explanation. Baptista in the very beginning is presented as neglectful of Katherina while protective of Bianca which leads to the assumption that Katherina has some justification for her scathing responses. Katherina's shrewd behavior amplifies repetitive reinforcement. The play does not provide any reference to Kate's mother, perhaps she died giving birth to Bianca or after that. Being young child, Baptista might give all his attention to Bianca and ignore Kate as the elder one that could be a possible reason of her ill-temperance. Nonetheless shrew she is, but she manages to maintain Baptista's attention through incessant apprehension. While on the other, in her silence and seeming obedience, Bianca is perceived as the feminine ideal of loveliness, charm, and humility. She seems to possess all of the qualities that the Lord asked the Page to assume and is a woman of "gentler, milder mold", but through Bianca's characterization Shakespeare again deftly draws the fine line that exists between appearance and reality. On the surface, Bianca gives the impression of being the epitome of the male fantasy of the perfect woman. Her behavior however speaks another story. In reality, she is spoiled and overly indulged. For example, her father, Baptista, while publicly humiliating Kate, tells Bianca publicly that he will love her "ne'er the less." He also attempts to lessen her "grief" at not being able to marry until Kate is out of the way by indulging her delight in music and poetry with in-house schoolmasters. But nothing is done to relieve Kate's anguish at her own situation. Baptista relies on the fervor of Bianca's suitors to find a husband for Katherina, and Petruchio; Hortensio friend arrives to Pedua looking for a wealthy wife. Petruchio exhibits wealth and status as his primary motive for which he can marry "an old trot with ne'er a tooth in her head", even he is ready to accept a diseased lady who can give him a stabilized social standing (1.2.76). Greer (2008) perceives Kate's married status as she has "the uncommon good fortune to find Petruchio who is man enough to know what he wants and how to get it" (Greer, 2008, p.234). The play revolves around the taming of Katherina to be submissive and docile in her wedlock. Her exaggerated shrewishness supplies farce in the text that chides the societal norms where individuals are supposed to behave in stereotyped behaviors. The divide of deference and defiance in the characters of Bianca and Kate appeals contemporary audience to probe the conventional patterns of acceptable behavior by contemplating over the underlying psychosocial circumstances which justifies the shrewishness of Kate. Idealized characterization of women is depicted as of Bianca in attire of submission and Katherina as shrew and disobedient. It seems as if Shakespeare deconstructs this idealization by arranging a marriage for both sisters. The obedient appears to be a shrew and Katherina clads

herself in docility. This reversal metaphorically refers to the superficial categorization of good and bad woman. Petruchio reveals his taming skills by keeping her hungry and sleepless like a *falconer* tames a falcon till she becomes helpless to resist. He concedes this practice is the only way to pacify an angry and obdurate wife. This approach manifests a problematic aspect of the play to treating woman like an animal. Despite of pondering over Kate's real intentions for her ill-mannered disposition, Petruchio's role is characteristically patriarchal to placate her ferocity. The obedience speech of tamed Kate renders the resolution of shrew plot in a society where shrewishness is unacceptable behaviour and by the end of the play, Kate appears to be more docile as other women of society are in spite of the fact that Kate "appeals for freedom of speech" as she "must learn to speak the way Petruchio wants her to in order for him to acknowledge the meaning of what she says. In a sense, Katherina is speaking another language" (Hutcheon, 2001, p. 327).

I frame Katherina's tamed behavior in Deniz Kandiyoti's patriarchal bargains. Kadyoti's contemplation appears to be relevant in examining the character of Katherina who is marginalized in a male-dominated society for her shrewish behavior. She is universal in terms of time and geographical boundaries with specific reference to Asian women. Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) coins the term 'patriarchal bargains' to define the strategic negotiations of women for their survival in the patriarchal domain within non-European patriarchal structure. She contends that their *bargaining with patriarchy* assert their agency to organize their support system and social standing for which their subordination cannot necessarily be regarded as their docility. The negotiations with patriarchal regime escalate lucrative opportunities for long-term survival in male dominated system.

Being fully aware of their space in the society, Shakespearean women like Asian women continuously strive for their prosperous survival at individual level; nonetheless, these efforts recreate and reinforce oppressive realm of patriarchy in the patrilineal-patrilocal complex for all women: "cyclical fluctuations of their power position, combined with status considerations, result in their active collusion in the reproduction of their own subordination" (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 280). While living in separate patriarchal spheres women seem disconnected from the alliance in public space. Their orbit is defined as fully domesticated and their connectivity to the other women is only possible through their men in the public space. They lack any collective resistance because their relationships are also dependent upon men. In such conditions, women acquire power from their negotiating strategies which maximize their power structure through docility and subservience but equally disable women to form resistance as Kandyoti puts it, "Systemetic analyses of women's strategies and coping mechanisms can help to capture the nature of patriarchal systems in their cultural, class-specific and temporal concreteness and reveal how men and women resist, accommodate, adapt and conflict with each other over resources, rights and responsibilities" (1988, p. 285).

Katherina's tamed monologue connotes ambiguity to examine male dominance for asserting control over women. Crocker contends that: "Katherine's behaviour outstrips any expectations Petruchio could have devised for her; she does not only what he says but reaches beyond what he says, thus demonstrating the failures inherent in the categorical system of identity" (Crocker, 2003, p. 155). This indicates the delusions of visible realities which differ in core course of relationships. The interpretation of emotional interdependence curtails the women's submission before the hegemonic frames of patriarchy. While bargaining with patriarchal norms women examine their lines of oppression and exploitation and develop strategic plan of conformity and internalization of patriarchal ideologies. Kate's speech ponders over the possibility of desired transformation that she learns as a technique to manipulate Petruchio and enjoy possible liberty in her relationship by

revealing herself an obedient wife. The power that women in patriarchy can exert over other women appears to be invisible in resistance strategies which also leave women alone in experiencing patriarchal oppressions. The scattered oppressions accelerate women in submissiveness and therefore to bargaining which ironically water the oppressive system to grow with more strength and power. Kandyoti's research provides insights to women's unorganized but strategic agency to create their space in the patriarchy. Their devising scheme of subordination does not necessarily be equated with subservience but it enables them to accommodate their temporary empowerment which through resistance cannot be achieved. Like Walby and Connell, Kandyoti also manifests the intricacy and diversity of patriarchal functioning which provides a confiscated milieu to women; nonetheless, women gradually comprehend its discursive lines and make their settlements accordingly. For all intents and purposes, Kate's conversion is considered to be a deliberate attempt. She willfully prefers to conduct herself in socially acceptable way. However, it is still to be argued whether this taming strategy is manifested as patriarchal malice or a Kate's willing endeavor to undergo this transformation.

The Taming of the Shrew has often been read and acted as a wife-humiliating farce... Yet, it is not so at all. True, it is based on the medieval conception of the obedience owed by a wife to her wedded lord, a conception generously and charmingly asserted by Katherine at the end. But it is a total misconception to suppose that she has been bludgeoned into it. (Tillyard, 1992, p.80)

As John Bean argues that there is "the emergence of a humanised heroine against the background of depersonalising farce", this farce according to him "treats persons as if they lacked the sensitivities of an inward self, that genre is appropriate to a view of marriage in which the wife is mainly the husband's chattel", nevertheless "romantic comedy" of Shakespeare is "concerned with the discovery the inward self, with love as personal, and hence with the relationship of lovers who face together the problem of reconciling liberty and commitment in marriage" (Bean, 1980, p. 66). She confesses that Petruchio adores her that can also become a reason for her inclination towards taming process as she admits that his openness beguiles as an honest man in a society filled with fraudulent. Perhaps, she refers to Bianca or her suitors who finds Bianca as easy prey for their socio-economic stability, if it is so then the beginning of the play also discloses real intentions of Petruchio who needs a strong and quick leverage through wealthy woman. There might be some truth that she extols Petruchio's way of exhibiting his true self and her transformed self is an expression of her adoration of Petruchio. Nonetheless, it is contentiously assumed that Kate's subservient transformation "evades the categories that her passivity instates", but presupposing her final speech as "Petruchio's agency" as Crocker asserts "then we miss the productive power that she ironically wilds through the appearance of passivity" (2003, p. 156). Her final words affirms her confined approach to reality, the patriarchal manifestation of her society designated her in subordinate position at her father's place at first then at her husband's after marriage. Her shrewish behaviour can be perceived as an honest reaction to the deceitful obedience of Bianca. But her sudden transformation affirms that her shrewish attitude is endurable by her father because he will not evict her from his home but she understands the vulnerability of her position being at her husband's place that she cannot continue with similar irascibility. The equivocal and ambiguous ending also leads to the possibility that she does not come across with deceits in her new home that she used to be being with Bianca. Her timely realization of being dependent upon her husband allows her to change her attitude to the extent that she can enjoy her freedom in her new home. It would not be wrong to say that her assertion of deference by the end epitomizes the overhaul of her manner to attain autonomy before marriage and after marriage. By overtly claiming

her altered perspective of reality as “be it the moon, or sun, or what you please” (IV.5.1-49), she seeks her autonomy by saying that “Thy husband is thy lord...one that cares for thee, and for thy maintenance; commits his body to painful labour...whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe” (V.2.145-150). As Kahn also highlights the interplay of Kate’s tamed words that her speech illustrates Petruchio as “Kate’s savior, the wise man who guides her to a better and truer self, or a clever doctor following homeopathic medicine” but nevertheless, she claims that the audience overlooks the scathing irony whereby “the play satirizes not woman herself in the person of the shrew, but male attitudes toward women” (Kahn, 1977, p. 86). Wayne Rebhorn contends that Kate’s long speech permits her “a measure of independence” as to “resist and even subvert to some degree the male authority which otherwise threatens to possess her totally” (1995, p. 296). Karen Newman (2009) perceives Katherina as a female epitome that rebuffs the power mechanism that controls her as woman. Newman notices Kate’s endeavors to be heard instead of to be seen. Throughout in the play she exhibits herself in shrewish attire that is ostracized by the patriarchal social structures. She renders marriage as an unequal union wherein woman is only considered to be the sexual partner of the man who will bear and nurture his children as Petruchio discerns Kate as ‘My household stuff, my field, my barn,/My horse, my ox, my ass, my anything’(III 2. 231–2), he exemplifies the palpable reality of the marriage in which woman is assumed to be the property of male counterpart. Newman concludes her argument as:

Kate’s having the last word contradicts the very sentiments she speaks; rather than resolve the play’s action, her monologue displays the fundamental contradiction presented by a female protagonist, between women as sexually desirable, silent objects and women of words, women with power over language who disrupt, or at least italicize, women’s place and part in culture. (2009, p. 36)

Katherina’s character exhibits relevance to contemporary times of her indifferent shrewish behaviour that seems justified from the beginning till the end of the play to resist against dominant power structures. Her resistance through her ill-tempered attitude exhibits her knowledge of the power dynamics. After her marriage, she exhibits herself in tamed obedience to exert her autonomy in her domestic sphere where she remains *safe and secure*. In contrast to Kate, Bianca seems unaware of these power dynamics when she displays her obedience to be acceptable by the men once she acquires the functioning of patriarchal hegemony she comes out to be shrew. By highlighting this shrewishness, Shakespeare seems challenging the hierarchical ethics of gender formation. His witty and shrew female characters show that “one is not born woman, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch which is described as feminine” (Beauvoir, 1989, p. 267).

3. Conclusion:

Shakespeare’s writing endeavors to examine human conditions by giving his characters life in diverse plot structures of comedy, tragedy and history. The prodigious diversity and individuation that gave birth to his female characters have made these women universal that seems relevant beyond the specificities of time and space. With his artistic play of universal and essentialist sentiments; love, envy, jealousy, greed, revenge, betrayal, his female characters are engaged in giving vivacious colors to his plays written centuries before. His women remain timeless because they are knowledgeable, wise and intelligent. This study has argued that Shakespearean witty female figure is human above all who is specified in gender formation of conventional patriarchy. Nevertheless, his women deconstruct the superficiality of institutionalized marginalization and

exhibit her prudence by negotiating and manipulating the ethics of male dominance. Her characters display that though they are confined to domesticity but they can make their space even the hostility of oppressions. His female artifice is beyond the stereotypical notions of defiance and deference, obedience and disobedience. These characters appear to be realistic and natural in the situations they have put in. His female antagonist is as sympathetic as admirable his protagonist. As Hankey notes that Shakespeare "looked 'upon women with the spirit of humanity, wisdom, and deep love' and was therefore able to do 'justice to their natural good tendencies and kindly sympathies.' In this way he came to stand as the patron saint of Woman" (Hankey, 1994, p. 427). This study perceives his plays as suggesting contemporary women who are living in strong patriarchal constraints to devise strategic negotiations by using their inherent wit and intelligence for creating ease and comfort in the hostile ambiance.

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