Ophellia’s Struggle in the World of Patriarchy: A Study of Female Victimization in William Shakespeare’s Hamlet

Introduction to the Author:

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ABSTRACT

During the Elizabethan era, generally all the aspects of the English society were dominated by men, which means that England was a patriarchal society. Women were expected to be weak, meek, and subordinate; without any legal independence or any right to freely express their views.

Shakespeare’s characterization of Ophelia in Hamlet illustrates the consequences that an extreme lack of female freedom has upon a woman. In “Reading Ophelia’s Madness”, talking about Ophelia, Gabrielle Dane writes “Motherless and complete circumscribed by the men around her, Ophelia has been shaped to conform to external demands, to reflect others’ desires.”

The principal objective of this study is to address female victimization in William Shakespeare’s Hamlet through the analysis of the bard’s treatment of Ophelia. Ophelia, it seems, is wholly at the mercy of the male figures who envelope her and is certainly portrayed as...
a victim. As a woman, she has lesser options in a patriarchal society compared to her male counterparts. What happens in her life is determined entirely by the whims of the men who control her. Unlike Hamlet, who can act according to his own will and speak his mind as he wants, Ophelia must find an alternative to express herself. The only way left for her is in her madness and eventual death.

**Key words - patriarchy, female victimization, Shakespeare, madness.**

Elizabeth I was on the throne of England during the sixteenth century, yet the social structure during the Elizabethan era allowed very limited opportunity to women. During this era, the Elizabethan society was patriarchal, where men had assumed a dominant social position and women were considered to be the weaker sex. “Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive” (Tyson 85). Patriarchy, as Sylvia Walby describes it, is “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate and exploit women” (Walby 20). And such a subordination of women was prevalent in the male dominated society during the time when William Shakespeare was writing. In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the role of women can be said to be a reflection of the Elizabethan era. The portrayal of Ophelia specifically draws on the fact that society during this era was indeed patriarchal. However, there was no official “patriarchal” system, but “rather an interlocking set of beliefs, assumptions, traditions, and practices” so that “these social arrangements rested on convention rather than law” (Capp 1).

Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, remarks that “from patriarchy’s earliest times [men] have deemed it useful to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes were set up
against her; she was thus concretely established as the Other” (Beauvoir 193). And Gabriel Dane notes that “[m]otherless and completely circumscribed by the men around her, Ophelia has been shaped to conform to external demands, to reflect others’ desires” (Dane 2). This is evident in the character portrayal of Ophelia in *Hamlet*, who is nothing but a mere plaything in the hands of her father and brother. In order to demonstrate the plight of certain women during the Elizabethan and Jacobean times, this paper aims to focus on the victimization of Ophelia who suffers in the hands of the men folk. For the male characters in the play, such as Laertes, Polonius, Claudius, and Hamlet, Ophelia is merely a convenient tool, to be exploited and manipulated. David Leverenz concludes his essay, “The Woman in Hamlet: An Interpersonal View,” commenting on Ophelia’s dramatic function in the play as one where “[e]veryone has used her: Polonius, to gain favor; Laertes, to belittle Hamlet; Claudius, to spy on Hamlet; Hamlet, to express rage at Gertrude and Hamlet again, to express his feigned madness with her as decoy” (Leverenz 302).

Ophelia first appears in Act I, iii, where not only Laertes but also Polonius feels obliged to remind her of the cruelty and torment that Hamlet’s love might cause her and also warns her from losing her virtue. Laertes asks her not to succumb to her desires when she faces Hamlet’s “unmastered importunity” (1.3.192). Regardless of Ophelia’s naivety of her feelings, Laertes subtly implies the possibility of her impetuous lasciviousness thus:

**LAERTES:** Then if he says he loves you,

It fits your wisdom so far to believe it [...]

Then weigh what loss your honour may sustain

If with too credent ear you list his songs

Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open
To his unmastered importunity.

Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister,

And keep within the rear of your affection

Out of the shot and danger of desire. (1.3.23-34)

Laertes asserts that since Hamlet belongs to a higher rank, Ophelia must reject Prince Hamlet before he deflowers her. Before embarking on his journey to Paris, he keeps reminding his sister of his directive to her in order to safeguard her chastity.

To a certain extent, Ophelia, is also oppressed by Polonius' manipulation who warns her from responding to Hamlet's affection as he believes that it is improper for a prince to give an unmarried girl “private time” (1.3.197), and for her to grant him “free and bounteous audience” (1.3.197). On being confronted by both Laertes and Polonius' overprotective advice, Ophelia merely responds, “I do not know, my lord, what I should think” (1.3.198). Here, it is reflected that Ophelia lacked the voice of her own and even the capability to think. Therefore, Polonius teaches her to “think [herself] a baby” (1.3.198). Unlike Gertrude who transgresses the patriarchal bounds of femininity by marrying soon after her husband’s death, Ophelia remains a victim of the patriarchal rules levied on her. She utters words which reflect her deep and genuine sorrow:

OPHELIA: And I, of ladies, most deject and wretched,

That sucked honey of his musicked vows,

Now see what noble and most sovereign reason

Like sweet bells jangled out of time and harsh-
That unmatched form and stature of blown youth

Blasted with ecstasy. O woe is me

T’ve seen what I have seen, see what I see. (3.1.154-160)

According to Sara Meldelson and Patricia Crawford, “[t]he difference between the two sexes was a fundamental principle upon which society was constructed. Writers assumed that woman was inferior to man” (Meldelson, 15). This is evident in the portrayal of Ophelia’s character. Despite her willingness to respond to Hamlet’s ardor, she chooses to obey her brother and father’s command over Hamlet’s affection. Thus, Ophelia is entrapped amid patriarchy.

John Knox is of the opinion that:

Woman in her greatest perfection was made to serve and obey man, not to rule and command him. As St.Paul does reason in these words: ‘Man is not of the woman, but the woman of the man. And man was not created for the cause of the woman; but the woman for the cause of man; and therefore ought the woman to have a power upon her head’ [1 Cor. 11:8-10] (that is a cover in sign of subjection). (Knox 67)

Ophelia is not only forced to repress her feelings for Hamlet, but she is also used by Claudius as a means to investigate into the Prince’s mental condition when he fails to understand the reason behind his son’s deranged behavior. In order to win the favor of the king, Polonius offers his daughter to find out the reason behind Hamlet’s madness. This action shows how she was controlled by the male forces.

The treatment of Ophelia in the hands of Hamlet too reveals her pathetic condition. At one instance of the play when Ophelia wishes to return some “remembrances” (3.1.92) of his, he denies the fact that he had given her anything. When Hamlet denies his affection for her, she fails to comprehend his hostility towards her and protests that he had given them along with
“words of so sweet breath” (3.1.97). Thereafter, Hamlet begins to hurl unkind words to Ophelia.

He does not only refuse to admit his love for Ophelia but also ends up questioning her chastity. Furthermore, he urges Ophelia, “Get thee to a nunnery!” (3.1.120), and then shifts his specific castigation of her to attacking women in general while referring to the lust within women. “Hamlet’s bitter words in [the nunnery] scene are directed not only against Ophelia but also against the world in general,” (Sen 150) says Taraknath Sen. Hamlet’s hatred towards women is reflected in his words like, “Frailty, thy name is Woman” (1.2.146), among many others.' The personification of women as frailty was basically a standard misogynistic attitude prevalent during Shakespeare’s time. Moreover, Sen goes on to claim that “[... when Ophelia repels his letters and denies his access to her, it does not take long for a man of Hamlet's intelligence to realize who is behind that move” (Sen 151). But “[...] his fury against Ophelia personally [is] the result of his knowledge that she was a decoy” (Sen 145). It is due to her meekness that Ophelia fails to assure Hamlet that she was not a part of the “unweeded garden.” After much insult and mockery, Ophelia is devastated and it makes her miserable. Unlike the lover in Andrew Marvell’s To His Coy Mistress where he persuades his mistress to respond to his youthful desire using euphemism in a playful manner, Hamlet uses euphemism in a cruel way to insult Ophelia. Hamlet continues to insult Ophelia even after the nunnery scene. His vicious attitude towards Ophelia is evident here. While watching the performance of the players, Hamlet deliberately sits beside Ophelia and verbally assaults her with bawdy innuendoes. However, Ophelia does not confront his vicious attack with bawdy puns.

Despite the fact that she is forced to live according to the rules of patriarchy, Ophelia does not voice her own thought. Unlike the Duchess in John Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi, who remarries her steward by going against her brothers’ wishes, Shakespeare’s Ophelia does
not speak a word against her father and brother and gradually succumbs to insanity. It is with the arrival of the news of her father’s sudden death that Ophelia crumbles into madness. On being pressurized from different sides, she finds it difficult to retain her sanity. Since she was not allowed by the male forces to reveal her feelings and to protest, she meekly accepts everything. “Passively becoming part of a scheme designed, as far as she can tell, to help Hamlet recover his wits, Ophelia instead loses her own” (Bevington 2). Ophelia in madness reveals particularly the struggle of the female character that endeavors to have a voice of her own.

It is however, her madness which enables her to give voice to her feelings. Ophelia “breaks from the subjection of a vehemently patriarchal society and makes public display, in her verses, of the body she has been taught to suppress” (Salkeld 95). After she becomes mentally deranged, she starts singing songs which indicate how she alternates between father and lover. Her madness is interpreted to be “her liberation from silence, obedience, and constraint or her absolute victimization by patriarchal oppression” (Neely 322). She keeps lamenting her father’s death in her song: “He is dead and gone, lady, / He is dead and gone. / At his head a grass-green turf, / At his heels a stone” (4.5.29-32). She mourns for her father by using various metaphors of flowers: “rosemary”, “pansies”, “fennel”, “columbines”, “daisy”, and “violets”. She also accuses men for exploiting young women sexually: “Young men will do’t if they come to’t, / By Cock, they are to blame” (4.5.60-61). Thus, it is through her madness that she is finally able to express her grief and disgust on being exploited.

When Ophelia sings ballads, she is interrupted not only by Polonius and Claudius, the male members of patriarchy, but also by Gertrude, though a woman herself, appears to play the part of patriarchal repression. Finally, after much suffering on being confined within the patriarchal system, her madness leads to her “death by water” (Jain 55). Even after Ophelia
dies, the men do not really honor her memory during her funeral, rather both Hamlet and Laertes decide to fight a duel on the basis of love for Ophelia. Unlike the play, she is finally given some respect and pity to the situations she was thrust into by the men in her life in Arthur Rimbaud’s poem, *Ophelia*.

Through the portrayal of Ophelia, Shakespeare basically reveals how women were at the mercy of the male-dominated society who dictated the roles of women. Like in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*, where Gilman’s raconteur turns insane due to the restrictions levied on her by patriarchy, Shakespeare’s Ophelia too loses her sanity and finally goes on to meet death. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, thus, acts as a pointer towards the fact that women were not free from the male control and were also constantly monitored by the men folk which is evident in the portrayal of Ophelia’s character.
Notes

1 Hamlet hurls unkind words towards Ophelia and further refers to the lust within women when he addresses Ophelia as “jig”, “amble”, “lisp”, and “nickname God’s creatures”.

2 For further information, see J. Dover Wilson’s What Happens in Hamlet, 101-14, 125-36.

3 Here, daisies signify unrequited love and are appropriate to Ophelia herself; rosemary for remembrance, and pansies for thought are offered to Laertes; fennel was associated with flattery and may be given to the King; either violets signifying fidelity or columbines signifying infidelity may be offered to the Queen.

4 Arthur Rimbaud’s poem Ophelia presents one interpretation of the life of Shakespeare’s Ophelia. Here, the poet uses poetic devises to convey both the beauty of Ophelia’s life and her tragic demise as well. Rimbaud’s poem appears to sympathise with Ophelia. From Rimbaud, we get the idea that Ophelia, in all her innocence and purity, deserved a lot more than what Shakespeare has offered her in the play.
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