On the Patriarchal Ideology Represented in Shakespeare’s Three Tragedies: The Tragedy of King Lear, Othello, and Macbeth

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How to cite this paper: Ji Hu. (2024) On the Patriarchal Ideology Represented in Shakespeare’s Three Tragedies: The Tragedy of King Lear, Othello, and Macbeth. Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science, 8(6), 1429-1433. DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2024.06.021

Received: May 6, 2024
Accepted: June 4, 2024
Published: July 2, 2024

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Abstract

Shakespeare lived in the English Renaissance period in the late 16th and early 17th century, which like our present world, was also dominated by patriarchal ideology. As a social subject, Shakespeare was inevitably influenced by the patriarchal ideology pervasive in society and internalized this kind of ideology. The internalization had an impact on his literary creation. In Shakespeare’s tragedies, the female characters are usually negatively portrayed. In this paper, I will provide an analysis of the female characters in three of Shakespeare's tragedies, The Tragedy of King Lear, Othello, and Macbeth from a feminist critical perspective. I will argue that these three tragedies demonstrate Shakespeare's typical influence by patriarchal ideology, leading him to portray female characters in negative ways, whether consciously or unconsciously. The negative-portrayed female characters in the three tragedies are only foils to the positive images of male characters, and through this kind of negative characterization of female characters Shakespeare justifies and thus promotes the patriarchy.

Keywords

Shakespeare, patriarchal ideology, tragedy, female character

In history, patriarchy has long been the established institution in human society, “The very word, ‘patriarchy’, describes a sociopolitical ideology based on the father as a ruler” (Aughterson Kate & Ailsa Grant Ferguson, 2020). The patriarchal ideology has been dominant in most periods since the Slave Society, though feminism rose at the beginning of the 20th century. William Shakespeare, the greatest English writer, lived in the English Renaissance period. As a social subject, he was inevitably influenced by and internalized the patriarchal ideology pervasive in human society. This is reflected in his literary creation. Though some female characters such as Potia in The Merchant of Venice are positive and brilliant, they are still subordinate to the main male characters. In Shakespeare’s tragedies, the female characters are usually negatively portrayed. In this paper, I will give an analysis of the female characters in three tragedies of Shakespeare from a feminist point of view to show that Shakespeare was typically influenced by patriarchal ideology and consciously or unconsciously portrayed female characters in a negative way.

Feminism, at first, is “a movement, which demands the removal of all social-political, economic, and other discriminations which are based upon sex, and the award of all rights and duties in all fields on the basis of individual capacity alone” (Adele Heller & Lois Rudnick, 1991). Afterwards, it was applied to literary criticism. “Broadly defined, feminist criticism examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women” (Tyson Lois, 2023). Patriarchal ideology is composed of systemized norms and values which promote traditional gender roles. Androcentrism is sexist, which means it justifies the innate superiority of men over women. This belief that women are inferior is called
biological essentialism because it is constructed on the basis of biological differences between men and women which are considered as an inherent essence of men and women.

In literature, male writers were dominant for a long time, and there were few female writers before the Renaissance in literary history. In the works of male writers, there is often sexism and objectification of female characters. As a social subject, Shakespeare also internalized patriarchal values and norms; most of his plays are “relentlessly male-centered” (Alfar Cristina León, 2019). In his tragedies, Shakespeare consciously or unconsciously reinforces the patriarchal ideology through the negative characterization of female characters. In this paper, I will examine the main female characters in three tragedies of Shakespeare, The Tragedy of King Lear, Othello, and Macbeth, to show the patriarchal ideology embodied in his dramatic works. The female characters are Desdemona in Othello, Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia in The Tragedy of King Lear, and Lady Macbeth in Macbeth. Some of them internalize patriarchal ideology and are willing to conform to patriarchal values, others are demonized or negatively portrayed in the case of violating the patriarchal norms.

1. Female characters that conform to patriarchal values and norms

One of the most important patriarchal norms is the traditional gender role. The females who conform to patriarchal values are “good girls” and those who do not conform are “bad girls.” The good girls are gentle, submissive, sexually pure, and angelic, while the bad girls are violent, aggressive, worldly, and monstrous. A female should be a good girl, or she will be an evil monster. Desdemona in Othello is a pure daughter and perfect wife. She is the sacrifice to the patriarchal sexual norms. Just as Linda Woodbridge points out: “Although Desdemona is no domineering shrew, her behaviour at one point comes dangerously close to stereotype” (Woodbridge Linda, 1984). In this drama, Desdemona breaks worldly values and marries Othello, the middle-aged moorish general in the Venetian State, in secret without her father’s permit and she is despised and deserted by her father. But Othello is a credulous man who only knows military affairs. He believes Iago’s words and doubts Desdemona’s loyalty, which leads him to smother her in her bed. After that, Emilia who is Desdemona’s maidservant exposes the evilness of her husband, Iago. Othello realizes his mistake and commits suicide. In this play, Desdemona is a perfect innocent wife. She does not have any doubt about Othello’s love for her. Even though she is doubted by Othello, she does not do anything going against the patriarchal moral values for women. Despite her first extraordinarily spirited behavior at the beginning of the play, she “becomes the most conventional spouse” (Sinfield Alan, 1992). From this point of view, she is totally a victim of patriarchal ideology. Her victimization is because of Othello’s requirement of faithfulness for her and also because of her internalization of patriarchal values and norms.

Brabantio is Desdemona’s father. When he knows that Desdemona marries Othello in secret, he is angry beyond his control. In act two of scene one, he thinks that his daughter has been stolen and insulted, and she has fallen under the temptation of other’s. Brabantio thinks that a normal person like his daughter without physical disability will not make such kind of mistake if she is enchanted by others: “If she in chains of magic were not bound, … Of arts inhibited and out of warrant” (Shakespeare William, 2020). Brabantio has a ideal of his daughter that she must be a pure, good girl instead of being depraved one. Being a pure, good girl, she cannot be independent and choose her husband freely by herself. She must obey the decision of her father, or she is depraved. In Brabantio’s mind, she has been a cute, submissive daughter all the time, and this role of hers makes him very satisfied, but the braveness in her love with Othello makes Brabantio feel her disobedience. This is her only firmness in the play, which starts her tragic life.

Desdemona is delicate, innocent, and simple-hearted. She chooses Othello to be her husband only because she hears the story of Othello and deeply admires Othello: “When I did speak of some distressful stroke That my youth suffered. My being done, she gave me for my pains a world of sighs: She swore, in faith, ’twas strange, ’twas passing strange…” (2020). So, Desdemona is a sentimental girl who needs protection. After the marriage, she goes to the frontier with her husband on her honeymoon. She waits for her husband in home and scrupulously fulfills the duties of a wife, treats her husband with affection, and does the work arranged by her husband. Even when Othello doubts her loyalty and thinks she has committed adultery with Cassio, she still accuses herself and tries to retrieve his heart. She asks Iago how to retrieve the love of her husband. This subjection to her husband makes her lose her status and dare not to resist and even does not how to deal with the rebuke of her husband, she wants to retrieve her husband’s love in a female way and tries to please her husband by being a qualified wife. She also pays much attention to chastity. She says that: “I cannot say “whore.” It does abhor me now I speak the word; To do the act that might the addition earn Not the world’s mass of vanity could make me” (2020). From this, we know that Desdemona has
internalized the patriarchal values. When Emilia enlighten her by telling her that “Then let them use us well: else let them know, the ills we do, their ills instruct us so” (2020), she does not agree with her words. Even when Othello wants to kill her she only begs for mercy instead of resisting him.

Desdemona, in her inner heart, is a submissive daughter and a chaste wife. Before her marriage, she depended on her father, and after marriage, she attached herself to her husband. She identified with patriarchal sexual values; when she is misunderstood, she does not know refutation and resistance. She even argues to Emilia in support of Othello, the murderer, before her death. It is the delicateness and submission that murder her. Corresponding to the image of Desdemona, it is the image of Othello. After he finds the handkerchief, Othello turns into a fierce and cruel man from his tender husband. By verbal violence, he lets Desdemona swear that she is chaste and lets her go to hell after her death. He says that Desdemona is not chaste though she appears to be an angel and she should go to hell after death for her unchastity and false swearing. After he kills Desdemona, he still thinks his act is right and justifiable. He argues that Desdemona has to die, or she will harm more men. All the virtues of Desdemona disappear in the so-called unchastity in Othello’s words. Once a female loses the label of chastity, she should go to hell; this is typical of patriarchal values and norms.

He does not want to do an investigation, and makes a groundless accusation, and tortures his wife to confess to his false charge, then kills Desdemona. This proves that chastity is so clear a bottom line in his heart that it cannot be touched. “The values of chastity specify the sexual identity, and it is the product of androcentrism. It is the cultural identity of females without any biological significance. This is the deprival of the subjectivity of females and the abuse of patriarchal discourse” (Faculty, 2009). All these are obvious embodiments of patriarchal ideology.

2. Female characters are full of negative portrayals

If Shakespeare is regretful to Desdomona, then he does denounce and castigate the female characters full of negative characteristics such as Goneril, Regan, and Lady Macbeth. They are full-on demons opposite to the angel-like females. They are embodiments of the scare and abomination of male to female and they are also a reflection of the peremptoriness and selfishness of male gender.

2.1 Immoral, evil, and brutal Goneril and Regan

King Lear is a famous tragedy of Shakespeare. In this play, Shakespeare projects the subjective consciousness and prejudice of males on the characterization of female characters. The female characters are divided into angel-like characters and demon-like characters. Goneril and Regan are typical demon-like characters.

Fierceness, toughness, selfishness, and cold-bloodedness are the substitutes for demon-like females. Goneril and Regan are unfilial to their father, King Lear, and they are disloyal to their husband. They are overweingly ambitious and eager for power. They actively grab what they want rather than be passive subordinate objects. They do not want to obey patriarchal rules and become obedient daughters and considerate wives but strive for political rights like men. They are just the object of condemnation and lash of males. Goneril and Regan are downright negative characters with astounding bestiality. Though they are noble princesses and should receive good education, pure and nice feelings never appear on them. Their driving their father out of their home and their mutual killing have already deprived them of their last humanity.

Under Shakespeare’s pen, Goneril and Regan are only depicted as greedy, atrocious, shameless, and lascivious. No doubt, the writing that only focuses on the defects of women demonizes females and alludes to the authority of men over women and the requirement for female obedience and consistency to males. If this requirement is not fulfilled, the woman will be portrayed as a demon without any human nature.

2.2 Lady Macbeth: the witch perplexed by material desires

*Macbeth* is one of the four great tragedies of Shakespeare. This play represents Macbeth’s indulging in the three witches’ prophecies and going to destruction in his pursuit of power. This play is full of ghostly and demonized female characters. Except for the three witches, Lady Macbeth is a thorough demon with evil, wicked words and acts.

Lady Macbeth is a ferocious, malicious, completely ruthless female. She is neither kind-hearted nor gentle, totally different from many other female characters. She is a thorough negative image and is unscrupulous in achieving her goals. It is she that leads to Macbeth, the hero’s falling. In the play, she is a witch and a danger-maker. Her image is also a reflection of Shakespeare’s internalization of patriarchal ideology and his stereotype of females. As Joanna
Levin asserts: “The construction of the demonic woman and the hysteric equally depended upon an eroticized concept of feminine frailty and imperfection” (2002).

She says to Macbeth: “I have given suck and know How tender ’tis to love the babe that milks me: I would, while it was smiling in my face, have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums and dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you have done to this” (Bloom Harold, 2019). In the play, Shakespeare strips maternity from Lady Macbeth and characterizes her as an extremely vicious devil. She puts poison in the drink of the guards and instigates Macbeth to kill the King. Compared with her, Macbeth is the weak who is instigated by his wife to murder; he hesitates and does not consider that the king should be killed, but instigated continuously by the lady, he just kills the king in his illusion. This seems to show that Lady Macbeth is the real criminal, while Macbeth is just confused.

In Macbeth, Lady Macbeth is just characterized like this. She is brilliant in appearance, but gloomy in her inner heart. The play almost attributes the crimes to her as if she is the initiator of the evil. She becomes the vicious woman to be cursed and spit on. This demonization reflects the ideal of females in men’s minds: they cannot pursue luxury enjoyment, let alone manipulate males. She can only wait for man’s saving and guidance. This shows the androcentrism and patriarchal values.

3. Female characters who do heteromorphous resistance

In Shakespeare’s tragedies, there are also resistant female characters, but their resistances are heteromorphous, and they serve as a foil to the brilliant image of male characters. They have internalized patriarchal values and their spirits are bound by males.

3.1 The resistance of Desdemona

In Othello, Desdemona has some consciousness of resistance to some extent. Her disobedience to her father is a kind of manifestation. Nonetheless, this resistance is heteromorphous, and it is a compromise to the patriarchal society; she gets rid of her father’s physical constraint but is imprisoned in Othello in spirit.

For marrying Othello, Desdemona breaks with her father. She says; “My noble father, … Due to the Moor my lord” (Shakespeare William, 2020). Her resistance makes her throw off her father’s constraint; it is a challenge to patriarchal norms, but its motive and result is to move to another man and fulfill her duty as a wife. Actually, it is to seek the protection and care of another man.

By nature, Desdemona’s image is just to pursue limited “freedom” within the scope of patriarchal ideology. She throws off her father’s constraint physically but is imprisoned in spirit by Othello. In this constraint and dependence, she resists marriage, but becomes a subsidiary of Othello; she resists her chastity by death but foregrounds the great image of Othello. As a female, she not only does not get real freedom but also becomes trouble maker causing the fight between two men. Desdemona still needs to surrender to patriarchal society again and deliver power to males and becomes the victim of patriarchy unconsciously.

3.2 Cordelia’s resistance

In King Lear, Cordelia is an honest, righteous, and dutiful female character. She refuses to be a gentle, submissive “good girl,” and thus offends her father, King Lear. She says honestly “Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave My heart into my mouth: I love your majesty According to my bond, no more nor less” (Shakespeare William, 2020). In her words, her father expresses his dissatisfaction and warns her to mend her speech, but she refuses to make her father satisfied. She says “Good my lord, … Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters” (2020). Nonetheless, actually, her rejection of patriarchal traditional gender roles is unconscious. She does not intend to resist the patriarchal values and norms; she just does not want to cheat her father. But this is intolerable to her father, and he punishes her for her refusal to be submissive and renounces his relationship with her, and thus deprives her of dower. Thus, she gets a punishment for her unintended rejection of patriarchal values. It is obvious her rejection of traditional gender roles is unconscious. Her later dependence on her husband, the King of France, shows that she never means to resist patriarchal norms. Though she does not rebel against patriarchy, Shakespeare also does not portray her in a positive way, and she dies without any significance and value. We have to say that Shakespeare is sexist in nature.

4. Conclusion

In these two tragedies, Shakespeare shows the influence of patriarchal ideology on him in the characterization of
female characters. Generally speaking, the female characters in these tragedies are negatively portrayed, compared with the positive or brilliant images of male characters in the plays. So, we can say that the negative-portrayed female characters are foils to the positive images of male characters, and through this kind of negative characterization of female characters Shakespeare justifies and thus promotes the patriarchy.

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