

SHAKESPEARE AS A PROTOFEMINIST PLAYWRIGHT: A STUDY OF POLITICAL AWARENESS IN GONERILL AND REGAN

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ABSTRACT

Calling King Lear, a feminist play is something difficult because many readers will not accept it, because it condemns politically ambitious women i.e. Gonerill and Regan and praises a feminine woman i.e. Cordelia. Apparently, it does not seem to be a feminist play but structure of the play has enough substance to prove it a feminist play. During its presentation, Gonerill and Regan dominate the stage for most of the time they are only second to King Lear as in number of dialogues delivered. King Lear embodies voices of different social-groups such as women, illegitimate children, patriarchal ideology, monarchy, faithful servants etc. and the voice of dominant groups seems to succeed. However, it is not the reality because success of various ideologies depends on both their execution in the play and manifestation in the outer society. Portrayal of Gonerill and Regan becomes even more important when we investigate the position and role of women in the England of Elizabethan era. During this period, women were expected to fulfill a variety of domestic roles in society, including roles to serve their husbands and children. Women were supposed to be beautiful, meek, obliging creatures. Literary works reflected and strengthened this social tendency.

Key Words: *Feminist, ideologies, socio-political, Elizabethan era, Renaissance theorists, structural compulsion, patriarchal, market capitalism*

I. Introduction

Calling *King Lear*, a feminist play is something difficult because many readers will not accept it, because it condemns politically ambitious women i.e. Gonerill and Regan and praises a feminine woman i.e. Cordelia. Apparently, it does not seem to be a feminist play but structure of the play has enough substance to prove it a feminist play. During its presentation, Gonerill and Regan dominate the stage for most of the time they are only second to King Lear as in number of dialogues delivered. Once King Lear divides his kingdom, he loses his power to act and become a passive character. Cordelia disappears from the stage in Act I Scene I and appears only towards the end. In short, Gonerill and Regan rule the stage, remain active, and deliver powerful speeches therefore they are the real protagonists of the play despite the fact that they are condemned throughout the play.

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King Lear embodies voices of different social-groups such as women, illegitimate children, patriarchal ideology, monarchy, faithful servants etc. and the voice of dominant groups seems to succeed. However, it is not the reality because success of various ideologies depends on both their execution in the play and manifestation in the outer society. For example, despite the fact that all movies condemn the criminals and they are punished at the end the crime is increasing. It is so because art provides various possibilities for doing both good and bad things and many times people start imitating the bad character if they are well executed. In this sense, a work of art provides diverse possibilities to various segments of the society. Shakespeare in *King Lear* also provides a new and adventures possibility for women i.e. getting political power. In *King Lear* there are three major women characters who represent two different and opposite social forces. In the portrayal of Gonerill and Regan Shakespeare is a feminist who portrays woman as a politically conscious being and a ruler. However, he denounces them in very severe terms but this denunciation was both a socio-political and artistic compulsion for the writer if he wants success in the market. Cordelia is an example of what the society wants from a woman. In other words, Cordelia represents the social notion of woman and Gonerill and Regan represent the social, political, and economic aspirations of a woman. Some of Shakespeare's contemporaries created powerful women characters in their plays such as Duchess of Malfi in the play of same name and Bel-Imperia in *The Spanish Tragedy*. However, none of these characters treads into the political field to grab power. Duchess of Malfi marries her own steward, which is a revolutionary step that empowers women to choose her partner, but her brothers kill her for doing so. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, the family kills Bel-Imperia's lover and she takes revenge by killing her own family member. It was a revolutionary step because here a revenge-taking woman is made into the protagonist. None of these characters was denounced in the respective plays because these plays do not portray political aspirations of a woman, which keeps the male hegemony in the field of politics intact. The case of *King Lear* is quite different; the characters of Gonerill and Regan are far more radical, unlike the Duchess and Bel-Imperia they are politically conscious and active they want to grab power in all spheres of life be it political, social or familial. They depend neither on their father nor on their husbands. Though Shakespeare has denounced them through various characters, still he has put in a lot of labor in the portrayal of these characters. To non-feminists the protagonists of the play are King Lear and Cordelia but to feminists Gonerill and Regan are the real protagonists.

Portrayal of Gonerill and Regan becomes even more important when we investigate the position and role of women in the England of Elizabethan era. During this period, women were expected to fulfill a variety of domestic roles in society, including roles to serve their husbands and children. Women were supposed to be beautiful, meek, obliging creatures. Literary works reflected and strengthened this social tendency. Most of the literary artists including Shakespeare followed this theory because the Renaissance theorists held that art was, or should be a construction of human reason, continuing, and completing the work of nature. Their view of organized society, which was based on the concept that the whole universe was governed by divine will, was the dominant opinion of the age. Under their influence people believed that Nature was God's instrument, the social hierarchy a product of Nature. It followed for Tudor theorists that subordination and unity were the natural rules for families and corporations and, above all, for the state, a 'body politic' that should be subject to a single head. The state was concerned with men's souls as much as their goods. However, at the same time, the order founded on Nature existed for man's benefit, and man as such was an integral part of it. Under the influence of this

concept after 1600, then, the theatres were quick to satirize social climbers and projectors, and tried to save the souls of common people on the behalf of the state.

Cordelia is a perfect representative of this ideology propounded by Tudor theorists. Through all her dialogues, she speaks for and strengthens the patriarchal needs of the society that divides the love and responsibility of women between fathers, husbands, and sons. Cordelia calls it social bond when she says, "I love your majesty/ According to my bond; nor more nor less." (William Shakespeare: 9). She further clarifies her position in particular and position of all women in general when she says: "Good my lord,/ You have begot me, bred me, loved me: I/ Return those duties back as are right fit,/ Obey you, love you, and most honor you." (William Shakespeare: 9-10). She not only confirms her position at par with Tudor ideology but also questions her sisters who profess all love for their father. When she says: "Why have my sisters husbands, if they say/ They love you all?" (William Shakespeare: 9-10). Apparently, this statement shows that Gonerill and Regan are telling lies but its hidden intention is to show that a woman cannot keep on loving her father in the same manner once she is married. This hidden agenda is confirmed when she says: "Haply, when I shall wed, / That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry / Half my love with him, half my care and duty: / Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters, / To love my father all." (William Shakespeare: 9-10).

In practical life, it seems impossible that a woman reduces her love to 50% towards her father when she is married. This mathematical division of love is not possible. In some cases women do live with some male through marriage beget children but do not love that man at all. In this sense, Gonerill and Regan are better representative of women found in real society. On the other hand, Cordelia is a representative of ideal women: ideal according to patriarchal society.

Though Shakespeare portrays Cordelia as an ideal woman still he challenges patriarchal division of woman's love and care because he does not write even a single line about how Cordelia's husband takes half of her love. Rather the structure of the play shows that whole of the love care and duty of Cordelia is directed only towards her Father whom she fails to satisfy verbally when he asks her to profess her love for him. In other words, we can say that Cordelia is a feminine character as far as her dialogues are concerned but she is an independent woman when it comes to her action because she loses her life for her father only. Her effort to save Lear springs from her independent spirit that does not recognize the social bond professed by her. However, the death of Cordelia was a political and structural compulsion, because primarily the king could not be portrayed unloved and Cordelia was the only person who could be given this role. Secondly, if Cordelia saves the King it could be possible only through French attack on England that could not be staged before the King of England. Therefore, this independence of Cordelia was a political compulsion. Otherwise, throughout most of the play she represents a kind of feminine passivity desired by male centric society of the age. She does not exhibit the efficient and political use of language, which was considered a demerit for women. She herself says, "What shall Cordelia do? Love, and be silent"(William Shakespeare: 98). when her father, the king asks how much she loves him she says "nothing" and displeases her father. However, as a representative of social hierarchies she clearly gives a message that once a woman is married her husband becomes her lord and everything. This ideology was put in the mouth of Cordelia to please male audience (husbands and to be husbands) who formed the bulk of audience and wanted their wives to be faithful to them. This feminine quality is well recognized and rewarded through the dialogues of the king of France who says: "Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich, being poor; / Most

choice, forsaken; and most loved, despised! / Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon:"(William Shakespeare: 109).

He accepts her as his wife without dowry. This scene very clearly advocates the subversive social role for women. Towards the end, Cordelia dies in her attempt to save her father. This scene pleases the male audience (fathers) again. In other words, Cordelia is created to please the patriarchal society and it was necessary for the immediate success of the play. Death of Cordelia in one sense stands for the death of most efficient advocate of patriarchal system. This quality makes her virtuous in the eyes of patriarchal critics who were shocked to see the death of Cordelia; Nahum Tate even revised the ending of the play. All these critics were shocked not by the death of a woman but by the death of a staunch supporter of patriarchy, that shakes the foundation of patriarchy otherwise Cordelia is an irrational and timid character, who does not act when a few words from her could have saved many lives and acts at wrong time and loses her own life. Still she is mourned greatly because patriarchal society loves timid women more than rational women. To a feminist and a person who believes in the equality of sexes it was the death of Gonerill and Regan that is more tragic and irrationally forced. Furthermore, the circumstances in which Gonerill and Regan die are not revealed. Their death is only reported by a gentleman who tells that both ladies killed each other. The circumstances in which both of them die leaves some doubt in the minds a feminist reader that perhaps another political group murders them.

There are three social climbers in the play: Edmund, Regan, and Gonerill. All of them refuse to accept their passive roles imposed upon them by the society. They make a very cunning use of language to achieve their aim. However, the writer in particular and many readers in general condemn them for their cunning use of language. Shakespeare seems to stand for the social hierarchy but he also gives space to the muted groups and let them speak. Taking the pre-existing socio-political circumstances as background the characters with mutated genes were treated as unnatural and condemned. However, they are the most important characters for they represent the emergent consciousness of the age. The two daughters, by their actions, by what they say, and by the imagery of beasts of prey so consistently associate with them; represent a ferocious emergence of individualist consciousness even among women. In this sense Gonerill and Regan are the representative of "a new kind of self" that "emerged in the Renaissance, the expressive, oftentimes, violently willful bourgeois individual, who sought wealth and power in the evolving world of early market capitalism. This self finds expression in Shakespeare's tragic character, from Hamlet to Lear. This self-expression or Willfulness is always depicted as tragic because Shakespeare himself, though a son of bourgeois parents, was a member of the court, a player for the King" (Julie Rivkin and Michel Ryon: 239). In this sense the conflict between Gonerill and Regan on the one hand and Cordelia. Lear and Kent on the other can be seen as a conflict between the old and the new. Here the most significant thing is that Shakespeare has chosen two women Gonerill and Regan to represent the new. These ambitious women die a tragic death because:

His (Shakespeare's) works cohere with the "public world of emotions" of which he was a part. While expressing the bourgeois illusion that the world is a field for the free play of self will, he also therefore argues in *King Lear* especially, in favour of the court's "coercive imposition of its will" on the emergent bourgeoisie. All of the willful characters in his plays must end tragically. (Julie Rivkin and Michel Ryon: 239).

Medieval social structure, on the one hand and emergence of capitalistic society on the other hand serves as father and mother for Shakespearean Drama. The union of these two traditions gives birth to Shakespeare, the dramatist. Apparently, Shakespeare seems to favor dominant social structure but as he gives more space to his representatives of new tendencies so he favors the marginalized sections of the society.

On the surface level, *King Lear* seems a tragedy of an old king who gives his whole property to his two daughters who later on ill-treats him. However, at deeper level the play depicts the conflict between various forces “in a century of steeply rising prices” that “brought about radical changes in the composition of society” and “a new spirit of composition loosened the whole social hierarchy”(L.G. Salingar: 170).

This struggle between ideologies manifests not only at textual level but also at social level. At both levels it is projected and imposed, that women are always softhearted, if they are not so, it is treated as unnatural and a sin. Woman with unwomanly qualities are always condemned in all medieval and Renaissance literature in general and in Shakespearean drama in particular such as Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Gonerill and Regan in *King Lear*. It is projected that a woman inherits *womanly* qualities genetically. That is why Lear curses his daughters Gonerill and Regan for *unwomanly* nature:

LEAR. It may be so, lord
Hear, Nature, hear! dear Goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful!
Into her womb convey sterility!
Dry up in her the organs of increase
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honour her! (William Shakespeare: 51)

Social nature is allied with biological nature that supports the socio-genetic dimension of social discourses. Social qualities are shown as genetic traits, and it is believed that if a woman loses her *Womanly* qualities, she will also lose her natural ability to give birth. However, when Lear is rendered incapable to act and starts cursing his two daughters, he takes up feminine qualities i.e. passivity. Here Shakespeare can be seen as a revolutionary who reverses the social roles of men and women, and shows that these ambitious women are a challenge to the masculine society as confessed by Lear:

LEAR: I'll tell thee. [To GONERILL.] Life and death! I am ashamed
That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus;
That these hot tears, which break from me perforce,
Should make thee worth them. Blasts and fogs upon thee!
Th'untented woundings of a father's curse
Pierce every sense about thee! Old fond eyes,

Beweep this cause again, I'll pluck ye out,
And cast you, with the waters that you lose,
To temper clay. (William Shakespeare: 134).

Based on the textual evidences we can say that the ambitious women, who have always formed a good proportion in the society, can see Gonerill and Regan as good examples. They are more rational than Cordelia who is very clearly made into an object of pity forcibly. They are very much aware of the nature and temperament of Lear. They are not greedy because they do not eye Cordelia's share as thought by some of the readers. They just want to save their share only when they express their love for the King because the father who is a king with unpredictable temperament demanded it. If Cordelia fails to do so and forfeits her share, it is not their fault. Even though their father, the King gives them Cordelia's share they are not blinded by this favor. The following conversation between Gonerill and Regan is a good example of their understanding of the King's nature.

GONERILL: You see how full of changes his age is; the observation
we have made of it hath not been little: he always loved our
sister most; and with what poor judgment he hath now cast
her off appears too grossly.

REGAN: 'Tis the infirmity of his age: yet he hath ever but slenderly
known himself.

GONERILL: The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash;
then must we look to receive from his age, not alone the
imperfections of long-engrafted condition, but therewithal the
unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with
them.

REGAN: Such unconstant starts are we like to have from him as this
of Kent's banishment. (William Shakespeare: 111).

This possession of knowledge by women and its use for their own self was considered a demerit during Elizabethan period. That is why they meet a tragic end like witches who were burned on stakes for having dark knowledge. Once the King divides his Crown between Gonerill and Regan, he becomes an ordinary citizen but he still wants to keep hundred soldiers that is not possible politically and therefore Gonerill says:

I do beseech you
To understand my purposes aright:
As you are old and reverend, you should be wise.
Here do you keep a hundred knights and squires;

Men so disorder'd, so debosh'd and bold, (William Shakespeare: 130).

Their fears regarding the attitude of Lear's knights is very true keeping in mind people like Kent who are ready to fight any moment on slightest of provocation and without provocation some times. As they are, rulers now they are thinking like rulers now and there is nothing wrong with this type of thinking because no sane ruler will allow two nations in one nation that is why Gonerill says:

GONERILL: This man hath had good counsel. A hundred knights!

'Tis politic and safe to let him keep

At point a hundred knights: yes, that, on every dream,

Each buzz, each fancy, each complaint, dislike,

He may enguard his dotage with their powers,

And hold our lives in mercy. Oswald, I say! (William Shakespeare: 130).

Regan supports her sister when she expresses the similar fears and says: "How, in one house,/Should many people, under two commands,/Hold amity? 'Tis hard; almost impossible." (William Shakespeare: 169). Furthermore, they are not against Lear, the father but it was impossible for them to accommodate Lear, the King. They try to convince Lear to behave like a father because now he is only a father and not a king. Gonerill requests her father "Hear me, my lord:/What need you five and twenty, ten, or five, /To follow in a house where twice so many/Have a command to tend you?" (William Shakespeare: 170). But Lear is not ready to accept this advice and the play is structured to make Gonerill and Regan villains. Their villainy is further highlighted when Cordelia comes to help Lear but when she comes Lear is not behaving like a king not even a father and therefore it is always easy to help a helpless mad man than an arrogant and temperamental King. However, we should not forget that this structure was a compulsion for making the play successful. After challenging the male authority as father, Gonerill challenges the male authority as husband when she challenges her husband: "Say, if I do, the laws are mine, not thine:/Who can arraign me for't"(William Shakespeare: 253). She again called monstrous by her husband. Here again exercising one's authority is not wrong and Albany's criticism is very irrational.

Gonerill and Regan represent the mutations in the concept of *perfectwoman*; Cordelia embodies the concept of *perfectwoman*. In this way, she serves as a carrier of socio-genetic code of a *perfectwoman*. Plot of the play is constructed in a way to arouse pity for Cordelia and reader feel sympathy for her and tries to imitate her. The socio-linguistic genes presented in the form of Cordelia's character, enter the mind of reader, replicate there, and manifest in the form of male hegemony over women, by persuading them to take up *Womanly* role. During medieval ages, girl child is considered only a guest in her parent's house, who is to be gifted. They are not supposed to have deep love relation with their parental family. On the other hand, the socio-linguistic genes presented in the form of Gonerill and Regan enter the mind of conscious woman reader, replicate there, and manifest in the form of challenge to male hegemony over women, by persuading them to take up independent roles.

Shakespeare becomes a carrier of patriarchal ideology when he condemns ambitious women through the characters of Gonerill and Regan. Acceptance of dominant ideology is considered a virtue, which is projected

through praise of Cordelia who asserts her personality only as per the social bond. To make it more convincing, authentic, and hence effective, Shakespeare makes Cordelia declare herself “richer” than her sisters:

COR. I yet beseech your majesty,

(If for I want that glib and oily art

To speak and purpose not, since what I will intend,

I'll do't before I speak), ...

But even for want of that for which I am richer, (William Shakespeare: 107).

Struggle between these two ideologies in the plays is actually taking place in the mind of Shakespeare himself. Traditions, customs, and social conventions pull the writer in one direction and make him to create characters of Cordelia, Kent and Edmund; changing socio-political and economic conditions of the age exert pressure on the poet and compel him to give voice to muted groups like woman and bastards who question the social structure.

Shakespeare condemns ambitious women like Lady Macbeth, Gonerill, and Regan, who possess many qualities, under the pressure of dominant ideology of the age. But even this portrayal (though for condemnation) of the woman who violate the socio-genetic code, come out of domestic life and think of possessing power and self, hints at the changes taking place at socio-genetic level that paved way for the concept of independent women of today.

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