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A Critical Insight into the Character of Cleopatra in Shakespeare's tragedy; *Antony and Cleopatra* where She is both a victim of male domination as well as a subverter of male authority

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Abstract

The paper attempts to demonstrate the character of Cleopatra from Shakespeare's work of tragedy – Antony and Cleopatra. Efforts are made to depict the reversal of gender positions as with the progression of the play the woman character of Cleopatra becomes powerful and masculine whereas Antony comes to represent more feminine aspects. The renaissance period's societal setup also echoes in the plays setup as women in the public sphere are a reason of mistrust, uneasiness and anxiety. The thorough critical approach of the character of Cleopatra only makes her more human with all her flaws imperfections. Further, feminist and post colonial approaches are also discussed in the paper to provide an in-depth and justified study of her personality. Hence, Cleopatra becomes a representative of women empowerment by playing an active role in questioning the societal norms and values. Thereby, making her one of the most remembered characters of Shakespeare's plays.

Keywords- *Conspiracy, Complexity, Imperfections, Victim*

Introduction

Considered as probably the subtlest and the greatest play in Shakespeare as G. W. Knight calls it- Antony and Cleopatra was a tragedy believed to have been written sometime between 1603-1607. Inspired from Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's "Life of Marcus Antonius", it is a drama of love, history, morality and politics which has combination of striking incidents, complex characterizations and exuberant eloquence. In the following paragraphs we shall deal with the characterization of one of the protagonists Cleopatra in detail.

She is a woman of infinite variety, Cleopatra is the queen of Egypt full of wiles, teasing, lustful, whimsical and capable of fuelling the desires while cloying. Age had no effect on her and her

beauty remains ageless- “Age cannot whither her...” She is cast into two contradictory roles which are closely connected to the structure of the play: she is at once the victim of male domination and conqueror of male territory. As a victim, she shares a range of masks, tricks and entertainments with the other kinds of suppressed and oppressed people be it the Jews, blacks, for she is made to conform to the popular image of a woman as constructed by the Shakespearean age. For the sake of her love and protection of her kingdom, she must devise various means to keep Antony in Egypt and to guard him from boredom by providing entertainment, feasting, drinking and amusing escapades. She asks him how much he loves her-“If it be love indeed, tell me how much..” and taunts him on his subservience to Fulvia or Caesar until he pays her a compliment. She even goes to the extent of sending a false message to Antony that she was dead and that the last words on her lips were “Antony”.

Cleopatra as a victim of male domination is reduced to being a “strumpet” (I,i). Infact, as Edward Said notes the image of Cleopatra goes on to represent an unconscious but gradual eroticization of Egypt which comes under the term “orientalism”-a way the west has of constructing and looking at the east, the unfamiliar, and the exotic. Therefore, the idea of the - ‘Other’ also comes to the forefront .Similarly, from a Post-Colonial perspective the character of Shakespeare’s Cleopatra becomes a strong portrayal of the idea of ‘Subaltern’ and reminds one of Spivak’s essay – ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ In fact, Critic Dymphna Callaghan in her essay on “Representing Cleopatra in the Post – Colonial Moment” curiously questions ‘whether Cleopatra can function as anything other than an exotic, racially marked heroine who is yet another manifestation of “Orientalism”’. This is aptly visible in the male chauvinistic society of Rome where one witnesses the character of Agrippa being very abusive to Cleopatra when discussing her with Maecenas and Enobarbus- “Royal wench..!” The choric commentator, Enobarbus too doesn’t stay behind as it is through his mouth piece does the famous speech of Cleopatra’s description at the river Cydnus is delivered. Here too her description has lot of sexual innuendos as he goes on to praise the beauty of her body. Clearly, a description with sordid commentary. Antony, Cleopatra’s Roman lover too doesn’t spare her as he goes on to call her a “foul Egyptian”, “triple turn’d whore” (IV,xii). Further, her reference to Caesar at the end of the play as “My master and my lord” (V,ii), itself is enough to establish the position Shakespeare assigns to her-that of a suppressed female. Even, the remark “tawny front” (I’i) on Cleopatra puts her in the realm of not only being dominated by patriarchal control but racially subjugated as well. Therefore, Shakespeare as a realist displays a World of his time where women occupied a lesser position in the societal hierarchy.

However, on the obverse side of her character, Cleopatra is a rebel to the male dispensation in every sphere: politics, sexual freedom, war. When it comes to politics it can be assumed that she

enchants Antony just to increase her power as a ruler which she does achieves-“All the east shall call her mistress..” as Antony notes in his letter to her. (I,v). In fact, Cleopatra’s remarks-“If you find him sad, say I am dancing; if in mirth, report I am sudden sick” (I,iii) and “.. go tell him(Antony) I have slain myself.. the last I spoke was ‘Antony’..” (IV,xiii) are enough to suggest that there was more than just affection for Antony in Cleopatra’s mind and she is woman of wisdom . Similarly, her sexual freedom itself is highlighted from Antony’s remark when he calls her-“triple turn’d whore” which portrays the amount of men she has enjoyed in her life, in fact her reference as a prostitute is enough to establish the liberty she enjoys in terms of a libertine. No wonder, critic J. Danby maintains that Cleopatra represents ‘the flesh’. War becomes another medium through which Cleopatra reflects her strength, power, her desperate attempt to participate with Antony against Caesar best supports it in the statement- “I will be even with thee” (though her fleeing from the war later portrays her side of a coward). In fact the cross dressing in which she “wore his sword Phillippan” (II,v) becomes symbolic of her taking on the masculine role and as Phyllis Rackin observes becomes a source of empowerment. Thereby, the role of Cleopatra becomes reminiscent of Shakespeare’s own times which was ruled by a female ruler. Hence, throughout the play one witnesses the running of tensions and anxieties as the culturally dominated male society is being challenged by a woman character as she attempts to become an active participant of all that belongs to the public sphere.

Finally, one can maintain, though in the end her death signifies the triumph of Octavius Caesar, it is actually Cleopatra who emerges victorious as she goes on to defy the male authoritative control that Caesar tries to exercise over her. It is this death, which reflects her love for Antony was not merely wantonness but had struck the deepest chords. Thus, the play ends by not only delivering to us that even death couldn’t separate Antony and Cleopatra, but also establishes Cleopatra, who though complex, as someone who is a strong robust, powerful female, who steps out of her female chamber defying the domestic enclosure of the female sex. Many critics also believe this gender bending as an attempt to depict the renaissance society of its time as well as question as to how justified it is to reverse the gender roles by making Antony more feminine and Cleopatra more masculine as the play progresses. In fact, with the advent of feminist criticism the theme of Gender in Shakespeare’s plays has become all the more common and is being explored extensively. Yet, in the overall analysis of the play one cannot restrict the position of Cleopatra to be restricted to not a mere passive watcher but an individual whose masculine qualities counterbalances the play. Indeed, it was for this reason that Linda Fitz notes that “male critics feel personally threatened by Cleopatra and what she represents to them.”

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