

Exploring Women's Triumph in Shakespeare's Last Plays

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Abstract

In Shakespearean literature, the portrayal of women often stands out as remarkably empowered and multifaceted, especially when compared to the contemporary norms of his time. The research paper delves into Shakespeare's depiction of women in his last plays, namely *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale*. Through a close examination of these works, it becomes evident that Shakespeare challenges conventional gender roles and presents women as strong, intelligent, and influential figures. The characters of Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the women in his later plays exemplify this empowerment, as they assert their agency and defy patriarchal norms. Shakespeare's portrayal of women goes beyond mere defiance; it portrays them as agents of unity and redemption within families. Through their wit, understanding, and resilience, these women bring about reconciliation and redemption, ultimately highlighting Shakespeare's progressive and positive feminist perspective.

Paper

Shakespeare happens to be the Elizabethan writer who gives more importance to women than his contemporary writers. In other writers' portrayal of women, we find that their women characters are subdued or to some extent they agree to the Bible that Eve is responsible for all the woes of humans, but Shakespeare strongly criticizes the Biblical view of the women. His female characters seem to be more powerful than the modern feminist writers. Johnson and Hazlitt rightly point out that Shakespeare has only heroines. No doubt, his women seem to be more powerful, witty, and intelligent and have the courage to stand up to the patriarchal society and outdo their male counterparts.

In the post-modern age, the feminists portray women as subalterns which is in true sense, a denigration of women. To Shakespeare, women are as strong as their male counterparts and he gives them equality even in the 16th century, for instance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hermia powerfully faces her tyrannous/dictatorial father. Her father asks her to marry Demetrius instead of Lysander. He insists that he has right to choose the husband for her as he gave her the beauty, the life, in fact, the whole existence. Therefore, he insists that she must look with his eyes, but Hermia who loves Lysander resists the idea and says 'Its better you should look with my eyes as I have to live with the husband, not you.' This is evident that Shakespeare empowered the women to make a choice in 16th century. In a way what feminists are asking at present, has already been given by Shakespeare. But Shakespeare's feminism is not as fundamentalist as some of the modern women ascribe to. His portrayal of women is always positive. They compel men to respect them by their sometimes surrender, sometimes by protest and sometimes by maintaining a silence. Silence as we know, is a very powerful weapon to foil the patriarchy which forces men to surrender and repent and to acknowledge the power of the women. Thus, a

sixteenth century writer like Shakespeare compels postmodernist writers to consider him as a real and true positive feminist dramatist.

The last plays demonstrate the vision of Shakespeare about the women perfectly. In all the last four plays *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest* emphasize that it is the women who can only bring the unity in the family by their wit and understanding, the characteristics generally attributed to the males, Shakespeare in these plays makes men to repent for their evil deeds committed against women.

Shakespeare's last plays so far have been studied in terms of romance or tragicomedies and have been rejected by saying that a father loses his offspring through the excess of his own passion-driven folly and in the end the lost daughter is restored to her father's blessings and becomes an instrument of reconciliation. In fact, at the heart of each of these plays, present in various forms, but clearly responding to a definite continuity of purpose, lies an organic relationship between breakdown and reconstruction, the divisions created in the most intimate human bonds by the action of time and passion and the final healing of these divisions. The division created in the most intimate human bonds by the action of time and passion and the final healing of these divisions. The critics have also studied the roles of the young women in re-uniting the family. The women in these plays are compared with King Lear's Cordelia who is portrayed as an innocent who forgives her father and showers her love on him. But, in fact, in the last plays, the role of women is altogether different than the earlier comedies and tragedies. In the comedies and tragedies, women are portrayed Goddess like who after some struggle submits to the designs of patriarchy, but in the last plays, women do not yield to the purpose of their fathers and husbands, rather they make them to kneel before them. In this paper, the attempt is made to study the women's assertive power in *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* which makes them real feminist in the present context. The study is based on text instead of New Historicism and Feminism.

Shakespeare's last plays happen to be the mature work enriched with the experience of more than twenty years as a dramatist. Johnson rightly said that Shakespeare is one who has created complete world in his plays which means that all the possible characteristics of the human beings are portrayed in his plays. Before 1608, his male and female characters are either good and innocent or the villains. He also portrays women, the goddess like as well as wicked who can murder even their father, but the last plays depict a balance and the characters that are neither good nor bad. Similarly, his women are also portrayed neither perfectly good nor perfectly bad. It is believed that man has the qualities of beast as well as of God. The last plays evidently depict the man with his follies, misjudgment and ultimately accepting their faults and submit to the men and women who made right judgments and ultimately seek of healing and reconciliation which is not found in his early plays.

Some critics think that the last plays are symbolic; and have fresh conception of relationship between verse and its dramatic vehicle which was not achieved in a single stage. Therefore, Shakespeare had to write four plays to achieve the relationship between verse and drama. But the critics have not studied the characters particularly the women in his last plays. They think that women in the last plays are a continuation of Cordelia which

is believed to seem to be weaker than the women in the last plays. Cordelia, after being disowned by her father does not go through any struggle to reclaim her father's love. No doubt, because of Cordelia, France attacks England where Cordelia is not directly involved in the confrontation, on the other hand, the women in the last plays are involved in the confrontation from the beginning to the end. They achieve freedom after fighting a battle with their fathers, guardians, and husbands. Thus, the women in the last plays really deserve the praise which has been denied to them. In the first play of the series *Pericles*, both the women, Thaisa and Marina go through extreme suffering. Thaisa married to Pericles is declared dead during the child birth and is thrown off the boat. It seems that Pericles was in hurry to get rid of dead body of Thaisa without confirming death of his wife. Thaisa with the help of the doctor Cerimon is revived, but she cannot continue her life as Thaisa, wife of Pericles, as she has been declared dead. She seeks shelter in Diana's Temple where she becomes a priestess due to the mistake of her husband. She is not able to enjoy being a mother and wife. She must wait till her daughter Marina restores and unites her to the husband. Marina was left with Cleon and Dionyza by her father. Dionyza becomes jealous of the child as she attracts attention of the others more than Dionyza's biological daughter. The queen desires that her daughter who is of the same age should be given attention. The Queen develops a hatred for Marina as her own daughter gets lesser attention of others. The lady hired assassins to get rid of Marina. She is saved by the pirates who sell her to the brothel. Marina not only resists the customers, but also transforms them into better human beings. She can save her chastity and reaches that ship where her father is also travelling. The interaction takes place which reveals the similarities between Marina and Pericles's daughter. It is ultimately established that Marina is the daughter of Pericles. They go to the Diana's temple where they find Thaisa as a priestess. Ultimately, the whole family is reunited, but the real sufferers have been the women. Shakespeare portrays the assertiveness of both the women. Marina, a young girl is courageous enough to keep her chastity intact from the cruel world of males. But the struggle of the women continues in next two plays *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*. There is a real test of the women in these two plays and they are portrayed more courageous than the first one.

In *Cymbeline*, the protagonist Imogen challenges the patriarchy in real sense. No, doubt in the other plays like *The Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Othello*, Hermia and Desdemona respectively challenge the male hegemony, they do not go through those struggles as Imogen goes through. The clash of loyalties occasioned by Imogen's forced betrothal to Cloten is given a definite universality of context in the opening words of the plays. The first gentleman says:

Our bloods obey the heavens Than our courtiers,
Still seen as does the King. (Act I Scene i)

The gentleman indicates that his daughter Imogen married to Posthumous, a poor man who is banished by the king. The King and the new Queen wanted Imogen to marry Cloten, the son of the new queen, but Imogen refuses to obey to her father and stepdame. For the disobedience Imogen is imprisoned so that she is not able to follow her husband. The queen cunningly shows her sympathies to Imogen, but Imogen understands her cunningness and says:

Oh,
dissembling Courtesy!
How fine this tyrant
Can tickle where she wounds! (Act I Scene i).

She knows that her father will never allow her to go with Posthumous, but she is determined to endure all the inflictions of her father and the new mother. She tells her husband:

I something fear my father's wrath, but nothing
Always reserved my holy duty-what
His rage can do on me...
I shall here abide the hourly shot of the angry eyes,
Not comforted to live.
But that there is this jewel in the world
That I may see again. (Act I, Scene i)

Imogen so far has been following the Biblical command to honour her father, but she now seems to be a rebellious woman as far as her marriage is concerned. She also seems to be optimistic to see her husband again, despite of the fact that her husband Posthumous is banished from England. She gives the diamond as the parting gift saying:

Take it, heart; but keep it till you woo another wife,
when Imogen is dead. (Act I, Scene i)

Cymbeline gets annoyed when he sees Imogen and Posthumous together. He orders Posthumous to leave immediately as he has polluted his daughter, but Imogen has courage to face her father. He imposes his authority as a father and a king as well. He becomes furious and tells her that her disloyalty is quickening his age by many years.

Thus, Imogen argues with her father and justifies her marriage to Posthumous. She emphasizes that by marrying Posthumous she added a luster to the throne. She also holds him responsible for her marriage. She points out:

Sir,
It is your fault that I have loved Posthumous
You bred him as my play fellow, and he is a man worth any women,
over buys me,
almost a seem he pays (Act I, Scene i)

Cymbeline calls her a mad woman to which she replies:

Almost Sir,
Heaven restore me!
Would I were A neat-herd's daughter, and my Leonatus
Our neighbour-shepherd's son. (Act I, Scene i)

The king cannot tolerate the obstinacy of his daughter and pronounces the punishment for her:

Nay, let her languish,
A drop of blood a day, and being aged
Die of this folly. (Act I, Scene i)

It is evident that Imogen asserts her choice which was not possible for a woman in sixteenth century.

But Imogen is not ready to leave her husband Posthumous. She is ready to undergo punishment. She is desperate to see her husband or receive some communication from him without caring for her father and step mother.

Iachimo decides to tempt Imogen by telling her that Posthumous, her husband is involved with the prostitutes of Rome to win the bet he has with Posthumous. Imogen is not able to believe her husband's indulgence with prostitutes, but however, Imogen's facial expressions expresses her worries and anguish for her husband. Iachimo reads her expressions and extends his sympathies to Imogen:

...Whilst I am bound to wonder,
I am bound to pity too.
Imogen: What do you pity, sir?
Iachimo: Two creatures heartily
Imogen: Am I one, sir?
You look on me. What wrack
Discern you in me
Deserves your pity? (Act I Scene vi)

Iachimo tries to establish Posthumous as a disloyal husband. Imogen for some moments succumbs to Iachimo's artful speeches, who ask her to take revenge on Posthumous for being insincere to her. Iachimo uses this opportunity to know the truth of the wavering mind of Imogen and proposes:

I dedicate myself to your sweet leisure,
More noble than that runagate to your bed,
And will continue fast to your affection,
Still close as sure. (Act I Scene vi)

He further says:

Let my service tender on your lips. (Act 1 Scene vi)

Imogen now awakens and becomes certain that Iachimo is not reliable man at all. She threatens him that his assault will be reported to her father. Thus, Imogen clarifies with determination that nothing can separate her from her husband. Iachimo accepts his defeat, but he decides to report to Posthumous that his wife can easily be seduced to keep his words. This also shows his jealousy. Therefore, as a jealous and villain, he cunningly notes down all the details of Imogen's bed chamber by smuggling himself into the box. Iachimo according to his plan comes out of the box at night when Imogen goes asleep like a log. He not only notes down the details of the bedroom, but also observes a mole on her breast, he takes off the bracelet of Imogen's wrist which was given by Posthumous. With these details, he goes back to Rome and presents them as a proof that he has seduced Imogen. Posthumous becomes furious and orders Pisanio, his servant, to murder Imogen. Pisanio understands that something has gone wrong as he knows that his lady cannot be insincere at all. He takes her to Milford Haven where Imogen is supposed to meet her husband, but in fact, Pisanio was supposed to murder her at that place. Pisanio does not convey the real purpose of going to Milford Haven. When they arrive on the spot, Imogen desperately wants to meet her husband. At this point Pisanio reveals that she has

been charged by her husband to be false to his bed. Imogen cannot believe this that her husband can charge her and she has been weeping all the time to meet him. She thinks that Iachimo was right in reporting Posthumous' involvement with the prostitutes. She expresses her pain and anger against these false accusations:

Poor I am stale, a garment out of fashion;
And, for I am richer to hang by the walls,
I must be ripped. To pieces with me! Oh
Men's vows are women's traitors. (Act III Scene iv)

She charges that her husband is no longer interested in her as he has found another woman. She rightly points out that women's honesty and their voice cannot be heard by society as it is dominated by the males. She satirizes male's domination: True honest men,
being herd like false,

Aeneas were in his time thought false;
And Sinone's weeping,
Did scandal many a holy tear, took pity,
From most true wretchedness, so thou Posthumous,
Wilt lay the leave on all proper me:
Goodly and gallant shall be false and purged
From thy great fail. (Act III Scene iv)

She offers her breast to be pierced by Pisanio's sword as he was ordered by his master, but Pisanio suggests that she must observe the activities of Posthumous by living in his neighbourhood in Rome. Imogen accepts the advice of Pisanio and disguises herself as a boy and decides to become the page of Lucius, the ambassador of Caesar. Unlike other Shakespearean heroines, she struggles to achieve her objective. Imogen is left alone to face the world. She walks twenty to twenty-one miles to reach the place where she was supposed to meet Lucius.

She becomes so tired and hungry that she takes shelter in cave and eats the food which is left by Bilarius. She is terrified when she confronts three males, but her beauty charms them and they welcome her. Shakespeare rightly points out:

Plenty and peace breeds cowards: hardness ever of hardiness is mother
(Act III Scene ii)

This is applicable almost on all the women of the last plays. Imogen leads a very hard life which she never expected. She falls sick and consumes the potion given to her by Pisanio. Bilarius's sons think that she is dead and all the rituals are performed of burial with Cloten. Cloten is one of the reasons for leaving the court since he has been forcing her to marry him. Thus, it is evident that Imogen struggles more than the other Shakespearean heroines.

She revives like other Shakespearean heroines and joins Lucius. Before joining him, she faces another shock as it has been pointed out. She was buried along with Cloten who was wearing Posthumous's clothes and his head was missing. She thinks that Cloten has murdered her husband as she is unable to identify his body. She has lost all hopes, but however, she decides to go to Rome with Lucius as his page. Imogen certainly is a very balanced woman. She hides her sorrows and gives proper grave to Cloten thinking that he is her husband. In the end, with her faith and courage she is united with her father and her

husband. She relates all her story which brings tears to everybody's eyes. Her father is saved by Bilarius and Posthumous who were banished by him. Cymbeline also discovers that his dead Queen i.e Cloten's mother had never loved him and Imogen, rather she had developed the drugs to kill Cymbeline. Imogen ultimately reveals her identity. She tells that how Iachimo deceived her which created a doubt in the mind of her husband who ordered to murder her. Iachimo accepts his involvement and returns that ring and bracelet which he had taken from Imogen's hand. He declares that Imogen is in real sense a chaste and virtuous woman and a faithful wife whose chastity cannot be violated by any man. Posthumous realizes his mistake and embraces his wife. Imogen with her patience and continuous struggles bring happiness to all by uniting who were once separated from one another. Imogen, of course, is the character who excites our greatest interest. She manages to come alive as do so many of Shakespeare's women and to impress us as a living personality and not merely as a cardboard counter on the stage. Many commentators have considered her the loveliest of Shakespeare's heroines who has in real sense faced the world. Some of the feminists also believe that Shakespeare's women characters reject the norms of patriarchal society.

Irene Dash proclaims that, "Shakespeare's women characters testify to his genius..., they learn the meaning of self sovereignty for a woman in patriarchal society." (*Wooing, Wedding, and Power: Women in Shakespeare's Plays*, 106) Similarly, Kathleen McLuskie appreciates Shakespeare's feminism and advises to the feminists to "assert the power of resistance, subverting rather than co-opting the domination of the patriarchal Bard." (*Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, 106)

However, the women in *The Winter's Tale* are more post-modern than any other Shakespeare's women. The struggle of women continues in *The Winter's Tale* and in real sense Shakespeare gives them the voice and courage to assert themselves over the male dominated society. One of women characters Hermione happens to be the queen to king Leontes who is very sensible and sensitive too. The queen in the beginning is not allowed to speak without her husband's permission. Polixenes a great friend of Leontes is ready to port from the family after nine months stay. Leontes insists him to stay for a few more days which is not conceded by his friend. Then he asks his wife Hermione:

Tongue tied our Queen?
Speak you. (Act I Scene ii).

Hermione like a good hostess and a good wife requests Polixenes to accept the request of her lord but he still is determined to go. Then like a good hostess, Hermione makes a very powerful request:

verily!
You put me off with limber vows; but I,
though you would seek to unsphere, the stars with oaths, should yet say
'Sir, no, 'going . Verily, you shall not go:
a ladies 'Verily' is as potent as a lord's. Will you go yet?
Force me to keep you as a prisoner,
not like a guest; so you shall pay you fees.
When you depart, and save your thanks. How say you?
My Prisoner? Or my guest? By your dread verily;

One of then you shall be. (Act I Scene ii)

Polixenes is unable to refuse Hermione's polite and yet powerful request. The acceptance of Hermione's request makes Leontes blind with jealousy. He imagines that Hermione and Polixenes have sexual relationship which made Hermione nine months' pregnant. On this, Rene Girard rightly points out:

Hermione owed her love for Polixenes to a mediation that remains pure, innocent, and respectful of the rights and duties of all parties involved, even though no barrier separates the two characters. At the instant when Leontes' jealousy is born, Polixenes and Hermione treat each other as familiarly as if they were brother and sister. Their loss of inhibition greatly contributes to the jealousy of Leontes. (*Religion & Literature*, 193)

But Leontes imagines their relationship as

'too hot, too hot!'
to mingle friendship for is mingling bloods.
I have tremor cordis on me: my heart dances;
But not for joy; not joy. This entertainment may
a free face put on, derive a liberty.
From heartiness, from bounty, fertile bosom,
and well become the agent; it may, I grant,
but to be peddling palms and pinching fingers
As now they, and making practiced smiles,
As in a looking glass, and then to sigh, as it were,
The mort of the deer; O, that is entertainment.
My bosom likes not, nor my brows. (Act I, Scene i)

Under the influence of jealousy, he not only distrusts his wife but also neglects the advice given by his loyalists. He disposes off one of his loyalists Cammillo who refuses to succumb to Leontes' desires. Cammillo again and again affirms his belief in the Queen's purity which Leontes detests. Leontes angrily reacts to Cammillo:

Dost think I am so muddy, so unsettled,
To appoint myself in this vexation, sully,
the purity and whiteness of my sheets,
which to preserve is sleep which being spotted,
is goads, thorns, nettles, tales of wasps,
gives candle to the blood of the prince my son:
who I do think is mine and love as mine,
without moving to that? Would I do this,
could man so blench? (Act I, Scene i)

Leontes is rigid to his own belief, he rejects Cammillo's advice outrightly:

Even so as I mine own course have set down:
I will give no blemish to her honour, none. (Act I, Scene i)

At this juncture Othello and Leontes seem to be same as their suspicion to their respective wives is concerned. The difference is, Othello sees and hears with Iago's eyes and ears while Leontes imagines the sexual intercourse between his wife Hermione and his friend Polixenes. He narrates sexual act to Cammillo as if has really seen the act:

Is whispering nothing?

Is leaning cheek to cheek? Is meeting noses?
Kissing with inside lip? Stopping the career
of laughter with a sigh? - a nose infallible
of breaking honesty-horsing foot on foot?
Skulking in corners? Whishing cloaks more swift?
Hours, minutes? Noon, midnight? And all eyes
blind with the pin and web but theirs, theirs only,
that would unseen but wicked? Is this nothing?
Why, then the world and all that's in it is nothing;
The covering sky is nothing; bohemia nothing
my wife is nothing; nor nothing have these nothing;
If this be nothing (Act I, Scene ii).

He calls his wife "slippery" and a hobby horse deserves a name as rank as "any flesh wench that puts to before her troth polite." (Act I, Scene ii).

It is very interesting that Shakespeare's characters always point figure at the woman's chastity and thus denigrate her, but Shakespeare criticizes such characters and appreciates women's loyalty as well as their intelligence. It is observed that only the males suspect their wives, but not the vice versa. Shakespeare's effort is to break the tradition. Traditionally the women were thought slippery or made up of wax where imprints can be made easily. Shakespeare does not agree with this view, we find that his women are more powerful and bear the strong moral character in comparison to their male counterparts.

Shakespeare not only gave the voice to the queen; but also portrayed the women servants with courage not to yield even before the king. In *The Winter's Tale*, Paulina's portrayal is very strong as she bears the truth which makes her to face powerful and jealous Leontes. She appears to be very confident about herself. She offers her help to queen to prove that newly born baby really belongs to Leontes. She expresses: If she dares trust me with her little babe;

I'll show to the king and undertake to be her advocate to the loudest; (Act II, scene ii)
She further shows her confidence to do something for the queen. She says:

tell her Emilia
I will use that tongue I have: if wit flow from that
as boldness from my bosom, let that not be doubted,
I shall do good. (Act II, Scene ii)

As it has been pointed out that Shakespeare's women are more logical. Paulina, a servant has the knowledge of the law like Portia. When Gaoler informs her that she cannot take the babe out, as she does not have the warrant, Paulina at this juncture quotes the law. She points out:

This child was prisoner to the womb and is
by law and process of great nature thence
freed and enfranchised, not a party to
the anger of the king, nor guilty of,
if any be, the trespass of the queen. (Act I, Scene ii).

Paulina as she has promised the queen, takes the babe to king and forces him to wink at the child. In the court she rightly indicates the characteristics of Leontes with which he is

suffering, without any fear. She advises the other lords:

Fear not his tyrannous passions more, Alas,
then the queen's life? A gracious innocent soul,
More free than he is jealous. Act II Scene iii)

She further tells about the king loudly to the lords:

Not so hot, good sir:
I come to bring him sleep, 'Tis such as you
that creep like shadows by him and do sigh.
At each his needless heavings, such as you,
Nourish the cause of his awaking: I
Do come with words as medicinal as true,
honest as either, to purge him of that humour.
That presses him from sleep. (Act II, Scene ii).

Paulina's rigidness was known to Leontes and he expected her to be there. But like a traditional male asks her husband Antigones: "what, canst not rule her?" (Act II, Scene III). Paulina, a Shakespearean woman cannot be ruled by the male hegemony; she challenges Leontes that no one can rule her:

From all dishonesty. He can: in this,
Unless he take the course that you have done,
Commit me for committing honour, trust it,
He shall not rule me. (Act II, Scene iii).

Shakespeare believes that honorable man or woman cannot be dictated. Paulina holds that reputation of honorable and powerful women. In feminist terms it can be said that she bears an identity which is presently talked a lot in case of modern women. Paulina emphasizes again and again on the goodness of queen without any fear. She forces the king to take a positive decision by her firm attitude. She very strongly resists Leontes' declaration that she is a traitor, rather she points a finger on Leontes that he is actually not only a traitor, but also dishonest. She reacts:

Nor I, nor any
But one that's here, and that's himself, for he
The sacred honour of himself, his queens,
His hopeful sons, his babes, betrays to slander,
whose sting is sharper than the sword's and will not
for, as the case now stands, it is a curse,
he cannot be compelled to that- once removed.
The root of his opinion, which is rotten,
As ever oak or stone was sound. (Act II Scene iii)

Thus Paulina seems to be more authoritative than the present day feminist woman. She has courage to stand up before a political power. Presently the concept of feminism has become a political gimmick instead of talking about the real rights of women. Women's strength lies in her honesty and love. Paulina knows very well that Hermione is honest like her that's why she faces Leontes like a rock, when he asks his servants to push her away from the court, she rightly remarks: "A most unworthy and unnatural Lord, can do no more." (Act II Scene iii)

Leontes threatens her to burn as she challenges the authority of a king, but Paulina is not

terrified by this threat, rather she rebukes the king:

I care not:

It is an heretic that makes the fire,
Not she which burns in it, I will not call you tyrant;
But this most cruel usage of your queen,
Not able to produce more accusation
Than your own weak hinged fancy, Something savours
Of tyranny and will; ignoble make you,
Yeah, scandalous to world. (Act II, Scene iii)

Thus, Shakespeare's women have powerful voice which the modern women are seeking to possess. Shakespeare certainly was not concerned with the upliftment of women, but as Johnson would put it that he portrays the general human nature, Shakespeare makes no distinction between man and woman. However, our perception is that Shakespeare always favoured females in place of males. The modern feminism only talks about the political rights and social inequality. On the other hand, Shakespeare had already assigned these to the women. Women play an important role in decision making process. It will be apt to say that males are unable to reject them. If males like Leontes and Othello show the courage to reject the women's innocence, they are punished severely in the end.

Leontes rejects all his advisers who are in real sense loyal to him, but Shakespeare even gives the voice to the servants. In case of queen's innocence, all the lords and servants are with Paulina's point of view and have no fear of death, but Leontes is adamant about his belief and not ready to accept newly born babe as his own child. He says, "No, I'll not rear, another's issue." (Act II, Scene iii). Like Paulina, Hermione also stands like a solid rock before Leontes without being terrified by his thrashings.

Hermione expresses that the moment he called her a strumpet, she was already dead spiritually, therefore the physical death is not important for her. Not only this, but woman dies when she is barred from the child bed. She rightly expresses:

Sir spare your threats:

The bug which you would fright me with I seek.
To me a life be no commodity:
Crown and comfort of my life, your favour,
I do give lost; for I do feel it gone,
My second joy
And first fruits of my body, from his presence.
I'm barred like one infectious. My third comfort,
starred most unluckily, is from my breast.
The innocent milk in it, most innocent mouth,
haled out to murder, myself on every post,
proclaimed a strumpet; with immodest hatred.
The child bed privilege denied, which belongs to old fashion.
Now, my liege,
Tell me what blessings I have her alive,
That I should fear to die. (Act III, Scene 2)

Thus, Hermione without any sorrow accepts the punishment which is unnecessarily meted out to her. Women were thought to be weak and submissive, but Shakespeare's women do

not compromise as far as their honour is concerned. The women protest is certainly very powerful in Shakespeare. Paulina and Hermione accept whatsoever is proclaimed by Leontes. Shakespeare believes that truth and determination always have the edge over the false and jealous men. To confirm, Leontes sends two of his Loyalists to Apollo's temple oracle. The oracle turns out to be just opposite what Leontes has been imagining. Hermione and Paulina immediately get the justice as oracle says:

Hermione is Chaste; Polixenes blameless;
Camillo, a true subject; Leontes, a jealous tyrant;
his innocent lab truly begotten;
and the kind shall live without an heir,
if that which is lost be not found. (Act III, Scene ii).

But Leontes is a very stubborn man who even rejects the oracle, which was called for by him. He asks the officers to continue the proceedings to punish the queen. Before he could punish the queen, he is informed that the prince is dead. Leontes senses are immediately restored but the queen has gone into swoon and later declared dead. Thus, Leontes is severely punished for suspecting his chaste wife.

Paulina now becomes his aid in the sorrows. He vows that he will do nothing without Paulina advice. Paulina also resurrects the statue of Hermione in her place to make Leontes repent for his sins. Leontes who hated Paulina once now admires her for showing him the true course of life and particularly thanks her for restoring his life in the statue. Shakespeare rightly makes him to repent what injustice he has done to both the women. Leontes expresses:

Good Paulina
Who hast the memory of Hermione,
I know, in honour, of that ever I,
Has squared me to thy counsel!
Even now,
I might have looked upon my queen's full eyes,
Have taken treasure from her lips. (Act V Scene i)

On Paulina's advice Leontes refuses to marry again. He reveals a great change which has taken place:

No more such wives:
Therefore, no wife; In worse,
And better used, would make her sainted spirit
Again possess her corpse, and on this stage,
Where we are offenders now, appear soul-vexed,
And begin 'why' to me. (Act V Scene i)

Combining magic with wisdom, Paulina becomes goddess-like by breathing life into the statue of Hermione. Paulina fulfills a multitude of feminist expectations both action based and symbolic: she confronts the patriarch, she defends the sister-hood, she speaks for vulnerable children, she memorializes womanhood, she worships the great Goddess Nature, she preserves artistic beauty, she strives for gender reconciliation, and she finally restores balance in community.

Similarly, in the end Hermione is resurrected by Paulina's magic and wisdom. This resurrection has so many connotations. Shakespeare thinks that Leontes has suffered a lot and repented for his deeds. To show the importance of woman, Shakespeare revived the statue. It is also thought that Paulina kept Hermione alive and made a statue to show Leontes and after sixteen years she brings her forth to make him realize the joy one gets with his wife after resurrection. It will not be wrong to say that it is the resurrection of Leontes because appearance of Hermione is in a sense proves that she has forgiven her husband.

Thus, it is evident that Leontes' renunciation of patriarchal attitude could take place because of two powerful women. Shakespeare believes that, in fact, it is not the male who rules but in real sense he is governed by the woman only. Shakespeare had a better understanding of power of woman than the post-modernists. The post-modernist feminists only talk about the political and social equality and sexual autonomy which can be brought only by law. On the other hand, Shakespeare believes that if the woman is intelligent and assertive, she can herself pave her way to achieve political authority and social equality. But Shakespeare would never consent to polygamy which perhaps is being sought by feminists today in the name of sexual autonomy. In Shakespeare's plays, it is not found that the woman is forced to marry to a man who is not of her choice. Thus, it is the woman who has right to choose husband for herself which is now-a-days happening in the world. Hermia, Hermione, Rosalind, Cordelia, Desdemona, Viola, Imogen, Marina and so on are the strong women characters who, by their wit, courage and by their infallible morality, redeem the males in one way or the other.

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