

Women's Place in the Renaissance Era

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Abstract

To portray the situation of women in the Elizabethan era, Shakespeare's works can be used as a rich source to put aside the curtain and see women's real lives. This article is divided into two major parts. Firstly, it will look at women's lives and their role in Renaissance society; secondly, it will represent Shakespeare's female character Ophelia from Hamlet as an example of female life representation in literary work. During the Renaissance era, women's place in society was largely determined by their social status and the prevailing cultural norms. Women were generally expected to fulfill domestic roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers. Their primary purpose was to support and serve their husbands and families. Generally, what I will try to do is study women's lives in Renaissance society and the representation of Ophelia in Shakespeare's Hamlet. When talking about women in Renaissance society, it is necessary to compare them with their opposite sex, men. At the time Shakespeare was writing his plays, the idea of the chain of being had an excessive influence on each aspect of Renaissance society. In the Renaissance era, women were believed to be physically, mentally, and emotionally weaker and inferior to men. Greek medical science claimed that "men were physically different from women and superior. The elements composing the human body were combined differently in each sex".

Keywords: Cultural norms, domesticity, religious belief, Renaissance era, situation of women

INTRODUCTION

It is quite possible that sermons and conduct books generated unease and resentment rather than molding domestic order and harmony. The more sermons and pamphlets formulate rigid conventions of household order, the more obvious the inevitable gap becomes, which of course existed long before the rise of popular print.

The woman, as a wife, could disobey her husband under certain circumstances. For example, if her husband forbids her from going to church or reading the Bible, in this case, the wife is allowed to disobey her husband. Another interesting example presented by William Gouge is that a wife can and has the right to disobey her husband when she is asked to attend a stage play.

Capp also made an interesting point about women. He says that there is a great difference between the ideal image of women at the time and reality; in other words, as I mentioned earlier, there were many instructive books on how women should behave, but these writers did not portray the reality of women's lives [1]. A question may arise: why did the writer of that time not portray the bitter reality and negative aspects of society explicitly? Why vaguely and implicitly? I found two answers from my lecturer, Ph.D. Abassi, who said that, because a writer is a product of his or her own time, he or she cannot write something against convention and the beliefs of the people. Another point that Ph.D. Jan Nessari added is that in the early Renaissance, those

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Received Date: June 02, 2023

Accepted Date: August 05, 2023

Published Date: August 28, 2023

Citation: Mahmood Suleimany, Mohammad Salem Hamidi. Women's Place in the Renaissance Era. Journal of Human Rights Law and Practice. 2023; 6(2): 26–30p.

writers who were writing something that pleased the courts and courtiers became the apple of the court's eye and could gain fame, publishing, and economic support from them.

To talk about the attitude of the public towards women, after passing the Renaissance course and studying some literary works, I came to understand that it was not just the lower classes that had a kind of misogynist attitude towards females, but it existed in almost all social classes of society. According to Crawford and Mondelson "contemporary proverbs, jokes, anecdotes, and tales give the impression that the axiom of female inferiority was as common among the ordinary people as it was among the educated elite [2]". A joke was circulated among the elite, claiming that women had no souls and were, in fact, not fully human. Even women's wisdom or wetness was considered cunning and the "most exceptional women, the best of sex", were considered cunning and a lesser evil.

England in Shakespeare's time was dominated by a patriarchal system; in other words, society was based on a series of "interlocking sets of beliefs, assumptions, traditions and practices... these social arrangements rested on conventions rather than law" which were created and preserved by men. There was no equality between women and men; that means even if a woman was superior to men in terms of intellectuality, morality, etc. she was still considered inferior to men. On the other hand, inferiority is not used for men at all, even if the man is bad. "Wives must obey bad husbands just as subjects must obey bad kings".

OBJECTIVES

1. To examine and analyze the social, cultural, and economic factors that influenced women's roles and status during the Renaissance era, with a focus on understanding the variations based on social class, geographical location, and individual circumstances
2. Exploring the opportunities and limitations faced by women in terms of education, employment, artistic and intellectual pursuits, marriage, and family life
3. To provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of women during this historical period and shed light on the impact of gender norms and patriarchal structures on their lives

LITERATURE REVIEW

A very interesting point is that religion dominated all aspects of English, and at the same time, they were strong religious believers in the Bible [3]. This situation created a great opportunity for the English men of patriarchal society, who had enormous control to find a way, in order to preserve their dominance and superiority over women. To fulfill their aim, they used the story of man's creation from the Bible because "the principle of female subordination is an integral part of the creation story" (Capp 3). They collected many reasons to indicate that women are inferior and are in second place. Eve was created from a man's rib, so she should be subordinate to her master, i.e., man. The second Eve was created, therefore, she was a deviation from the norm. Third Eve was deceived and tempted by the devil to eat the forbidden treat and disobey God's order which led to the fall of Adam and Eve from heaven to earth. Because it was Eve, a woman, who was deceived by devil, that is why she is no longer trustable and strong enough to control her life; therefore, women need a kind of protector, i.e. man. So the dominant convention and belief of the English has grown the seed of women's inferiority in the mind of every individual man that a woman should be controlled and kept in a place, home, in order to be safe and not deceived once again by something or somebody, the alternative of the devil.

According to Mondelson and Crawford, Christ had freed men and women from the bondage of sin but not from outward subjection, therefore, women might hope to benefit from the doctrine of an equal soul in the next world but not in the present one. Everything, even the Bible, was twisted to fit the patriarchy and the repression of women. The law upheld the patriarchy because it did not treat men and women equally. The law recognized the man as the kindest in his household. Everything Shakespeare believed existed in Shakespeare's time manipulated the right of women to be equal with men.

To talk a little more about the unequal treatment of women, let me add another law of the Elizabethan era. According to Capp, if a man killed his wife, he would be hanged for murdering his wife, but at the same time, if a woman murdered her husband, she would be burned harshly. On the other hand, society, especially men, was trying to exclude women from social life outside the home. They tried to keep women mostly at home, and even if these women wanted to become part of the social circle, there were many restrictions in their ways. For example, women were not allowed to work in governmental agencies, churches, or in any other formal jobs. At the same time, they were prohibited from any kind of higher education or voting. What they could mostly become were nurses, midwives, and some of the daughters and wives of craftsmen, tradesmen, labors, single women, and widows even worked shoulder to shoulder with the men of the family in the cook shops, lodging houses and running pawnshops, and some others in trading and some of them even became surgeons. Here, we can come to the conclusion that women were manipulated in English society during the Elizabethan era. In poor families, when women were needed to work outside, they were allowed to go out and work in order to get money and provide for household expenditures.

Some of the women accepted that home is their permanent place in this world and did not protest but some others protested. It was difficult for the women to challenge their repression because most of women were not educated well to debate and defend their certain rights. According to Patricia Crawford "Men's power depended upon keeping women ignorant". It is a very important point that Patricia pointed out. When these women are not educated enough to know why they were deprived from their own right? Why they were kept in the ignorant and dark, and why men were trying to keep them submissive and out of education? Therefore, this system will exist and men will benefit from this ignorance. These women had to be woken up from the ignorance sleep and should protest against injustice in a way or other.

For the patriarchal system to remain alive and keep women submissive and obedient, it needed women's ignorance. But it could not last forever. It was ruling class women who received education and became aware of women's rights and protested by writing such as Margaret Cavendish, who wrote "Triumphs of Female Wit" 1683, in which, she claimed that women had become like worms who lives in the dull earth of ignorance and are kept like cage birds that hop up and down in their houses [4]. Here, we see that some women fight against misogynist attitudes towards them. But from other hand, some other believed that they are inferior. "Writers were apologetic and defensive in tone acknowledging their intellectual weakness".

The Queen of England, Elizabeth 1, instead of demanding equality and rights for her sex in her speeches, publicly stated: "I may have the body of weak and feeble woman but I have the heart and stomach of a king." Many historians labeled her patriarchal and misogynistic. According to Mondelson and Crawford, Queen Elizabeth's success as a female ruler depended on putting a distance between herself and all other women, because of central problem of female authority. Elizabeth knew well what her people want to hear from her. Another statement of her about women is that "women cannot live unless they are married". A question may rise in your mind that why she cannot live? You can find the answer in my earlier discussion. Elizabethan women cannot live without a supporter, without the one who provide her shelter to live, money to spend, and a place to live. She cannot live on her own, and work freely. On the contrary, the current (21th century) USA single women's and young girls' situation is different from Elizabethan times as they can find any kind of jobs they want and can live alone [5-7].

It is difficult to know what Shakespeare thought about women but what we can do is look at his female characters and see how they were portrayed. In the second part of my article, I want to use Ophelia from Hamlet as an example to see what Shakespeare wanted us to know about the lives of women in the Elizabethan era. At first, the young love between Ophelia and Hamlet develops very hopefully [8]. Ophelia receives proven affection from Hamlet, who reciprocates her love, though the changes in Hamlet's state of mind have a dramatic impact on Hamlet and Ophelia's relationship. If you

listen deeply to Hamlet's speech, you will find out that he still has deep feelings for Ophelia, and consequently, after the revenge of Hamlet's father, he would like to get together with her.

Ophelia's father and the king forced her to find out whether Ophelia's refusal to continue the love relationship made Hamlet insane. When they hear Hamlet's response, the king believes that there must be another cause of his madness. But it can be observed that Ophelia is very disappointed with Hamlet's confession [9]. She is not able to protect herself against him, and the answers she gives without any self-confidence prove her inner pain. Furthermore, neither her father nor her mother care about her feelings; she remains all by herself without receiving any kind of support to get love from her family.

Generally, Ophelia has a quiet personality. Mostly, even when facing difficult moments, she says very little. But a very noticeable feeling of Ophelia can be seen when Hamlet quits her love. These feelings of frustration, betrayal, and even disillusion gradually bring her to her knees.

"Hamlet kills Ophelia before he kills Polonius' body" [10]. Having experienced Hamlet's cruel humiliation and hearing about Hamlet's murder of her father, Ophelia begins to feel very confused. She does not have any strength to alleviate her suffering and she goes insane. In this state of madness, she reveals her opinion on young men who are, according to her, the epitome of the exploitation and unfaithfulness.

Hilský suggests that Ophelia's character is associated with two important themes: water and flowers. Her flowers carry an ambiguous meaning that balances between traditional or flower speech and feminine sensuality. Ophelia's violet is a traditional symbol of melancholy, fennel—the symbol of flattery; columbine is the symbol of ingratitude and infidelity; rue is the symbol of mourning and wishes. However, the wreaths woven of wildflowers that decorate Ophelia's body, resembling a bride of death, have obvious sexual connotations. The theme of water traditionally stands for the madness and grief of women and girls.

"Her obsequies have been as far enlarged as we have warranty. Her death was doubtful; and, but for that great command o'ers ways the order, she should have lodged in the ground unsanctified till the last trumpet. For charitable prayers, Shards, flints, and pebbles should be thrown on her." (V.1. 219-224)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the portrayal of women in the Elizabethan era, as revealed through Shakespeare's works, offers valuable insights into the challenges and complexities of their lives. This article has explored two key aspects: firstly, the societal roles and expectations placed upon women during the Renaissance, and secondly, the representation of women, exemplified by Shakespeare's character Ophelia from 'Hamlet.' During the Renaissance, women's lives were greatly influenced by cultural norms and social status, constraining their opportunities and limiting their freedoms. The prevailing belief in female inferiority, rooted in religious interpretations and societal constructs, played a pivotal role in maintaining a patriarchal system. However, it is essential to acknowledge that not all women conformed to these restrictions. Some women challenged societal norms, and though often met with resistance, they played a significant role in initiating change.

We could not deny the great importance of Ophelia's role in the story. Her death results in an unexpected twist in the plot towards the end of the tragedy. When she dies, both her brother and Hamlet have nothing to live for anymore. Finally, the king gets "the tool" to kill Hamlet (Mondelson and Crawford 23). As Laertes remains the only member of his beloved family and he has nothing to lose, nothing restrains him from the revenge of his father's murder as well as the subsequent state of insanity of her sister caused by Hamlet's acts. By the end of the play, it is the character of Ophelia who is regarded as the tragic climax of the story.

Ophelia is restricted to a patriarchal life which is the main reason why she is often pulled apart by orders and suggestions proposed by her father, brother, the king and Hamlet. Her personality is torn to pieces by two commands: one is the need to obey her father and the other one is the voice of the heart that belongs to Hamlet. We can call her life is kind of mysterious one because she cannot be both a devoted love and a devoted daughter at the same time. The result of such a life for her is madness and result of her madness is her drowning. Her madness means that the irrational forces within her get up and overcome her rational and finally consume her. This is the complex nature of people behind their social identities. Through the madness and wearing different masks, Hamlet and Ophelia can play their next roles leading by irrational forces and this is what makes their roles and character complex. And they do not know even in some cases that which role they are playing, whether it is the true Hamlet or a player? Whether he is a faith Hamlet? These are the confirmation of human complex.

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