

The Deviation of Power and Gender Roles in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*

SADIA AFRIN MRIDHA

Department of English
University of Information Technology and Sciences (UITS), Dhaka, Bangladesh

IFFAT JAHAN SUCHONA

Department of English
University of Asia Pacific (UAP), Dhaka, Bangladesh

Abstract

King Lear, a masterpiece by Shakespeare, explores the human desire for authority and the marginalization of women in history. Through the Marxist lens, the exploration of societal norms and their subversion is presented through the characters Gonerill, Regan, and Edmund. The play reveals the patriarchal nature of authority and its influence on individual identities. Through deconstructive, Marxist, and feminist theories, the exploration of power dynamics and individual identities is a profound exploration.

Keywords: Marxist Theory, Feminism, Women, Lear, Patriarchal Society

Introduction

The ambition to hold and wield power over others and to occupy a position of authority lies latent in every human being. All over the world from the very beginning of monarchical system there have been certain arbitrary rules which excluded women from holding authoritative positions and allowed power to transfer strictly through legal male heirs. One of Shakespeare's most important plays, *King Lear*, provides an excellent opportunity to examine these homogenous norms and their subversion by the antagonists Gonerill, Regan and Edmund from many points of views. The play also depicts King Lear's transformation from a temperamental, egotistic ruler to a person sympathetic to the suffering of the disadvantaged people after he loses everything. It is our objective to shed light on the strict, patriarchal nature of the authority and how it shaped the identities of various characters of this play using deconstructive, Marxist and feminist theories.

Gender Roles

In this play, Cordelia, France, Kent, and the Fool, despite their differences in gender, nationality, and

social rank, are all committed to duty and truth. Cordelia goes beyond expected speech and uses both speech and silence to criticize Lear's unfair use of power. In spite of Orgel's criticism, Cordelia's response demonstrates what people thought was important at the time. Shakespeare ensures Cordelia's ideas are heard by providing male counterparts and supporters throughout the play, highlighting the importance of understanding and respecting social rank. However, in stark contrast to Cordelia's alleged reservations, Regan and Goneril breach several gender standards by actively complying with their father's plea.

King Lear stands as one of the finest examples of the tragic genre. One cannot help but think of the myriad theories that could be applied to the dramatic fabric of this particular text in dramatic analysis as well as Shakespeare's skillful portrayal of women in his works and social norms is in stark contrast to the expectations that exist around women. In the eloquent speech at hand, the author astutely notes that despite the dominance of men in politics at the time they art respects the prevailing notion of a ghost by

extending the narrative by cleverly intentionally including, the playwright skillfully orchestrates gradual and dramatic changes, with marginalized women traditionally in the 19th century come out of the shadows and take a position of power. This dramatic shift in the balance of opportunity not only challenges social norms but is a poignant commentary on women's inherent strength and ability stands in the present that it invites in questioning and rethinking the story, ultimately revealing the possibility of profound social transformation. According to a study by Hickey, Shakespeare's depiction of gender appears to be a recommendation that men and women work together for a happy family and community rather than that women must come to nurse their fathers as Lear seeks or become subservient to a husband, as Goneril opposes.

Feminist and psychoanalytical critiques can point out problems with patriarchal systems and gender roles, but these issues are already present in Shakespeare's work—not because he agrees with them, but because he shows them to be problematic. Cordelia is scolded, and the women in the play are put in a sexist choice between two options. This leads to tragedy. Isenberg thinks about how powerful Cordelia's silence is and writes:

For speech is show; and the show of the feeling is, in Shakespeare, perhaps not always false but always suspect. The plays are haunted by this prepossession as by few others: it is a prime facet and exemplification of the greater theme that dominates his art—appearance and reality, the difference between *seems* and *is*. (188)

Marxist Viewpoints

From Marxist viewpoint, the strictly class based hierarchical organization of Lear's kingdom proves to be a fertile area to examine. Everyone is strictly bound to their position and identity unless a violent upheaval occurs. The most noticeable change that is

seen in this play is Lear's descent into madness and his newfound empathy for the poor and suffering. He is greatly moved by Edgar who was in beggar's disguise and utters in great despair -

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend
you From seasons such as these? (3.4.28-32)

But Lear is only able to truly understand the pain of the disadvantaged after he himself loses everything. Michael Ryan proposes that Lear's loss of land is representative of the way land was losing its economic power and being replaced by trade in Shakespeare's time (56). The poor Tom-o-bedlam, who is actually Edgar, represents extreme form of alienation through his distorted speech. Also, Louis Althusser, French Marxist philosopher states that all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject (162). Interpellation is the process through which individual identities are shaped through the process of 'hailing' them in social interactions.

In Act I Scene I, Gloucester introduced Edmund as his bastard son, thus establishing his position to be inferior in society. When banished Kent comes back with changed identities to serve Lear, he asks Kent "What art thou?" Lear after interrogation designates him as his servant. Oswald, who serves Gonerill, draws much ire and abuse from both Kent and Lear for refusing to be subservient. It shows that though all men is created equal some consider themselves to be superior than others, which is much discussed in Marxist philosophy.

Conclusion

Though five hundred years have passed since King Lear was written and first performed it remains an important text to understand human nature and

destiny. In this play, a profound exploration of themes emerges, centering around the intricate interplay between patriarchy and kingship, the dynamics of gender relationships, and the exercise of familial control. The play's opening, centered on a partition of land, offers a remarkable literary perspective to delve into and scrutinize the prevailing attitudes towards nationalism and gender in present-day as well. Consider a society with deeply rooted in tradition where certain attitudes prevail, shaping the roles and perceptions of women. One such attitude revolves around the concept of 'dowry,' where women are seen as commodities, exchanged between fathers and husbands. This practice underscores the belief that women hold a duty to care for their fathers above all else. Furthermore, women are regarded as the embodiment of spiritual purity and the guardians of the nation's conscience, a responsibility that extends to the well-being of men. These prevailing attitudes shed light on the complex dynamics surrounding gender in this society. The Post-Structuralist, Marxist and Feminist theories enable us delineate various social norms and their subsequent breakage in turbulent times.

References

1. Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans Ben Brewster. London: New Left Books, 1971. Print.
2. Booker, M. Keith. *A Practical Introduction to Literary Theory and Criticism*. New York: Longman, 1996. Print.
3. Cixous, Helene. "Sorties." *New French Feminisms*. 1975: 366-71. Rpt.in *Modern Literary Theory*. Ed. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. Print.
4. Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. Print.
5. Hickey, Kate Downey. "'Struck with Her Tongue": Speech, Gender, and Power in King Lear." (2015). July 2015.
6. Isenberg, Arnold. "Cordelia Absent." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 2.3 (1951): 185-94. JSTOR. Web. 9
7. Powell, Jim. *Derrida for Beginners*. Danbury: For Beginners, 1997. Print.
8. Ryan, Michael. "Post-Structuralism, Deconstruction, Post-Modernism." *Literary Theory: A Practical Introduction*. Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1999. Print.
9. Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of King Lear*. Ed. Jay L. Halio. South Asia: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Print.