

Modern İngiltere'nin İlk Dönemleri Ve Kültür Temsilcileri Olarak Shakespeare Kadınları

Early Modern England And Shakespeare's Women As Cultural Representations

Rümeysa Çavuş*

Özet

Modern İngiltere'nin ilk dönemlerinde, Rönesans ve Reformasyonun getirdiği değişimlerle birlikte cinsiyet kavramı yeni bir boyut kazanmıştır. Kadın imajını güçlendirmek için yeni yasal ve toplumsal düzenlemeler getirilmiştir. Ancak dönemin egemen politik ideolojisi — erkek egemensi düşünce ısrarla geleneksel kadın motifini savunmuştur. Shakespeare, bu dönemde yazan bir edebiyatçı olarak, toplumdaki karmaşık görüşlere oyunlarında yer vermektedir. Yazar oyunlarında zaman zaman standard Rönesans kadın tiplemesini yansıtırken zaman zaman ise kadın karakterlerini geleneksel kalıpların dışına taşımaktadır.

Abstract

In Early Modern England definitions of gender roles were reconsidered in the light of the innovations brought about both by Renaissance and Reformation. New legal and social arrangements were made with the aim of improving the female image. Yet, the dominant ideology of the period - the patriarchal system still held on to the traditional role of woman in society. Shakespeare writing his plays in this period inevitably reflected the paradoxical visions in gender criticism. At times Shakespeare supports the English Renaissance stereotypes of women and he is also a playwright who questions the standard female image.

Recent literary critics have pointed out that the English Renaissance theatre was the basic location for cultural and political ideologies - "the perfect arena for the representations of power". (Phyllis Rackin, 1999:53) Since gender is a form of power, the various works of Renaissance theatre provide an important insight into gender definitions. Many of the earlier gender or feminist studies analyzed theatrical texts from either the perspective of New Critics, considering women as transhistorical and searching for common denominators that women share at all times, or from a psychological point of view or the historical approach which places the female characters within the context of the conventions and attitudes of the period in which they were written. With the advent of cultural studies, female identity is reconsidered within the period's cultural conditions and political institutions. For years the issue whether being a woman was a 'natural fact' or a 'cultural formation' has been debated. Many critics of gender consider sexual identity as a social construct varying from one culture to the other. Susan Bordo, an influential feminist critic, defines "femininity" as an ideology (a culture's dominant notions of the feminine) inscribed on the body. (2001:2361) In her essay, she further expresses that it is possible to conceive female identity only through an analysis of cultural codings. (2001:2361) Hence female identity is arbitrary and can be reconstructed in different periods of history. The new tendency in literary criticism focuses on the dominant social and political codes that shape and define the female image in different eras. In this perspective, Shakespeare's women can be reanalyzed as cultural artifacts and changing visions in gender can be witnessed in his plays.

The aim of this paper is to present the conditions and the attitudes concerning gender in 16th century England and how far Shakespeare reflected the Renaissance woman in his three tragedies; **King Lear**, **Macbeth** and **Othello**. Inevitably, the social texture of the period does not provide sufficient information to understand the nature of the plays and it would be unrealistic to claim that his plays reflect the period. Yet, understanding the period's outlook on women may help the reader to get a better insight into Shakespeare's tragedies. Shakespeare's plays constitute an important place in the history of women. While some critics consider the playwright as the source of feminism, others refuse to see him as a fervent supporter of women, asserting that his women accept the traditional role imposed on them by Renaissance society. It is a well known fact that William Shakespeare is a significant author in terms of raising questions about the images of males and females and about the patriarchal system in his time. At times the dramatist supports the English stereotypes of women and their various roles in society however, he is also a writer who questions these "representations".

There are two diverse views as regards the position of women in Renaissance society. A group of feminists argued that English Renaissance drama reflected powerful and intellectual women as opposed to the common view that women were the weaker and the inferior sex. The former view related the positive changes in women's positions to the Protestant Reformation and Queen Elizabeth's rule. Protestant ideology brought about a new outlook on women. Nevertheless they were careful not to make any radical changes, they did not want to dismiss the male authority altogether. They supported the idea that women should be submissive to their husbands, on the condition that all should rest on mutual comfort. In other words, the wife should be respected as an individual by her husband. She was to be treated as a separate entity, as a separate identity. According to the Puritans, man and wife are responsible as individuals for their joint identity as a couple. As opposed to the Christian dogma, changing religion even discussed whether Eve and Adam shared responsibility for the fall, whether men and women were equal before God. The transformations in theology considered the ideal marriage to be one in which men and women were companions, sharing the responsibilities of the family. The marriage concept turns out to be highly significant since women in sixteenth century England are given an identity only within the family either as a wife or as a mother. Women could only survive as married people. The early changes concerning the status of women came about with the changes in the outlook towards matrimony. Juliet Dusinberre, an eminent critic of feminism, considers the Puritan doctrine of "chaste marriage" and the "equality of souls" as the early seeds of feminism. (1975:2)

Queen Elizabeth proved to be an indispensable ally for the feminist critics who searched for a strong woman figure in Renaissance. With Elizabeth at the top of the hierarchy, the period began to witness the breakdown of old ideas and attitudes in the structure of society. As an unmarried powerful female figure she had positive influence on Renaissance discourse. In a period where people were arguing whether women had souls, Queen Elizabeth as a woman stood at the very top of the political hierarchy as a powerful governor, a brave general and a skillful orator. Queen Elizabeth was granted a good education: she majored in popular subjects of her time and was a fluent speaker of many languages. This was a very uncommon picture in this period. Women in the 16th century were only given the freedom to enjoy learning only behind closed doors. In public, the knowing or educated woman was ostracized from society, declared either mad or a witch. However, despite the differences in the way she was brought up, she could not escape the realities of the gender roles assigned to Renaissance women. Basically, she manipulated her sex, at times presenting herself as a powerful princess with authority or as a nurturing mother or as a

vulnerable woman .(Carol Thomas Neely,1985:8) This contradictory picture of her gender is most evident in her well-known speech at Tillbury, "I have the body of a weak and feeble woman but I have the heart and stomach of a king and of a King of England too".

Another group of critics disagree with the strong female image asserting that the Reformation together with Puritanism did not necessarily improve women's status since it stressed hierarchy within the family, making the female subordinate to male dominance. In early modern England, both gender hierarchy with the man at the top and the husband's patriarchal role as governor of his family were claimed to have been established by God. Patriarchal system asserted the analogy between the husband's role and that of God in the universe and the King in the state. This was one of the dominant political ideologies of the period shared by public. Although the Chain of Degree was a political belief, it was adapted to the male-female relationship. The chain starting from the highest point required the subordination of the Pope to the God, the subordination of the King or the Queen to the Pope, that of the subjects to their ruler and similarly the subordination of women to their husbands. It was genuinely believed that violation of the order would lead to disorder. This patriarchal ideology was reinforced by a new conception of the family. Characterised by Lawrence Stone as "restricted patriarchal nuclear family" the family unit is minimized in 16th century and its borders are more clearly defined. As Nicole Rogers asserts, the family unit becomes as institution and metaphor central to the Renaissance concept of order, and this new sense entails an increase in patriotic obligations and obedience to the sovereign. In this newly formed structure a man, his wife and their children became the basic foundation of society and it was strongly believed that a decent arrangement in this unit would bring harmony and order to the monarchy. Although Renaissance is a period in which Humanism - a philosophy which placed importance on individual's dignity and worth - gained ground, it is argued by the critics of gender studies whether women had Renaissance. While the distinctive feature of humanist belief was "human dignity", it seemed that it was inadequate to exalt the position of women.

Renaissance society ascribed certain cultural traits to women. The ideal woman was supposed to embody the following virtues: silence, obedience, sexual chastity, humility, loyalty and patience. In the sixteenth century "silence" was regarded as an essential trait in defining a virtuous woman. If a woman had a sharp tongue, she was thought to break the social order. The emphasis on the need for women to keep quiet is strictly stressed in the Bible. Virgin Mary is set as an example - she is recorded to have spoken four times in Scripture. The reference to the danger of a woman's devilish

tongue originates back to Eve's speech when she deceives Adam into eating the apple. At the end of a hot debate Eve encourages Adam to eat the apple and causes their expulsion from Paradise. Therefore in Medieval and Renaissance performances the serpent took the female form. Eve's punishment for her disobedience was the pain of childbearing, sexual dependence upon and subjection to the man. Obedience within the patriarchal system had a vital role. In addition to the political ideologies of the period, the Christian doctrine imposed total obedience among the members of the family unit. Dymrna Gallagher reminds us of the fifth Commandment in which the father's role and authority is vividly explained. "Wives submit yourselves to your own husbands as unto the Lord... Children obey your parents in the Lord... Servants be obedient to them that are your masters... as to the Lord." (1989:17) All members of the family are under the government of the father. He is the sole authority and his authority cannot be shaken since he derives his authority from God.

In his plays Shakespeare gives voice to the paradoxical perspective in gender criticism. Since the playwright's main concern was to explore human nature, he experimented with the traditional female principles to see the result in the case of exploitation and abuse of these principles. One of the critics who highlights this idea in his **Short History of English Literature** is Andrew Sanders. Sanders states that at times Shakespeare tended to see women as defined and circumscribed in a patriarchal society by their roles as queens, wives, mothers, daughters and lovers, his plays also show that he was capable of exploring both gender opposition and more crucially gender blurring. Sanders further states that Shakespeare allows women to take crucial initiatives in male-dominated worlds and confuse distinctiveness between what might loosely be assumed to be "male" and "female" characteristics.(1991:160)

In **King Lear** Shakespeare establishes an open platform where he discusses the conflicts between father and daughter. The play deals with a conventional characteristic of the patriarchal system, which is "filial obedience". When Cordelia refuses to play the role of a loving and caring daughter in public, she is accused of disobedience. Her reaction which is a sign of her denial of Renaissance ideology upsets the order and triggers off the tragedy in the play. The father sees no harm in setting up this love-contest, in which he is determined to confirm his power, expecting Cordelia to be the winner. Contrary to his expectations his plan fails and Lear disowns Cordelia. Cordelia's notion of love is a personal one, incompatible with public announcement. This scene is indicative of the conflict between Cordelia's 'personal autonomy' and her father's power. (Kathleen McLuskie, 1985:104)

Lear's "innocent" game - besides resulting in filial disobedience - in fact relates to another cultural reality in Shakespeare's time - the frail bond between father and child, a common picture in early modern England. Lear as a father cannot express his love for Cordelia openly, therefore he sets up a contest in which he hopes Cordelia to win and claim the biggest gift. Lawrence Stone draws attention to the "emotional distance" in the Elizabethan family. In **Family, Sex and Marriage: In England 1500-1800**, he characterizes the Elizabethan family by "distance, manipulation and deference". He claims that Elizabethan aristocracy tried to appear in control of their emotional attachments, though the cost might be suspicion and loneliness.(1977:63) The early scene in the play deals with another important issue which is materialistic oppression. Lear wants to exert control over his daughters with his only source of power now: property - a very common practice in early modern England. He publishes his daughters' dowries so as to prove his authority and power as father. However, the insubordination of the daughters lead to anarchy. In Shakespeare's time, the only alternative to patriarchal system was chaos. In early modern England, the dowry system posed daughters as serious economic sources for the family finances. Materialistic interests were controlled by the father and used as tools of oppression. In the dowry system, brides who were not landowners, brought with them a substantial amount of money. This money was given to the father of the groom. In **King Lear**, Cordelia refuses to get married to Burgundy because his intention in becoming a suitor is status and wealth:

Peace be with Burgundy!

Since that respect and fortunes are his love,

I shall not be his wife. (II.i)

Once again Cordelia is seen as violating the norms of patriarchal convention. Although freedom of forming independent judgement for women was alien in Renaissance England, Shakespeare grants Cordelia the opportunity "to develop an independent conscience of her own" (Juliet Dusinberre, 1975:91) Shakespeare almost in all his plays shows his preference for pure love. Cordelia wants to get married to the person who loves her for her own being. Marriage for love was a very uncommon practice in early modern England. Marriages were mostly arranged by the father, who followed his own interests in choosing the groom, thus securing his property. As Juliet Dusinberre argues, the relationship of father and daughter is capitalist in Elizabethan period. A daughter was man's best investment. (1975:123) In modern England, the primary interest for marriage should be money, status or power. Marriage among the property-owning classes in the sixteenth century England was therefore a collective

decision of family and kin, not an individual one. (Lawrence, 1977:70) However, not adhering to standard female principles, in the end Cordelia is destroyed by the patriarchal system. The play dramatises the material conditions of power within the family, expresses deep anxieties about the chaos which can ensue when the balance of power is altered. (Kathleen McLuskie, 1985:90) The play presents a connection between generic insubordination and anarchy.

In Macbeth Shakespeare deals with a female figure, who not only strips out of her traditional role but cherishes the masculine traits to the full. The play creates a defiant character who acts with a masculine mentality in most events in man's world. Lady Macbeth is an ambitious woman who actively and willingly joins her husband's deadly mischief, poisoning King Duncan. Totally denying the image of the submissive and weak Renaissance woman portrait, she coldly participates in every step of this vicious act. The world of Macbeth's Scotland is 'heroic' and brutal. In this heroic world a man was expected to be a brave fighter and a powerful ruler, yet the role of an exemplary wife in this violent and crude atmosphere did not change; the woman's place was still in the house, taking care of the welfare of the family. (Marilyn French,1981:245) Thus Lady Macbeth's attitude is by no means acceptable. She violates her social role and urges her husband into murdering King Duncan. When Macbeth admits his intention of killing King Duncan and taking over the kingdom, she behaves not in a manner expected of a conventional wife: discouraging him from committing such a vicious act. On the contrary, she encourages Macbeth with all her heart. Lady Macbeth's renunciation of her role leads to the murder of a king, father and guest. Her act leads to the emergence of a new world in which the feminine principle is being wiped out. (French,1981:247)

In this play , Shakespeare portrays an unusual woman figure who is craving for power, who has the desire to be at the top of the political ladder. With Lady Macbeth Shakespeare aims at presenting the paradoxes inherent in gender definitions. Yet fully conscious of the mentality of his Renaissance audience, the great playwright lets the strong female character undertake the control of events only for a limited time. While creating a "monstrous" woman Shakespeare is careful to pinpoint the Renaissance thinking that a woman cannot step outside the boundaries of her defined role. Firstly, she has a stable life; she cannot leave the castle of Enverness on her own free will. In early modern England women could not have become an active partner or have an active role in any social strata therefore the woman was either restricted to her father's house or to that of her husband. Secondly, before the arrival of King Duncan, as a submissive wife and as part of her wifely duty she takes care of all the preparations in the household.

And when Lady Macbeth decides to take her place in the center of manly affairs, she is fully aware that the only way to take action is to be a man. In fact she is fully aware of her inferiority as a woman:

Come you spirits...unsex me here,
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, topful
Of direst cruelty! (I.v)

The final line suggests that "cruelty" is a masculine trait, so a woman cannot be wicked in terms of Renaissance coding. In **Macbeth** as in Renaissance society men were expected to take part in the social network as soldiers, politicians and leaders. As opposed to women, males were expected to be good talkers and to make decisions and to take action. While men participated in the active part of social life, women assumed a more passive role.

In **Othello** Shakespeare creates a dominant masculine world. The play takes place in Venice, which is portrayed as "worldly, powerful and moneyed" (Marilyn French, p.203) The Senate scene at the beginning of the play implies the masculine power and control over the city. This suggests the superiority of reason and domination over emotion and obedience. Shakespeare builds up a world in which masculine traits overrule qualities ascribed to women. So from the start the audience is given hints that women in this world have no power whatsoever. The play deals with an innocent weak female character, Desdemona, who becomes a victim of the patriarchal system. Desdemona, the heroine of the play, is depicted as a submissive, loyal, and chaste woman. Yet, when she runs off to her lover against her father's will, she is cruelly punished according to cultural codings. She disobeys her father in order to marry the person she falls in love with. Having betrayed her father, Brabantio, Desdemona is introduced as a possible threat to man's world:

Brabantio: Look to her Moor, if thou hast eyes to see;
She has deceiv'd her father and may thee (Liii)

Actually, Desdemona's getting married without her father's consent has upset the order. Her rebellious act at the very beginning of the play triggers off her own tragic end. Once the order is upset chaos will eventually follow. When Othello becomes suspicious of his wife's infidelity, Iago reminds him of Brabantio's words. In early modern England it was a dogma for a woman to be chaste. If a man committed adultery he was regarded as brave and honest. A woman, on the other hand, if involved in a similar act would be regarded as worthless, because conformity demanded that without virginity

a woman is useless. In his plays, Shakespeare implies a criticism that man's dignity is contained in his honour and woman's in her chastity. (Gayle Greene, 1995:50) Moreover, distrust of a person are the predominant features of the Elizabethan view of human character and conduct. The basic assumption is that no one is to be trusted, since anyone and everyone - wife, servants, children, friends, neighbours or patrons - are only kept loyal by self-interest and may therefore turn out to be enemies at any moment. (Stone, 1977:78) Therefore, when Othello is easily deceived into believing his wife's inconstancy, he cannot be accused of acting as incredulous. What is pathetic about Desdemona is her vulnerability. She is unable to defend her rights against the false accusations within the patriarchal system. Patriarchy requires her to be obedient and silent, she cannot find a way to get herself out of this impasse. In this man's world she is left to her own fate and ironically that fate is shaped by man's mode of thinking; she is given the death sentence.

At the time when Shakespeare was writing his plays English society was going through an important phase. Both Renaissance and Reformation brought with it innovations on the social platform, implying changes in the family structure and women's position in society. Gender definitions were trying to be reformed under the illuminations of these changing views. Yet, the political ideology of the period did not allow the feminine principle to evolve on a wide scale. Transformations were limited and the whole control was still in the hands of the man's world. Shakespeare's "representation of women" (Phyllis Rackin,1999:65) can be dealt with in two categories. His comedies celebrate women who are allowed to form independent judgements and are allowed to dominate their own worlds, his tragedies, on the other hand, depict women who can only force the boundaries of the masculine world and are quickly reminded to step back into their inferior position. As Gallagher asserts "tragedy is a political space" in which masculine mode of thinking finds expression. (1989:9) The focal point of the tragic action always rests on the male protagonist, therefore the rules of the patriarchal world are more stiffly felt within the tragic sphere. The comic mode aims at ensuring social reconciliation usually in the form of marriage at the end of the play and for reconciliation to take place, comedy allows both the male and the female to express themselves on a more democratic platform. In tragedies the dominant ideology is evident from the beginning - power is in the hands of man. Women characters are most of the time degraded and devalued in order to maintain masculine autonomy. **In King Lear**, in **Macbeth** and in **Othello**, the feminine principle is eradicated and masculine features such as honour, power and trust dominate.

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