

## THE SUFFOCATION OF MOTHERHOOD IN THREE SHAKESPEAREAN PLAYS: THE TEMPEST, ROMEO AND JULIET AND KING LEAR

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### Abstract

*This study investigates the suffocation of motherhood in the three major Plays of William Shakespeare which are The Tempest, Romeo and Juliet, and King Lear by using the feminist theories of Janet Adelman, Luce Irigaray, and Merry Rose Beth. The absence of motherhood in many of William Shakespeare's plays has been controversial and a point of attraction in criticism for feminist critics who are actively engaged in highlighting the patriarchal aspects of William Shakespeare's plays. According to the critics, the suffocation and absence of motherhood in the three Shakespearean plays: The Tempest, Romeo & Juliet, and King Lear was portrayed on purpose to give dominance to patriarchy. This Thesis will analyze motherhood and the absence of motherhood in the three Shakespearean plays through the works of feminist critics: Janet Adelman (1992), Mary Beth Rose (2017) and Luce Irigaray (2004), who have highlighted the patriarchal factors and elements which are directly or indirectly responsible for the suffocation of motherhood in the three Shakespearean plays. Moreover, in many of his plays, William Shakespeare gives preference to daughters over mothers, regardless of the phallogocentric view which associates females with motherhood and places them through maternity. An evaluation of William Shakespeare's plays marks it obvious, that it is not only the mother-son relationship or bond which is entirely suffocated, the daughters are no exception and they are also left motherless in most of William Shakespeare's plays. Thus, William Shakespeare's preference for making influential and dominant male characters while ignoring particularly mothers and generally womanly questions is not merely misogyny or just an image of historical representativeness.*

**KEYWORDS:** Motherhood, Feminism, Patriarchy, Gender Inequality, Suffocation.





## INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare like many of his contemporaries has completely suffocated the female gender in order to show patriarchy/male dominance in his plays. The portrayal of female characters in Shakespearean plays makes it obvious that as the relation between mothers and their sons cannot be the one and individual relation that is smothered; daughters are also shown and left motherless. Basically, it counts for both the nonappearance of motherhood in Shakespeare and the absence of the portrayal of feminine characters indicate an ancient image of patriarchy based on the subjugation of female characters. Due to this very reason, there is no space for the existence of a motherly character or motherhood. The same character as soon as shown or portrayed as masculine or male, and controls the governance of life, experiences life with all its dimensions whereas the female is credited having no sense. Therefore, the women agency is shown quit and made silent in these three plays, perhaps more importantly the female or in particular the mother/motherhood is thought as a menace to both son and to the daughter respectively.

As it is true of the patriarchal understanding the woman is associated with incompetence and feebleness, and the absence of mother/motherhood is responsible for the son to becoming mature person and ripening himself as a male. Moreover, resultantly the proper relationship between a mother and her daughter is completely ignored from the very beginning. This suggests that by disturbing the relationships between mother and her offspring which is visible even in the present era is quite dangerous and disturbing. It is historical forgetfulness when it comes to maternal lineage. In almost all the plays of William Shakespeare, the female gender is portrayed with inferiority and less importance which makes the male dominance obvious in every aspect.

The missing maternal lineage in Shakespearean plays can neither be merely understood as historical image nor can it be liable on the writer rather it must be kept in mind that William Shakespeare just like his contemporaries of the time gave preference to men over women because of the societal norms and rituals of the time. As “Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare’s Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest” (1992), Janet Adelman investigates the absent or missing mother and son relationship, referring to the oedipal position which most probably concerns motherly compassion as, a threat to the formation for masculinity. Moreover. Mary Beth Rose offers a historical impression of the English Renaissance in connection to the communal and cultural image and legitimate status of maternity. According to Rose, the nonappearance of motherhood is



essential for masculine development. Mary Beth Rose (2017) mentions in her book "Plotting Motherhood in Medieval, Early Modern, and Modern Literature" that a long Western literary tradition in which maternal authority is unequally and inconsistently characterized. We recognize what narrative places the father's power must involve: progenitor, legislator, upholder of order, and knowledge seeker. Paternal authority, regardless of how fragile, damaged, or vanquished it may be, offers the potential of structural certainties. But the image of maternal power does not have this structural coherence. She also uses Freud's Oedipus complex theory/myth as an example of how men create their identities, which calls for the successful subject to cut ties with his mother and assume the role of the father.

The three Shakespearean plays selected for this Thesis makes it quite obvious that the issue raised by the researcher is reasonable and valid as the female characters of the said plays are suffocated and given less importance in every aspect of life.

Over time, feminist and sexual role study approaches to Shakespeare criticism have gained a lot of significance. Instead of presenting Shakespeare's works to a historical formalist study, feminists, particularly those who identify with the New Historicist movement, have long been captivated with contextualizing his writings. Feminist critics, citing anthropologists like Strauss here, minimized the degree to which Shakespeare colonized a world dominated by males and fathers, where women served primarily as a bargaining chip in male power dynamics.

Relationships between men and women, sexual roles, and family systems are all deeply impacted by feminist criticism. Feminists, for instance, frequently concentrate on Prospero's controlling position as a father in *The Tempest*, together with the method and custom by which Ferdinand and Miranda are engaged and wedded when both profess their love for one another in front of a witness who is Miranda's father, Prospero. Romeo's sensitivity to marital stress, which ostensibly and superficially compels him to murder Tybalt, is a major contributing factor in *Romeo and Juliet's* tragedy because Romeo rejects Juliet's example of kindness and forgiveness in favor of macho male allegiances.

Few women appear in William Shakespeare's works or writings precisely because women were not allowed to perform in London in the late 1500s and early 1600s since it was viewed as socially and ethically unacceptable for them to do so. Shakespeare's plays had numerous female characters who were important and crucial to the dramatic progression of events. Shakespeare's female characters were destined to follow the patriarchal Elizabethan era's laws and conventions, just like in real life. As a result, forcing



women into marriage with the hope of getting authority, inheritance, dowry, or property in return was a frequent practice in Elizabethan England.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:**

Following are the objectives of the study:

- To investigate the absence of motherhood from a feminist perspective in the three major plays of William Shakespeare: The Tempest, Romeo and Juliet, and King Lear.
- To find out the patriarchal elements responsible for undermining and suffocating motherhood in these Plays of William Shakespeare.

### **QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY:**

The study has two questions that will be answered, which are mentioned below:

- How the suffocation of motherhood be traced back from a feminist perspective in William Shakespeare's three major plays: The Tempest, Romeo and Juliet, and King Lear?
- Why has William Shakespeare undermined motherhood through patriarchy in the three major plays: The Tempest, Romeo and Juliet, and King Lear?

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **The Tempest:**

Miranda, the protagonist, the only child of Prospero is plainly motherless and broken from parenthood and more specifically from motherhood. It is noticeable in The Tempest Prospero, Marinda's father has elevated and brought up his daughter on the Island all by himself and there is a complete absence of mother/motherhood in the Play. This completely endorses my argument about the suffocation of motherhood by William Shakespeare because it was important to portray Miranda motherless in order to give more power and supremacy to her father Prospero. William Shakespeare did it on purpose so that he could make Miranda motherless in the play and give more importance to Prospero.

Feminists often take an interest in Prospero's dominating role as a patriarch and the way Ferdinand and Miranda become engaged and then, inadvertently, wed when they profess their love for one another in front of Miranda's father. Over the course of the play, Miranda only encounters men. In the entire play, she never encounters a girl. The Tempest's audience only recognizes Miranda as a feminine human character.

The Tempest's lack of female characters reveals a lot about how the play's male characters view women's roles in society as a whole. Perhaps Gonzolo's description of how he would administer the island if given the chance to rule is the most overt example of a male character publicly positioning women in a broad social vision. Gonzalo paints a



picture of a society where leisure and a lack of trade define it. All men and women are idle and without occupation, but they are all innocent and sincere. (2.1). Gonzalo mentions women, but only if they are "Innocent and pure," as if he had almost forgotten about a crucial function in society. The Tempest as a whole maintains its female characters in the background and Miranda, the lone female character, is dependent on her father, much like Gonzalo relegates women to the social background.

Prospero's speech, in which he expresses his approval of Miranda and Ferdinand's impending wedding, makes it very evident that he views his daughter as his property. Miranda's significance to Prospero mostly arises from her virginity, which enables her politically advantageous marriage to Ferdinand. Miranda's union with Ferdinand represents the possibility of a fresh start, something Prospero desperately desires for himself. Since Prospero's whole future rests entirely on Miranda being virgin, he must avoid any sexual approaches, whether they come from Caliban or Ferdinand.

Prospero is conscious about the virginity of his daughter Miranda as he says,

“If thou dost break her virgin-knot before

All sanctimonious ceremonies may with full and holy rite be ministered.

*No sweet aspersion shall the heavens let fall*

*To make this contract grow, but barren hate.*

*Sour-eyed disdain, and discord shall bestrew*

*The union of your bed with weeds so loathly*

*That you shall hate it both.” (Act 4, Scene 1)*

The lengthy line above is Prospero's way of warning Ferdinand about the repercussions of his soon-to-be son-in-law trying to have sexual relations with his beloved daughter, Miranda, before their legal marriage. This threat, as opposed to Prospero's other warnings and threats, which amply demonstrate how cruel he is capable of being, shows his concern for his daughter. Prospero purposefully employs such strong language so that Ferdinand understands how important his daughter is to him above all else. He does not truly mean it when he says that having sex before marriage will sow "disdain" and "discord" in their marriage and make their relationship "barren."

As Prospero says to his daughter Miranda in The Tempest:

“Have I, thy schoolmaster, made thee more profit than other princesses can?

That have more time for vainer hours, and tutors not so careful.” (Act 1, Scene 2).

Miranda has no remembrance of her mother, but she only remembers her harbors and the nurse. The readers are told nothing about the mother of Miranda at all. The readers have



no idea whether her mother, Prospero's wife is lifeless or alive and thriving. Prospero talks about his spouse; Miranda's mother merely one time in the entire play and this position is nothing but a fortification of the fatherly role. While Miranda enquires if Prospero is actually her father, he answers:

"Thy mother was a piece of virtue, and she said thou wast my daughter (...)" (Act 1, Scene 2).

In order to be more specific, that, the very concept of the righteous mother can be, labeled as a phallogocentric acknowledgement. Miranda, who has disconnected her existence from her beloved mother, has additional befitting example of de-subjectified character with nearly whole submission to the ancestor continued by a whole parting from the motherly lineage. The lineage from her mother as it seems, was not considered important to be mentioned in the play as giving boost to patriarchy was the main purpose beyond writing this play. Her distinctiveness is designed and cherished by her father Prospero; for instance, she satisfies his wish by the time she obeys and performs according to his command and she therefore, falls in love with the other protagonist of the play, Ferdinand. Her father's control over her life and her decisions, describes the role of patriarchy and subjugation of women.

### **ROMEO AND JULIET:**

Romeo and Juliet are one of the best plays ever written by William Shakespeare which is his first and most famous tragedy of all time. It is necessary to mention that as Miranda's dear mother was not present in the play, on the contrary Juliet's beloved and dearest mother, Lady Capulet having presence in this Drama. She performs like as voice of Capulet who is Juliet's cruel father. Lady Capulet, her individual existence and identity are suffocated throughout the play. As a result, she fails to develop proper relationship with her daughter. There is a character in this play who is known as the nurse, she even has a better and extra apparent relationship with Juliet, than her mother Lady Capulet ever has with her. When the protagonist Juliet tells her mother about her intentions of marrying her love Romeo, the response comes:

"Talk not to me, for I'll not speak a word: Do as thou wilt, for I have done with thee." (Act III: Scene V).

The rivalry between the Capulet and Montague families, together with the stars or their fate, are said to have contributed to the tragedy in a traditional understanding of Romeo and Juliet. The prologue of the play reveals this at the outset. The tragic outcome of Romeo and Juliet, according to a feminist perspective, is the product of deeply rooted



patriarchy and patriarchal views. Four women play characters in this drama. The role of Lady Montague is not very significant. Lady Capulet is a patriarchal female leader. She is conscious of and embraces her subordinate position within patriarchal conceptions of the family and society. Even though Juliet is only a young child, she declares that she will soon wed Lord Paris. Juliet is appropriate for marrying at the age of fourteen so because patriarchal structure does not really acknowledge the place of women outside of the institution of marriage.

The nurse's statement that "women grow by men" reflects sexism and how women are inevitably dependent on men for everything. This very statement by the nurse is problematic and disturbing as it suggests that women have always and should always depend on men for everything in their life. Women cannot judge or decide anything of their own. It is nonsense that a writer of the caliber of William Shakespeare can show the female gender weaker than men. Juliet is almost portrayed as a slave who cannot exercise her own freewill. She even cannot marry a man of her own choice.

### **King Lear:**

Another one of Shakespeare's plays with an obvious patriarchal undertone and inadequate motherly representation is King Lear. Lear asks his daughters Cordelia, Goneril, and Regan to declare their love for him at the beginning of the play in exchange for a share of his kingdom. The mother of the three female characters, as well as the protagonist King Lear's wife, is not mentioned in the play. In the play's opening scene, Goneril and Regan profess their fake love to King Lear, who accepts it and then requests that Cordelia do the same. Honest Cordelia admits she doesn't think that love can be expressed. She says: "And yet not so; since I am sure my love's more ponderous than my tongue." (Act I Scene I).

Cordelia says nothing when asked to express her love for her father. King Lear expects Cordelia to be more obedient to her father and work in accordance with his command which is quite typical of a patriarchal or male-dominant society or form of life. When Cordelia says nothing, King Lear tells her that she will get nothing if she does not express her love for him:

Nothing will come of nothing: speak again. (King Lear 2009) This dialogue of King Lear is full of dominance and clearly manifests patriarchy. This is a clear representation of the age which William Shakespeare belonged to. The male dominance over the female gender is quite evident.

The mother of Cordelia, Goneril, and Regan is absent in King Lear, leaving Lear to care for his three daughters by himself. His youngest daughter, Cordelia, has grown up to





be an honest and kind woman despite growing up without a mother. On the other hand, the other two daughters have developed into scheming, power-hungry adults. Perhaps the two elder daughters would have behaved differently if a mother had been present.

In *King Lear*, the term "mother" appears twice and both times in a derogatory way. A reference in Act II, scene 4, when Lear exclaims, "O!" "how this mother fills up into my heart" alludes to a disease that resembled being a child in a mother's womb. It also resembles a mother being suffocated. Mother is connected to the womb, which is where hysteria is thought to originate. Lear and Regan's conversation includes yet another allusion to a mother. "I believe you to be [my kid]; I know why I believe this; if thou shouldst not be glad, I would divorce me from thy mother's tomb, sepulchering an adulteress," he declares (*King Lear*. II.136- 139). Lear is advising her that because he has given her his kingdom and is aware that she is his legal daughter, she ought to treat him better. Lear claims that the mother is readily to blame for the undesirable outcomes that her daughters, Regan and Goneril, have experienced.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The theoretical framework and technique that were employed to carry out this research are the main topics of this section of the study. *The Tempest*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *King Lear* are the three Shakespearean plays which are analyzed properly in this Thesis. The primary goal of this study is to understand the three plays of William Shakespeare that were chosen, and it does so by using the "Textual Analysis" method. Details on the research design and methods used to analyze the collected data and draw the necessary conclusions about the issues and research questions are provided in this part of the report. In order to draw the proper conclusions about how motherhood was suppressed in Elizabethan society, the chapter also provides appropriate inferences about the research philosophy, data collection methods, research strategy, data analysis tools, and techniques that have been used to study the text of the plays "*The Tempest*," "*Romeo and Juliet*," and "*King Lear*."

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:**

This thesis uses feminist theories of Janet Adelman (1992), Mary Beth Rose (1991) and Luce Irigaray (2004) to analyze the three Shakespearean plays to bring forth the factors responsible for the suffocation and subjugation of motherhood. By using the Feminist Theories, the researcher will elaborate the female characters of the three plays by analyzing their role in the respective plays. It will also analyze the patriarchal elements of



the time which were directly or indirectly causing the suffocation of motherhood and the subjugation of females.

### **CONCLUSION/ RECOMMENDATION**

In conclusion, it will not be wrong to state that both the non-appearance of maternity/motherhood as in William Shakespeare's works and also the non-attendance of depictions of feminine subjects boldly hint to the obvious historical image of the male dominance or patriarchy created over the subjugation and suffocation of women in general and motherhood in particular. This certain and absolute condition makes it quite difficult and leaves no space for presence of a mother. By not providing powerful representation of female subjects, is therefore not merely the culpability of the great playwright William Shakespeare rather it was the communal system and ethos of the time that wanted it to be the way Shakespeare described them. It is this patriarchal mindset which says the mother should remain undermined or excluded from the plays which have smothered mothers in particular and women in over-all.

The women are completely ignored and excluded owing to the patriarchal linguistic order which totally undermines the female gender. The women cannot be women and speak for themselves unless they are portrayed as weak and inferior compared to men. For this reason, it will be possible that father will have the full authority and the mothers will be silenced and only then the father of a family could have the complete authority. The separation from motherly line provides space for authoritarian domination. This is the very reason that motherhood has been suffocated and compromised in order to give more importance to fathers as well as to men in general.

The Elizabethan era/society was also responsible for the weak status of women of the time. Women were considered inferior and weak and were completely ignored in the social spheres and important social activities. In this study, the feminist critics objected to this portrayal of the women of time when William Shakespeare portrayed the females as weak and inferior in his plays though he could have represented the female gender in a better way. The language used in his plays is also male dominant even the females are speaking the way men speak. The women in his plays do not have their own identity rather they are represented by men. The subjugation and suffocation of women was done on purpose to give more dominance and importance to men in particular.

This Research Work elaborates on the clash between patriarchy, or the Old School, and anti-patriarchy, or the New School. The New School contends that the daughter must



choose her husband, contrary to the Old School's belief that the father should make this decision. The Old School predominated from the classical era through the middle Ages and the Renaissance. Shakespeare's plays demonstrate this, where male performers took on the parts of female actors because women did not have a voice in society and were not viewed as men's equals. They were thought to be beneath men. As a result, they were denied their fundamental human rights.

Moreover, it has been determined that the Elizabethan period contributed to the portrayal of the patriarchal culture and gender inequality that compelled William Shakespeare to depict women as inferior to males. It has been evaluated that in the three plays of William Shakespeare, motherhood is suffocated in order to give importance to patriarchy/men. The language used by William Shakespeare is completely male dominant and the female also uses the language of men for communication in these plays.

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