

Shakespeare's Cleopatra: Queer Disposition in Character Development

Deepthi Menon*

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Chetana College of Media and Performing Arts, Thrissur, India

Abstract: William Shakespeare, the greatest World poet and playwright, had an enormous talent for combining and expressing thoughts and emotions, expanding the capacity of language, in the representation of thinking, acting and interpreting. Shakespeare's art of characterization, his power of creating personality through verbal and non-verbal clues, is exemplary. His tragic play, Antony and Cleopatra depicts the most famous lovers in history, their affair, their war together, their defeat and finally their suicide. The story had been told and retold for centuries in many different ways with many possible interpretations. I attempt to read the character of Cleopatra in the light of Queer Theory, which emerged in the early 1990s as a field of critical theory interested in shifting the boundaries and re-evaluating gender arrangements.

Keywords: Characterization, Elizabethan Drama, Shakespearean Tragedy, Queer.

1. Introduction

Shakespeare is one of the greatest men of genius and enigma, who had ever lived in our planet. Though he wrote for the Elizabethan stage and audience, he is read and enjoyed even today by people all over the world. His works have been translated into all the important languages of the world, and the films based on his dramas have always drawn packed houses. He had always appealed with his capacity to lift the narrow world to a higher world, thus transcending his plays to a vast panorama of humanity, acquiring cosmic significance. He could pierce to the hidden sources of impulses and passion, prompting action through the complexities of thoughts and emotions. His art was never merely based on abstract theories, but on the world that he had lived in, the stage that he wrote for and the realities he had experienced. In the field of characterization, he surpasses all with lively, evolving, rounded and capable characters, painting the good and the evil, the virtuous and the wicked, with the same impartial loving care. His characters exhibit unimpaired complexity, variety and fullness, laying bare the very soul of his characters, helping human kind in understanding its own nature and actions, internalized in his art.

In Elizabethan England, social/political power was entirely in the hands of 'noble' men. Both women and men in lower classes were powerless; women in the upper classes were in a particular position as their value was generally reckoned to be a rich or powerful man's path to more riches or more power. Daughters were considered to be possessions and were passed

from father to husband to forge alliances between the rich and powerful. The father had the sole right to make the decision about his daughter's marriage. Once she was married her function was to produce a male heir, and daughters could be used for the family's further advancement. One cannot talk about Shakespeare's powerful women in the social or political sense; but there are a number of very powerful women in Shakespeare in the personal sense, who have influenced the schemes bringing about some personal and political results. Cordelia in King Lear, Portia in The Merchant of Venice, Lady Macbeth in Macbeth, Beatrice in Much Ado about Nothing, Desdemona in Othello, Rosalind in As you Like it, Viola in Twelfth Night are all remarkable, independent women.

In Shakespeare's comedies, there is more accommodation of female voices, where the female characters got a chance to speak-out atleast in disguise. Rosalind, Viola, and Portia acquire full potential in their male garb. In this act of cross-dressing, we can find a rudimentary form of 'drag' --- dressing like a person of the opposite sex to parody the social definitions of gender identity --- which is popular among Queer Theorists and LGBT circles in the West. It can be considered as a kind of pastiche that subverts the received notions and exposes the fictional nature of the 'essential naturality' of sexuality in any given society. Of all his plays, the voice of rebellious womanhood is heard loudest in Antony and Cleopatra, which embodied a major conflict in the social psyche. Cleopatra embodied not just the fluidity of Alexandria, but of her sex, trying to surpass the stiff male-values symbolised by Rome and its rulers.

According to David Halperin, "Queer is by definition is whatever at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant ... it describes a horizon of possibilities whose precise extent and heterogenous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance." (112) It challenges the essentialist notions of naturalised socio-sexual norms and ceaselessly interrogates the preconditions of identity-categories. Queer, as it appears in the dictionary, has a primary meaning of 'odd', 'peculiar' and 'out of the ordinary'. In culture and politics, Queer articulates a strategy, a radical questioning of binary notions of gender and is deconstructive of institutional powers. Queer studies have grown out of Lesbian and Gay Studies, which in turn, grew out of Feminist Theories. While Lesbian and Gay Studies focus on

*Corresponding author: deepthi@chetanacollege.ac.in

the questions of homosexuality, Queer is a political critique of anything that falls into the normative concepts. It decentres those social practises that consolidate and limit the possibilities of human existence and expressly challenges, destabilises, subverts and undermines conventional norms and conservative thinking.

Shakespeare's Cleopatra was like a flowing river of life and beauty with mysterious complexity and existential fallibility. She was the Queen of Egypt, a woman who was not only entirely financially independent, but also ruled a country, something that would have been incredibly rare in that era, and this unbridled power was a key part of her characterisation. Rather than succumb to subservient stereotypes as was often the case in domestic partnerships, Cleopatra offered a breath of fresh air by outsmarting the men around her and using her powerful personality and sexuality to get what she wanted in terms of social and political power.

In Antony and Cleopatra, we meet Antony, one member of the Triumvirate which ruled Rome, the other two being Octavius Caesar and Lepidus. Most people considered him the finest soldier and bravest general in the world; successes at wars and power-politics were what he had known until he came to Egypt and Cleopatra. Then he had to choose between his sense of honour and reputation that his country represented and the world of love and imagination that Cleopatra represented. He made the deeper choice in a purely emotional way. By letting go of his drive to reassert his influence as a world figure, he chose the more intimate role as Cleopatra's lover. Antony is summoned back to Rome, where he clashed with Octavius before returning to Cleopatra in Egypt. Then in battle with Octavius, Antony and Cleopatra suffered losses and miscommunication, and both eventually committed suicide.

As Shakespeare portrays him, Antony is a magnanimous man with strong contrasts and vacillations of character; but Cleopatra astonishes us with her elusive female self, creative mind and uninhibited revolts against androcentrism. In Act I Scene I, Shakespeare impressively introduces Cleopatra by having her dominate Antony in their opening exchange. She chides him for dismissing the messenger and reminds him of his responsibilities by saying, "I'll set a bourn (boundary) how far to be beloved". In Act I scene III, we see her determined to maintain control over Antony's emotions, and refusing her maid Charmian's urging to be suppliant and obedient to Antony, she taunts him with her playful, mock accusations, expressing her unpleasantness over his leaving to Rome. In Act I Scene V, she openly expresses her preoccupation with Antony and her unsatisfied longings in his absence, without any shame or guilt. In Act II Scene V, unlike effeminate, lady-like heroines who accept disloyalty from the lover as destiny, Cleopatra, flies to rage, anger and apprehension when she hears the news of Antony's marriage with Octavia, betraying her. However, when a messenger delivers word that Octavia, Caesar's sister, is plain and unimpressive, Cleopatra becomes confident that she will win Antony back. The news of Caesar's betrayals angers Antony and he dispatches his wife to Rome on a peace mission, and quickly returns to Egypt and Cleopatra. There, he raises a large army to fight Caesar and ignoring all advice to the

contrary, Antony elects to fight him at sea, which was Caesar's stronghold. Antony and Cleopatra had a larger fleet than Octavian, but the crews of Antony and Cleopatra's navy were not all well-trained, some of them perhaps from merchant vessels, whereas Octavian had a fully professional force. In the decisive hour of the Battle at Actium, Cleopatra ordered her fleet to leave and sail for home. Antony's forces lose the battle when Cleopatra's ship flees and Antony's follows, leaving the rest of the fleet vulnerable. Though partisan Roman writers would later accuse Cleopatra of cowardly deserting Antony, Historian Stanley Burstein (2004) and Classical Archaeologist Duane Roller (2010) suggests the possibility of Cleopatra's concern with defending Egypt, behind her decision. Caesar sends word to Cleopatra that she might have all her wishes granted if she would surrender Antony to him. In Act III Scene XIII, we see a Cleopatra who declines to sacrifice Antony for her own safety, though she expresses admiration for the greatness of the victor. The ambassador is sent back to Caesar with a challenge for him to meet Antony in single combat. She tells Caesar that though her honour can be conquered, it will never be lost and renders him her crown. After a failure to sue for peace, Antony decides again to march against his enemy. Antony's initial victory on land makes him seriously underestimate his youthful opponent Octavius Caesar, which makes him fearlessly state that wherever Caesar chooses to fight, he will fight. Not being a careful tactician as how Caesar is, this impulsiveness brings in the final defeat for Antony. Cleopatra and her fleet leave the scene to circumvent the defeat's worst effects, only to be blamed by Antony of treachery. Desperate to dispel Antony's persistent doubts about her, she sends word to Antony that she dies with his name on her lips. Having believed that he had lost everything, he attempts to kill himself, learning too late that he acted too rashly. Seriously wounded Antony is taken to Cleopatra and there he dies in her arms, proclaiming love to each other. Caesar sends word to Cleopatra that she would be treated royally, but she decides not to risk her honour marching behind him in his triumphant procession, to be pinched and spat upon by slaves and rabble. She puts on her crown and royal garb, places a poisonous asp on her breast and dies. Caesar, entering her chamber finds her dead, but as beautiful and desirable as in life and orders Antony's and Cleopatra's burial in a common grave, together in death as they had wished to be in life.

Cleopatra stands as a dynamic character who declines to be fooled by the androcentric mystifications. In a patriarchal world, it is considered to be a merit to play the role of meek, obedient, docile women, with total self-surrender to men in their lives. It disagrees with women who give expression to their thoughts and emotions and considers it as an unpardonable blasphemy. Women are conditioned to repress any spontaneous expression of their sexuality, because, 'good' women have to sublimate their sexuality. But, instead of the masochistic tendency to suffer quietly, Cleopatra thinks, speaks and expresses her consciousness and always substitutes the victim status generally attributed on women with an authentic representation of the female self. She is never ashamed of her instinctive, sensual, erotic body and psyche and never treats

herself as an instrument to bear and rear children whenever man demands. She passionately violates and subverts the taboos of society, institutionalised beliefs and orthodox codes of conduct and deviates from 'ideal' womanly behaviour in her quest to be true to her potentialities and convictions. When Caesar comments that women are no stronger than their own interests, and that, being a woman, Cleopatra can probably be bribed with the promise of her own safety in exchange for Antony's life, what is revealed is the male supremacist ideology that undermines feminine integrity. Since he can't see beyond the popular stereotype of her as being little more than a prostitute, he believes that she can easily be bought. Cleopatra's character begins to reveal a more complex nature here, more mature and noble, in the sense that she never wavers from her loyalty to Antony. Antony's rashness makes him jump to the conclusion that Cleopatra is altering her loyalties, when in fact she is not. Throughout the play we see that the men generally give Cleopatra less credit than she deserves, and we shall see that even Antony, though temporarily reassured, will doubt her again. But, Cleopatra remains focused and committed, not just to herself, or to her love, but to her country too, and demonstrates a composed leap for self-preservation and survival even in adversity, unlike Antony. Even while Antony acts as if he had lost reason, Cleopatra follows him to the battle field and tries to defend him up to the last possible minute. She always maintains a space where she takes decisions and makes judgements, safeguarding the multiple dimensions of herself. She subverts the expectations of the masculine world by discovering new definition for survival; she survives by dying and wins by losing and through this very bold subversive performance, shocks the conventional male-centred visions represented by Caesar. She never allows his male ego to claim her; she redeems herself through her self-willed death and celebrates it as an act of defiance and self-assertion of her personality and individual spirit.

Stepping beyond the discursively-constrained notions regarding femininity and normality, she realises, evolves, registers and lives her 'difference', exposing the false hierarchies and artificial borders that operate in society. Her rejection of the traditional constructions of female existence, refusal to accept the confinements of patriarchal confinements, exploration of the multiple possibilities of her existence and a

perpetual redefinition of herself unmistakably evolves a queer outlook. In the beginning of the play, she is little more than a charming regal woman who has the power to enslave men. But gradually we come to learn that she is an abundant pool of wit and resourcefulness, adapting to changes with versatility and accepting even death with dignity and self-assurance. She always posits herself beyond gender-role expectations and reinforces her rights as a full-fledged human individual, debunking the patriarchal fantasies regarding womanhood. Death is celebrated by her as a flight to a more meaningful role, a redemption from a world where guilt, sin, crime, scorn, humiliation and punishment stood stock still, revolting against an unfeeling callous masculine world, actualising the autonomy of her own self. She executes her subjective potential for individual freedom and free-will, and emerges as a self-reliant, confident, emancipated individual, truly 'queer,' deconstructing the in-built belief in woman's inferior position and frailty, enacting the possibilities of self-determination in a rapture of absolute liberation, both in life and death.

2. Conclusion

This paper presented an overview on Shakespeare's Cleopatra: Queer Disposition in Character Development.

References

- [1] Armstrong, Edward A. Shakespeare's Imagination. Nebraska: Nebraska University Press, 1963.
- [2] Bloom, Harold. Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human. New York: Riverhead, 1998.
- [3] Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- [4] Burstein, Stanley M. The Reign of Cleopatra. Westport: Green wood Press, 2004.
- [5] Fletcher, Joann. Cleopatra, the Great: The Woman Behind the Legend. 2008. London: Harper, 2012.
- [6] Garber, Marjorie. Shakespeare After All. 2004. Harvard: Anchor, 2005.
- [7] Halperin, David. Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography. New York, OUP, 1995.
- [8] Hazlitt, William. Characters of Shakespeare's plays. 1817. London: Modern Parlance, 2013.
- [9] Roller, Duane, W. Cleopatra: A Biography. Oxford: OUP, 2010.
- [10] Schiff, Stacy. Cleopatra: A Life. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2010.
- [11] Shakespeare, William. Antony and Cleopatra. 1607. New Delhi: Rupa, 2004.
- [12] Smith, Emma. This is Shakespeare. New Orleans: Pelican, 2019.