

The Elizabethan Family As Reflected in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *The Winter's Tale*

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Abstract

This paper presents a study of the Elizabethan family and the status of women in Shakespeare's times. The different plays written by dramatists of this time reflect the hierarchal order of the Elizabethan society. In this order, men, as fathers and husbands, placed themselves at the top and women were relegated to the subordinate position. A daughter was supposed to be obedient towards her father and later to her husband. The fundamental work of a wife was considered to be child-bearing and child-rearing in addition to managing the household. Marriage was more a privilege of the father than the right of a daughter. A father used to decide the husband of his daughter, not the daughter herself. This paper attempts to explore the structure of Elizabethan family and the status of women through a close study of Shakespeare's two plays: *King Lear* and *The Winter's Tale*. As Shakespeare has shown his great interest in describing family and family relationships of his times so it would be very interesting to study the Elizabethan family in these two selected plays.

Keywords: Hierarchal, Subordinate, Patriarchal, Marriage, Silence.

Introduction:

The plays of Shakespeare have always been the most popular sources of research in English literature. There may be many factors that attract the researchers. As Literature is considered to be a mirror to society, Shakespeare's plays are no exception to it. If one closely goes through his plays, one finds Shakespeare's keen interest in describing the family of his times. His plays are still quoted to reflect the status of women in

Elizabethan time. It is necessary to have a glance over the historical background of the Elizabethan society in general and the family in particular before going into the close study of Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *The Winter's Tale*. James I wrote "The state of monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth...kings are compared to fathers in families : for a king is truly parens patriae, the politic father of his people" (Stone 152). The statement of James I reflects the structure of Renaissance family. It is noteworthy that he presents father as superior to a king. In an Elizabethan family, the father was the head and other members had to submit their will to him. As the father was the head of the family similarly the king was the head of the state. All people had to live under him as all family members lived under the control of the father. James I probably means to say that the king was the political father of the state. Robert Cleaver tries to clarify the picture shown by James I "A household is as it were a little commonwealth, by the good government whereof God's glory may be achieved" (5). The king was considered to be the representative of God on earth, none could go against him. The Elizabethan society had a hierarchical order in which women had subordinate role. Women were considered to be weak and inferior to men. They were not supposed to take decisions by themselves. Edmund Tilney throws light on Elizabethan family "for both divine and human laws in our religion giveth the man absolute authority over the woman in all places" (Stone 97). 'The absolute authority over the woman in all places' reflects the true picture of Elizabethan society. These critics seem to be saying that the Elizabethan society was highly male dominated. In *King Lear*, Cordelia, the honest daughter of Lear, is banished because she refuses to flatter her father. In *The Winter's Tale*, Hermione, the pregnant wife of king Leontes, is imprisoned and her newly born baby daughter is left at the mercy of wild animals due to misperception and miscalculation of king Leontes. This paper will try to explore many more aspects of Elizabethan family through the critical analysis of Shakespeare's selected plays.

Family in *King Lear*:

In *King Lear*, there are two plots : main plot of Lear's story and the subplot of Gloucester's story. In these two plots, we are introduced with two families : the Lear Family and the Gloucester family. These families are headed by two patriarchs : Lear and Gloucester. Lear has three daughters : Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. The mother of the daughters is absent in the family. Her absence symbolizes the absence of a counterbalance to Lear's male authority. In the opening scene, Lear presents himself as a powerful patriarch. He declares to distribute the property among his daughters. He loves his youngest daughter the most so he reserves the larger part of the property to her share. He tells that he wants to unburden himself from the royal duties and responsibilities. He has also to hand over his most favourite daughter Cordelia to her husband in marriage.

In the opening scene, when Lear makes serious decisions, he does not seek the advice of anyone. He keeps going at his own will. In both of his dignities, as a father and as king, he presented himself as a powerful head. Before going to implement his will of distributing the property, he announces something that takes all aback. He makes

the distribution of the kingdom conditional. The daughters are asked to express their love towards their father in order to claim their share in the kingdom. By making such declaration, he invites a conflict among his daughters to compete with one another. But he himself seems to be unaware of it. His elder daughters plan to give him what he wanted. Probably they knew that their father was a king and therefore gave more importance to language. He demanded the amount of love be conveyed to him through words. But he forgets that words can be as false as they are true. He probably thinks that he has power to shape the things as per his desire.

His elder daughters, Goneril and Regan, grasp the need of the hour. They satisfy their father's intense desire to listen flattery. The youngest daughter, Cordelia, presents herself quite different from her elder sisters. She had already heard them making hyperbolic expressions of love. Moreover, she quickly grasps their hypocrisy. In verbal assurances, they gave their father even more than what he had expected. As Cordelia was his most beloved daughter, he expected that she would excel her elder sisters in verbal expression of love. But Cordelia surprised Lear by remaining silent. Her silence was intolerable for Lear. He insists her on making hyperbolic expression of love. But Cordelia remains silent and tells that her love cannot be expressed in words. She further tells that she has 'nothing' to express in words. Cordelia's nothing for Lear meant the shattering of his high expectations. He has already publicly confirmed in the opening scene that Cordelia was his most favourite daughter. Cordelia's silence on the name of love for him would have put him to public humiliation therefore he bursts out in anger. In the extreme state of anger, he not only deprives Cordelia of her share in the property but also of his fatherly love and care. Moreover, he discourages her suitors by making her dowerless. He urges the King of France and the Duke of Albany not to marry her. Albany refuses to accept her without dowry.

In the opening scene, Lear shows his male prerogative as the head of the family. He can banish a daughter who does not act as he wants. He does not care where a young daughter would go and what would happen to her. He only seems to be nurturing his ego by disowning a daughter who refuses to be submissive to his will. The initial action of the opening scene reflects the typical image of the Elizabethan family where the father is the head of the family and is above all. Everyone, particularly a woman, is supposed to be submissive to his will. The daughters and wives have to live respectively under fathers' and husbands' control. If they assert their own individuality, they can be punished like Cordelia. Cordelia is a young daughter and she is motherless. The father does not think about her future while banishing her. Lawrence Stone writes on the family of this time:

The sixteenth century aristocratic family was patrilinear, primogenitural, and patriarchal: patrilinear in that it was the male line whose ancestry was traced so diligently by the genealogists and heralds, and in almost all cases via the male line the titles were inherited; Primogenitural in that most of the property went to the eldest son, the brothers being dispatched into the world with little more than a modest annuity or life interest in a small

estate to keep them afloat; and patriarchal in that the husband and father lorded over wife or children with the quashi – absolute authority of a despot. (10).

Stone's observation reflects the family structure of Shakespeare's times. Stone continues that "they are political and religious forces that are responsible for heightening the paternal power in the family between 1580 and 1640" (11). The phrase 'the quashi – absolute authority of a despot' seems to be applicable to Lear. His behavior irrespective of the concern of his daughter's age and insecure future shows his quashi-absolute authority. The mother of Cordelia is absent in the family. Her absence deprives her of the maternal support that she could have got. So, initially we get the image of patriarchal family in *King Lear*. The children are subject to the will of their father. The position of the father is more strengthened in the absence of the maternal figure in the family.

Stone points out "there was lack of emotional tie between parents and children in the renaissance period. It was common fashion of sending the children out to mercenary wet nurses" (113). The statement of Stone helps much in understanding the relationship between parents and children. We find the emotional distance between Lear and his daughters. He fails to understand his own children. His blunder proves irreparable as it takes away the life of his good daughter Cordelia and his own. Lear's family appears to be a patriarchal family where he has the privilege to choose wrong and banish good. He would allow only those daughters to stay in his home who speak the language that he likes.

The subplot of the play repeats the same story. Here, a family is headed by Gloucester, one more patriarch. The mother is absent in this family as well. Like Lear, Gloucester also misunderstands his children. He banishes the good child and accepts the bad one who becomes instrumental in his tragic end of life. In both families good children are punished due to egotistical perception of their fathers.

It would also be interesting to see how children are affected by the demonstration of tyrannical paternal authority in the family. In *King Lear*, the elder daughters of Lear become almost unnatural in their treatment of the father. Lear believed on their deceptive words and gave them all: power and property. He reserved nothing for his old age. The same daughters refused to entertain him as a father and started showing negligence towards him. They treated him cruelly and drove him out of the home. Some critics are of the opinion that unnatural behavior of Lear's elder daughters is the consequence of their maternal deprivation. A mother could tell them how to behave like a daughter. In the absence of the mother, they were deprived of motherly education. Lear also failed to play the role of the mother for them. So, if a daughter is motherless, her behavior can be as unnatural as that of Lear's elder daughters. The Elizabethan family seems to have under-estimated the value of the mother, it made the family father – centred which often brought dire results. Shakespeare has reflected it by describing a motherless family.

Marianne Novy talks about certain terms that govern the Elizabethan family. They are distance, deference and manipulation. She comes out with the idea that “such family kept feelings of attachment and grief under strict control on one hand and on the other was ready to express at anger” (315). Through this statement, Novy talks about the ‘masculine model’. In this model, women were not provided their voice, rather they have to follow what this model constitutes for them.

Family in The Winter’s Tale:

The winter’s Tale is also one of the Shakespeare’s plays that reflects the Elizabethan family and the status of women. In this play, the family is headed by Leontes, the king of Sicilia. In this family, there are Hermione, his wife, and Mamillius, his son, in addition to Leontes himself. The king has a happy hope of a second child as the queen is pregnant. When the play opens, the king has a prosperous family but as the play progresses, he ruins the peace and the prosperity of the family. Leontes presents himself as a powerful patriarch who cannot see women excelling him. Polixenes, Leontes’ close friend was staying in his court. Leontes wanted to prolong his stay, but he failed in persuading him. He appoints his wife, Hermione, for the same work. Hermione succeeds in the work through her eloquence. The success of the queen as woman challenges the male authority of her husband who failed to do that work. He feels to have been superseded by his wife. Thus, he uses his male prerogative to silence his wife. He questions her fidelity and accuses her of adultery with his friend. He imprisons her without taking her pitiable condition into consideration. It is noteworthy that none except Leontes supports his notion. He does not listen to anyone against his preoccupied mind. He insults his wife publicly by questioning her chastity in the presence of his son, Mamillius. Mamillius dies grief-stricken as it was impossible for him to defend his mother by going against his father.

If one wants to know how powerful the head of the family (often fathers or husbands) used to be in Elizabethan family, one can go through *The Winter’s Tale*. Leontes is powerful and his decision so irrevocable that he can ignore the divine justice. In the play, we find that he sends his attendants to have Apollo’s judgment over Hermione’s supposed adultery, but he denies to accept the divine judgment that goes against his expectation. The oracle of Apollo declares Hermione innocent and pure but Leontes refuses to accept it. He does not want to loosen his patriarchal grip on Hermione. Such a demonstration of patriarchal power is perceptible in Sicilia. He goes on to even worse when he refuses to accept the baby daughter that Hermione bears in the prison. He terms the baby as ‘bastard’ and orders to burn it. The psychoanalytical critics have tried to seek the grounds of Hermione’s victimization. J. I. M. Stewart offers a Freudian interpretation of Leontes’ jealousy in his book *Character and Motive in Shakespeare*:

The jealousy of Leontes is pathological ; it arises through the projection of guilt proper to Leontes himself upon the very person before whom he is most ashamed, Hermione is a standing reproach to his conscience, therefore she must be daubed with slime; but Leontes is not propelled into the truly

delusional phrase until condition is brought to a crisis by the arrival of great love, and the great guilt, of his life—Polixenes; the presence of Polixenes is a torment from which the only refuge is neurosis; finally, there is an element of genuine sexuality (which Leontes' hungry vigilance succeeds in picking up) in the courtesy of Hermione to Polixenes; social conventions do not merely simulate non-existent emotions; they also transmute and accommodate pressures which might otherwise be dangerous; in allowing a degree of flirtatiousness they act as a 'safety valve' for something quite real (Barber 75).

Stewart throws a psychological light on the state of affairs in Sicilia. He finds Hermione as an reproach to Leontes' guilty conscience therefore Leontes uses his patriarchal power on her and makes her victim. While commenting on Shakespeare's romances, Charles Frey notes an ideology running in the Elizabethan age which impoverishes women :

...though the romances have witnessed in our supposedly liberated age a mounting tide of enthusiasm, they may be more patriarchal and patrilineal in perspective than Shakespearean interpreters have yet cared or dared to recognize. To ask the following questions is to ask, in some respects, how many children had lady Macbeth, but still: Is not the engendering of a daughter in each romance taken implicitly as a guilty act which signals the impotence of the father or his receipt of divine displeasure? Else why should he have lost or in the course of the play lose wife and sons he may have had? Kings need sons. When they produce a daughter or daughters, in a patrilineal society, they do less than the optimum to further a secure succession (41).

Probably Frey means to say that in a patriarchal society fathers need only sons as they have to maintain the patrilineal society by transferring the power from male to male. "Unfortunately, when they produce a daughter, it may signal their impotency to do what they need to do or it may be a receipt of divine displeasure. When they produce a daughter or only daughters alone, they find themselves vulnerable" (Frey 43). The rejection of Perdita by Leontes can be seen in the light of Frey's words. Did he reject Perdita due to her female sex? Or was the rejection of Perdita a reaction of Leontes on the loss of his son, Mamillius. There may be different reasons but it is clear that *The Winter's Tale* shows us a family in which patriarchal power of a man represses and suppresses the voice of a woman, though no interpretation can be a final interpretation of Shakespeare.

Conclusion:

Thus, we find that the Elizabethan family that Shakespeare has reflected in these two plays is highly patriarchal. Whether it is the family of Lear or of Gloucester, each one is headed by a patriarch who wants his children behave as per his desire. Moreover, we find that the position of the mother is either vacant or insignificant in the family. In

King Lear the position of the mother is vacant whereas in *The Winter's Tale*, we find that the presence of the mother is insignificant to the action of the play. She could neither defend herself nor her daughter against the tyranny of her husband. Moreover, she has to accept social death to survive in the patriarchal society. In the analysis of the selected plays, we have found that a father could go to the extent of banishing a young daughter without a little concern of her insecure future. In the study of *The Winter's Tale*, we have found that an innocent wife was accused of adultery and was imprisoned in her pregnancy. Moreover, the father rejected the newly born daughter under his false belief that she was a bastard child. When the play concludes, Leontes accepts that Hermione was pure and innocent and the daughter was biologically his only. But what about the sufferings and tortures that Hermione underwent? If a queen was treated in such a way, the status of women in other families can be imagined. So Shakespeare was not only catering to the audience that was patriarchal but also he was probably reflecting the true picture of the family of his times.

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