

# THE TRAGEDY OF WOMAN: OPHELIA

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## ABSTRACT

Throughout the history it is seen that in patriarchal system woman is regarded as ‘the other’. As a result woman does not have any right or freedom like man in the society. The contemporary British playwright Byron Lavery deals with being ‘the other’ in her play Ophelia. In fact the major character is a secondary character of a well known play, *Hamlet*. In *Hamlet* Ophelia is a silent girl and does not share her inner world. In *Ophelia* Lavery consciously gives hesitations, fears, anxieties, hatred of woman through using Ophelia as a major character. In this study the style of playwright is questioned. Also the way of portraying the woman characters in her play, the reason of using play within a play technique and intertextuality are dealt with. The playwright gives the inner world of woman major character and gives clues about the power and abilities of woman to create their own life. At the end of *Ophelia* the reader/audience sees that there is a way to change the life of woman and in fact it is in the hands of woman. The play is of course a fictional world, but the effect of it on the society cannot be denied. The playwright consciously by using a well known play’s character tries to get the attention of people and want them to see and evaluate the events from other aspects especially when the subject is woman.

Keywords: Woman, Hamlet, Ophelia

## INTRODUCTION

The hatred towards women comes from Ancient Greek, to dark streets of London in 19. Century, then the murders on the street of Los Angeles in 21. century etc. is called mijoni and this combines Aristotles to Jack the Ripper, King Lear to James Bond. (Holland, 2016, p.19) When you look at the world history it is seen that Ancient Greeks do not only give Pandora the guilt of being mortal but at the same being ‘the other’. They believe in dualism and for them there is no need to show respect to woman. For instance Aristoteles in his book *Politics* says that silence is the most important feature of woman which underlines the obedience of woman. (Berkday, 2014, p.87)

The medieval period is the witness of humiliation and at the same time divinization of woman. The reason of divinization is passiveness of woman that is symbolized with Meryem. In the icons of churches Meryem is potrayed when she is crushing a snake which means that girls/women should repress their sexuality. In fact this visuality is an attack to women’s sexuality.

In monotheistic religions it is believed that there is a close relation between man and God because God creates the universe and its reflection in the world is man that Adam gives birth to Eve. (Berkday, 2014, p.58) In these monotheistic religions it is believed that man has a power for fertility, and woman is in passive situation, she just gives birth to a child because of having a womb. This interesting understanding underlines the deny of woman’s fertility and its power, by this way this power is controlled by man. Woman’s body just protects the seeds of man.

In 16. Century this time father gets the power of God as it is seen in *The Lost Paradise* of John Milton that he says ‘For God only man, For God and man only woman’. (Holland, 2016, p.152) For lots of Renaissance people because of having a womb, woman is weak, and feels anger, hatred, anxiety or fear, etc. and this belief causes her to stay out of the social and economical system.

It is seen that these ideas are not changed during the Enlightenment period. For instance in 17. century Descartes regards mind and knowledge with man and body with woman which is dirty. For Kant woman is the representative of beauty and should serve to man. The most important historical figures appreciates woman from patriarchal point of view. For instance for Schopenhauer woman is created to protect man. (Belkis, 2015, p.145) Nietzsche only appreciates the authority and a result he exalts manhood. For him women are puzzles and the solution of this puzzle is pregnancy. She should obey the man and this obedience can bring depth to her superficial existence.

It is understood that from Platon to Aristoteles, from Nietzsche to Hitler the existence of this big hatred underlines the belief that there is a strong connection between God and man and with the universe. This creates a duality that; woman shows people the universe/nature can change. But man wants to control the universe and as a result

consciously ignores and humiliates the abilities, feelings and thoughts of woman because she is the enemy of his authority. (Holland, 2016, p.295)

As it is seen from the history that patriarchal system organizes the economical, social and idea system and gives shape to the understanding of gender roles and their identity. (Davidoff, 2012, p.197) The differences between the genders on the subject such as behaviour, thinking, emotions are thought biological. (Sancar, 2013, p.184) It is clear that manhood is such kind of a system that all the time it questions the situation of 'the others' but not itself. In this sense it is the sound of power.

## METHOD

The contemporary English playwright Bryan Lavery deals with the prejudice or hatred against woman through a play *Ophelia*. In *Ophelia*, it is Ophelia who takes pen, rewriting Hamlet to tell her story of literal survival; she does not suffer a doubtful death, but is the victim of a murder attempt by Gertrude, which she manages to escape by holding breath under water. She is also given a hopeful future as the play ends, even though she is carrying her brother Laertes' child. In this study the style of the playwright on this play is analysed by foregrounding her approach to woman. As a woman playwright how does she give the reaction, fear, hope, desire, anxiety of Ophelia in a patriarchal system is dealt with. In the core of the study the reason of the playwright to rewrite a play from a woman character's point of view is questioned through focusing on the style of the play. In other words the success of the playwright is analysed whether she is good at using play within a play technique and intertextuality.

## THE TRAGEDY OF WOMAN

It is known that in *Hamlet*, Hamlet wants from his friends to play a text which functions to make clear the thoughts of him about his uncle and mother. In *Ophelia* also another play is played '*The Tragedy of Ophelia: The Lady of Netherlands*' to Fortinbras and it gives the events that are happened in *Hamlet* through the eyes of Ophelia.

Byrony Lavery writes *Ophelia* in play within a play technique just to underline the position of woman in the society through using a well-known play *Hamlet*. It is the fact that *Hamlet* is known all over the world and the relation between Hamlet and Ophelia is one of the issue of discussion. She is a docile girl, and does not trust on herself thus obeys every words of her brother and father as if they are sacred. She is not strong enough to be with Hamlet and support him against his enemies. Throughout the play she does not know what she should think, and feel and at the end of the play she consciously or unconsciously kills herself. (Urgan, 2014, p.351) The silent girl of *Hamlet* is the central figure of this play just to question the role of the woman in the society through focusing on being a woman with love, anxiety, despair, hope, childness etc. in the play.

Play within a play technique helps the audience to analyse the events from a distance with different perspectives that makes the play rich with lots of different meanings and comic effects. Because the characters tell that it is just a play that they do not allow the audience to identify her/himself with the characters which allow him/her to analyse and criticize the play. (Erkek, 1999, p.64) So *Hamlet* is the centre play. *Ophelia* is written by referring to Hamlet. In *Ophelia*, *The Tragedy of Ophelia: The Lady of Netherlands* is played. And in this play the woman characters of Shakespeare's other plays also exist with their identities. So play within a play relation exists with lots of layers and this makes the play colourful. Play within a play is an advantage technique for Lavery because she wants the audience to be shocked, to question the established rules of society especially when the subject is woman. Lavery also uses the techniques of post modernism such as parody and rewriting which help to reach her aim. Because parody disturbs the prejudice of mind system. (Güçbilmez, 2005, p.166) Rewriting brings intertextuality and this causes reader to focus on the play seriously to follow the irony carefully.

It is known that *Hamlet* is a play of idea and the tragedy of Hamlet is not only because of his special conditions but his life surrounded with people who are the enemy of idea. (Urgan, 2014, p. 321). There are lots of themes in *Hamlet*; power and politics against morality, the difference between theory and practice, the discussion about the aim of life, the tragedy of love affair and the tragedy of a family, a heavy psychological problem, bloody tale, a duel, a massacre etc. (Kott, 1999, p.55)

Violence that is used to Ophelia by Hamlet is such kind of a violence that cannot be seen in any Shakespeare's plays. It is difficult to guess the reason of this anger; some critics claim that Hamlet is very angry with his mother and shows his reaction on Ophelia. Another one says that he hears the dialogue between Polonius and Cladius and gets angry with Ophelia's betrayal but there is no clear data about the timing of the entrance of Hamlet to that scene in the play. In other words Hamlet thinks that two women in his life betray him; his mother

has a relation with his uncle and Ophelia does not understand him and obeying the advice of his father and brother she betrays him, at the same time. For Wilson the mystery of the play is not the hesitation of Hamlet or pantomim scene, the most important mystery is his behaviour towards Ophelia. (Bayard, 2007, p.135)

In *Ophelia* it is seen that Queen Gertrude has a big plan. She is the one who puts forward the rules of her plays. In the play she is the symbol of masculine-woman. She looks from man's point of view, accepts the values of patriarchal system without questioning and at the same time accepts the hatred towards woman unconsciously. Gertrude tries to be a part of this patriarchal system and does not hesitate to kill or give harm to anyone that she regards as a threat to her authority. For instance she behaves as if King Hamlet whips her, and traces of whips on her back are her proof. Claudius believes in this lie and kills his brother without any hesitation. In fact these traces are just the paint that her maid Iras makes it for her. After the death of King Hamlet, Queen Gertrude also kills Iras, thus she does not want to leave any witness. Another fact is that King Hamlet wants to be with Iras, although Iras refuses him. But Queen Gertrude does not believe in Iras. According to Gertrude's plan it is said that Iras is died when she was swimming. But her sister Kharmian knows that Iras is afraid of sea till her childhood. Then Gertrude puts into practice another plan that she tells Kharmian she loves Ophelia and Iras as if they are her own daughters, but Ophelia is jealous with this affair and kills her. Again Gertrude makes a plan to kill King Hamlet because of his betrayal. Gertrude as a woman cannot accept his love affair with another woman, although she is not a noble rival.

Lavery uses funeral of King Hamlet to use the woman characters of Shakespeare's other plays. Lady Capulet from *Romeo and Juliet*, Portia from *The Merchant of Venice*, Katharina, from *The Taming of The Shrew*, Princess Goneril from *King Lear* and Lady Macbeth from *Macbeth* come to the funeral. In this play Lady Capulet is portrayed as a mother who cannot rescue her daughter and she is the voice of wisdom. Portia who helps Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice* is a feminist in this play but nobody pays attention to her ideas. Katharina is not combative anymore after the marriage, but still her oppressed feelings can be seen in the play Ophelia. Princess Goneril does not have any role to divide the lands of her father yet, she is just the owner of the ship that will carry Hamlet to England. Lady Macbeth is pregnant in *Ophelia* and till the loss of her child she believes that woman creates kings. But at the end of the play she learns that throughout her life she lost the chance of having a baby and this psychology is seen in *Macbeth*. Kharmian and Iras from *Antoinus and Cleopatra* are the victims of Gertrude. By this way, Lavery successfully uses intertextuality to combine different times, different woman figures with different identities. These figures are on the stage with their possible hidden feelings, desires or ideas which cannot be seen in their original texts.

Lavery gives shape to these characters according to her aim; for instance when Claudius does not want to see the noble woman in the funeral and feels demeaned by their friends sending their wives instead of coming themselves, and most of the woman characters become the voice of suppressed woman, some of them accept their situation in the society, some of them just angry with the accepted idea of society about woman. For instance Katharina declares that like her husband also she is the friend of King Hamlet and with the death of the king her hearth is full of grief. Lady Macbeth underlines that her blood is noble as her husband's, women are in the same position with men. Lady Capulet underlines that she does not have any husband to protect her honour or any child but believes in that everyone is equal in grief in order to mourn there is no need to have noble names. Goneril says that her father wants her to be there and she can leave whenever they want but it is the fact that her father will be paid that rudeness. She admits that she is a simple woman, and does not have any value.

In the play, the playwright uses women clerks who write everything that they witness. The clerks write the history with the words that man wants during daytime. But when the night comes this time words just belong to them and begin to see the world with different eyes to write herstory.

It is seen Lavery also uses these woman characters to discuss their own problem; being a woman in the patriarchal society. For instance; Portia underlines the fact to Ophelia that women are good at helping other people and obeying their needs. They do not have any feeling such as being selfish. All the time women are in the end of the raw and convict to languish. For her woman should love herself at first. After this dialogue Ophelia questions this idea with Katharina. And Katharina ironically uses the words of patriarchal system that Ophelia should love others first such as family, father, brother, husband, son, etc. This is the rule of the world. Woman should obey whatever they say. A man in Ophelia's world will protect her from other men. Ophelia shares her secret with Katharina that she is pregnant. Katharina again with the voice of patriarchal system says that she should be patient. It is the fact that woman should not be in hurry to talk to.

In the play the nick name of Ophelia is Illogical Hearth. For her if brain directs hearth everything will be frozen. If hearth directs brain this time everything is in fire. Emotion and thoughts should direct the human together in harmony. For instance she loves Hamlet although she knows that it is an impossible love. And she cannot find

out that harmony that it disturbs her. She is not happy and wants to find out her own way. She could not breath, she has hatred and anger inside and wants to be free to heal herself. Ophelia wants to escape not only because of Hamlet but also Laertes. Because Laertes wants to see and be with Ophelia all the time. He teaches fencing to protect herself against men, but in fact he is the molester. Throughout the dialogue he refers his penis with the words swords. Ophelia's cry that "does nobody teach me how to fight against his penis" is ironic that patriarchal system does not give such a lesson, instead obeyance is important. In the monologue of Laertes the man's point of view is given thus he blames Ophelia as the one who seduce him and he regards her as a black witch. Polanius also the member of patriarchal system wants Ophelia to obey the needs of Laerters. Because Laertes will be the head of his family in the future.

In this play Ophelia does not hesitate to talk to Hamlet about her feelings. She declares that Hamlet kills her father because he does not love his father. He gets her love but does not give his love. He gives his grief to her but does not get her grief. He gets the dreams of her but gives her nightmare. He talks about love, but then he teases. He gives hope to him, then he suddenly gets it back and runs away. This scene is important because as a woman she has enough courage to share her own love, anger, etc. and this situation underlines the fact that she is aware of the humiliation of Hamlet. But she does not give up her love and forgive him. Also Hamlet accepts what she says and adds that there is no future for their love. It is seen that they forgive each other. Because they achieve to share their feelings about themselves and their relation. It is not possible to change the situation for them, but at least they know each other's hearth.

Ophelia knows that she is very tired and alone in this world and is dying becaues of the lies of Getrude. Another plan of Getrude is seen; she learns that Ophelia is pregnant although she is not sure about the father of the baby. She instinctly feels that if Hamlet learns the pregnancy of Ophelia she does not have any chance and place for the life of Cladius and herself in the future of kingdom. But she wants to live with Cladius and gives birth to his child. So Ophelia should be killed.

At this point *The Tragedy of Ophelia* is finished and Fortrinbras says that although men are less and women are so angry in the performance they have a good time. When Fortrinbras leaves the actress Ophelia says that at the end of the play she does not die because she holds her breath, fights and now she has a new life, future and lots of friends. Without money or nobility she will be rich with love. And after that the name of the play will be not *The Tragedy of Ophelia*. The new play should be played with lots of colours, all the lies, betrayal, evil and grief do not have any place in this new play. A new day, and fresh breath should open a new window to women's life and women should wear fire that burns bigotry. In fact Lavery gives the same idea in *The Tragedy of Ophelia* through Portia. She says that woman is regarded only with their fertility. Otherwise it is not possible to say the existance of woman in that region. She accepts that woman's defense to have a position in the society is so weak. With the new day the woman should open their eyes and walk through sun, leave the habits silently, and should be bolt upright to do what should be done. It is ironic that Portia wants the clerks to write these thoughts but Cladius does not allow them to write that imply it is not so easy to change the prejudice in the society. Using the same idea for twice, but with different conclusions underlines that woman has two choices in life; she can accept the already established system or she can create her own world.

## CONCLUSION

Lavery focuses on the feelings, ideas of Ophelia in *The Tragedy of Ophelia*. It is tragic that although Ophelia is a woman who is aware of her own feelings and does not hesitate to share her inner world with her lover and a woman who knows her desperate situation she is not succesfull to get the control of her own life. Throughout the play water/sea image is used for Ophelia as a place that she can only breath and feel herself free. In fact it is the life that patriarchal system cannot reach. But because of having not enough strength it is ironic that Ophelia is died in the sea. Because she does not know how to live with her own features as a result obeys the accepted rules of patriarchal system in *The Tragedy of Ophelia*. It is ironic that in her last dialogue with Hamlet she gives a cover to Hamlet that she imprints Adam and Eve with Knowledge Tree on it. According to the belief the first act of Adam is to give names to objects, words are important for him. The first act of Eve is to eat the forbidden apple from Knowledge Tree because she wants to get the knowledge of God. But it is said that God punished both of them but especially woman because gaining knowledge is privilege of man. (Berkday, 2014, p.216) Ophelia with this gift underlines her withdrawal in life. Like Eve she is also punished and does not allow to live her own life. In the play it is seen that the powerful insicts of women can be destroyed by patriarchal system but it can be destroyed at the same time by the women who accept the lost of her identity, freedom etc. consciously just to survive in that patriarchal system. (Estes, 2015, p.277) In the play Getrude consciously follows the rules of patriarchal system in order to be powerful and makes lots of plans. For instance, as a woman she knows the feelings of Ophelia but does not hesitate to make a play about her because she does not want to share the kingdom with her. She has a plan for King Hamlet and also Cladius, because she cannot accept the betrayal of

her husband. She makes a plan for Iras because she is jealous with her. She uses Claudious against her husband and wants to marry with him because she knows that only in this way she has a power in the kingdom. But Lavery consciously does not put an end with *The Tragedy of Ophelia* to her play and *Ophelia* ends with the thought that it is the fact that society is the enemy of the naturel life of woman, but woman should not accept the humiliation of people and the accepted roles of her, she should resist all the forces and like the ugly duckling manage to survive. (Estes, 2015, p.269)

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## BIO

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