

**RESEARCH PAPER****Vitality and Variety of Female Persona in Shakespeare's Comedy the Merchant of Venice****Vijay Pratap Singh¹ and Hem Prakash²**¹Department of English, K.N.I. (PG) College, Sultanpur²Department of English, D.S. College, AligarhEmail: vijayptp.vp@gmail.comReceived: 4th February 2017, Revised: 26th March 2017, Accepted: 5th April 2017**ABSTRACT**

Shakespeare's myriad minded genius is well recognized all over the world for the last four centuries. He is recognized as the creator of the variety of the shades of human behaviour under the stresses of untold descriptions. Generally, his creations in tragic figures under various passions are noted to show his ingenuity in character creations. But, his mastery in the creation of the various shades of female persona in his comedies also convinces us about the unfathomable range of his thoughts and feelings. In his early comedies, however, he dwells on the playfulness of his comic genius in creating certain caricatures of female portraits for the sheer purpose of fun. But in his later comedies he alloys his fun with intellect and psychological stress of various shades. In *The Merchant of Venice* three female portraits are depicted with variety and exclusive vitality of the three. Therefore, a close study of all that happens around these three women becomes interesting from the angle of the modern concepts of female autonomy.

Key words: Vitality, femininity, autonomy, wit, intellect

FEMALE PERSONA IN SHAKESPEAREAN COMEDIES

Shakespeare's female world comprises a great variety of women who possess both the common and the individual traits. His early comedies, regarded as experimentation with types, apparently reflect his comic scheme. By the time he begins to write his bright comedies, his style and approach attain to complete maturity and individuality of his own. A broad range of humanity subsequently becomes one of Shakespeare's favourite devices. We feel for the first time that Shakespeare's men and women have deep emotional and intellectual life. Here, Shakespeare reveals amazing incidents that form the plot of the play and are significant only as they provide occasions for the revelation of a character both from within and without. Apart from this, Shakespeare has also lent a voice to his female characters. He seems to have suggested that neither silence is natural to women and speech to men, nor that femininity requires silence. His noble ladies partake of the wit giving them a noticeable status in the drama.

In this manner, the characters of quick witted, warm, disguised and responsive young ladies are best exemplified in Shakespeare's luminous comedies. The greatest playwright of the world has endorsed in favour of female autonomy with special regard to unviolated norms of the society. He wants to force the female autonomy and brilliance of female personality even in the faultily designed patterns of the society where greed, duplicity, avarice and selfish motives have gone in favour of male persona. Shakespeare's comic heroines and other ladies accompanying them exhibit their brilliance in sportive manner and attract the attention of the male world with a view to having an edge over them in wit and romance. As David Daiches says, these comedies "have common features – the lively and witty heroines, the carefully placed moments of poetic hush, the delicate and happy treatment of love, the undertones of melancholy or perverted disaster, atmosphere and unique pattern" (Daiches, 1960). H.B. Charlton also makes a commendable remark in this connection, "Here Shakespearean comedy realizes its most perfect form, and, therefore, in them Shakespeare's comic idea, his vision of the reach of human happiness in the world of men and women, is richer, deeper, more sustained and more satisfying than in any other of his plays" (Charlton, 1949). Really, Shakespeare's female world in his comedies is compounded with wit and feeling, laughter and mockery and finally gravity all personified together.

BALANCE OF WIT, AUTONOMY, FEELING AND FEMININITY IN PORTIA

Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* seems to open a new phase of heroines who are bestowed with sterling qualities. Assessment of Portia naturally dwells upon the harmonious perfection of her character. She endears herself chiefly by her wit and intellect. Mrs. Jameson explores in her "all the noblest and most loveable qualities ever met together in women" (Jameson, 1932 & 1933). Each letter of Portia's name describes her quality:

<i>P – Passion for Bassanio</i>	<i>O – Obedience towards her father</i>
<i>R – Resolute to help Antonio</i>	<i>T – Tactful at planning</i>
<i>I – Intelligent at manner and speech</i>	<i>A – Acceptance of every situation</i>

Portia has wonderful intellect—moral and mental, which is a state more beautiful than beauty of the face. Portia's intellect is discernible in every word she speaks and in every action she undertakes. E. Terry, a famous actress loved Portia's character and played that role to the end of her career. Her remark about her playing this role is significant:

There are many different ways of playing that part. I have tried many ways, but I have always come back to the Renaissance way. Portia is the fruit of Renaissance, the child of a period of beautiful clothes, beautiful cities, beautiful ideas. She speaks the beautiful language of the inspired poetry. Wreck that beauty and the part goes to pieces. (Terry 1932).

Portia's dominating virtue is her power of intellect. But in the beginning she finds her intellect weakened by her father's will. In the opinion of Dr. Granville Barker, "Shakespeare can do little enough with Portia while she is still the slave of the caskets" (Barkley, 1947). But Portia knows very well that her father had assumed that most suitors would be deterred by the hard conditions laid down in the will. Some might be interested mainly in her fortune, while others might be unsuitable in other ways. The caskets themselves and the inscriptions on them were designed to eliminate such suitors. Portia does not exercise her autonomy in the choice of her husband, although she has great preference for Bassanio. She is witty and intelligent, but does not want to ignore her dead father's commands as her feelings for and loyalty to her father still makes her a satisfied woman. She leaves everything in Almighty's hands and hopes to get the best by treading on the path of her soul. Since Portia has no control over the choice of suitors, and, therefore, she leaves it for the 'Higher Powers' to decide the issue. In this respect, she resembles Viola who leaves everything to time and fate when Olivia mistakes her to be youth and falls miserable in love with her.

It is significant to note that the casket scene emphasizes Portia's superiority over her suitors and her ability to deal with them directly without the aid of other men. Her description of some of her suitors shows the powers of intellect and female autonomy. The suitors come one after another to prove their worth as a right husband for Portia, but she knows the background of them and has already rejected them in her interior self. She appears in high spirits, when Bassanio, the real man of her choice makes the right choice of the casket. "Once Portia is free from the bondage of her father's will, she makes up for the lost time and expands her fine freedom growing in authority and dignity" (Dean Leonard, 1967).

POLITENESS AND LOVE

Portia believes in feminine virtues and knows quite well that the success of marital life depends in mutual harmony which results, when both of the conjugal pair sacrifice their vain and petty ego to burn the flames of love. She knows that to win a loving husband is to surrender in the choices of her husband. She is ready to turn herself in her husband's attire and to gain his love. She awakens herself to the joys of that surrender and sacrifice, which melt in tenderness under the genial sunshine of love's fresh and opening glory.

*Happy of all is that her gentle spirit
commits itself to yours to be directed,
..... but now
This house, there servants, and this same myself are yours. (III.ii. 170-173)*

Portia's surrender to Bassanio's authority may appear to some the result of the popular instinct of male domination in the society. But Shakespeare has dwelt on the better side of self-surrender, which sparks the glory of love. In reality, Portia retains her individual independence. In her, obedience to parental authority and maintenance of individual liberty meet and merge together. Her efforts to release Antonio from the cruel clutches of Shylock and to extract ring from Bassanio indicate her intellectual superiority and individuality of first rank.

It is remarkable that Portia's surrender is an act of courtesy and ceremonial to the reality of love. In practice, she retains her individual independence. Submission is a garment she wears as gracefully as her disguise. But her attitude to herself is entirely different from that heroine, who owning "the hereditary strain of Puritan energy, embraced the freedom of voluntary submission." Portia wishes that Bassanio must also reciprocate love in the same manner. So, she invents an idea to bind him with the vow of love. Somewhere in her mind, she has a feeling that fickleness in love is a common trait in men. Therefore, she wields a moral restraint by offering to Bassanio a ring in the name of love and invests it with her emotional excellence— parting away the ring means losing the love of Portia.

INTELLECTUAL BLOOMS

Portia is an adept psychologist and can learn what is transpiring in other's mind. She has learnt the art of finding the mind's construction on the face. She judges quite clearly the perturbation caused in Bassanio's mind while he is reading Antonio's letter. The news of Antonio's arrest and the proposed trial "steals the colour from Bassanio's checks." Portia marks this change and sympathizes with Antonio who had staked his life for Bassanio. She is prompted to help Bassanio's friend, Antonio. She herself swings into action and plans to save Antonio's life without any second thought. She arranges her immediate marriage to Bassanio so that he may have legal right to use her money. She is bounteous and doles out money to enable her husband to release his friend from the bond.

*Pay him six thousand, and deface the bond,
Double six thousand, and thin treble that. (III.ii, 294-95)*

Portia is restless even after dispatching Bassanio with ample money. Infact, she is not sure whether Bassanio, who had always depended on other's help, will be able to deliver the goods and save Antonio from the fiend's fangs. Therefore, she sends a letter to Dr. Bellario, a lawyer to help her achieve her motive. The learned Bellario tells Portia at once that the law cannot help Antonio. So, he counsels her to appeal to Shylock's mercy. If that fails, she should try a threat. On these lines, Portia assumes a surrogate body by dressing herself and Nerissa in men's apparel. She herself becomes counsellor and dresses Nerissa as her clerk. She has, thus, got opportunity of showing her true self in wit and intelligence. Dawrence Danson states thus:

She is an intelligent, capable woman— and of making the transformation into Balthazar sexually all the more miraculous. There is an absolute distinction between Portia and Balthazar. Portia speaks, only as Balthazar, not in a double voice as Julia does to Silvia or as Viola with Orsino. Portia plays one role unambiguously and continuously. She is transformed into a new character and most importantly, a man. (Danson, 1978).

The importance of the hazardous task of saving Antonio provides Portia with courage and enables her to proceed boldly to attain her objective. She is smart and proficient enough to face the crowded court in defence of Antonio.

In the Trial Scene, Portia dominates the whole proceedings with the chequer board of her intellect. First, she announces that the law is in favour of Shylock, and, therefore, the only remedy lies in his showing mercy. She gives a beautiful account of the quality of mercy and implores Shylock to avail himself of the opportunity of winning hearts by showing mercy. Knowing that she has the means to confound him later on, she puts forth all her eloquence on the quality of mercy. She plans to take Shylock into confidence by gravely answering that laws once established must never be altered.

*There is no power in Venice can alter a decree established.
(IV. i. 216-17)*

She also declares that by the lawful script of the Bond Shylock is entitled to extract a pound of flesh from the body of Antonio. At this Shylock excitedly comments:

*A Daniel come to judgement, yea a Daniel
O wise young judge, how do & honour thee (IV. i. 221-22)*

Step by Step, Portia acts in creating suspense around Shylock, who with all the power of his malicious intellect, has already outwitted all the companions of Antonio. She makes sure that her intellect acts not only with the lightening speed, but also with steady caution. She keeps an unclouded mind so that she can fully size up for this swiftness. She knows that Shylock's reason can be solely disturbed by the tempest of conflicting emotions. Therefore, she brings him to corner first by getting his refusal in defacing the Bond by accepting multiple amount of money in lieu of three thousand ducats. She strikes Shylock psychologically by closing all the loopholes by which Shylock could escape. She also asks Shylock to call a doctor to stop bleeding in Antonio's wound in the execution of the Bond and gets his loud refusal in the open court to prove his malice later on.

Now Portia is ready to display the intellectual fire of her mind by forcing the table against Shylock. She takes a look at the Bond and halts the proceedings, "Tarry a little, there is something else." (IV, i, 300) She argues about the language of the Bond as Shylock was earlier arguing, "Whether it is written in the Bond?" Portia's words become soothing syrup to the painful situation:

*Take then thy bond, take thy pound of flesh;
But, in the cutting it, if thou dost shed
One, drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods
Are, by the law of Venice, confiscate. (IV.i. 307-310)*

The mechanic trick of "No jot of blood" becomes her trump card and Shylock's collapse is quite evident. Now, Shylock is totally shattered and unaided. Having been outwitted and gauging the outcome, he is ready to accept the money. But, Portia has another strategy in her mind and did prepare herself for that by checking mate the chequer board of Shylock. She designs the total downfall and collapse of the malicious figure.

He shall have nothing but the penalty. (IV.i. 320)

Having found Shylock outwitted and helpless, Portia invokes another portion of Venetian law – whosoever maliciously makes an attempt to snatch a citizen's life, and found guilty, will lose his entire property in favour of the state and the victim by half-half portion. Portia states that no other evidence is required to prove the malicious intention of Shylock as he openly before the court intended to take away the life of Antonio by denying goodwill of calling a doctor to stop bleeding in case he lawfully cut a pound of flesh. In this manner, Shylock is left penniless to his utter dismay. The glittering intellect of Portia works efficiently in the Trial Scene. The legal acuteness, the passionate declamations, the sound maxims of jurisprudence, the wit and irony, the fluctuations of hope and fear, suddenness of the apprehensive catastrophe and then the quick turn towards happiness of Antonio and his party are all the products of Portia's intellect.

In the next episode with Bassanio, Portia shows her brilliance of mind in taking away the avowed ring from Bassanio's hand. Bassanio wanted to give some money or some gift in lieu of the commendable advocacy of the lawyer (Portia, not recognized by him in her disguise). First she refuses, but on greater insistence from Bassanio, she praises the ring in her finger and demands it as a fee of her commendable services. Bassanio hesitates on the issue as the departing of the ring would mean his unfaithfulness to his newly wedded wife. At this Portia intelligently and ironically corners him:

First you taught me to beg and now you teach me how beggar should be answered.

With several other ironic comments Portia leaves no option before Bassanio but to part with the ring in her favour. Then she plays a beautiful comic trick of teasing him about the ring when she reaches Belmont with Antonio and other friends. Moreover, the ring itself will confirm Portia's role in the Trial Scene to the belief of Bassanio and Antonio in the later part. Thus, Portia is awakened in her intellect at every occasion, small or large, and her individuality and autonomy in her decisions are commendable.

NERISSA, PORTIA'S INTELLECTUAL SHADOW

Shakespeare has presented Nerissa, another woman as a foil to Portia. She impresses all by her devotion, her righteousness and companionship towards Portia. Her devotion can well be judged from the fact that she is determined not to leave Portia even if Bassanio's choice falls out amiss. She is familiar with the fact that Portia is torn between her father's will and her own choice. So, she tries to address her with soothing and comfortable words in order to pacify her sore heart. When Portia is dejected with her father's will, Nerissa relaxes her by saying:

*Your father was ever virtuous
And holy men at their death have good inspirations. (I. i. 25-26)*

Nerissa carries wisdom with her besides playing a waiting maid. She applies her brains on appropriate occasions in order to play a wise and useful companion to her mistress. She makes useful comments of universal value to console her mistress.

*Superfluity comes sooner by white hairs
But competency lives longer.*

She also comforts sby saying that only the person who shall rightly love will choose the right casket. Portia knows about the wisdom of Nerissa, and therefore, she freely discusses with her the nature and character of the suitors for her marriage. When all the suitors having come so far fall short of their estimation, Nerissa wisely quotes the proverb:

Hanging and wiving goes by Destin.

When Portia is in despair on the issue of undeserving suitors coming and going in utter failure, it is Nerissa who recalls to her mind the figure of Bassanio as the most deserving suitor. Portia confirms, "and I remember him of thy praise."

Nerissa shows her independence in choosing a husband for her. When she knows her mistress' partiality for Bassanio, she decides in her mind to choose a companion for her conjugal life a fellow of Bassanio's orbit, so that the harmony between her and her mistress may be sustained longer. Gratiano seems to be the right person as he is very close to Bassanio and he is also eying her. In the wooing process, she is intelligent enough to put the condition that her promise of marriage with Gratiano will continue only on the condition that Bassanio chooses the right casket and becomes eligible for a matrimonial match with her mistress. When Bassanio opens the right casket, Nerissa is so happy that all her emotions get united into one general feeling of pure joy. She exclaims:

*My lord and lady, it is now our time
That have stood by and seen our wishes prosper
To cry, good joy, good joy, my lord and lady.*

While Bassanio was busy in choosing the right casket for the supreme realization of his love for Portia, Gratiano and Nerissa were making their own preparations in the grandeur of love. Gratiano confirms it thus:

*You saw the mistress, I be held the maid
you loved, I loved....*

Nerissa's choice of Gratiano fulfills many purposes as she may continue in the service of Portia even after her marriage with Bassanio and she will be in a harmonious atmosphere as Gratiano has friendly ties with Bassanio. Fulfilment of the commitments of marriage as well as her devotion to Portia will be attained and successfully sustained in the Trial Scene also. She faithfully assists her mistress and achieves the designed objectives. She displays her duty adroitly and introduces Balthazar confidently in the court of the Duke of Venice.

In the Ring Episode also she displays her quality of intellect. When Portia intelligently takes away the ring from Bassanio's hand, Nerissa also plays the same fun with Gratiano. In Belmont, she take initiative in wrangling with Gratiano on the absence of the ring in her husband's hand.

*What talk you of the posy or the value
You swore to me, when I did give it you
That you would wear it till your hour of death
And that it should lie with you in your grave*

*Though not for me, yet for your vehement oaths
You should have been respective and have kept it.
Give it a judge's clerk! no God's my judge,
The clerk will never wear hair on's face that had it.*

In this manner, fun in suspense is created by Nerissa through her intellectual initiatives.

INDEPENDENCE OF JESSICA IN HER ROMANCE

Jessica and Lorenzo form the romantic pair of lovers. Jessica reminds us of Juliet in being the stronger force that directs the situation. Fortune has been too much against her as she was rendered motherless. Moreover, her father being alive around her, she seems to be fatherless receiving only taunts and forced restrictions upon her from her father's dictates. Jessica is well aware of Shylock's temperament, for she characterizes her house as "hell". She knows that his father is prone to severance and does not allow her freedom in her emotions. So, she holds a very low approbation of her father. The manner in which Shylock deals with her and other people has turned her against him. She feels ashamed of being the daughter of such a father. Within she becomes rebellious and takes pride in avoiding her father's manners.

*Alack, What heinous is it in me
To be ashamed to be my father's child?
Though I am a daughter to his blood.
I am not to his manners. (II.iii. 16-19)*

In her free choice Jessica has developed her emotion for Lorenzo. Shylock can never allow blooming of this emotion. So, she decides and plans elopement with Lorenzo. After her elopement, she acts like a free bird and blooms like a rose. In fact, her natural attributes flourish in free and fresh atmosphere of love and her emotional fulfillment. She enjoys full advantage of her fine physical features and commands love language in the company of Lorenzo. She has got with her money and jewels collected from her father's house and in Lorenzo's opinion she is "wise, fair and true." She spends money and gold freely to fulfill her emotional freaks. As Shylock has got reports, she purchased a monkey in the exchange of a ring of gold and spent in Genoa four score ducats in one night. It can be understood that Jessica acts with her independent will after being freed from her father's restrictions. While talking to Lorenzo, she develops arguments to keep her dominance in retorts. While in Belmont, left in charge of the husbandry of the house, Lorenzo talks about the beauty of the night with mythological allusions. And she answers back confidently in the same manner and concludes thus:

*I would out-night you, did no body come
But, hark, I hear the footing of a man.*

In this manner, it can be realized that Shakespeare puts his women in his comedies in never defeated position. They appear with their brilliant speeches and shine above heads and shoulders of their male counterparts.

In the critical assessment of the character of Jessica, scholars with their scanty knowledge in front of Shakespearean dazzle find fault with Jessica's actions. They call her disloyal to her father and foolish in spending his father's money. Dover Wilson has branded her as a disloyal child who betrays her father and shows no love for home (Wilson, 1960). John Russel Brown treats her as the "unfilial daughter of a presented Jew" (Brown John Russel). Perhaps, the dislike of these critics has mounted on account of the recent increase in the sympathy for the Jews. But the Elizabethan audience would have shown more kindness to Jessica than what the moderns have done. Moreover, Shakespeare's art must be judged as quite purged of such narrow considerations. Jews or Christians are simply circumstantial nomenclatures to please the audience and draw their approbations. The objectivity of the great dramatist should be judged on the ground that in his comedies he dwells on the brilliance and autonomy of women characters.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the modern questions about female enhancement and female autonomy in the social set up are very well hinted in Shakespeare's art. Comedies represent the sunnier aspects of life – of course the life as it is to be lived by human beings in their peaceful times. And in such times, the role of women becomes precious. In creating female characters like Portia, Nerissa and Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare has, as also elsewhere, shown that the importance of female beings with all the display of their brilliance makes the beauty of the romantic pairs. This should not go unnoticed and unpraised.

REFERENCES

1. Barkley Granville (1947): Prefaces to Shakespeare. London, p. 75-76.
2. Brown John Russel: Studying Shakespeare in Performance, <https://he.palgrave.com>
3. Charlton H.B. (1949): Shakespearean Comedy. London, Methuen, p. 266.
4. Daiches David (1960): Critical History of English Literature. London, Ronald Press, p. 253.
5. Danson Lawrence (1978): The Harmonies of the Merchant of Venice. New Haven, p. 114.
6. Dean Leonard F. (ed.) (1967): Shakespeare: Modern Essays in Criticism. London, Oxford Univ. Press, p. 43.
7. Jameson Anna (1932&1933): Shakespeare's Heroines. London, p. 31.
8. Terry E. (1932): Four Lectures on Shakespeare. London, p. 36.
9. Wilson Dover (1960): The Essential Shakespeare. London: N.Y., p. 213.

How to cite this article:

Singh V.P. and Prakash H. (2017): Vitality and Variety of Female Persona in Shakespeare's Comedy the Merchant of Venice. Annals of Education, Vol. 3[2]: June, 2017: 23-29.