

# Gender Roles in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Mah-E-Nur Qudsi Islam\*

**Abstract:** The voices of Shakespeare's women call across the ages for women to express their thoughts, emotions, intelligence and spirit. These voices are voices of a wide range of intellectual, emotional and psychological dimensions of women and womanhood, which in this age of gender awareness, call today's women to use their different tones and assert their points of view. These voices are as contemporary today as they were in the times of Shakespeare. Within theatrical context, the importance of female characters is like the ebb and flow of an ocean; sometimes pushed to the margin and sometimes brought into the centre. The paper is an exploratory survey of Hamlet's relationship with Gertrude and Ophelia, the two important female characters of *Hamlet* using the theoretical tools of psychoanalysis and feminism.

The heroines of Shakespeare's comedies are intelligent, humorous, insightful, emotional and eloquent. Most of the heroines of his tragedies are fortified with strong individualism, deep learning and high self-esteem. Although, in tragedies, they are a minority, they occupy a significant place in them. In most of the tragedies, the female characters are pushed to the periphery – they do not appear on the stage as many times as the heroes and the other male characters do. They have much fewer lines to speak. Sometimes they are also awarded with inferior intelligence to that of the males. Even when the females come out of their conventional gender roles of benevolent mothers, obedient daughters and equally obedient and passionate spouses and indulge in villainy, as Goneril and Regan do in *King Lear*, they are not granted first rate intelligence and professionalism as is granted to their co-partner, Edmund. At other times, the females are held responsible for the doom of their heroes. A.C. Bradley's labeling Lady Macbeth as the 'fourth witch' and holding her responsible for Macbeth's fall has been so well wrung in the past century that it has become a cliché now. Many critics hold the stance that it was inappropriate for Cordelia to defy her father at a full court. Does it mean she should rather have stooped down to the level of her hypocritical sisters? Do they really deserve these classifications and accusations? Do they really deserve to be punished? Surely, not more than Hester Prynne had received for wearing the badge of 'A' for 'Adultery' in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *A Scarlet Letter*.

*Hamlet*, the most complicated and enigmatic of Shakespeare's tragedies, has two female characters, Gertrude, whose status within the play is that of a mother, of a

---

\* Mah-E-Nur Qudsi Islam, Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Chittagong.

wife and of a queen, and Ophelia, whose status in the drama is that of a beloved, of a daughter and of a sister. In this play an analytical framework revealing the symbolic relations of power in patriarchal representation of the females is shown. Gertrude and Ophelia are projected in all conventional gender roles of a patriarchal frame; mother, sister, daughter, lover, spouse, and to some extent, holder of passive power as the joint sovereign. Standing in opposition to the two major male characters, Hamlet and Claudius and to two other secondary male characters, Polonius and Laertes, Gertrude and Ophelia apparently appear to be insignificant, puny, powerless and above all, silent. Silent, because when they stand with their male counterparts to hold conversations with them, their words can be counted only as something slightly better than silence. This exactly is what the feminist critics' objection is about, the fact that often the females remain silent and fail to formulate their thoughts and frustrations in words. "Silence and obedience were politely regarded as the highest of the female graces" (206), writes Sean McEvoy in *Shakespeare: The Basics*. Both these 'graces' adorn Ophelia, but apparently find a breach in Gertrude, hence giving rise to controversy and ill reputation. How silence of the marginal class works against the vindication of their own rights, Edward Said explains in his seminal book *Orientalism* where his inference of the occidental study of the orient is like reading a book about lions, reading which, a reader might feel like knowing everything about a lion but might fail to know the lion's version of his own account. Sophia Phoca, a leading feminist theorist, mentions Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as raising the same protest in her essay "Feminism and Gender." Phoca opens her essay with the following words of Spivak, "Can men theorise feminism, can whites theorise racism, can the bourgeois theorise revolution, and so on. It is only when the former groups theorise that the situation is politically intolerable" (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'A Literary Representation of The Subaltern: A Woman's Text from the Third World', in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (1987) (Phoca 46).

*Hamlet*, like *King Lear*, is also founded basically on the centre-margin principles of patriarchal structure of the play's setting. But *Hamlet* is not only about total dominance of monarchy and male power over the female but also its dense layers of complexities unfold multiple planes of psychological turns, twists, dramas and behavioural disorder of Hamlet, the philosophical prince and Ophelia, his beloved.

Act I, scene II of the play gives a chance to Gertrude to speak in front of a full court. The scene occurs shortly after her marriage with Claudius. In this formal courtly session, Claudius, the new king announces that his 'one time sister' is now the new queen, but offers no explanation regarding the ground of this marriage. The queen also remains uneasily silent about the issue of her marriage. The readers, the audience, the court and the people of Denmark and last but not the least, her own son Hamlet have no clue whether this marriage has taken place

out of the old queen's love for the new king or out of political necessity. Her silence on the issue essentially brings her position close to that of Jocasta whose marriage with Oedipus, a stranger rather than in the right age to be her son, never raises any question about her initial consent about taking a second husband. Both the ladies appear to be quite happy in their second marriages. Could this mean both of them were so thoroughly unhappy in their first marriages that as soon as they were free of their bondage, they pined for second ones? Jocasta has four children from Oedipus and tries her best to protect him from knowing the truth till the truth is revealed at last. In Gertrude's case, her first husband's ghost confirms that she had been an adulteress. We have this, and one other clue from the soliloquy of Claudius "...I am still possessed / Of those effects for which I did the murder-/ My crown, my own ambition and my queen" (3.3 53-55) to tell us of love and contentment she had by her second marriage. The defining of Gertrude's second marriage as incest and adultery is a view maintained only by King and prince Hamlet. Gertrude's marriage with Claudius might be regarded as incestuous from a sixteenth century social and religious ideology, the notion which compelled King Henry VIII, Queen Elizabeth's father to go through a religious ceremony sanctified by Pope to legitimize his marriage with his elder brother's wife, Catherine. But about labeling the marriage as adultery there is no solid clue in the play. Whether it is because Gertrude was truly an adulteress during her first husband's lifetime or whether she is called one because she did not remain a widow forever, is not clarified by either the Ghost, or Claudius or Gertrude. The lines quoted above from Claudius's soliloquy and the way he mentions Gertrude to be his 'virtue' as well as his 'plague' to Laertes strongly suggest that she is Claudius's passion, love and at least a partial cause of his crime. He says:

The Queen his mother  
Lives almost by his looks; and for myself-  
My virtue or my plague, be it either which-  
She's so conjunctive to my life and soul  
That, as the star moves not but in his sphere,  
I could not but by her. (4.7.11-16)

As for the speech of Gertrude in this scene occurring at a full, formal court ceremony, her words merely echo the ideas expressed by Claudius on King Hamlet's death. Her first speech of the play is directed to Hamlet:

Good Hamlet, cast thy nightly colour off,  
And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.  
Do not for ever with thy veiled lids  
Seek for thy noble father in the dust.  
Thou know'st 'tis common – all that lives must die,  
Passing through nature to eternity. (1.2 68-73)

The speech has two sides. One, Gertrude's plea to Hamlet to accept the new king as his friend or well wisher ('Denmark' means both the king and the country), and to abandon mourning for his father whose death is not even 'two months' old'. The first point is vitally important for Gertrude as she would naturally want her husband and her son to be on good terms. The second one is controversial. Her appeal to forget the grief of a father's loss may mean she has also forgotten her first husband's love and is happily settled with the new one. If it is so, then it surely suggests that her first marriage did not mean much to her. But it may also mean that she is speaking only what is expected of her to speak under the gender role imposed on her by the conventional court conduct assigned to a queen. So her present status as the queen of King Claudius demands that her words do not differ in mettle than her husband's. Hence, her words have to show ultimate loyalty to the sovereign. If this is so then it was not within her capacity to speak a word of truly felt consolation to Hamlet, even if she has felt it. Hamlet, on the other hand, takes this indifferent tone of his mother straight into his heart and says, 'Ay, madam, it is common' (74). Hamlet's subtle agreement with Gertrude's casually passed judgment on human mortality betrays Hamlet's deep agony, shock, frustration, profound grief and accusation; all of which are Hamlet's own. In Gertrude's speech, however, we do not hear a word that can be authentically called her own. To Hamlet whose personal philosophy regarding death is, 'readiness is all', Gertrude's words should not have come as a surprise, had it not been for the fact that the response is coming from his own mother, a first-hand family member of the deceased person, who was as close in relation to her as he was to him. His acceptance of Gertrude's simple understanding of death signals the un-worded questions in his tone, 'how could such a loving relationship become just a crude commonplace to you?' and 'how could you even think my father's loss would be nothing more than a commonplace to me?' and 'how could you even think that *I* would replace my father with some one else?' and 'how could *you* so quickly replace your first love with a new one?'. Hamlet's shock at his mother's uncaring and unsympathetic response to King Hamlet and his anguish of metaphorically losing a mother along with the real loss of a father is clearly observable. His answer is not given to his mother; it is given to the queen of Denmark, meaning both the king and the country. Gertrude, just because she is a female, is not granted speech and voice of her own. With all her speeches in the scene she can merely be deducted to be silent and wording only what is allowed to her by her male master Claudius whereas Hamlet, with his extreme economy of words, can be deducted to be highly eloquent.

Like female voice, female sexuality was also not for the women to decide in early modern England. For the Renaissance society as well as for Shakespeare, good women represented the virtues which, importantly, have their meaning in relationship to the male; namely obedience, silence, sexual chastity, piety, humility, constancy, and patience. Gertrude sticks to each of these roles except 'constancy'. This is the only role she transgresses; that also hypothetically.

This vital point about defining the feminine gender roles in relationship to the males is at the centre of the feud between two principal male figures of the play – Hamlet and Claudius. As her husband, her present male master, Claudius expects Gertrude to be obedient, constant, silent and sexually ready and competent to satisfy him. As her son, Hamlet expects Gertrude to play the role of a virgin mother, who should be caring, nursing, self-sacrificing and being the ‘home’ for a homecoming child. She should also be an unsexed person, who is not allowed to feel sexual desire at all, let alone hurry to fulfill it by taking another husband. How Puritan Hamlet’s attitude is towards female sexuality is recorded by Marilyn French in her essay, “Chaste Constancy in *Hamlet*.”

She pens:

The speed Gertrude’s remarriage violates Hamlet’s sensibilities because of what it betrays: sexual desire in Gertrude, desire great enough to lead *her* to ignore standard social forms. The horror and shock he feels at the fact that she can feel desire at all is evident later, in his speech to her in her chamber, but it underlies all earlier references to the marriage. For Hamlet, sexual desire in a woman is a posting ‘with...dexterity to incestuous sheets’ (I.ii.157). The phrases he uses here and elsewhere to describe sexual acts have the same ugly fascination to the abomination, the same fastidious revulsion, found in Iago’s description of sex between Desdemona and Othello, Desdemona and Cassio. The haste of the marriage suggests Gertrude’s desire existed before King Hamlet’s death. Any remarriage by Gertrude shows her inconstant; hasty remarriage suggests she may also be unchaste. (99)

French’s readings of Hamlet’s and Iago’s analogous view of female sexuality are valid. Hamlet refers to the nuptial bed of the king and the queen as ‘...the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,’ where the incestuous and unchaste couple lose themselves, ‘honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty –’ (3.4. 83-85). Iago also refers to Othello’s lovemaking with Desdemona as ‘an old black ram’ ‘tupping’ Brabantio’s ‘white ewe’ (1.1 88-89). Thorough out the play *Othello* Iago continues to use this kind of dirty slang about Othello-Desdemona marital relationship. So, what French’s writing suggests is sexual desire is a male prerogative. It is not only a male prerogative but also the male pride, the way Hamlet feels about it when he speaks of his father’s virility to be as acute as his appetite in his first soliloquy, ‘Why, she would hang on him / As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on’t’ (1.2. 143-45). But in a woman, it is that vice, which can make ‘sweet religion’ mere ‘rhapsody of words’, ‘Call virtue hypocrite’, blur ‘the grace and blush of modesty’ (3.4. 40-41, 46-47).

Hamlet loves what any early modern English man loved: the image of authority - the dead father - and the object of the dead father’s love - the mother. Luce writes on son’s inheritance of father’s possessions, “Consider the exemplary case of

*father-son relationships*, which guarantee the transmission of patriarchal power and its laws, its discourse, its social structures" (574). It is essentially this tie of inheritance of 'patriarchal power' that makes the son and the ghost of the father speak the same language, think the same line of thoughts, feel the same jealousy and outrage towards the usurper of that authority and hatred towards the woman who is the commodity and object of their common desire.

In the absence of his father, Hamlet's expectations from his mother nothing but increases. In an androcentric society that is organized to prioritize male viewpoints and concerns, Hamlet's claim on his father's half of her affection as soon as the mother's role as a spouse is put to an end, should seem quite legitimate to him. Gertrude's remarriage robs him the chance of promoting himself to her primary master's role from a secondary one. Hamlet's psychological trauma starts at this point. His suffering is the suffering of not being able to have the sole claim of Gertrude's care, attention, love and obedience on the one hand and the helplessness of seeing another male, who apparently has no claim on their (father and son Hamlets') metaphorical female serf, snatching away their roles of feudal masters on the other. Since she has dared to choose her own master, she is found immoral by her traditional son. Although on other issues of life, Hamlet is quite open minded and even declares that some traditions are better maintained in breaches, on the issue of allowing a free will to a woman, his attitude is traditionally feudal.

Jacques Lacan, the great psychoanalyst after Sigmund Freud, also reads Gertrude as a woman with desires. Lacan says no matter how much Hamlet wants his mother to abstain herself from her husband's love, she yields to it out of her irrepressible carnal urges. Referring to Hamlet's conversation with his mother in the bedchamber scene of the play, he says:

Even when he transmits to her in the crudest, cruellest terms –the essential message with which the ghost, his father, has entrusted him, he still first appeals to her to abstain. Then, a moment later, his appeal fails, and he sends her to Claudius' bed, into the arms of the man who once again will not fail to make her yield. (13)

However, 'desire', when seen in Hamlet, takes a special psychological interpretation and a completely different dimension in Lacan.

Jacques Lacan states, "The dependence of his desire on the Other subject forms the permanent dimension of Hamlet's drama" (13). In his seminal essay, 'Desire and the Interpretation of The Desire in *Hamlet*', Lacan places Hamlet's infantile desire for his mother at the centre of his emotional crisis that bars him from attaining fulfillment from his love relation with Ophelia. To Lacan, Ophelia is a character not on her own right but an extension of Hamlet's mother, 'the Other'. It is in this relationship of the 'mother' and 'the Other' that Lacan's idea of Hamlet's 'Desire' is enrooted. Lacan defines 'desire' to be an infant's purely

psychological craving of love for its 'mother'. He explains that the infantile demand for the fulfillment of its instinctive needs derives from its instinctive awareness that the mother is the only entity apart from itself to provide it all necessities of life. Gradually the child starts developing an extra attraction for the mother's attachment and affection. This attachment of the child to its mother leads it to grow that craving for the mother's love that demands her sole attention. At this point the child sees its mother as the 'Other', meaning the only other existing creature other than itself that the child is aware and acutely conscious of. When this extra craving becomes free of all kinds of physical demands of the child, it gives birth in the child's psyche a need, a craving called 'Desire'. This 'Desire' that an infant feels for its mother gradually travels to the 'unconscious' layer of his mind as it grows up, and remains there, influencing the person's behavioural pattern but never coming out into the conscious mind. Lacan explains:

Our first step in this direction was to express the extent to which the play is dominated by the Mother as Other [Autre], i.e., the primordial subject of the demand [la demande]. The omnipotence of which we are always speaking in psychoanalysis is first of all the omnipotence of the subject as subject of the first demand, and this omnipotence must be related back to the Mother. (12)

So, Lacan detects in *Hamlet* a strong craving for love for Gertrude, the subject of his 'pure desire', which craves two things: one, an unattainable satisfaction, and second, an ardent desire to be the object of his desire; that is, of his mother, or in other words, his primordial 'Other'. Both these cravings fail in this case. The first craving cannot be fulfilled because it is morally, socially and civilly bricked. *Hamlet's* Superego, which is his social conscience, will not allow him to consciously acknowledge it even to himself. The second one cannot be fulfilled because of Gertrude herself. *Hamlet's* desire demands that he has total control of his mother, the omnipotent and omnipresent 'Other' figure he is destined to know and depend on from the first moment of his birth. But this demand fails because of Claudius.

The status quo can be defined with the following formula:

Hamlet – Desire → Ophelia

If *Hamlet* completely disregards his desire, which is elemental of his psychological existence, he is free to love Ophelia with an open-hearted, suspicion-free mind; there remains nothing to stop him from getting a fulfillment of his passion. If '– Desire' is taken to the right side of the '→' sign then the formula stands as, < Hamlet → Ophelia + Desire >. This shows that *Hamlet's* emotion for Ophelia is submerged in his desire for his mother, blurring the margin between the emotions directed to two apparently different relationships. Again, if Ophelia and Desire interchange their positions, the formula stands as,

<Hamlet – Ophelia → Desire>, establishing the fact that if Ophelia is uprooted from this emotional triangle then there stands nothing between Hamlet and Desire. This 'Desire' is the perpetual life-drive that he grows with from his infancy. It is the drive that governs and influences his total behavioural pattern. It is the part of his inner and unconscious self that he cannot do without.

Hamlet actually wants to punish Gertrude for betraying him. But he fails to detect the true cause of this urge; that is to say, he fails to recognize why he wants to punish Gertrude. His unconscious mind demands that he hates Gertrude for denying him an absolute possession of herself which he craves for all along his life and for the first time, finds an opportunity coming to him as blessings in disguise, unintentionally but fortunately, created by the death of his father. When he cannot punish her, he takes out his frustration on Ophelia.

Hamlet's disgust towards his mother engenders in him a living reproach towards life. An attitude to see or find lust in every love relation absorbs Hamlet. He begins to suspect everyone. He wants to find out if Ophelia is what she seems to be. She seems to be the image of innocence and devotion. Yet, like his mother she is a woman and so, might be ethically insensitive, containing within herself irrationality and moral 'frailty'. The notion of the moon affecting female constancy as it affects the sea was common and popular in Shakespeare's times. Sean McEvoy pens in Shakespeare: The Basics:

The rational and logical element believed to distinguish the male was lacking in the woman. Women were governed by the moon, as their menstrual cycle revealed. Consequently they were inconstant and changeable. Women could never shake off the responsibility of mother Eve for the Fall of mankind in the Garden of Eden. Once their virginity was lost, they were likely to be sexually demanding and to lead men into sin. (206)

The notion of women being governed by the lunar sway and thus representing more fluidity in nature than the males is explored further by Elaine Showalter regarding Ophelia's death by water. "Drowning," she writes explaining Gaston Bachelard's symbolic connections between women, water and death, to be-

...truly feminine death in the dramas of literature and life, one which is a beautiful immersion and submersion in the female element. Water is the profound and organic symbol of the liquid woman whose eyes are so easily drowned in tears, as her body is the repository of blood, amniotic fluid, and milk. (118)

This uncertainty regarding the true nature of Ophelia disturbs Hamlet deeply, and his cry - "Get thee to a nunnery" - reflects the anguish of this uncertainty. If Ophelia is what she seems, then this ugly world is no place for her. But if not, then a nunnery, in its other sense, brothel, would be appropriate for her, a line of

thought reflecting what Luce Irigaray states about women, "Women, signs, commodities, and currency always pass from one man to another; if it were otherwise, we are told, the social order would fall back upon incestuous and exclusively endogamous ties that would paralyze all commerce" (574). Hence for Gertrude, the changing of masters', commercial agents' and consumers' hands might be those of King Hamlet, Claudius or of prince Hamlet, and for Ophelia, they might be either of father Polonius, brother Laertis, or Lover Hamlet or of the consumers of prostitutes.

Although Hamlet miserably fails to yield to Ophelia's love, he passionately longs for her. The carnal jokes he cuts with her just prior to the play 'The Mouse Trap' shows even though he has been rude, cruel and suspicious of her in the 'nunnery' scene, he finds her sexual appeal to be irresistible:

HAMLET: [to OPHELIA] Lady, shall I lie in your lap?

OPHELIA: No, my lord.

HAMLET: I mean my head upon your lap?

OPHELIA: Ay, my lord.

HAMLET: Do you think I meant country matters?

OPHELIA: I think nothing, my lord.

HAMLET: That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs.

In spite of Hamlet's newly developed misogynistic tendencies exposed in the 'nunnery scene', his attraction towards Ophelia is clearly displayed in this dialogue. Hamlet yearns for Ophelia but hates the fact that he needs her.

In the nunnery scene, Ophelia's speeches spark with sharp intelligence and keen observation. It is only Ophelia in the whole play that makes a keen philosophical and insightful comparison between Hamlet's past and present in her short but extremely significant soliloquy:

What noble mind is here o'erthrown!

The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword,

Th'expectancy and rose of the fair state,

The glass of fashion and the mould of form,

Th'observed of all observers, quite, quite, down!

.....

woe is me,

T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see! (3.1 149-153, 159-160)

It is a pity that Hamlet does not hear these beautiful words spoken by Ophelia about himself. This is by far the most beautiful eulogy of Hamlet and an in-depth

comprehension of his present crisis felt and expressed by any other character of the play. But somehow, the testimony of her true love, the genuine and infinite care, the understanding and the affection Ophelia feels for Hamlet in spite of his rude dejection is overlooked by Hamlet and missed by the critics. And yet, Elaine Showalter writes, to a critic as powerful and observational as Mallarme, Ophelia is no more than 'a blank page to be written over or on by the male imagination' (124). Showalter further shows how critics of different ages have often seen Ophelia as 'deprived of thought, sexuality, language', and quotes R. D. Laing as having said in his book, *The Divided Self* that "Ophelia . . . is an empty space." She further quotes Laing, "In her madness there is no one there . . . There is no integral selfhood expressed through her actions or utterances. Incomprehensible statements are said by nothing. She has already died. There is now only a vacuum where there was once a person" (126). Laing's this particular extract is also quoted by Ranjini Philip who contradicts Laing's interpretation of Ophelia's madness in comparison to that of King Lear showing that Ophelia's madness is a 'negative nothing' while Lear's is a positive one (124). Rather, Philip interprets Ophelia's madness as the reconciliation of her passive, slandered self, the enraged prisoner with her 'perfect image', liberated and free from her gender roles, about which Irigaray writes:

And the woman? She "doesn't exist". She adopts the disguise that she is told to put on. She acts out the role that is imposed on her; the only thing really required of her is that she keep intact the circulation of pretense by enveloping herself in femininity. (575)

Truth of these quoted lines works in Polonius' using his daughter as a bait, Hamlet's labeling Polonius as the 'fish monger' taking Ophelia as a product or commodity to be sent to the male market to be sold and to be festered. Truth of these quoted lines also surfaces in Ophelia's non-protesting acceptance of all the roles assigned to her, till she is finally freed from all her gender roles. David Leverenz refers to her gender roles as multiple characters of numerous directors:

...Ophelia is forever faithful to her contradictory directives. She herself is a play within a play, or a player trying to respond to several imperious directors at once. Everyone has used her: Polonius, to gain favour; Laertes, to belittle Hamlet; Claudius, to spy on Hamlet; Hamlet, to express rage at Gertrude; and Hamlet again, to express his feigned madness with her as a decoy. She is only valued for the roles that further other people's plots. (142-43)

But Ophelia pays. Her liberty costs her both her sanity and her life.

Critical readings of Ophelia have been quite controversial in Shakespearean studies. With each type of different reading imposed upon the play, the interpretation of the relationship changes. Elaine Showalter's ground-breaking essay, 'Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism' records a trajectory of a historical study of Ophelia's representation in English literary criticisms, stage performances and film

directions starting from Augustan Age up to the present Age of theories and shows how Ophelia has been no less an enigma than Hamlet himself; occupying critics', theorists', directors' and performers' imagination, study and inference. Towards the end of her essay she writes:

The alteration of strong and weak Ophelias on stage, virginal and seductive Ophelias in art, (because in her survey she also includes Pre-Raphaelites paintings of Ophelia's reported drowning scene) inadequate or oppressed Ophelias in criticism, tells us how these representations have overflowed the text, and how they have reflected the ideological character of their times, erupting as debates between dominant and feminist views in periods of gender crisis and redefinition. (127, my parenthesis)

A marginalized character like Emilia's observation on male treatment of women is worth noticing:

'Tis not a year or two shows us a man,  
They are all but stomachs, and we all but food.  
They eat us hungrily, and when they are full,  
They belch us. (*Othello* 3.3 99-102)

Emilia's comparing male sexual need of females with physical hunger brings the status of women down to that of the animals to whom both these biological urges are just elemental, as if females are no more worthy than reasonless, emotionless, merit and caliber less inanimate object like food.

Writing about the gender roles of early modern England, Professor Mohit Ul Alam remarks in his essay, 'The Daughters in Shakespeare's Plays', "...the only goal set for women was to become good wives having three qualities: beauty, virtue and wealth. They must be chaste and they must breed after marriage" (45). Indeed, this obsession with chastity and breeding is vital to Hamlet who uses all three criteria to assess Ophelia. In his conversation with her in Act 3 scene 1, he links beauty with chastity, or rather, with transgression of chastity and hence being the breeder of sinners:

HAMLET. Ha, ha? Are you honest?

OPHELIA. My lord.

HAMLET. Are you fair?

OPHELIA. What means your lordship?

HAMLET. That if you be honest and fair, your honest should admit no discourse to your beauty.

OPHELIA. Could beauty, my lord, have better commerce than with honesty?

HAMLET. Ay, truly, for the power of beauty will sooner

transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of  
honesty can translate beauty into his likeness. (3.1.105-115)

Shakespeare's incorporating Hamlet's idealized expectation of Gertrude to represent Virgin Mother might have drawn its incentive from Queen Elizabeth I's single marital status. Mary Beth Rose, in her essay "Gender and the Construction of Royal Authority in the Speeches of Elizabeth I" records,

"...Elizabeth identifies herself strongly and frequently with the traditional female roles of virgin and mother...And in her final speech (1601), she reminds her subjects, 'I have diminished my own revenue that I might add to your security, and been content to be a taper of true virgin wax, to waste myself and spend my life that I might give light and comfort to those that live under me.' " (34)

Hamlet, which was composed around this time, could have upheld, as one of its purposes, the playwright's personal and unique way of offering tribute to a queen who was not only a patron of him but a true taper to enlighten a nation with unity, tolerance and pacifism.

### Works cited

- Alam, Mohit Ul 'The Daughters in Shakespeare's Plays' in *Crossings: ULAB Journal of English Studies*, Volume 1, Number 1, Fall 2008, eds. Mohit Ul Alam. Dhaka. University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh. 2008.
- French, Marilyn "Chaste Constancy in *Hamlet*" in *New Casebooks: Hamlet*. London. Macmillan Press Ltd. 1992.
- Irigaray, Luce 'Commodities amongst Themselves' in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. London. Blackwell Publishers. Rpr. 2000.
- Lacan, Jacques 'Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet' in *Yale French Studies*, No. 55/56, *Literature and Psychoanalysis. The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, pp. 11-52. Yale, Yale University Press, 1977.
- Leverenz, David "The Woman in Hamlet: An Interpersonal View" in *New Casebooks: Hamlet*. London. Macmillan Press Ltd. 1992.
- McEvoy, Sean *Shakespeare: The Basics*. New York. Routledge. Rpr. 2001.
- Philip, Ranjini 'The Shattered Glass: The Story of (O)phelia' in *Postmodern Essays on Love, Sex, and Marriage in Shakespeare* ed. Bhim S. Dahiya. New Delhi. Viva Books Private Limited. 2008.
- Phoca, Sophia "Feminism and Gender" in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* London, Routledge, 2006.
- Rose, Mary Beth *Gender and Heroism in Early Modern English Literature* Chicago. Chicago University Press. 2002.
- Showalter, Elaine 'Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism' in *New Casebooks: Hamlet*. London. Macmillan Press Ltd. 1992.