CONCLUSION

“I have good reason to be content,
for thank God I can read and
perhaps understand Shakespeare to his
depths.”

John Keats
CHAPTER - V

CONCLUSION

The development of ‘Drama’ as a genre of literature locates the place of William Shakespeare, the bard of Avon, whose “magic could he be and within that circle none doth walk but he”. This thesis on “Treatment of Women in Shakespearean tragedies – a Study” in five chapters is an analysis of his plays in the background of the perceptions of post-modern trends and themes that literature has been subjected to in the recent times.

Chapter-1 was an attempt to give an introduction to drama in English literature and the period in which Shakespeare wrote. It also deals with women in general in literature – wherein it has been mentioned that women in England were treated differently from women in some other European countries. They were not stuck up indoors but were permitted to move freely through the streets with uncovered heads and to socialize with friends or shop in the markets. The chapter also gives a background to the study undertaken.

Chapter-2 titled A brief study of Shakespeare and his tragedies was an attempt to give an overview of William Shakespeare and his works and the classification of his plays and the
theatre during his time. It also presented the origin and types of tragedies in world literature. The distinction between Shakespearean tragic heroes and other tragic heroes was also made in this chapter.

**Chapter-3** titled **Treatment of women in Tragedies** dealt with the salient features of Shakespearean tragedies with a specific focus on the way the women characters were portrayed in them. It has been observed that Shakespeare was at his best in his tragedies in which Shakespeare fixes the downfall of his tragic heroes due to one of the inbuilt weaknesses in the protagonists. The tragic hero becomes one such either because of indecisiveness – as in *Hamlet*, or because of a overvaulting ambition as in *Macbeth*, or of suspicion as in *Othello* or being given to flattery as in *King Lear* or of obstinacy as in *Julius Ceaser*.

This chapter also gives a brief account of how women got portrayed in Shakespeare’s drama and how their problems have been slighted. An argument for the need to look at these women from the post modern feministic perspectives has been presented.

**Chapter-4** titled **Contemporaneity of Shakespeare’s Women Characters in the Tragedies** was a detailed analysis of the women characters in particular with special reference to the way in
which they are fixed or could be located in the whole drama of life and their role in the protagonists’ downfall or growth.

This chapter also gives an account of the staging of Shakespearean plays in the contemporary scenario, the adaptations that have been rendered into Kannada and it also presents a few expert opinions expressed by few eminent Shakespearean scholars, practicing theatre artistes and critics who were interviewed exclusively for this research.

Drama in English is as old as English literature. Drama in English literature flourished during the later half of the renaissance period and the early half of the Elizabethan period. It was popularized by none other than William Shakespeare the bard of Stratford – upon – Avon, about whom ‘what we do not know is a most fascinating subject and one that would fill a volume’ says (Oscar Wilde) a dramatist of the early 20th century. What we do know about him is so meager and inadequate that when it is collected together the result is disappointing. Any amount of criticism of Shakespearean works, particularly his plays, can never be exhausting, for Shakespeare has a way of exhausting and swallowing up his critics. Shakespearean critic is a master mariner who valiantly effects a passage to the furthest shores of understanding and
enjoyment, making his way through the mists and storms and the many hidden rocks or largely hidden icebergs that are apt to confuse or overwhelm the unlucky or the unwary and he is willing to carry us to in his magic bask.

The writings of Shakespeare reveal the workings of a great mind. Shakespeare never speaks in his own voice about his idea on writing or on what would be called his own philosophy. That is because he is a dramatist with a special genius for allowing his characters to speak on their own beliefs without his editorial intervention.

Shakespeare is one who is gifted and wisely self-taught and is one who has the knowledge of the natural world learned or not. Shakespeare's writings make observations on free will versus determination, relativity versus certainty, skepticism, dualism, pantheism, astrology and still more.

Shakespeare ultimately endorses a providential reading of divine justice. There are multiple philosophies in Shakespeare.

Shakespeare's chandlers sometimes serve as mouth pieces for his own personal beliefs. Every speaker is a narrative voice.
Shakespeare’s extraordinary ability to submerge his own personality as writer into the mindset of the characters he creates. He allows Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth to speak their innermost thoughts as though without the intervening or controlling perspective of the author.

Shakespeare’s gift for creating unforgettable characters this way is legendary. It is sometimes called negative capability, meaning his skill as a dramatist in setting aside his own point of view in order to focus entirely on what the character he has created must be thinking at any given moment.

Shakespeare’s tragedies were written first of all for performance. They are the work of a practitioner as much as of a poet. The theatre has, in fact, done more to keep these plays, the poetry written and their characters alive than the scholar. Tragedy can mean some strikingly some unhappy accident or a merciless arbitrary destiny, a moral exemplum of just retribution or an unfathomable catastrophe suggesting an essentially malevolent fate. As a rule, to be properly called tragedy, the disaster has to have an element of sheer pathos or some sensational and astounding quality. Tragic suffering implies an idea of dignity and an inevitability of more than average stature, even though this may not be true of every
single stage tragedy. Any great tragedy touches on the fundamental questions of the ultimate cause of human suffering, the origin and nature of evil in man, and the existence of a destructive or benevolent fate. It is an expression of a universal desire to come to terms with these disturbing uncertainties. "Is there any cause in native that makes these hard hearts? (King Lear, III Act, 6sc – 76-7).¹ This is repeated in some form or other in all Shakespeare’s tragedies. Man’s bewildered attempt to come to terms with suffering, loss or disillusionment is at the heart of almost every tragedy of Shakespeare’s age. The problems of tragic guilt, catharsis and Christian redemption in Shakespearean tragedy that have been debated time and again in Shakespeare criticism are all aspects of this impact.

“There is no such thing as Shakespearean tragedy; there are only Shakespeare and tragedies.” (Kenneth Muir, *Shakespeare’s Tragic Sequence*, London, 1972; p12 Hutcherson University)²

Shakespeare’s tragedies are different from the tragedies of his contemporaries and are due to the sheer power and wealth of his poetical language, his inventive dramaturgy and his surprising range of insights into human character more than to any clearly definable
common elements of plot or theme. The impact of his tragedy is so complex and changeable because it is not produced by one single character of one clear cut conflict, but by the way the reader is confronted with the whole world in which an often rather mixed group of human beings are trying to find their way; even though the Lew's dilemma often overshadows all other concerns.

Shakespearean tragedy is an action issuing from character or character issuing in action. Through the hero's sufferings, we experience vicariously the titanic upheaval of Shakespeare's moral universe. A system that aims for perfection, this moral order nevertheless engenders from in this itself evil which it can expel only at the price of great agony and senseless waste.

Shakespearean drama educates its readers morally through their emotions. He never lets us off the hook by attributing the hero's down fall to definite causes such as inscrutable fate or the even-handled calculus of poetic justice. It confronts us with the self destruction of moral order that paradoxically, in striving for perfection, becomes the source of its own undoing. In his tragedies, Shakespeare was not attempting to justify the ways of God to men, or to show the universe as a divine comedy. He was writing tragedy and tragedy would not be tragedy if it were not a painful mystery.
Shakespeare, like an honest miscellaneous journalist was putting into the mouths of his different characters the sentiments that for the moment were suggested to him by their predicaments.

Like the other tragic dramatists of his time, Shakespeare followed a tradition which by then had become well established in England. This tradition can partly form the Roman tragic dramatic Seneca and partly from the medieval mystery plays which were still being acted in Shakespeare’s boyhood.

Shakespeare was a professional actor, a professional dramatist, his greatness lay there and in the gift of the gab; in the exuberance and joy in language which everybody had in that age. He supremely handled the language. The Renaissance needed no mastering living religion, no mastering living philosophy. Life was gayer without them.

In the early stages of feminist Shakespearean criticism, however, the prospect of a broad convergence of interests and priorities between scholarship and mere mainstream, as well as radical, feminist activism and theatrical feminist activism is from mid 1970’s.
Women of Shakespearean time were well dressed, fond of taking it easy and commonly left the care of household matters and drudgery to their servants. They sat before their doors, decked out in fine clothes in order to see and be seen by the passerby. In all banquets and feasts they were shown the greatest honor. They were placed at the upper end of the table, where they are the first served; at the lower end they help the men. All the rest of their time, they employ in walking and reading, in playing at cards of otherwise, in visiting their friends and keeping company conversing with their equals and their neighbors and making merry with them at childbirth, christening, churching and funerals not at all this with the permission and knowledge of their husbands, as such was the custom.

During the same period, England was famously described as a paradise for women, a prison for servants, and hell for horses, but women today might disagree with that assessment. Women were held to be full of faults praised for only those virtues that made them docile wives barred from full participation in life and deemed equal rights. In literature they met with worse treatment at times than the real life, and they were, in most respects, treated badly by
Shakespeare, despite the age-old claims that he wrote strong female characters.

Men attributed to women a staggering catalog of faults and considered them the scourge of and a pernicious influence on decent men everywhere. Women were supposedly stubborn, fickle, lustful contrary, stingy, greedy, proud, vain cowardly, physically and morally weak imprudent, unthrifty, rash, devious, deceitful, hateful, garrulous, indiscreet, jealous and disobedient. Some women of course, were many of these things; just some were exactly the opposite. Shakespeare however, chose to repeat most of the calumnies against the sex as a whole. His company of actors, of course, would not be likely to object, since they were all male, even those playing the female characters.

Shakespeare did write strong and memorable female characters, but his strongest women are portrayed as villains. One of the chief vices with which he charges women is ill temper in one form or another. Women are portrayed as wrangling women, characterized as misbehaved and shallow, self absorbed, scolding and shrewd. They are constant, fearful and weak-minded. The most common vices of which Shakespeare accuses women are cowardice
and physical weakness. Sometimes the terms are applied directly to the female characters.

*I am sick and capable of fears.*

*Oppressed with wrongs, and therefore full of tears,*

*A widow, husbandless, subject to fears,*

*A woman naturally born to freak*

*(King John, Act II, Sc ii, 12-15)*

When women are in arms or endowed with unusual physical courage, it usually serves as an exhortation to the men around them. The societal virtues of women also appear in Shakespeare’s plays. These were the virtues that husbands, poets and the authors of conduct. Manuals told women what they ought to have, and everyone was designed to create wives who were useful and trouble free. The ideal women was supposed to be chaste, so that the husband could be sure of his children’s paternity, obedient so that he never had to argue; quiet as in King Lear (ii, iii, 274-275), so that he need not be bothered by her; Chiefly so that she might spend less of his money; modest, so that he need never feel threatened; skillful, so that he could save money by using her talents rather than those of expensive specialties. Women’s virtues are being soft, mild, pitiful and flexible. Their three ideal characteristics are beauty, virtue and self control.
They should be wise, fair, true and above all deferential to men and modest about their own strengths. The actual behaviour of Shakespeare’s characters, like the actual behaviour of the real women of his time, often had little to do with such lists of virtues.

The odd thing about Shakespeare’s women is that they are at once more and less than their real counterparts. They do much that real women could not, but they also reflect only a fraction of real woman’s experience. Shakespeare makes only passing references, for example, to the fact that, the women there are entirely in the power of their husbands except for their lives. Women were essential to the work of the farm and to the family economy, and while some continued to view them as annoyances fit only for the breeding of their heirs, there were many husbands who doted on their wives (King Lear I iv 3f-3g) and mourned them deeply after their death.

Women in his plays are given credit for a great deal of wit and Shakespeare’s heroines are generously endowed with this virtue, but in real life the woman who constantly got the better of men in verbal disputes was subjected to various forms of public humiliation. The reality in Renaissance England was that people liked a clever woman on the stage, but not in their homes or villages. Shakespeare also sometimes provides an excuse for a woman’s wit, some extenuating
circumstances that explain how she could be so clever. The most famous example of a woman in the plays outsmarting the men around her is that of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*.

The dramas of Shakespeare and his contemporaries not only enthusiastically embraced the challenge to explore assumptions about women in their plays but are explicitly identified as feminist in sympathy. The spirit of Shakespeare’s own plays is profoundly dramatic in that he sees men and women, from the milk maid to empress, the fool to the wise men, and the prince to the gravedigger as equals. Shakespeare’s feminist sympathies are evident in many of his plays. It is evident in the description of Cleopatra as she afforded her own moral law that is being always an artist. Macbeth’s ambition is constitutional, but not in fluently and yet in the bloody, tempest, tossed world that confronts the hero-where supernatural forces join with his own life against his better self— even Macbeth’s characteristic ability to imagine the horrific consequences of his deeds cannot save him. Macbeth grows inhuman and as his wife, equally sublime in her courage and commitment to murder, descends into madness. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth destroy both the good within themselves and within each other. Once again, like in the
other tragedies, it can be seen, good producing evil and tragically ensuring its own destruction.

Lady Macbeth is a great bad woman. Whom we hate but whom we fear more than we hate. Though she is terrifying, she is never beyond one's sympathy. Lady Macbeth, far from being masculine, has a story through conscience to drive her to suicide.

She was in fact true to her own nature. Shakespeare’s female characters are real and psychologically complex individuals, rather than stereotypes to the extent that even the fact that the roles were played by boys meant that their presence in the secular drama of character and personal relations spurned the dramatists to look beyond a feminist susceptible of imitation to ways of representing women which would be less superficial.

Shakespeare’s women provide opportunities for self expression, adjustment to social codes, release, relief, rebellion and transformation. For Shakespeare only the women, sometimes witch, sometimes saint, sometimes mother, command the innate energy that renews and revives and only in him daughters escape, and follow, reject and recreate their once and future fathers.
Shakespeare and Sigmund Freud deal with the same subject: They expressed the hidden feelings in the human heart. While Shakespeare had no formal theory of the unconsciousness, he nonetheless possessed extraordinary and sophisticated insight into it. Though Shakespeare accepts conventional arguments for patriarchy, he objects to the extreme polarization of sex roles and his works reflect and voice a masculine anxiety about the uses of patriarchal power over women, specifically about men’s control over women’s sexuality. The theme of the relations between masculine identity – formation and the figure of the material body, wherein selfhood is grounded in paternal absence and in the fantasy of overwhelming contamination at the point of origin. The private conversations between Shakespeare’s women provide opportunities for self expression, adjustment to social codes, release, relief, rebellion and transformation.

Lear records the horrific discovery of the suffocating mother at the centre of masculine authority and to terrible vengeance laden on her. Macbeth records the attempt. Othello’s fault is a sexual jealousy so intense that it converts human nature into chaos and liberates the beast in man. In his fall we see the noblest of human passions, love, recoiling upon itself, producing in a man who is great at heart, a
tortured mixture of longing and loathing. Othello becomes increasingly mired in jealousy, the animal in man forcing itself into his consciousness is naked grossness and he writhing before it powerless to deny its entrance, grasping inarticulate images of pollution and funding relief only in bestial thirst for blood. The tragedy’s most heartbreaking victim is Desdemona, the sweetest and most pathetic of Shakespeare’s women, who nevertheless lacks the independence and strength of spirit that might help her rise above suffering. In Othello, evil destroys itself but not before taking down all goodness with it.

Othello is not governed by tempests of passion but by a slow, inexorable process in which Othello, a noble, confiding, tender, generous man, succumbs to a destructive jealousy that finally breaks out into open fury.

*King Lear* is Shakespeare’s great master-piece in the logic of passion. In *King Lear*, one can see the ebb and flow of passion, its impatience of opposition, its accumulating force when it has time to recollect itself, the transfer in which it avails itself of every passing word of gesture, its haste to repel insinuation, the alternate contraction and dilation of the soul... in this moral combat with poisoned weapons aimed at the heart where each would is fatal.
Despite Shakespeare’s sometimes astonishing moments of sympathetic engagement with his female characters, they generally tend to be more significant as screens for role fantasy than as independent characters making their own claim to dramatic reality.

Their sexual bodies will always be dangerous, the sign of the fall and original sin.

The central element in Shakespeare’s treatment of women is always their sex, not as a focus for culture observation or social criticism, but primarily as a mystic source of power, an archetypal symbol that arouses both love and loathing in the male.

Cleopatra is a woman of moods and she lives for feeling. She recks not of duty; she makes a mock of morality; she is essentially the seductress, the temptress. Of the pernicious character of her influence, there can be no doubt; she has described as a courtesan of genius’. Sexual attraction is the element of her life; her armours are her glory, not her shame; she is proud to recall her youthful intrigues with Julius Caesar and Pompey. Yet the passion she inspires in Antony is not dismissed with unmixed contempt as an expense of spirit in a waste of shame.
Shakespeare regards Cleopatra with artistic detachment and fully feels the charm of her vitality and variety and the glowing gorgeousness of her native. She is for him in the incarnation of passion, part siren and part fury. Indeed, the disillusioned raptures that she evokes often recall to us Shakespeare’s tribute to the Dark Lady of his sonnets.

When my love swears that she is made of truth, I do believe her, though I know she lies her ascendance over Antony results not only from her infinite graces but also from her capacity for comradeship. She is at home in a stately feast and in a gaudy revelry. She has a passion for simple vulgar pleasures and for the cause of ceremonious worship.

By nature she is all life and movement, with sparkles and flashes; the variety of her moods is as dazzling as the play of sunlight on mountain.

Though the plays are basically about the men, one does not miss the gripping influence of the female characters. As stated earlier in the thesis, Lady Macbeth has enough power over Macbeth in influencing him to murder the King. The sin is threefold as Macbeth has to kill Duncan who is his King, relative and above all his guest. The guiding provocation traces back to the three witches. Interesting
to note that the witches are androgynus; Banco reflects on their very appearance saying they look like women but have beards. Was Shakespeare talking about ostracized women who defied the rules and codes of patriarchal society? Interestingly the witches were distrustled by a sailor’s wife who refused to partake the fruit she was eating. Even as they are nursing the wound of humiliation the conspire the prank to entertain themselves by misleading ‘the wayward son’ Macbeth.

They are admonished for their act by Hecate who is all too powerful in the black art. One understands here that the play ‘Macbeth’ rests to a great extent on the whims and fancies of female characters.

Though they are portrayed as seen by the eyes of patriarchy and powerful influence is uncannily manifested all throughout the play. Indeed the multidimensional personality of women characters unravel the mystery of womanhood. As mentioned earlier, Lady Macbeth is quite masculine in a feminine body. She said she knew womanhood but would have rocked the baby’s head into pieces if she had promised to fulfill the ambition of becoming the king. She even said that she would have killed Duncan, if he did not resemble, her father.

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Lady Macduff takes the responsibility of protecting her family in her husband's absence faithfully but in vain. Gertrude is accused of adultery and has to undergo the painful agony of facing her grown up son. She is a mother, wife and an adultress. Was Shakespeare being a moralist here? Was he setting an example to deter women from transgression. Or was he creating a very normal woman whose unadulterated feelings find wings? Torn between guilt and responsibility she succumbs to her wrong doing.

Many writers have focused on this aspect to get into the depth of what lies beneath when a woman sins. This has been a matter of focus because for men infidelity has never been a problem. Harem full of woman raises the stature of a man but a single paramour strips the woman of her virtue. Be it Emma of Flaubert or Anna Karenina of Tolstoy, women have been relegated to the status of a whore. Gertrude failing to seek herself loses herself.

Then discussing Desdemona, she is an epitome of virtue. She becomes the victim of Iago's foul play. She represents the ideal wife. Nonetheless ends up murdered by her husband. Is Shakespeare unwittingly suggesting that women end up in the graves irrespective of the virtue or transgressions?
The intriguing portrayal of women can be found in King Lear. The senile King expects love from daughters which simply explains that daughters and their love is indispensable. Shakespeare sums it all by depicting the pitiable condition of King Lear.

No matter how great the King is, his making and unmaking is in the hands of his wives, daughters, mothers, witches, angels who are all women.

**Implications and suggestions**

Shakespeare would be the last person to portray or deal only with stereotyped characters. One of the glorious facts about Shakespeare is that he individualizes his characters. No two characters are alike, no two men are alike, no two women are alike, no two heroes are alike and no two heroines are alike. In fact, Shakespeare infests each character with distinctive differences and personality of his/her own. Therefore it would be unacceptable to say that he represents only stereotyped characters. In fact in the various characters and the various plays which have been chosen for this research, each character is different from the other.

In Shakespeare’s tragedies, each tragic heroine is different from the other but it can be seen that the hero is more important than the heroine. Involuntarily, women take a second role and are as
powerfully presented as some of the comic characters in the play. Therefore it would be wrong to say that Shakespeare does not individualize. It is quite obvious that each of the character has her own or his own personality.

Shakespeare is a writer who believes in ‘universals’ and universal by definition it is very good for all time, it is not stereotyped, it is not time bound. Human nature has not changed since the time of the Greeks. Elemental passions like anger, love, hate etc have all remained the same without much change in the human minds and hearts. It is said that hate is the only emotion stronger than love.

Shakespeare’s tragedies are all concerned about eternal values. Even today people are angry, they love and they hate each other. Everything that happened in Shakespeare is happening today too. As long as human nature does not change Shakespeare’s plays will hold a semblance to the characters in life.

After having done a detailed examination of the women characters in Shakespearean tragedies, it is clear that the women he created were neither good nor bad entirely. They were neither black altogether nor white. They were grey characters. A mixture of both good and bad mixed in varying proportions as in real life. They had
good qualities as well as bad - ambitious, greedy, immoral, shameless, lustful, ignorant, clever, charming, cunning, shrewd, impolite, beautiful, sacrificing, selfless, loving, caring, and motherly. It can hence be said that Shakespeare was not in any way biased against women. He was not an anti-feminist. He was an artist who portrayed life as life, in its totality. Therefore he portrays women in their entirety. He was basically an entertainer but at the same time he was also an artist of sublime understanding of life who did not sacrifice art and artistic values for the sake of theatrical success.

The study implies that there is ample scope for studying other women characters in the other works of Shakespeare. This research has concerned itself only with the women characters in his best known tragedies, of which five were selected for the sake of the study. There are other women characters in his comedies, in both categories namely heroines and minor characters. Probably these women characters in his comedies were created in a different manner than the characters he created for the sake of tragedies. It is recommended that a further study be taken up of these characters in the light of post modern feminist perspective.
An understanding of Shakespeare from a modern perspective is essential as it will help us re-invent the master genius and make fresh adaptations of his work to suit the requirements of the present day.

It can be concluded that Shakespeare is alive for our time and he cannot be restricted to his own age. As it can be understood from *Antony and Cleopatra*, the interest aroused by Cleopatra at the end is too ideal and that she has ceased to be part and parcel of the real. The end does not bring the whole of our minds into play and everything is set as if to bring about a new pattern on our being.
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