

A Comparative Study of Males and Females Writing's Content of Elizabethan Era

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to make a comparative study of male and female writing's content of Elizabethan era. In connection to this, I have selected some female writers, as Elizabeth Carrey, Margret Cavendish, Aemilia Lanyer, Lady Marry Wroth and Margret Tyler and to compare them with Ben Jonson, Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlow, William Shakespeare and Thomas Heywood's writing content. This study would help the reader to have a comprehensive idea about Elizabethan writings of both, male and female. The research is qualitative and descriptive in its mode. Further, the researcher has proposed to use inductive approach while drawing on textual analysis for the study of the selected pieces of excerpt. Moreover, the researcher has argued that the Elizabethan patriarchal society does not allow women to write and they are deprived of their basic rights i.e. education and freedom of speech. Further, Catholics adds fuel to fire as they are not in favour of female liberty so female writers find themselves delving between devil and the deep sea. Yet to write in such a sordid environment is a great contribution on the part of the females. So, all the appreciation goes to the female writers of Elizabethan era. A comparative study of males and females writing's content of Elizabethan era revealed that the women were puppet in hands of men.

Keywords: Elizabethan era literature; female writers; patriarchal influence; religious influence; male dominance

Introduction

This paper aims at discussing the works of female writers of Elizabethan age in order to draw a comparison between female and male writers of this era. Female writers of this age are not that much renowned as is the opposite sex. In this article, my findings would be: female writers of Elizabethan age produced a smaller amount of work, and secondly their work was less versatile in terms of Style and Themes vis-à-vis their male contemporary writers. Besides drawing a comparison and evaluating the worth of their writings, this topic is important as it would also be shedding light on some of the historical backgrounds of Elizabethan female writers that why we don't find much celebrated literary work from female side.

Literature Review

Much have been talked previously about Elizabethan writers, men and women, and the

prominent figures, in this connection, are Tina Krontiris, Susan Wilson and Stephanie J. Wright. They all have discussed different perspectives in their studies in one way or the other but this research paper is different from their study as it focuses on particular figures' writing content that are mentioned above. In addition to, it also glimpses women writings' content worth among Elizabethan Patriarchal society.

Methodology

The proposed study is qualitative and empirical in nature and takes up narrative as its unit of study. The mode of the research is descriptive in its nature. The researcher proposes to use inductive approach while drawing on textual analysis for the study of the selected pieces of excerpt. Moreover, much of the help has been taken from library material, archives, articles, book reviews and journalistic publications as secondary sources for conducting this research.

Data Analysis

Where Elizabethan era is hailed for its contribution in English literature, as the male members of this era have earned much popularity because of their works, same there, this era puts a lot of questions on the females' works. Though we find some of the works by the females yet they are not welcomed with the same zeal as the males' works. In this regard, says Elaine,

“Very few women, compared with men, wrote for publication: their works from less than one percent of the total number of texts published in the period” (Hobby, 1988: 1).

The Renaissance revived the learning all around the Europe with its major characteristic *humanism* which focuses on the individuality of *every individual*, but it is also worth mentioning that women of this age could not enjoy the revival of learning in full swung. In Seventeenth century England, very few women, compared with men, wrote for publication. It is said that the work of female writers of Elizabethan age published is only one percent of the total published work of that age. The ratio is quite astonishing. The published work, produced by female writers, is found of those women who belonged to elite social class, or those who had access to the royal court. Works of middle class women of Elizabethan age are not found.

Though the royal ladies or those who had some relations with royalties tried to produce some kind of literature, but their work is not that much renowned, and thus it is a time taking job to trace out the works of female Elizabethan writers. Definitely, there could be many reasons behind this phenomenon that's why we don't find variety of literature with female authorship.

The major reason that is found in the works and criticism of various writers is nothing but the absence of education for women as compared to men who enjoyed high standards of education. “Whatever degree of education was available to the poor, boys were more likely than girls to receive it (Hobby, 1988: 2).” Margaret Cavendish in her *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655) mentions that:

“We are become like worms that only live in the dull earth of ignorance, winding ourselves sometimes out by the help of some refreshing rain of good education, which seldom is given to us; for we are kept like birds in cages to hop up and down in our houses”... (3).

Women were not allowed to move out of the domestic realm and to work or to compete with

male members. Women, belonging to upper strata, wrote various works. Women, belonging to lower class, were nearly provided with education as the preference goes to boys than girls to receive any degree of education. In *Philosophical and Physical Opinions (1655)* Margaret Cavendish asserts that:

“If we were bred in school to mature our brain, and to mature our understandings...we might bring forth the fruits of the knowledge (3)”.

Lack of women education results in rare occurrence of creative writing as a few had the ability or opportunity to do so and one of them was Elizabeth Carrey.

Elizabeth Carrey wrote a play namely *The Tragedy of Mariam* in which we are told that Mariam is a lady who breaks the convention of being silent before the husband as she is alleged of adultery by her husband and she is murdered by him. By the same token, Shakespeare’s tragedy, *Othello*, is somehow similar to Elizabeth Carrey’s tragedy. As in *Othello* Desdemona is alleged of adultery by her husband and she is murdered. Now the question arises that why Shakespeare’s tragedy receives so much appreciation of the Elizabethan people but Elizabeth Carrey’s tragedy is not welcomed by the same society? For this to answer, by keeping in view the aforementioned compare and contrast of the writing content, I would like to draw your attention on the religious scenario of Elizabethan contemporary society. Since the Catholics were in power and they were strict followers of Bible, so they did not allow women freedom of speech because Bible announces, “A wife commands her children and household, but must obey her husband”. As St. Paul wrote, “Let women be subjected to their husbands, as to Lord; for the husband is the head of the women, as Christ is the head of the church”. Further, in *On Wifely Duties (1417)* Francesco Barbo said that

“Not only the arms but indeed also the *speech* of women never be made public; for the speech of the noble woman can be no less dangerous than the nakedness of her limbs” (2).

The male members of Elizabethan era associated women chastity with her silent tongue. They were of the view that the more women tongue would be in control, the more peaceful house would be. So, in this sort of biased patriarchal society, how a woman can be appreciated for her works by the males? This was the reason for Elizabeth Carrey’s writing is unpopular comparatively Shakespeare’s writing.

At another point, males’ writing content at thematic level was vast and diversified than that of females. Males writing elucidate theme of violence, theme of revenge, theme of power, theme of male superiority to females, theme of comedy but, on the other hand, females writing content are inferior and narrow. In this regard, Thomas kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* is an excellent example of theme of violence and revenge in which we are told about a father who desire to avenge his son’s death. This brings fame to Thomas kyd and new genre to England known to be as ‘bloody tragedy’. Theme of power is easily traceable from Marlow’s play *Dr. Faustus* as he wants to be a demi-god. Lastly, theme of male superiority to females and theme of comedy can be figured out from Thomas Heywood’s *A Woman Killed with Kindness* and Ben Jonson’s *Every Man in His Humour* respectively. The former play deals with a lady who betrays her husband, Frankford, but after knowing the secret her husband treats her with kindness while the latter deals with humour. The one liner of the play is that humours were bodily fluids which controlled a person’s temperament. If an individual had too much of any one humour, he would exhibit that trait to excess. In the play, Jonson emphasizes these humours and achieves his comic effect by exaggerating each character’s quirks, almost to the point of caricature⁴.

Women are found restricted in writing Diaries, Letters, Religious Poetry or Translation, memoirs and a few plays. Related to this, writes Margret Cavendish,

“But I hope my reader will not think me vain for writing my life, since there have been many that have done the like, as Caesar, Ovid, and many more, both men and women, and I know no reason I may not do it well as they. But I verily believe some censuring readers will scornfully say ‘Why hath this Lady writ her own life? Since none care to know whose daughter she was, or whose she was, or how she was bred, or what fortunes she had, or how she lived, or what humour or disposition she was of?’ i answer that it is true, that ‘tis of no purpose, to the readers, but it is to authoress, because I write it for my own sake, not theirs.” (Williamson, 1990: 39)

This piece of excerpt declares that women were marginalized in Elizabethan era and they were not given due respect as the authoress gives the theme of suppression. Moreover, in “That Blindest Weakenesse Be Not Over-Bold: Aemilia Lanyer's Radical Unfolding of the Passion”, a poetess, seeks helps from God, stating that

“Therefore I humbly for his Grace will pray,
That he will give me Power and strength to Write,
That what I have begun, so end I may,
As his great Glory may appeare more bright” (1997: 13).

These lines are taken by Aemilia’s *Slave Deus Rex Iudaeorum* in which she associates the sufferings of Christ to the sufferings of all women. This shows that women were not free enough from the tyranny of patriarchal society and theme of women suffering is obvious from these lines. In next stage, Lady Marry Wroth, in a letter (1621) to Marquess of Bukingham, states that

“I have with all care caused the sale of my booke to bee forbidden, and the books left to bee shut up, for those that are abroad, I will likewise doe my best to get them in, if itt will please your Lordship to procure mee the kings warrant to that effect, without which will deliver them to mee, besides that your Lordship will be to lett mee have that which I sent you...what i ame able to doe for the getting in of books (which from the first were solde against my minde I never purposing to have had then published) I will with all care, and diligence parforme” (1621: 6-7).

This letter shows that she does not want her books to be published as it could be her protest against male dominant set up and if she wants her books to be published then she has to acknowledge her natural feminine weakness which explains the theme of inferiority of women to men. Thus, women have to invoke male writers before getting their works published.

Lastly, Margret Tyler in the preface to her translation of *The Mirrour of Princely Deeds and knighthood (1578)* requested that

“Amongest al my il willers, some I hope are not so straight that they would enforce me necessarily either not to write or to write of divinite (8)”.

Margret Tyler’s translation, a Spanish chivalric romance, paves the way for other to write romance or love poetry. We can figure out from this translation the theme of love.

But on the other hand, male writers of the same age attended different esteemed universities and colleges, and they learned different languages as well. When someone learns the language of other nation, he also becomes acquainted with the culture and social values of that nation. So, male writers of Elizabethan age, being taught at the most famous academic institutions and learnt more than two languages, produced a diversified literature which is easily traceable and has been celebrated much in all the ages.

If we talk about the style and themes of their writings, male writers of Elizabethan age remained quite matchless in their works. Christopher Marlowe had been a dominant figure in producing tragedies. His versification is marvelous. It was Marlowe who changed the trend and created the real tragic hero. His tragedy is a tragedy of one man – his rise and fall, and his death for his own incapacities.

Moreover, Marlowe also introduced the concept of tragedy of the soul or spiritual tragedy to the English Drama. He introduces the concept of inner conflict which is found in his *Dr. Faustus*.

Another prominent figure of Elizabethan era was Sir Francis Bacon who is famous for his worldly wisdom and practicality. Subject-wise, his essays cover almost every aspect of life – politics, history, religion, practicality, morality, social relationships, etc. As far as his style is concerned, he is one of the most quotable writers. His essays comprise a lot of maxims and religious allusions. Some of the most famous and quotable lines from his essays are as follows:

1. “Suspicious among thoughts are like bats among birds.” (*Of Suspicion*)
2. “The ways to enrich are many, and most of them foul.” (*Of Riches*)

Furthermore, Thomas Kyd is also a leading figure amongst the male Elizabethan writers who contributed his share in the development of Elizabethan drama. He embraced greatest theatrical success with the production of *The Spanish Tragedy*, which was wildly popular with Elizabethan audiences and claimed Kyd as the founder of new genre of Elizabethan drama known as “blood tragedy”. He modified the trend of showing violence onstage. Most of the brutality takes place right in front of the audience.

While on the opposite side, the works of female writers of these contemporary male writers were devoid of such type of resourcefulness. Several topics such as Science, Philosophy, Politics and other current issues of Elizabethan era were thought to be outside the domain of women, and thus having no place in their writings.

If we trace out the works of female writers of Elizabethan age, we find very few writers whose work was published. Those who tried to produce some kind of literature were limited in choosing their themes as well as style of writing. Upon unfolding the records of history we find that Translation of religious scripture and works of other Greek and contemporary male writers had been the subject matter of female writers of Elizabethan period. As there was no variety in their style so there was no variety in their themes.

For instance, the work of Mary Sidney, sister of Sir Philip Sidney, comprises the translation of various works of other male writers, and includes *A Discourse of Life and Death*, translated from the French original of Philippe de Mornay, *Antonius (Tragedie of Antonie)*, translated from Garnier’s French version, *The Triumph of Death*, translated from the Petrarch’s

Italian, etc. As it is mostly the translation work, so we cannot expect some loftiness of thought and grandeur of style in her works.

Then, we also have the name of Elizabeth Carey in that era. Now I would like to discuss the main points regarding *The Tragedy of Mariam* by Elizabeth Carey. It is a play which was published in 1613. It was the first work of a woman published under her own name. In this play, we find contradictory feelings of Mariam towards her husband's death. She feels herself as free creature after her husband's death, and she also recalls his love for her. Through Mariam, the writer wants to portray women's position at that time and also their desire to be free and enjoy nature and other experiences as did the men.

‘When Herod liv’d, that now is done to death,
Oft have I wish’d that I from him were free:
Oft have I wish’d that he might lose his breath,
Oft have I wish’d his carcass dead to see.’

(Bulmar, 2010: 15-18).

If we talk about the theme of this play, we'll find subjugation of women by men. Actually, she has reflected in her work the scenario of her age that how women were treated in that era. At large scale, it can be inferred that female writers were also not free in expressing their thoughts as did the male writers who were the renowned and much celebrated personalities.

By analyzing the themes of both male and female's writing content we can infer that male has diversification as he is inventing new genres i.e. bloody tragedy and comedy of manner and male is writing tragedy, comedy, epic poetry, tragi-comedy, sonnets... etc. but women are wailing to be free from male dominant set up of Elizabethan era. Females writing content reveals that they are four walled by males.

Conclusion

In the light of the above quoted and discussed points, it can be remarked that, it can be surmised that in Elizabethan patriarchal society does not allow women to write and they are deprived of their basic rights i.e. education and freedom of speech. Further, Catholics adds fuel to fire as they are not in favour of female liberty so female writers find themselves delving between devil and the deep sea. Yet to write in such a sordid environment is a great contribution on the part of the females. So, all the appreciation goes to the female writers of Elizabethan era. A comparative study of males and females writing's content of Elizabethan era revealed that the women were puppet in hands of men.

The female writers of Elizabethan age were not free to produce literature or raise their voices in any form in that patriarchal society. Men of that age produced highly celebrated literature like Epics, Tragedies, Tragi-Comedies, Blood Tragedy, Essays, etc on different lofty themes, but on the other hand women were constrained only to translation work approximately with no variety in their themes. At that time, writing poetry and drama was at its peak, but women of Elizabethan age did not produce such magnificent work either in terms of style or subject matter.

But there is also another side of the picture. One thing which I found positive is that Elizabethan women at least started writing something which is really encouraging. It can be said that Elizabeth Carey has taken the initiative against her husband's cruelty as well as against the patriarchal society at large scale being the spokesperson of all the females of Elizabethan age. It

might be conjectured that the modern female writers are the product of these Elizabethan writers who just ignited the spark. But the fact that women were not allowed expressing themselves in writing remains, in spite of the fact that the ruling authority was also a lady (Queen Elizabeth) who had been patronizing all the male writers of that age.

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