

The Status of Women in Renaissance Drama: An Analytical and Critical Study of Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1613), and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612)

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Abstract—This paper attempts to analyze two plays, Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1613), and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612). It focuses on main characters in these works which compares and contrasts between them. These plays were selected to highlight issues related to Renaissance women such as marriage, feminism, misogynist, silence, and obedience. This analysis shows the tyranny of the husband against women, and their revolution against their social status. The outcome of this analysis endeavors to present new kind of heroines who want to change the traditional stereotype about women. Special attempt is given to propose feminist explanations for these characters.

Index Terms—misogyny, renaissance women, feminism and male-authority

I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the ages, women encountered many problems and difficulties in their lives. They were treated as a property, and they were deprived of the power to prove or assert their selfhood. Abushihab and Abushihab (2016) state that women were controlled by their parents in their childhood, and then handed over to their husbands who controlled their lives as well. Unmarried girls had to live as nuns in convents under male authority. Critics of misogyny say that women should only appear in the margin of history, and they are born to be subjected to male-authority. They consider women as a source of trouble in their society starting from Eve who is believed to be responsible for all of human misery because of eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. They accuse her of entering the province of men "your eyes shall be opened and you shall be as gods knowing good and evil" (qtd. In Findlay, 1999, P. 12). We can say that Eve is a good woman, but the serpent allures her to eat the Fruit of Knowledge.

In the Renaissance period, women are expected to be dutiful to their fathers and husbands. They are supposed to restrict themselves to feminine activities, such as child-rearing. Women allegedly play Passive roles in their society and adopt men's viewpoints. Nawal El Saadawi says that family does not support their ambitious daughters.

My brother took a bigger piece of meat than me, gobbled it up and drank his soup noisily and my mother never said a word. But I was different: I was a girl. I had to watch every movement I made, hide my longing for the food, eat slowly and drink my soup without a sound (qtd. Athamneh, 2008, P. 4).

Therefore, many women writers focus on the inequality that women themselves impose upon their own sex as mothers. This quotation shows the traditional view of gender differences on the children.

The issue of the suppressed women is considered as a rich area for play writers to write about the Greek era. Roberts (2002) says that "A continually intriguing puzzle in the study of Greek drama is why an Athenian society, which according to all accounts suppressed and ghettoized women, should have produced plays with such strong central female characters as Clytemnestra, Electra, Jocasta, Phaedra, Helen, Iphigenia, Agave, Alcestis, Medea, and Antigone" (p. 201). This issue is also an area of interest for Greek writers like Euripides who wrote a prominent play entitled *Medea* in which the heroine, Medea, revolts against her repressed conditions. Her reaction against men is severe. She decides to take revenge by killing her children as a reaction against her husband's betrayal. She revolts against being inferior in her society and complains against repressive conditions imposed upon women in general. In the Renaissance period, women never took part in lawmaking procedures and were silenced by men in their society.

Under these miserable conditions, the rebellious voices of women appear in various English places. Women decide to fight for freedom. They have the power to change their passive position in their society and challenge the tyranny of their society. Many writers deal with this issue in their writings. Renaissance women dramatists challenge the demands of their society to be obedient and raise their voices to assert their selfhood. The treatment of the rebellious women in drama has not been adequately investigated, because any such treatment would be considered as a rebellion against the patriarchal society. Accordingly, most works in the Renaissance period deal with men's issues which are easily accepted in the society.

II. THE STATUS OF THE REBELLIOUS WOMEN IN *THE TRAGEDY OF MARIAM, THE FAIR QUEEN OF JEWRY*

Abushihab and Abushihab (2016:95) stress that plays written by Renaissance dramatists provide voices in which women characters speak of their struggle over marriage and the restrictions imposed on them. Marriage obliges women to be under control all the time. Elizabeth Cary (1585-1639) is the first woman dramatist to write about women humiliation. Beilin (1998) says "In 1641, Carendon [remarks] that Elizabeth Cary [is] 'a lady of a most masculine understanding, [allays] with the passions and infirmities of her own sex'" (p.167). She struggles against male-authority of her parents, the Protestant church, her mother-in-law, and her husband. Some critics say that the problems of Elizabeth Cary are her independence and her own sex at that time. *The Tragedy of Mariam* which was the most important play in Renaissance era was written by a woman who criticized her society because of the class discrimination between men and women. Cary put the blame on patriarchal society for the suffering of women.

Cary tries to show two kinds of women in her play *The Tragedy of Mariam*. She presents Mariam as a woman who decides to revolt against the patriarchal society. At the same time, she presents Salome as a woman Herod's sister who represents the stereotype of the Renaissance women. Ferguson (1991) says that Salome represents the model of "private vice, public virtue" (p. 188). One feels that Ferguson argues that the patriarchal society accepts such women, but at the same time this society refuses Mariam who expresses her identity. Wang (2010) in his article "Women's Position in the Renaissance Period: the Case of *The Tragedy of Mariam*" tries to make a contrast between Mariam and Salome. He says Mariam challenges her husband's authority and maintains her physical and moral virtues. Wang adds that Salome exceeds by her speech and sexuality but without the moral virtues.

May with a bill divorce her from his bed.
But in this custom women are not free
Yet I for once will wrest it; blame not thou
The ill I do, since what I do's for thee,
Though others blame, Silleus should allow (I. 331-340).

In this quotation, Salome criticizes the society indirectly, especially the Jewish marriage which prevents women to be free from the patriarchal authority. Because of her marriage, she cannot get rid of her husband Constabarus.

In *The Tragedy Of Mariam*, Cary focuses on marriage and divorce as one of the most important issues which affect the Renaissance women. The play deals not only with Mariam's marital marriage and separation but also with Herod's divorce from Doris, his first wife because Mariam is Herod's second wife and Salome is Herod's sister. Salome's desire is to get rid of her husband Constabarus. Britland (2010) in *Elizabeth Cary: The Tragedy of Mariam* says that "[Some] biblical texts such as Ephesians 5.22-3, command wives to 'be obedient to their husbands' and to submit because 'the man [is] head of the woman in marriage'" (p. 15).

The Tragedy of Mariam focuses on marriage problems, and how women are imprisoned in the marriage relationship which restricts their freedom. Raber (2002) in "The Gender and the Political Subject in *The Tragedy of Mariam*" states that "Cary's play reproduces these arguments about women's changeable and imperfect nature, but in a dramatically different way-literally, since she dramatizes inconstancy itself, exposing its source" (p. 326). After her declaration of her public voice, Cary decides to state the problems of the oppressed Renaissance women.

Both Mariam and Salome refuse treatment of women in the Renaissance period. At this point, presumably both Mariam and Salome are at crossroads of their lives. In this case, Cary shows that Renaissance women have the power to describe their identities, but they punish themselves by refusing to face the patriarchal authority such as Salome who does not confront her society. Britland (2010) in *Elizabeth Cary: The Tragedy Of Mariam* focuses on the Renaissance women by saying that "There is a fundamental paradox in social injunctions toward women's selfless obedience: if one is exhorted to submit, one's will that must be given up. Indeed, the act of submission itself implies an act of will" (p. 16). Cary focuses on this issue by presenting Salome who hides her will and ambition to live in her tyrannical society safely. When she says "To Constabarus by itself is tied" (I. V. 16-17), she talks about her tongue. Here, Salome has the power to control her tongue by describing her desires to leave Constabarus.

Cary shows how men mistreat women by presenting Constabarus, Salome's husband who tries to humiliate her because he knows that women have the power to threaten men's authority:

Are Hebrew women now transformed to men?
Why do you not as well our battles fight,
And wear our armor? Suffer this and then
Let all the world be topsy-turved quit
Let fishes graze, beasts swim and birds descend (I. 421-425)

Consequently, the Renaissance men think that the best way to defend themselves is not to give women a chance to threaten their authority. Constabarus represents the Renaissance man who sees that the world will be destroyed if women have power. Wang (2010) also mentions that women in the Renaissance period have three virtues: chastity, silence, and obedience. Any woman who tries to revolt against these virtues will be severely punished. She will be considered as a threat to her patriarchal society.

This play highlights virtuous woman's psychological conflicts that show how a woman becomes like Christ. Beilin (1998) sheds light on Renaissance women in her article "Elizabeth Cary (1585-1639)". She says that Cary tries to use her dramatic works to express her feeling towards the society. At the end of the play, Mariam finds herself. She represents the revolutionary voice of women who refuse humiliation by men.

Wherein humility and chastity Doth That mind for glory of our sex might stand,
march with equal paces hand in hand...
My soul is free from adversary's power (VI. 559-569).

Mariam is punished, because she refuses to give up her ideas. She knows that she will lose her life, but she decides to free her soul. She does not try to change Herod's mind. Ironically, Cary shows a contrast between Salome and Mariam. Both of them want to free themselves from their husbands. Mariam is loyal to her husband, but she falls in a trap between her loyalty to her relatives and her freedom. She is punished for her rebellious voice. At the same time, Salome betrays her husband, and loses her chastity, but she is not punished at the end of the play. It is known that, Salome rebels against her society in her own way without breaking its traditions.

III. THE REBELLIOUS VOICE OF WOMEN IN *THE DUCHESS OF MALFI*

Women's issues have been treated in many English Renaissance plays by men and women writers alike. Some of these writers depict women as being a source of danger to their societies, and they treat them as inferior and dependent characters. For example, Desdemona in *Othello* is treated as an inferior character who cannot face her patriarchal society. As mentioned in earlier, Cary tries in *The Tragedy Of Mariam* to defend her sex by refusing such accusations about women. This play is considered as the first work which defends women in public.

The Duchess of Malfi (published in 1612) is another work which shows the humiliation of women in the Renaissance period. Bartels' article (2002) "Strategies of Submission: Desdemona, the Duchess, and the Assertion of Desire" maintains that many feminist writers and critics focus on the miserable situation of women in the Renaissance time. This play focuses on *The Duchess of Malfi* as a voice against the patriarchal authority, especially in the Renaissance period.

Many writers like George Hersey and Vincent Hopper deal with the origin and source of *The Duchess of Malfi*. They say that *The Duchess of Malfi* is taken from the Italian documents: Bandello's *Novelle* (1554), and Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques* (1565), which is translated and included by William Painter *Palace of Pleasure*. Hersey and Hopper in *John Webster* (1960) have this to say about *The Duchess of Malfi* "Belleforest, priggishly and petulantly makes the Duchess a lustful lady who pursues her pleasure behind the screen of marriage" (p. 15). This is the image of women in ancient decades that are identified with lust, sex, and betrayal. The present paper shows how women start to refuse this image, and decide to acquire a new identity.

In *The Duchess of Malfi*, Webster presents the Duchess as the heroine of the play trying to get her liberty from patriarchal authority. She has two brothers, the Cardinal and Ferdinand, who want to control her life. At that time, men think that women are unable to plan their lives. Webster starts his play by presenting the passive image of women in the Renaissance era. He states that Ferdinand and the Cardinal threaten their sister the Duchess not to marry again. In this play, Webster reveals the domestic life of Renaissance women. *The Duchess of Malfi* is considered as an unusual play, because it presents the humiliation of Renaissance women.

Webster shows the negative position of women in Renaissance period, and they have no authority over anybody even their children. The Cardinal and Ferdinand represent the patriarchal power over the Duchess.

Abushihab and Abushihab (2016:95) remark that at that time, "men control the social, political, religious, and economic lives of the whole society, especially those of women. Many of the Renaissance writers try to bind between marriage and religious issues." Leech (1963) focuses on this issue by saying that "Dr. Bradbrook notes from Thomas notes from Thomas Beard's account of the story in *The Theatre of Gods Judgments* his view that the Cardinal was an instrument of God's justice 'to punish those who under a veil of secret marriage thought it lawful for man to commit any villainy', and [the Duchess] draws attention to the strong words used on the subject of secret marriage" (p.53).

At that time, secret marriage is considered as an evil event. Many writers focus on the passive consequences of the secret marriage in their works like Webster in *The Duchess of Malfi* and Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet*. At that time, secret marriage is presented as blameworthy. For that, Webster and Shakespeare show the dangerous consequences of it. Secret marriage is a kind of revolution against the society.

Webster does not show the role of religion in his play. The Church is 'secularized'. He shows the Cardinal as an official in the Roman Catholic Church who does not represent the Church. Webster suggests that men use religion to help them control women. Antonio criticizes the Church, when he says "Churches and cities, which have diseases like men, /Must have like death that we have" (V. III. 20-21). Here, Antonio shows the passive role of the Church and considers it similar to men.

At the same time, women cannot govern their lives; they are treated as a property. Many writers stress the Passive image of women in their works like John Ford in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, Shakespeare in *Othello* and *Hamlet*, and in other important works. At that time, any woman who dares to express her selfhood will be accused of revolting against the traditions of the society, and is called a whore.

In general, we can say that Webster shows an interest in the patriarchal traditions that allow men to control everything. He submits in his play that the brothers are anxious to control the Duchess's sexuality. Webster shows one of the most important weapons that help women get their rights, which is their tongue. Their tongues give them the freedom to govern their lives "While the Duchess strives to move outside the patriarchal family circle, Ferdinand longs to bind her within it, as is clear when he returns her wedding ring" (Findlay, 1999, p. 103).

Webster portrays the Duchess in two different ways: the first one is the political woman who leads many people and the second is the Renaissance woman who is controlled by the patriarchal society. Jankowski (2001) in "Defining/Confining the Duchess: Negotiating the Female Body in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*" says that Webster depends on three important issues: first, the political contexts of this play especially the presentation of the Duchess as a ruler of Malfi. Second, the patriarchal relationship between the Duchess and her brothers Ferdinand and Cardinal, and third, how the Duchess tries to develop her life as she wants without heeding the dangerous consequences.

Both the Cardinal and Ferdinand try to warn the Duchess not to do anything against their will. Choudhury (2010) in his article "Subjugation of woman in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*" says that "Under the veil of court, Webster draws a domestic life and relations between man and woman. The head of the family, either father or in his absence his surrogate, a male, controls the social, political and economic lives of those in his charge-his kins and dependents. Male controlling power over woman is explicitly visible in this drama" (p. 1). In this case, Webster discusses the relation between the Duchess and her brothers, Ferdinand and the Cardinal. The brothers refuse the second marriage because she is their sister, not because of her political position. The Duchess decides to challenge her patriarchal authority by marrying again. She wants to find her own identity although she knows all of the consequences. Lall (1988) in his book *John Webster's The Duchess of Malfi* comments on the Duchess's situation in relation to her brothers: "[she] will attempt the dangerous enterprise of a re-marriage in spite of their threatening and frightening [her], just as men, by coming to grips with danger in the course of certain great battles, have accomplished impossible brave deeds" (p. 23). At the Renaissance time, women cannot face their society, because if they try, they will be punished severely. Thus, the Duchess cannot declare that she will not obey her brother's directions, because she knows that they will prevent her in various ways

The Duchess of Malfi is a story of resistance of a widow who defies her brothers in disregard to the traditions of her society. She challenges her brothers by marrying Antonio who is below of her class. Bartels (2002) says that the Duchess's actions push women to fight back against patriarchal domination. She adds "[Writers] routinely assume [women] either constrained or restrained, despite histories that suggest otherwise. When aggressively outspoken women such as Jane Anger apologize for their rashness, [the readers] read their gestures as a sign that they 'accepted silence as a feminine ideal'" (p. 418). For example, Anne in *A Woman killed With Kindness* is accepted to be subjected at the end of the play. At the beginning of the play, she gets out from the patriarchal traditions, but she cannot bear the consequences of her doings. Anne, unlike the Duchess retreats from her new position and gets back under the patriarchal authority. The Duchess decides to lead the life she likes. Evidently, she decides to choose a man from the middle class to prove her selfhood, but, at the same time, she gives him the reins.

At the end of act one, Antonio and the Duchess become husband and wife. The Duchess rebels against male authority, and shows willingness to subject herself to her husband in order to make him her lord and to be led by his hand. In this case, I think that the Duchess gives Antonio the leadership by her own freewill.

Webster focuses on this issue by presenting the Duchess and Antonio's marriage. He wants to show the passive image of such marriage. Leech (1963) in *Webster: The Duchess of Malfi* says that "The Elizabethans had a term, 'disparagement' for the wrong done to a person if a marriage with one of lower rank was inflicted on him...For that reason it was easier for a woman to be raised to her husband's level than for a man to win nobility through marriage" (p. 51). When the Duchess's marriage is threatened by Ferdinand's defiance, she wants to save her marriage, without heeding her duties to defend her country.

Webster criticizes the Duchess's marriage by saying that it makes her neglect her duties. Under all this pressure, the Duchess describes the miserable situation of the Renaissance women, when she says "I account this world a tedious theatre" (IV, I, 87). Here, the Duchess describes her life as a tedious theatre which she wants to escape. She wants to live her own way of life, not as her brothers want. She decides to face her society by showing that she has the power to prove her selfhood. At the end of the play, she decides to face death courageously. She does not want to live under the patriarchal society any more.

In the following quotation, Webster presents the Duchess as one of the courageous women who face torment boldly, and does not show fear of death. This situation shows that the Duchess defends her freedom.

The Duchess: pull and pull strongly, from your able strength
Must pull down heaven upon me (IV, II, 227, 28)

The Duchess of Malfi presents a new kind of female rulers who try to help other women to take their rights, but in reality many women rulers do not care about women such as Queen Elizabeth. One may say that there are big

differences between the Duchess and Queen Elizabeth. Both of them live their lives as rulers, but Queen Elizabeth does not dare to face her society or defend her sex. For that, many critics criticize her because the Queen Elizabeth does not take any step to rescue the Renaissance women. On the other hand, Webster in *The Duchess of Malfi* creates a woman ruler who challenges the Renaissance society's views. She sacrifices herself for the Renaissance women. At the end of the play, the Duchess takes her political role showing power as a sovereign prince. She does not give up under the patriarchal authority. She uses her political role to assert that Renaissance women have rights in the patriarchal society. In this case, the Duchess is presented as an example of the rebellious woman who refuses to be under humiliation.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Tragedy of Mariam and *The Duchess of Malfi* focus on identity, sexuality, and patriarchal power. In both plays, the heroines are obliged to be like the ordinary model of the Renaissance woman. When Mariam and the Duchess try to search for new identities, the patriarchal authorities stop them by punishing them severely. On the other hand, sexuality is related to identity. In both plays, Mariam and the Duchess are punished for their sexuality. For example, Mariam is accused of betraying her husband Herod, and the Duchess marries for the second time. These behaviors are seen as a threat to their position in their societies.

Women start to become aware of their role in society in the modern time. Therefore, Women writers try to highlight on the image of women in their fiction by projecting the female self-consciousness. Their works can be considered a drive for women's liberation. Al-Salman (2005) argues this issue "[Women writers] have condemned both authors and critics for their disenfranchisement of the woman character in literature by regarding her either as a stereotype or as an extension of phallogocentric fears and desires" (p. 6). Some feminist critics focus on the great works of male writers and examine the image of women characters in their fiction. They criticize the patriarchal ideology and the tradition of masculine dominance over female characters.

Many women writers like Jane Austen try to follow the way of Elizabeth Cary and John Webster by presenting different kinds of women. Jane Austen is one of the most important feminist writers that criticize the masculine traditions by presenting two kinds of women. The first type is the heroines who prove their identities and independence like Elizabeth Bennet, Elinor Dashwood, and Emma Knightly. The other type is seen as inferior characters, and depends on men like Lydia Bennet, Marianne Dashwood, and Maria Bertram. (Al-Salman, 2005, p. 7)

Abushihab and Abushihab(2016) point out that "Mariam and the Duchess are presented as rebellious women who refuse to be under male authority. Critics focus on Mariam and the Duchess as characters representing the contradictions of female identity in patriarchal cultures. Both characters have the right to choose between two paths. One path is to give vent to their grievances and challenge their societies regardless of the dangerous consequences. The second path is to abide by the supremacy of men, and the social code of their societies. Accordingly, they have to be silent and obedient. Both have chosen the first rugged path and have decided to challenge the norms and customs of their societies." (p.95)

Some critics say that both plays rely on companionate marriage. Both plays focus on the childless couples, and a loveless marriage which compares well with a prison. For that reason, both heroines Mariam and the Duchess rebel against the patriarchal authority. Some critics say that these plays can be deemed a spark of the women's revolution. The image of the 'New Woman' which is against the traditions of the patriarchal society is shown in *A Doll's House*. Ibsen (1988) supports greater freedom for women. Nora the main character represents the rebellious women when she refuses to be an inferior character. At the end of the play, she slams the door behind her. This action shows the changing role of women in the modern time, and it shows the emergence of women's self-consciousness.

The conclusion shows how modern feminist writers try to break the conventions of women's silence. We can say that women gain a significant role in the current society, and they get what they want away from any injustice. Nowadays, there are a lot of women's rights organizations which help women to get their rights.

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