



Lear's Daughters : Poaching the Cultural Capital of King Lear

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ABSTRACT

The paper is an attempt to analyse the political dimensions of adaptations and the decanonising attempts made by the subsequent generations especially women writers. The play titled Lear's Daughters produced by the Women's Theatre Group in London is the focus of analysis here.

Key words: Shakespeare Adaptation, Canonisation, Decanonisation, Gender Stereotypes

INTRODUCTION

Nostalgia for the past has always been a characteristic of creative writing. Susan Bennett has remarked on this desire for the past: "The Past, in the present, has become a powerful trading economy on a global scale." (15). Shakespeare is the writer whose works have inspired the most number of adaptations. He remains the most iconic writer of the English literary canon. Shakespearean texts were believed to be authoritative ones having immanent universal meanings. James H. Kavanagh opines: "To discuss Shakespeare is to discuss the study of English itself. The word 'Shakespeare' is less the name of a specific historical figure than a sign that has come to designate a vaguely defined, but fiercely defended, set of characteristics that function as the touch-stone of value for what we commonly call the 'English literary tradition' (144)

Canonical works have inspired a plethora of revisions and rewritings. The idea of the canon has been vehemently challenged from various quarters. The Shakespearean canon was the most apt textual locus. The majority of them stayed true to the original even when placed in varied socio-cultural spaces. Most of the male writers influenced by Shakespeare used his plays as a stepping board which would attribute authority to them. The rewritings are political in nature. To elaborate on the concept of the "political", one may take recourse to the formulations of Althusser, as summarized by Howard and O'Connor: "By a political analysis we mean one which examines how Shakespearean texts have functioned to produce, reproduce, or contest historically specific relations of power (relations among classes, genders, and races, for example) and have been used to produce and naturalize interested representations of the real" (3). Conscious attempts to dismantle the "cultural icon" of Shakespeare also occupied the field of rewriting. Women readers and writers find Shakespeare's portrayal of women highly problematic. In the tragedies they are presented as "unnatural" and mere shadowy figures. Men too are indeed presented as weak and villainous by Shakespeare. However, the possibility of female agency and strength is not paid attention to. Women in Shakespeare are denied a voice. Ophelia is a pawn in the hands of Polonius, Laertes and Hamlet. She turns mad too. Here, madness could be a defence mechanism against patriarchal hegemony. Gertrude is a lustful and negligent mother. Desdemona is a disobedient daughter. These female characters are the products of the patriarchal stereotyping of women which has been reiterated through generations. Feminist writers explored the possibilities of alternative readings of these constructions of female subjectivity. Their endeavour was to disclose the gaps and fissures in the patriarchal discourse and to effect a paradigm shift by rewriting the canon. Such creative gestures were simultaneously theoretical and political. But, strangely enough, they culminated in corroborating the canon and engendering new totalizing structures. Donna Haraway's opinion seems pertinent here. She said, "The production of universal totalising theory is a major mistake that misses most of reality, probably always, but certainly now." (149).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s Women's Liberation Movement became very vibrant and the activists ventured to acquire agency and a space for themselves in the male-dominated world. Patriarchal discourses were challenged and rewritten. They realised that patriarchy perpetuates itself through various narrative texts. Power gets vested on the one who narrates. Women became aware of this and took upon themselves the task of narration which would grant voice and power to them. They started objecting to the act of 'faithful' rewritings as they serve to reinstate the ideology of the original text. This paper tries to cull out the ways in which such a revisionistic work asserts the possibility of the strength of female bonding in opposition to male portrayal. The text contested is Shakespeare's *King Lear* and the rewritten text is *Lear's Daughters*. Adrienne Rich's observation seems relevant here:

Re-vision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction - is for women more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched, we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity; it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male dominated society...we need to know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.(35).

LEAR'S DAUGHTERS

Lear's Daughters (1987) was performed by the Women's Theatre Group (WTG) in London which was an all-women theatre group which devised plays collaboratively to carve a space for themselves in the world and in the world of theatre. The theatre industry and theatrical imagination then were male dominated to the core. Women actors, writers, directors and shareholders were practically absent. This awareness led to the blooming of all-women theatre companies. Four feminist companies were established. Women's Theatre Group, Monstrous Regiment, Gay Sweatshop and Siren by women who were active in theatre and the field of gender politics. They played a very crucial role in the development and progress of feminism and theatre by their attempts at re-evaluating the past from a female perspective. The WTG's major mission was this rewriting of culture. The feminist historian Joan Kelly's remark is pertinent here: "Their aim was to restore women to history and our history to women" (1).

According to Kathleen Mc Luskie, "Shakespeare gave voice to the social views of his age. His thoughts on women were necessarily bounded by the parameters of hagiography and misogyny."(33-40). Rewriting Shakespeare, the cultural father, was an act of empowerment and pleasure for women writers. The WTG appropriated Shakespeare to assert their feminist ideas. *King Lear* was the text they chose for revision as the play is an embodiment of patriarchal injunctions. *Lear's Daughters* is written as a prequel to *King Lear*. It tries to read the absences in the play from a female perspective. It is the co-creation of Elaine Feinstein and the WTG and thus challenge the authority of a single author. The WTG focus on feminist themes. They employ even multi-racial casting. Loren Kruger writes, "There is a saying that women have always made spectacles of themselves. However, it has been only recently, and intermittently, that women have made spectacles themselves. On this difference turns the ambiguous identity of a feminist theatre."(27). The WTG is performative. They enact resistance through gendered performance.

Lear's Daughters takes off from the absence of the mother of the daughters. The multi-racial casting employed varied from one performance to another. Black women played the roles of Goneril and Regan in the first production. Cordelia's role was enacted by a white woman. In the second production black women played the roles of the three sisters. The Fool and the Nanny were white. The play portrays the backstory of *Lear's* family. One gets to know what might have happened before the opening scene of Shakespeare's play. The story is told or rather re-told by the Fool. The Fool is an androgynous character. Her/His costume was a combination of an evening gown, a man's dinner suit and a grotesque pair of false breasts. This challenges the status attributed conventionally to male narrators. The sexual identity of the Fool remains ambiguous throughout the play. On one occasion the Nurse says that the Fool has "a woman's voice, but walks with the carriage and stature of a man" (48). Griffin and Aston have remarked about the Fool's function that s/he "details the fictions, myths and structures which are deployed by men to imprison women in patriarchal ideology, to separate them from themselves, their bodies and their desires so that they are only ever daughters, wives or others"(11-12). Hints are given that the Fool who was there when the daughters were children is not the same as the one who narrates the story, thus questioning the credibility of the story itself.

Mc Luskie argues that the narrative and its dramatization in *King Lear* "present a connection between sexual insubordination and anarchy, and the connection is given an explicitly misogynist emphasis".(). The daughters are presented in a sequestered phallic fairy tale type of tower. The parents are absent most of the time. The children are taken care of by a Nanny. One can understand that theirs is a dysfunctional family. However, the Nanny feeds them with stories or rather myths about an ideal happy family. This gives them a feeling of security. *Lear's Daughters* subverts the myth of *Lear* as the embodiment of universal human

experience. The play looks into the reasons for the behaviour of the daughters and reveals that they are trapped in the straightjacket of the role of “daughters”.

The daughters’ parents are not physically shown on stage. The overarching physical presence of Lear in King Lear is not granted in Lear's Daughters. The focus of the play is clearly on the daughters. However, the conversations highlight their presence and the influence they wield over the lives of the daughters. The father is presented as a lecherous autocrat who is constantly travelling and spends time sporting in the countryside. The Fool uses broomstick puppets wearing bejeweled crowns to represent the parents, and their voice is also given by the Fool. One gets to know about them from the narrations on stage. When the play begins, the mother is already dead and the family is in dissaray. The play brings in the mother of the daughters who is absent in the Shakespearean play. Though the father is always away, his looming presence hovers over the family. He is an all powerful male. The myth of the father who is the epitome of power is emphasized through the Fool’s description: “At sixty- five he is still the most agile horse man and best Archer. The title ‘king’ demeans his status - he is a demi – god. He has competed against the best and won. His countrymen weep with pride and disbelief”(33).

Though the father is a towering figure, he fails to establish an orderly family. But the women try to keep the male incompetence a secret from the next generation as it will unsettle their sense of security. The Nurse tells elaborate stories to create an idyllic picture of an ideal family, the “happy ever after of marriage” as in fairy tales. The daughters, however, find that the contrary is reality. The tower in which they live has only one window. They get glimpses of the stark realities of the outside world through this single outlet. The make - believe world of the idyll of happy family is shattered when on the very day of the funeral of their mother they see their father making love to another woman. Here the daughters are shown to be disgusted and disturbed. They express their concern about whether the father will get married again and have a son to be the heir to the throne. Goneril says, “If he does, he will have a son. I know it. He will try until he does. I will never be Queen” (44-45). The patriarchal anxiety about the absence of male heirs and the frustration of daughters who are denied the right to be heirs are focused here. Lear is revealed to be an ultimate patriarch who is desperate for a son. One gets to know that the mother passed away because of repeated pregnancies. Thus the female body is treated just as an instrument to propagate male hierarchy. In the absence of a male child the mother becomes insignificant and powerless in the family which is the same as death for her.

Scene 5 of the play presents an event of Lear's return from a victorious sporting tournament. It is noteworthy that neither the daughters nor the Nanny has the same version of the incident. This shows how unreliable the memories are. The Nurse then retells the story and the daughters contribute their versions too so that they can have a version which is acceptable to all of them. They deny and distort their real experience to fabricate an ‘ideal’ family.

The three daughters have their own unique individualities though subsumed by the family narrative. Goneril has leadership potential, Cordelia is the father's favourite. The middle child Regan is dominated by the powerful Goneril. Lear's plan is to get the two daughters married. He intends to keep Cordelia with him. Goneril is a born painter. But circumstances do not allow her to flourish and hence she is frustrated. She says, “When I look, the world breaks into colours... And now I paint all the time, ...Self portrait ...on a throne...scarlet, gold, black it's outside”(23). Regan's skill is in carving. “When I carve, it is as if there is there is a shape lying within the wood already, waiting to be released, moving my knife independent of the hand that holds it”(23). Cordelia has power over words, unlike the silent Shakespearean character. “I like words. Words are like stones, heavy and solid and everyone different, you can feel their shape and their weight on your tongue....and I look up at the sky, and it's full of words.”(22)

The Shakespearean daughters are either monstrous, perverted or silent. In the rewritten version each of them has aspirations of her own. Their wish is to enter the masculine world by establishing themselves as painter, sculptor and writer respectively. But none of them is given a space to fulfil their passions. Earlier in the play one finds the daughters pestering their mother with a lot of questions. The Queen and the Nanny ask them persistently to stay silent and not to ask questions like boys as the king won't like it. The patriarchal insistence on female silence is corroborated here. The fact that they are not boys is repeatedly referred to as if it is their fault. Fool (Queen) says: “Stop these boy's manners!”(38). Cordelia has the talent of words. Yet she is trapped in the role of daddy's girl. She is even forced to do Salome - like dances for him. Shakespeare doesn't give any excuse for the monstrosity of the two elder daughters. This huge Shakespearean lacuna is generally attributed to female perversity that is the norm. Lear's Daughters attempts to read against the grain in this regard.

Regan is shown to be pregnant and is forced to undergo an abortion as a baby born out of wedlock will not be granted any legal rights. Thus the play points out that the daughters behave in strange ways at the beginning of King Lear because of parental neglect, ill treatment and even sexual abuse probably. An incestuous relationship is hinted at in the case of Cordelia. Griffin and Aston's observation seems relevant here:

The articulation of her desire as logos rather than as shapes, colours, textures etc. is significant in terms of the play's representation of the youngest daughter archetype. The desire for logos identifies her with the male/father figure, while the woman is locked inside silenced, but turns over words to find another voice, her voice. This deconstructive discourse surrounding the mythology of the special relationship between father and youngest daughter is reinforced by the switch of focus to Goneril and Regan. Their bonding, both with each other and with the nurse, positioned Cordelia as an outsider.(12)

The possibility of an incestuous relationship between Cordelia and King Lear is traced by critics in the Shakespearean play itself. Cordelia's answer "nothing" is said to have sexual connotations. Grace Loppolo has elaborated thus:

Although the word may not have that direct meaning here, Lear is clearly perturbed about Cordelia's honesty (meaning both 'truthfulness' and 'chastity') and divorces himself from her, as if she were his wife, rather than his daughter. Some critics have suggested that Lear's irrational anger derives from his fear of his incestuous feelings for his daughters. Unlike the author of the source play, who portrays Lear mourning his late, beloved wife, Shakespeare provides no information about the absent mother of Lear's daughters or the state of his relationship with or his treatment of them before Act I Scene i. Instead, Shakespeare leaves us to draw our own conclusions about whether such division between father and daughter, and such collusion between sisters, stems from their innate evil natures or from their nurture by him thus far.(106)

Though this hint is prominently there most of the Shakespeare critics have ignored this and they elaborate on the wickedness of the daughters as a universal phenomenon. The WTG has concentrated on this aspect and thus has given a reason for the behaviour of the daughters. Cordelia remembers her father lifting her from the floor. She says,

In a giant's arms, my feet are touching the sky and then ... down. The smell of a breath, warm and sweet, soft lips wet on my cheek, bristles scratching my chin and neck, and down on to the table, and I turn, holding my skirt, round and round. Look, Daddy, look, Daddy, look, look look" (29). At the time of the death of the Queen, her mother Cordelia is upset about the father. She says that she is daddy's special girl and has to look after him. After dressing up she says, "Oh. Look, Nanny, look. I look really grown up. Just like a queen (44)

The patriarchal desire for a male child is in a way subverted by the WTG. Room for suspicion is aroused that Cordelia is not Lear's daughter. Some of the nurse's ruminations suggest that Cordelia is a changeling and she is Cordelia's real mother. As a protest to Lear, the towering patriarchal figure, it seems the Nurse had replaced Lear's third child with her child Cordelia. The third child was in fact a boy. So the Nurse claims that she denied the boy child to Lear. It is already said that the Queen had died. Thus the WTG attributes agency even to the Nanny. Kate Chedgoy elaborates on the challenge posited by the Nurse : "The enigmatic uncontrollability of female sexuality which always threatens to undermine the fiction of paternity and which shapes the rhetoric of Lear's rage in Shakespeare's play is here literalised by the Nurse's presence on stage, as she refuses to confirm whether this claim is true; maternity, the reason that the Nurse is as trapped at court as any of Lear's daughters, also provides her only means of resistance." (62)

Goneril tells the sisters that their only means of escape from the roles of daughters is to marry wealthy lords. She knows that marriage also is a covert means of imprisonment. But that is the only way out of the father/tower. Having spent their entire life in the secluded phallic tower of patriarchal ideology the daughters are contained within it. Cordelia is confused between her role as a daughter and as "daddy's girl".

Thus Lear's Daughters, as a prequel to King Lear, presents the circumstances in which Shakespeare's play opens. King Lear asks the daughters to profess the quantity of their love on which their inheritance depends. Goneril and Regan know the nature of their father and hence they eloquently express their love to get the maximum share from him. However, Cordelia, trapped in the incestuous relationship, can say only "nothing". Readers and critics of all generations sympathised and empathised with Lear looking down on the daughters as ungrateful and lustful daughters. The WTG performed a counter-narrative. Cordelia's death is essential for the tragic redemption of Lear. Lear's Daughters resists this objectification of women in order to give authority to men. In the final scene of the play the crown is thrown into the air and is caught together by the daughters. The three of them become aware of their potential and they decide to stay together. They catch the crown together symbolizing the bonding and solidarity possible among women. The crown in fact can be interpreted as a yonic symbol which replaces the cultural legacy of canonical male writers. The Fool says "an ending" and "a beginning". This can be read as the end of subservient days and the beginning of power and agency.

Thus, one may conclude that Lear's Daughters is a radical re-righting of Shakespeare, which alters the politics of the play to the advantage of women. The male writers' adaptations get the status of canon easily. The WTG does not occupy a position in the mainstream world of theatre. It exists on the fringes and its acceptance is similar to the fate of women in history. Perpetual silencing is the result. It got a place for itself in the Herstory volume. The dominant critical repertoire has not yet given due credit to the play. Mothers are either dead or

absent in Shakespeare tragedies. Men appear to be strong and comfortable in this absence. Similarly male society is comfortable in the absence of female versions of male writing. The WTG later changed its name to "The Sphynx". The sphynx is a creature with the body of a lion and the head of a woman. By adopting the name the members of the WTG highlighted their unique nature as one which is a combination of masculine physical power and the intellectual power of a woman.

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