

PORTIA- A SKETCH OF A LEADER?

Anuradha Pandit

Assistant Professor, Institute of Management, Nirma University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India

Abstract: Literature offers us precious few examples of women leaders. Some of these leaders exhibit open displays of leadership owing to their respective situations. However we also come across some women leaders in Literature who are passive yet exhibit great potential to be frontrunners. This paper aims at examining William Shakespeare's Portia as an example of female leadership exhibited during the times of Elizabethan England, and attempts to examine whether such kinds of leadership is possible in the Indian social scenario. The paper examines Portia's survival strategies, as used in her times and draws parallels with the societal conditions of eighteenth century India, to judge whether a woman like Portia would be able to survive in Indian conditions. The paper takes into consideration another female protagonist, Rabindranath Tagore's Chitrangada, and compares the leadership qualities of both women in their respective social contexts, in order to build a framework of the women's survival strategies.

Keywords: passive leadership, survival strategies, manipulate, cross-dressing.

INTRODUCTION

Portia, from William Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice, is probably the most loved characters from Elizabethan drama. She has been lovingly and painstakingly created by Shakespeare and projected as an answer to the patriarchal society of Elizabethan England; much like a potter moulds his clay giving it shape and functionality. As a woman living in a male domineered society, ironically governed by a woman, Portia was subjected to dominance in several instances. Shakespeare, however, had been a little sympathetic in her portrayal. While she was still governed by societal restrictions, even from the grave (in the form of paternal dominance) she exhibited courageous displays of her intelligence and manipulated situations to her benefit. In contrast to Portia, Tagore's Chitrangada has been presented as a princess, the sole heir to her father's kingdom. She has absolute power over her land and her people, who look up to her as their protector. Tagore has added another shade to her personality- she does not mind cross dressing as a male to exert her dominance. The deliberate suppression of her femininity is shown almost as a strategy for wielding power. There is no overt expression of male dominance for Chitrangada, except for her father's insistence that all her sons would be the future heirs of Manipur and would therefore not be allowed to leave the state, and the fact that Chitrangada has to don the male garb several times during the play, on demands of the State.

Now the question lies- who among these women yields greater leadership power? Will such a woman like Portia be able to survive in Indian society? Before we even try to answer this- the preceding question is- do such women exist in reality? And if they do- under what conditions and using what survival strategies?

PORTIA'S STAND

William Shakespeare wrote his plays during times which were very different from today, both in terms of the eco-political atmosphere as well as the social climate. Shakespeare's society predominantly recognized the male as superior, with a woman's role being restricted to the 'weaker sex'. Liberties, if given to women, were solely at the discretion of men. Pinciss and Lockyer point out, in their 'State of Matrimony' (1989) that a woman in Elizabethan England was considered 'a weak creature' having 'vain phantasies and opinions' - someone to be subjugated. Shakespeare introduces us to this concept through Katherine in the *Taming of the Shrew* (1590). In the play we find Petruchio wielding absolute power over his wife, marrying her against her will and by repeated denials and suppression of her will, almost forcing her to submission. Portia, on the other hand, has been portrayed as more independent, capable of wielding control over her disposition and even manipulating situations to her benefit. The play *Merchant of Venice* (1596) gives ample evidence of her independence where she controls the conditions set around her marriage, ultimately leading to her choice of husband. Compared to Katherine, Portia wields a greater degree of independence, in terms of controlling power. Katherine's independence is only restricted to the power of her tongue. Portia has been given a higher social stand compared to her husband and a higher intellect. Though she is initially introduced as a 'lottery prize' (Maynard) William Shakespeare has allowed Portia the determination to take charge of situations (even in the guise of a man) and grow according to its demands. Portia, unlike Katherine, demands Bassanio get married to her before leaving to save his friend Antonio. Even though she is limited by her boundaries, yet Portia manages to manipulate. She has no qualms about dressing up as a doctor, (something unheard of in Elizabethan England) and venture out of her house (to Venice, along with Nerrisa, also in incognito). She challenges the intellectual and judgmental ability of the men around her and displays rare presence of mind and wit to save Antonio in the courtroom. Finally by demanding the marriage ring from Bassanio, Portia wields ultimate control over marital privileges allowed by a wife.

Many critics have claimed that Portia's character to have been modeled on Queen Elizabeth I, the reigning monarch of the times. The daughter of Henry VIII, Queen Elizabeth I was a remarkable woman. She received one of the finest educations of her time, from the best available tutors and could write and speak in Latin and Greek, translating verses and using her rhetorical skills to maneuver tidings in her kingdom. With such a patron monarch to please, no wonder it could have considerably influenced the portrayal of Portia as a strong, intelligent and intellectually independent woman of her age. And much like her patron monarch, Portia too exhibited traits of leadership in her own domain. In fact, far from being part of a 'weak sex' Portia has been portrayed as a strong willed woman, capable of taking her own decisions, almost a challenge to the male dominated society of her times.

TAGORE'S CHITRANGADA

Rabindranath Tagore adopts the story of Chitrangada from the Mahabharata. The original story has Chitrangada, the princess of Manipur, as one of Arjuna's wives. Arjuna, during his travels across India, comes to the mystic land of Manipur where he meets Chitrangada and falls in love with her. They get married respecting the matrilineal customs of Manipur which insist on all sons of Chitrangada become future heirs of the State and therefore do not leave their native land.

Tagore's Chitrangada impresses Arjuna initially with her martial skills, leading him to believe that she is a man. Meanwhile, Chitrangada, unable to suppress her feminine desire of seeking love, uses her boon from Kamdev, the God of Love, to transform into a beautiful woman to win Arjuna's affection. However deep down, she wishes that Arjuna loves her, for her real self. The political situations in her country demand Chitrangada don her martial image once again, which incidentally manages to impress Arjuna. Misunderstandings resolved, Arjuna recognises the real self of Chitrangada, and the play ends on a happy note.

LEADERSHIP

Portia and Chitrangada, both ladies wield power in their own way, Portia by subtly manipulating situations to her favour using her superior wit, and Chitrangada, by resorting to divine intervention. Both women willingly cross-dress, one to gain access in a male dominated society, and the other, bowing to the demands of state and mind. Socio-economic situations of both characters are similar- both lives being extensively governed by societal norms and pressures.

William Shakespeare composed *The Merchant of Venice* in the 16th Century. Rabindranath Tagore remodeled a story from the Mahabharata and published his play in 1892. Though both plays have vastly different settings of time, place and inspiration, a preliminary comparison between them, shows that not much change in the social position of women. Even after a gap of almost two centuries, the social status of women does not show a significant change. The struggles of desires over demands still continue, and to survive under these conditions, both women are shown to wield power within their control to manipulate things to their favour. Both characters display transactional leadership qualities (Bass, 1985); Portia, through her negotiations with her suitors, Bassanio and Shylock, during the courtroom scene; and Chitrangada, with Kamdev and Arjuna himself.

CONCLUSION

- Even with the passage of time and socio-economic changes, women still hold the position of strugglers in society.
- The world is probably waiting for more examples of women leaders to change the rarity complex about them, and identify women's leadership as an acceptable norm.
- Further research needs to be conducted on the social makeup which moulds or restricts women leaders from flourishing.

REFERENCE

[01] Bevington, D. Ed. "The Complete Works of Shakespeare". 5th ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2004.

- [02] Boulton, E. "I stand for Sacrifice: The Heiress of Belmont and her Role as Hero", Research Paper. Retrieved on March 21, 2015 from <https://www.lagrange.edu/resources/pdf/citations08/ISTANDFORSACRIFICE.pdf>
- [03] Christensen, J. "The Mind at Ocean." William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986. 121-128.
- [04] Chitrangada. 1892. Rabindra Rachanabali 2. Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati, 1986. 234.
- [05] Hankey, J. "Victorian Portias: Shakespeare's Borderline Heroine." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 45.4. Winter 1994. Folger Shakespeare Library. JSTOR. 426-448. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2870965>
- [06] Maynard, L. "Shakespeare's Heriones: Kate Portia and Beatrice", Research Paper Retrieved on March 21, 2015 from https://www.southeastern.edu/acad_research/programs/writing_center/pick/backissue/volume36/assets/maynard.pdf
- [07] Pinciss, G. M. and Roger L., eds. "Shakespeare's World". New York: Continuum, 1989. "State of Matrimony." Pinciss and Lockyer. 41-43.
- [08] Sen, P. "De-gendered Expressions: The Chitrangadas of Tagore and Ghosh", Research Paper. Retrieved on March 24, 2015 from https://www.academia.edu/2612092/De-Gendered_Expressions_the_Chitrangadas_of_Tagore_and_Ghosh