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 **THE UNlVERSE**: *an e-Journal of Literature in English*
Quarterly Refereed Open Access e-Journal

Vol. 1, Issue 1 (March 2019)

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“Is frailty thy name is a woman? No even Shakespeare who penned these lines portrayed strong women to break the patriarchal myths”

Sarrah
India, New Delhi

When noted playwright William Shakespeare wrote “Frailty thy name is a woman”, it was a window to what 16th-century writers perceived women to be. The most quoted quote appears in Shakespeare’s masterpiece Hamlet when in a soliloquy the protagonist Hamlet denounces his mother’s remarriage immediately after the mysterious death of his father. Frailty thy name is a woman has been used by Shakespeare to describe women of being fickle minded and weak.

One may or may not agree with the Elizabethan star about his portrayal of women, but the fact remains that the English literature has been dominated by men writers and the portrayal of women in literature was undoubtedly biased.

In the earlier times when Geoffrey Chaucer penned his Canterbury Tales to sixteenth-century dominated by the likes of William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlow, the women were considered as a mere adage to men. We can blame it on the fact that in the ancient world, literacy was strictly limited to men and even female foeticide was prevalent because the majority of those who could write were men. During the era of Renaissance, the era of Reformation and the Victorian era, there was an unending debate over the roles of women. The women were considered physically weaker and nothing less than household commodities. Even to John Donne, it is famously said that “To Donne, women were not a Goddess, but a creature, desirable indeed, but not adorable”.

However, during the times of Shakespeare, a change was visible as William Shakespeare was ahead of his times. His character portrayed by strong women ventured out of their homes during crisis situations. Little doubt, Shakespeare’s representation of women has become a topic of scholarly interest and animated discussions in academic circles worldwide. His characters like Ophelia in Hamlet and Cleopatra in Antony and Cleopatra enjoy a wide range of capabilities and quirky traits like candidness of Cordelia, the sharp wit of Beatrice and the intellect of Portia and utter ruthlessness of Lady Macbeth. His women characters are intelligent, humorous and independent. In his later years, Shakespeare had become a champion of feminism and has portrayed a number of powerful, mighty women characters through the women occupying positions of power are frequently portrayed as capricious and highly corruptible like men. The women character in Shakespeare could defy the prevalent system and even their parents. For instance, in both Othello and Romeo and Juliet, women even defy their fathers as well as the society and its customs. His women characters are witty, warm, jovial, delightful, friendly and amiable. Shakespeare’s character Isabella refused to give in to the threats of a rapist-seduction. A tragic heroine like Desdemona, for example, chooses Othello and defends her

choice. Her combination of special feminine traits and qualities makes the critics praise her.

Women were advised to achieve economic and political independence. William Shakespeare by creating amiable, confident and independent thinking women insisted on their personal freedom. Shakespeare lived at a time in the sixteenth century, when Queen Elizabeth-I, who remained spinster whole her life, adorned the English throne, a genius of Shakespeare's caliber must have been influenced by this extraordinary scenario. Queen Elizabeth's life signaled a woman's potential for greatness in a predominantly patriarchal society. Surely, Shakespeare's women characters had a certain dominance, confidence, ooze, and vitality and were way ahead of conventional stereotypes of femininity of those days. Little doubt the state of Elizabethan women was better than that of their predecessors all thanks to the work done by writers like William Shakespeare in the 16th-century literature. We may disagree with Shakespeare for his lines "frailty thy name is a woman" but his later portrayal of women characters changes the entire perception about him and he can be dubbed as a feminist in the times of male chauvinism.