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Female Inferiority: A Lie Transcending Time

Bernardino Luini’s painting *Head and shoulders of a young woman*, depicts a gorgeously crafted woman with wide, expressive brown doe eyes, flowing flaxen hair and the creamy white skin that epitomized the standard of beauty during the Renaissance. The woman’s unearthly beauty makes her seem delicate, intangible, and even weak. The image, while admirable to those who appreciate the piece’s aesthetic appeal, reflects the effigy of women during the Renaissance, one that held them to be fragile beings, a strong contrast to the strength of men portrayed in the art of the era. However, the Renaissance is not the first time in which women have held to be the weaker sex; Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart,* Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* serve as proof of this by representing sexism against women in their respective settings. The singular role of female characters and the verbal abuse heaped upon them in *Hamlet,* the physical abuse of women and their specific gender roles in *Things Fall Apart*, and the humiliation of a female character and the double standards she is judged against in *The Scarlet Letter* demonstrate this.

As a stark portrayal of a ruining quest for revenge and the tenacious effects human guilt can wreak, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* , set in the late 16th century, makes use of stalwart characters, such as Prince Hamlet, who is bent on revenge against his uncle, and Claudius, the uncle in question, who displaced Hamlet’s father from the throne by engineering his death. However, the play is noticeably absent in strong female characters. With the heavy themes and dark occurrences of the play, and the significant effects they have on the female characters, it seems incongruous that the women of the play should not have the depth of character that is present in the men. Instead, they are designated to roles that perfectly fit the stereotypes associated with their gender. For instance, Gertrude, who at should at least have some strength of character given her position as Queen of Denmark, plays a role that is solely based on her marriage to Claudius, who as her former brother in law, and the usurper of her late husband’s throne is a seemingly outrageous choice for a husband. Deeply affected by the dark circumstances surrounding his marriage, Claudius expresses profound emotion and guilt regarding the situation as he falls on his knees in prayer “…I am still possessed/ Of those effects for which I did the murder: my crown, mine own ambition, and my Queen” (III, iii, 53-55). Gertrude, however, is oblivious of the implications of her marriage, expressing no thought that suggests any guilt or understanding about the somber circumstances encompassing her union with Claudius. By giving the male character a more complex and emotional role and portraying the female character as a stereotypical simple woman swept up in her marriage and ignorant of the scandal surrounding it, Shakespeare demonstrates a scathing view of women ,one that questions their acumen, and recognizes men as the more intelligent, and thus superior, sex. This superiority is especially illustrated through the dialogue between the families of the play, where vicious condemnations and condescendingly delivered advice toward female characters suggest both an acceptance of verbal abuse toward females and the idea that women require guidance in their decisions. This is especially prevalent in the conversations between Hamlet and his mother, where he actively condemns her for marrying her former brother in law Claudius, saying “Such an act…/blurs the grace and blush of modesty…” (III, ii, 40-41). The censure of Gertrude’s personal life continues when Hamlet feels inclined to offer her advice on her love life with Claudius, in order to serve his own purposes of revenge, instructing her not to go to bed with Claudius (III, iv, 180-191). Hamlet’s invasion on a decision so personal suggests that such involvement in his mother’s life was, in fact, normal and indeed, accepted, as it was not met with nary a protest from his mother. The theme of controlling females within families is also illustrated quite distinctly in the relationship between Laertes and his sister Ophelia. Laertes feels entitled to offer his advice on Ophelia’s relationship with Hamlet, who is shown to be romantically inclined to her. Laertes warns her “Perhaps he loves you now, /And no soil nor cautel doth besmirch/ The virtue of his will; but you must fear…/Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open…/The chariest maid is prodigal enough/If she unmask her beauty to the moon” (I, iii, 14-35). The continued meddling in the women’s private lives that the male characters demonstrate in *Hamlet* only strengthens the argument that women are incapable of taking a dominant role in their own lives, and are thus destined to be submissive to the whims and abuse of men around them, reflecting the real life situation of women in the sixteenth century.

Domination of women is expounded upon in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart,* a novel which documents the life of an Igbo man named Okonkwo who is witness to the ultimate disintegration of traditional Igbo culture of Niger when white men come and wreak disastrous changes upon it in the 19th century.. Throughout the novel, a vivid picture of Igbo life is painted, illustrating its customs, traditions, regular life, and the subordinate positions women took in its society. As it is in *Hamlet*, the women in this work are restricted to particular roles in the society, and prevented from overstepping the boundaries of those roles, which are all aimed toward supporting the men in the novel. The care given to Okonkwo by his wives, including the meals prepared by them is a prime example of this,

Okonkwo was sitting on a goatskin already eating his wife’s first meal. Obiageli, who had brought it from her mother’s hut, sat on the floor waiting for him to finish. Ezinma placed her mother’s dish before him and sat with Obiageli.

‘Sit like a woman!’ Okonkwo shouted at her. (Achebe 44)

The subordinate role the young women play in this scene, the harsh words of Okonkwo and the systematic pattern of food delivery established by the women, which is repeated throughout the novel, suggest the normal expectation that women cater to the needs of the male head of the family and play the role of inferior servants. The same role is later reflected in the expectations Okonkwo is shown to hold for his son Nwoye. As Nwoye transfers from a child like stage of existence to accepting the functions of adulthood, he begins to demonstrate a scathing contempt for the women in his life, as described “Nwoye would…grumble aloud about women and their troubles” (Achebe 51). Okonkwo views this metamorphism with pleasure, as stated

…he was always happy when he heard him (Nwoye) grumbling about women. That showed in time he would be able to control his women folk. No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and children (and especially his women) he was not really a man. (Achebe 52)

The dominant role men are expected to assume over women in Igbo culture reflects the normalcy of female submission, an idea ingrained in its social attitude. As the inferior sex, women were expected to be meek and obedient and adopt a submissive role toward the needs and wants of the men folk. Their inferior state also made poor treatment an expectation for women, as shown by the novel’s effective documentation of the physical and verbal abuse that women endured at the hands of men in Igbo culture. Okonkwo demonstrates this when his rage results in the severe beating of his second wife, “…Okonkwo gave her a sound beating and left her and her only daughter weeping”(Achebe 39). The ease and lack of hesitation involved in Okonkwo’s decision to commit an act of violence against his wife, is a prime example of the lack of respect geared toward women in Igbo culture. As a great man in the clan, Okonkwo represents the pillars of the values of his community, insinuating that the actions he commits portray the attitude of the entire society, marking acceptance of female inferiority, and violent actions against them as justifiable.

Female inferiority is a familiar concept to Puritan New England, the setting of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s  *The Scarlet Letter*, which tells the story of Hester Prynne, a married woman, who embarks on an extra marital affair in her husband’s long absence, which results in the birth of her daughter Pearl. Following the strict codes for behavior of the Puritans, Hester is shunned by the townspeople. Hester’s affair and illegitimate serve as the main catalyst for the humiliation and contradictory standards heaped upon her, demonstrating the unfair judgment of women. Humiliation begins to play its part when Hester is assigned to wear a scarlet ‘A’ upon her chest, to mark her sin of adultery,

In a moment, however, wisely judging that one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another, she took the baby on her arm, and with a burning blush, and yet a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed…On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, appeared the letter A. (Hawthorne)

Such a punishment, rather than forcing her to repent for her private sin, is designed to publicly embarrass Hester, a trait which marks the cruelty and injustice of it. This injustice is enunciated when, later in the novel, it is revealed, through self confession, that Dimmesdale, a reverend no less, fathered Pearl. Rather than the scorn that flavored Hester’s reception, this confession is met with acclaim from the townspeople, who are described as believing “he had made the manner of his death(which occurs after his confession) a parable, in order to impress on his admirers the mighty and mournful lesson, that, in the view of Infinite Purity, we are sinners all alike” (Hawthorne). As a man of high standing in the community whose actions contradict his very teachings, logically, Dimmesdale should have been condemned more severely than Hester. However, because he is a man, and more importantly, a minister, his confession and dramatic death is easily warped into the illusion of a lesson for the townspeople, whereas Hester, as a woman, is not given such a benefit of the doubt and is instantly labeled a “brazen hussy” (Hawthorne) for her role in the affair. Hester’s unfair treatment reflects the contempt held toward women in Puritan society.

The cultural insights offered by the vividly described settings of *Hamlet, Things Fall Apart,* and *The Scarlet Letter* effectively portray women as the inferior sex through the use of strictly limited gender roles, verbal and physical abuse, and conflicting standards between men and women. Gertrude, Ophelia, the wives and daughters of Okonkwo, and Hester Prynne are shown to be victims of these misguided ideas. Despite being separated by centuries, the settings of these works manage to propagate the same theme, demonstrating the tenacity a misconception can possess.

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