



Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

[www.vidhyayanaejournal.org](http://www.vidhyayanaejournal.org)

Indexed in: Crossref, ROAD & Google Scholar

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**Exploring the Representation of Female Characters in Shakespearean  
Plays and Classical Sanskrit Dramas: A Comparative Analysis**

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**Abstract:**

This research study conducts a comparative assessment of the representation of female characters in two unique theatrical traditions: Shakespearean plays from the Western canon and Classical Sanskrit tragedies from ancient Indian literature. Both theatre traditions are distinct from one another. This study aims to investigate topics such as agency, power dynamics, gender roles, and social expectations by analyzing a selection of female characters. The analysis will be used to identify parallels and discrepancies in the depictions of these characters. This article intends to give insights into the various viewpoints on femininity and womanhood in Elizabethan England and ancient India by contextualizing these representations within their unique cultural, social, and historical milieus. Specifically, the study will focus on the differences between the two countries.



**Keywords:** Shakespearean plays, Classical Sanskrit dramas, Female characters, Gender representation, Cultural context, Feminist theory.

## 1. Introduction

The plays written in classical Sanskrit and Shakespearean are pillars of global literature. These plays are renowned for their intricate subject matter and profound representations of characters. These literary canons place a significant emphasis on women's representation, which reflects the prevalent cultural perspectives on gender roles and expectations throughout world history. There are fascinating perspectives on women's depiction that can be found in both ancient Indian and Elizabethan English traditions. These perspectives provide light on the similarities and distinctions that exist between the human condition and the cultural circumstances in which they were developed.

Shakespeare's plays regularly feature women in crucial roles, allowing them to weave their agency and influence into the intricate web of events. Literary characters such as Lady Macbeth from *Macbeth* and Portia from *The Merchant of Venice* demonstrate the complexities of femininity. These characters fight to conform to social norms while pursuing their objectives and ambitions. Shakespeare's plays feature multifaceted representations of women that call into question long-established gender norms and inspire spectators to contemplate how women's roles in society are evolving.

On the other hand, traditional Sanskrit tragedies have diverse female characters strongly rooted in the cultural ethos of centuries-old India. These women, ranging from the valiant Sita of the epic *Ramayana* to the enigmatic Shakuntala of *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, are emblematic of the principles of dharma (duty), sacrifice, and unwavering commitment. Considering that their narratives take place within a framework of divine intervention and cosmic order, they reflect the concepts and values prevalent in ancient Indian society. Even though these women appear to be submissive in comparison to the norms of today, their portrayal gives insight into the complexities of femininity in a patriarchal culture.



Plays produced in Sanskrit and those written by Shakespeare have comparable themes of love, power, and self-discovery. This is true despite the immense gaps in time and geography that separate the two traditions. When we look at how women are depicted, we may also identify wider problems with societal stratification, family connections, and the constraints of societal standards. These issues may be brought to light when we examine gender roles. Through the process of comparing different images, it is possible to gain a greater understanding of the intricate structure of gender relations as well as how literature both reflects and evolves cultural beliefs toward women.

## 2. Portrayal of Female Characters in Shakespearean Plays

### Portia (The Merchant of Venice):

Moreover, when it comes to knowledge, Portia from The Merchant of Venice is the archetypal role model. Due to her gender, Portia was not allowed to participate in court proceedings or significant social gatherings throughout the Renaissance. She persists in assisting her husband Bassanio and his buddy Antonio, nevertheless. In order to accomplish her goals, she transcends the bounds of a woman and assumes a male identity. Her bright intelligence brings about a cunning point to argue contrary to Shylock's argument, and she proves herself to be wiser than any male who was present during the trial. "Tarry a little; there is something else. This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood; The words expressly are a pound of flesh: Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh; But, in the cutting it, if thou dost shed one drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods are, by the laws of Venice, confiscate unto the state of Venice."

Moreover, she notices the faint yet recognizable homosexual emotions between her husband Bassanio and his friend Antonio. She makes no big deal out of it or even brings it up to her spouse. Instead, she would like to see how Bassanio uses the ring she gave him. Speaking on behalf of his buddy, Antonio assures her that Bassanio will never betray her faith when she queries him about the ring once he gets home. In a cunning move, Portia seizes the opportunity and invites Antonio to serve as a witness of their religion, stopping him from harboring any further feelings of lust for her husband. "Then you shall be his surety. Give



him this and bid him keep it better than the other.” Like so, Portia can keep her identity and co-exist with males simultaneously rather than being completely submissive or destructive towards them.

### **Lady Macbeth (Macbeth):**

Lady Macbeth from Macbeth is the other strong-willed female character. Following his hearing the three witches' prophecy, Macbeth writes his wife, Lady Macbeth, a letter outlining it. Lady Macbeth is more eager than Macbeth to assassinate the king because she so much wants the prophecy to come true. Lady Macbeth supports Macbeth and even arranges the murder before him when he is reluctant to act on his ideas out of concern that he might fail. “We fail! But screw your courage to the sticking place, and we will not fail. When Duncan is asleep, whereto the rather shall his day's hard journey soundly invite him his two chamberlains will I with wine and wassail so convince that memory, the warder of the brain, shall be a fume, and the receipt of the reason a limbeck only: when in swinish sleep Their drenched natures lie as in a death, what cannot you and I perform upon the unguarded Duncan? What not put upon his spongy officers, who shall bear the guilt of our great quell?” Similar to this, Lady Macbeth is well-known for being a femme who seduces a man and ultimately brings him to ruin. Men have always been advised to steer clear of the so-called femme fatale. Women who aspired to and desired masculine attributes like honor and power were frequently condemned as femme-fatales. This works as a certain type of badge of shame and blame for the women who dare try to cross over the boundary of males. Calling a strong-willed woman like Lady Macbeth a femme fatal, Macbeth's murder could now be justified on the grounds that his poisonous wife led him astray. Now that Macbeth is blaming everything on a woman who is thought to be guilty, the readers are even beginning to feel sympathy for him.

### **Juliet (Romeo and Juliet):**

The first of these female characters who fearlessly rebelled against the patriarchal laws that oppressed her is Juliet from Romeo and Juliet. When her father forced her to marry Paris rather than the man she loves, she was left with no other option, Juliet does not hesitate in



expressing her opinion to her father. “Now, by Saint Peter's Church and Peter too, he shall not make me there a joyful bride. I wonder at this haste that I must wed ere he, that should be husband, comes to woo. I pray you tell my lord and father, madam, I will not marry yet, and when I do, I swear, it shall be Romeo, whom you know I hate, rather than Paris. These are news indeed!” While rejecting her mother, who delivered her father’s words, Juliet even inserts her secret lover’s name ‘Romeo’ in her speech, swearing to herself that she would marry no one else but him. Furthermore, she worries that a death-like sleep might not revive her before she takes the vial that Friar Laurence gave her. Since she is aware that surviving in the current system is worse than dying, she nevertheless accepts the vial. She would sooner be free than spend the rest of her life in such agony. Goodbye! God knows when our paths will cross again. A tinge of icy terror pulses through my bloodstream, nearly immobilizing the warmth of existence. I'll give them another call to let them console me: Nurse! In this situation, what should she do? The gloomy scene I require must act on its own. Hello, vial. What if this mixture is completely ineffective? So, tomorrow morning, should I get married? No, no, that will not be allowed. Please lie there.

### **3. Socio-Cultural Context of Elizabethan England:**

The portrayal of female characters in Shakespearean plays must be understood within the socio-cultural context of Elizabethan England. During this period, women were largely marginalized and confined to domestic roles, with limited access to education, employment, and legal rights. Patriarchal norms dictated women's behavior and prescribed their roles within the family and society. Moreover, anxieties surrounding female agency and sexuality were prevalent, contributing to the portrayal of women as both objects of desire and sources of temptation.

In the context of theatre, female roles were typically performed by male actors, further complicating the representation of women on stage. Despite these constraints, Shakespearean drama offered a space for the exploration of complex female characters and the interrogation of gender dynamics. The portrayal of women in Shakespearean plays reflects the tensions and



contradictions inherent in Elizabethan society, offering insights into the evolving roles and perceptions of women during this period.

#### 4. Portrayal of Female Characters in Classical Sanskrit Dramas

##### **Sita (Ramayana):**

A pivotal figure in the epic *Ramayana*, Sita is admired for her everlasting commitment to her husband, Rama, and her uncompromising observance of dharma (duty). Sita remains pure and virtuous in the face of many hardships, including being kidnapped by the demon king Ravana. In Hindu mythology, her persona stands in for the ideal of pativrata dharma, or wifely devotion, and represents feminine virtue. But because Sita is frequently portrayed as submissive and passive, especially in her relationships with Rama, her portrayal also calls into question problems of agency and autonomy.

##### **Shakuntala (Abhijnanasakuntalam):**

In Kalidasa's drama *Abhijnanasakuntalam* (The Recognition of Sakuntala), Shakuntala is the title character. She is described as a lovely and moral young woman who was nurtured in the forest by wise Kanva. When Shakuntala falls in love and gives birth to a son for King Dushyanta, her life dramatically changes. But a curse causes Dushyanta to forget Shakuntala, which puts their love to the test until she is eventually recognized and reunited with the monarch. Though Shakuntala's persona reflects the ideals of feminine elegance, purity, and selflessness, the whims of fate and the acts of men undermine her autonomy.

##### **Draupadi (Mahabharata):**

A complicated and multidimensional figure in the epic *Mahabharata* is Draupadi. Draupadi, the wife of the Pandava brothers, endures many hardships and injustices, such as being humiliated by the Kauravas and being banished alongside her husbands. Despite her hardships, Draupadi becomes a representation of bravery, tenacity, and rebellion. She challenges patriarchal standards and asserts female agency in the face of hardship as she fiercely protects her dignity and seeks justice for the injustices committed against her. The



persona of Draupadi captures the intricacies of femininity and the obstacles that women encountered in traditional Indian culture.

## 5. Socio-Cultural Context of Ancient India:

The sociocultural background of ancient India must be taken into consideration when interpreting how women are portrayed in Classical Sanskrit plays. Gender roles and expectations at this time were greatly influenced by religious beliefs and society conventions. Women were supposed to be chaste, obedient, and selfless, and they were frequently restricted to household duties. Social and familial institutions were ruled by patriarchal standards, which also limited the autonomy and dictated the conduct of women.

In addition, Hindu mythology and sacred writings like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* acted as touchstones for culture, affecting how women were portrayed in Sanskrit plays. Female characters were supposed to preserve social order and familial dignity, and they were frequently portrayed as representations of traditional feminine characteristics. Some female characters, like Draupadi, defy social conventions and express their agency in defiance of patriarchal tyranny, while other characters, like Sita and Shakuntala, adhere to these values.

## 6. Comparative Analysis

### Comparative Study of Selected Female Characters Across Traditions:

#### Portia (Shakespeare) vs. Sita (Valmiki):

- **Agency:** One illustration of Portia's agency is how she saves Antonio in the play *The Merchant of Venice*. This demonstrates her talent for inventiveness and intelligence. However, the societal standards she is subject to restrict her freedom of choice, particularly regarding marriage and inheritance.
- **Sita,** Even though she exemplifies qualities like dedication and sacrifice, she is constrained in her ability to exercise agency since she adheres to traditional gender roles and patriarchal conventions in the *Ramayana*. Although she is a strong character, she is frequently shown as submissive and submissive, particularly in her dealings with Rama.





## Lady Macbeth (Shakespeare) vs Shakuntala (Kalidas):

- **Power Dynamics:** The character of Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* challenges the established gender standards in society through her manipulation of Macbeth to achieve their high aspirations. As a result of her unquenchable thirst for power, she is ultimately brought to her knees.
- **Shakuntala** symbolizes the ideal of the good woman, whose power and fate are usually restrained by males in *Abhijnanasakuntalam*. In contrast, represents the ideal of the good woman. She has little control over the events that eventually determine her fate, even though she is elegant and powerful.

## Juliet (Shakespeare) vs. Draupadi (Ved Vyas):

- **Gender Roles:** In the play *Romeo and Juliet*, written by William Shakespeare, Juliet defies the established conventions of society and takes ownership of her fate via her pursuit of Romeo. Unfortunately, however, her fate is predetermined by the cultural and family forces that she is a part of.
- **Draupadi**, in the same way as Juliet, challenges the norms of patriarchy and assumes leadership in *Mahabharata*. Even though she has been subjected to some injustices, Draupadi seeks justice and refuses to be silent. She is a powerful symbol of resistance and endurance.

## Exploration of Agency, Power Dynamics, and Gender Roles:

- Shakespearean plays and traditional Sanskrit tragedies both deal with gender roles and power systems that are impacted by patriarchal customs and societal expectations. This is the case for women in both types of plays.
- Even though some characters exhibit initiative and self-assurance, the laws of their society usually restrict the freedom they freely exercise.





- The portrayal of female characters throws light on how women handle the demands that patriarchal society places on them, whether they choose to oppose or embrace those expectations.

### **Examination of Societal Expectations and Patriarchal Norms:**

- The ideals of femininity, such as virtue, purity, and devotion, are valued in both religions, reflecting and reinforcing the standards that are prevalent in society.
- As a result of their dominance in society and the institutions of the home, patriarchal rules control the behaviour of women and restrict their liberty inside narratives.
- For female characters, the decisions they make, their behaviours, and ultimately, their outcomes are all influenced by the societal expectations and pressures they are subjected to.

The comparative examination uncovered fascinating similarities and differences in how women are portrayed in these two very different theatrical traditions. The representation of agency and autonomy among female characters is one of the main topics of discussion. Shakespearean women, like as Lady Macbeth and Portia, are strong and independent, yet society expectations and conventions sometimes limit their autonomy. Conversely, female characters from Classical Sanskrit literature, like Sita and Shakuntala, exhibit unflinching loyalty and sacrifice, but their conformity to conventional gender norms may make them appear more docile.

A further topic of debate is how cultural distinctiveness affects how women are portrayed. Shakespearean plays and Classical Sanskrit tragedies, respectively, feature prominently female characters whose experiences and behaviors are heavily influenced by the sociocultural backgrounds of Elizabethan England and ancient India. The representation of gender roles and expectations is influenced by a variety of situations, such as literary conventions, religious convictions, and society standards. Investigating the ways in which these cultural elements influence gender portrayal offers insightful information on the complexity of femininity in various historical and cultural contexts.



The conversation also touches on the comparative analysis's consequences for literary studies and gender debate. Through the comparison of women's representations from various cultural traditions, readers and academics may better comprehend the intricate relationships between gender and power. Essentialist ideas of femininity are contested by this comparative method, which also emphasizes the variety of women's experiences throughout history and geography. In addition, it fosters empathy and intercultural communication, which advances a more inclusive and complex view of gender in literature and society.

## 7. Conclusion

There are female characters in both Shakespearean plays and Classical Sanskrit tragedies. However, when contrasted, the representation of these characters is more complicated, demonstrating the intricate connection between culturally specific and universal themes. The investigation of specific female characters, such as Portia, Lady Macbeth, Sita, Shakuntala, Juliet, and Draupadi, indicates that although they live in various cultural settings and confront diverse challenges, these women have common aspirations and struggles. Through portrayals of female autonomy, power relations, and gender roles, literature both reflects and develops society's ideas on gender. These depictions, which all highlight the complexity of femininity, allow literature to reflect and develop society's views on gender. This research stimulates critical thinking about how culture, tradition, and personal identity are connected by comparing and contrasting various historical and cultural situations. As a result, it offers helpful insights into the many different perspectives on femininity. This comparative strategy may assist us in better comprehending and appreciating the numerous experiences that women from various regions of the world and throughout history have had on various occasions as we progress further into the study of literature.



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