

The Politics of 'Othering' and the Representation of Cleopatra in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*

Aakankhita Sharma

Research Scholar

Department of English

Dibrugarh University

Abstract

The concept of 'othering' is a European invention which is used as a tool by the colonizers to rule over the non-Europeans. In the post-colonial theory, 'othering' is a key concept which is based on the assumption that the Orient cannot represent itself and therefore needs the help of the Occident to represent them. Therefore, through this politics of reducing the Orient to a passive entity, the Occident establishes itself as a superior one. Edward Said, in his *Orientalism*, points out that 'othering' is the major element of European culture which establishes itself as superior to non-Europeans and it is the politics of representation of the west. The Occident uses this mechanism of othering not only to assert power and dominance over the non-Europeans, but this mechanism serves the double purpose as well. To be more precise, by perceiving the non-Europeans as an inferior, powerless, savage beings, the Europeans build themselves up in opposition, i.e., civilized, powerful, superior to the non-Europeans. In a way, the non-Europeans help to define the Europeans in a positive way. The post-colonial era is the era of counter discourse where the colonial countries strike back the Europeans by re-reading and re-interpreting the seminal texts of the European canon. William Shakespeare lived in a time of great social and political turmoil when English colonial power had started growing. Though Shakespeare had not written his plays in the colonial contexts, yet his plays provide an ample scope of study in terms of gender, ideology and race. The aim of this paper is to study the play, *Antony and Cleopatra*, from the post-colonial point of view-how far the concept of othering is reflected in the representation of the character of Cleopatra. It also aims at studying the character of Cleopatra from the feminist point of view-whether she is actually responsible for Antony's downfall or it is a conflict between reason and passion on the part of Antony.

Keywords: Othering, politics, representation, power, dominance, post-colonial

Analysis

The concept of "Othering" is described as a process, perception, misconception, representation, mental classification, rhetorical device etc. In fact, it may be a basic human mental category, a mechanism of survival that has existed since the beginning of human history. It is a basic principle of group dynamics, basing the cohesion between members of one group on their difference from another group.

In post-colonial theory, "Othering" has been a key concept. Since the colonial or imperial framework is inherently hegemonic, the division between a dominant group and subordinate group is thoroughly enforced. "Othering" appears as a key concept in many

important works of post-colonial theory. Edward Said's view of cultural imperialism is that it represents the colonized as the inferior Other. This is supported by an unspoken presumption that the Orient cannot represent itself and thus surrenders this task to the Occident. Naturally, by reducing the Orient to a passive role of something that needs to be represented, studied, depicted, taught, the Occident establishes itself in opposition to all the negative traits that are ascribed to the Orient. Said points out that a major element in European culture is the idea of European identity as superior to non-European, and this precisely is the mechanism of "Othering" - displacing undesirable characteristic and behaviours onto the Other. As Said says in *Orientalism*: "European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and culture" (Said 2). However, there is a deeper purpose behind it, other than simply asserting dominance. The mechanism of othering, when placed in the colonial context, does not serve solely the purpose of keeping the colonized powerless. Rather, the relationship functions as a dialogue in which the two sides participate in constructing one another. To be more precise, in perceiving others-i.e., the non-Europeans- in a negative way, the Europeans build themselves up in opposition. As Said says in *Orientalism*: "The Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Said 1-2).

Shakespeare lived in a time of great political and social turmoil, when English colonial power had started growing. Though Shakespeare died long before Britain's colonial power peaked yet the study of his plays provides a unique perspective into certain issues of the period, especially in terms of race, ideology and gender. The aim of this paper is to study the play, *Antony and Cleopatra*, from the post-colonial point of view- how far the concept of othering is reflected in the representation of the character of Cleopatra. It also aims at studying the character of Cleopatra from the feminist point of view-whether she is actually responsible for Antony's downfall or it is a conflict between reason and passion on the part of Antony.

Shakespeare's Cleopatra, whom the playwright described as having 'infinite variety', is considered as one of the most complex and fully developed female characters in his entire body of work. Being a queen of Egypt, she is depicted as a powerful woman who uses her power as a means of control. Cleopatra is depicted as a practiser of feminine wiles, mysterious, depends more on passion than on reason. Shakespeare wrote *Antony and Cleopatra* during the reign of James I, who had ascended the Thorne of England directly after a female monarch, James I was well-known for his conservative outlook and hater of women in general. Shakespeare's company earned a great deal of profit in pleasing him by assuring that a male ruler always proved superior to a female sovereign. However, Shakespeare does not equate but contrast the noble England and angelic Elizabeth I with the black Egyptian queen Cleopatra.

The central theme of the play is conflict between reason and passion. Mark Antony, the Roman General and one of the triumvirs, is torn between his love for Cleopatra and desire to maintain power at Rome and material glory. The very first scene gives a hint to the great transformation that has occurred in Antony. He consumes in love, disregards to his duty and embraces of life of ease and pleasure. Finally, he defeats at the hands of Caesar, the second triumvir, and leads to his tragic end. Throughout, the play, it is Cleopatra who is blamed by the Romans for this downfall of Antony.

From the barge
 A strange invisible perfume hits the sense
 Of the adjacent wharfs. (Shakespeare 30)

In the very opening of the play, Philo, Antony's attendant, comments on Antony's infatuation with Cleopatra, this is in his opinion, a weakness for a soldier. In his very first speech, Philo calls Cleopatra tawny, a lustful gypsy, a strumpet. Throughout the play, she is described as 'witch', 'whore', 'Antony's Egyptian dish' etc. and Caesar, along with Antony's attendants, is of the view that too much indulgence with the Egyptian queen is responsible for Antony's fall from a great warrior to a loser.

Look where they come!
Take but good note, and you shall see him
The triple pillar of the world transformed
Into a strumpet's fool. (Shakespeare 3)

But it is Antony's own lack of judgement which is responsible for his downfall, not Cleopatra. Being a politician and a warrior, he should behave and take decisions rationally. When Caesar challenges him to fight by sea, he at once becomes passionate and decides to fight by sea when his naval force is weaker than Caesar. Antony's followers and soldiers warn him again and again against the upcoming defeat but Antony remains adamant in his decision. Cleopatra only does her duty as a queen by supporting Antony in this battle by sea as Egypt is strong in its naval force, but she does not indicate this disastrous plan. Thus, this shows Antony's sheer lack of judgement as a politician in comparison to Caesar who refuses to accept Antony's challenge for a single combat.

Antony is again swayed by his passion when Cleopatra leaves the battlefield and Antony follows her. Cleopatra may leave the battlefield but Antony should behave rationally as a warrior, should remain in the battlefield till the end and die like a warrior. Cleopatra does not ask him to follow her and in fact, it is also unexpected on her part also that he would follow her. She says:

O, my lord, my lord,
Forgive my fearful sails! I little thought
You would have followed. (Shakespeare 66)

This shows that Antony is torn between passion and reason, and he is unable to balance between these two which leads to his downfall. But Shakespeare, a true representative of his society, depicts Cleopatra as responsible for Antony's downfall because she is a powerful woman and that too from East-someone who is outside of the norms of the patriarchal European society.

In the play, Shakespeare portrays the character of Octavia as a foil to Cleopatra to contrast between a noble white woman with a black Egyptian woman. Octavia is chaste and submissive. She is the embodiment of obedience, silence and patience which were very much part of the patriarchal conception of femininity. Octavia represents the old Roman ideal of virtue while Cleopatra symbolizes the luxury of the East. When Octavia comes to know from Caesar that "Cleopatra hath nodded him to her" and "he hath given his empire up to a whore", she does not protest as a legal wife and makes no effort to retrieve her lost love. She is easily taken in by the scheming Caesar. On the contrary, far from being the silent woman, Cleopatra makes her voice heard whenever she wishes, challenging and meeting challenges. She mocks Antony and quarrels with him. Spirited and passionate, she physically beats the

messenger who informs her of Antony's marriage with Octavia. Such an act is a far cry from the passive silent role of the women in patriarchal society of Europe.

In spite of the condemnation by the patriarchal men as "strumpet" and "whore" on various occasions throughout the play, Cleopatra's sexuality is unhidden and unrestricted. She refuses to adhere to the stereotypes of patriarchal society and transforms her natural sexuality into part of her power, rather than as a diminishing of her goodness. So, Cleopatra insists on fulfilling a political role by participating in the battle against the wishes of the patriarchal men. When Enobarbus attempts to prevent her from doing so she replies in enraged determination:

A charge we bear i' th' war,
And, as the president of my kingdom, will
Appear there for a man. Speak not against it!
I will not stay behind. (Shakespeare 60)

The gender and racial discrimination is evident in the grudging and embarrassed remarks to the power of Cleopatra and her actions. After Antony's defeat at the hands of Caesar in the battle of Actium, when Cleopatra apparently makes some political overtures to Caesar in order to save her country and her sons, she has been repeatedly blamed for betraying Antony. But, in the beginning of the play, when Antony leaves Cleopatra and Egypt and tries to patch up his political situation in Rome through marriage to the sister of Octavius Caesar, he receives nothing but praise for his first preference of his duty. This is the politics of representation during Shakespeare's time. A woman, that too from East, cannot be represented as superior or equal to her male counterparts.

Though the play is full of sexist and racist remarks with regard to Cleopatra, her character grows and matures with the progress of the play but Antony does not. From a willful, mercurial and wanton woman she transforms into a passionate lover, die-hard in her resolute to remain attached to Antony until death. There is an inner struggle in Cleopatra but Antony lacks in this inner struggle. She struggles against her own inconstant nature which had previously led her to change moods and to change lovers. She who so often threatens to die that Enobarbus credits her with "celerity in dying", at last truly kills herself. She who had sent false message to Antony that she was dead and asked the messenger to say that her last word was 'Antony', finally really dies with the words "O Antony" on her lips. Cleopatra is portrayed in the play as a wanton mistress and Antony that of the hero, but during their affair he was first married to Fulvia, and then to Octavia. He cheats on two wives and one mistress in the course of the play, but she remains faithful. Shakespeare allots her one entire act "Act V" wherein Cleopatra is in search of her true-self. Here, she outshines Caesar, all powerful, mighty manipulator. Here, she is not a besotted lover but she acts as a mother and a queen who feels responsible to the war-ravaged Egypt. Here is a noble lady who is aware of her misrepresentation as a token of Roman victory. She dies an Egyptian the Egyptian way. Similarly, she retains her identity as a beloved too. She is no longer the much misunderstood and misinterpreted mistress of the beginning of the play.

Cleopatra's death can be depicted as an assertion of selfhood and an act of defiance to the patriarchal laws. Cleopatra's death becomes an act of triumph over Caesar-the representative of patriarchal Rome. Through death Cleopatra not only transcends the world of oppression and fate, but embraces her death as a positive act rather than as an act of negation. She is a woman of high status, has inner struggle and she gradually develops throughout the play-qualities which satisfy the criteria of a tragic hero. But she is not given the status of a

tragic hero in the play because she is a woman first and secondly she is a non-European. This exclusion corresponds with the principles of patriarchal society and that of colonization.

In conclusion it can be said that Cleopatra is a complex character to assess properly because there are multiple aspects of her personality. Her gender renders her politically unacceptable; her political status problematizes her femininity and her racial otherness troubles both power and sexuality. But she comes out of the lady's chamber to which women are symbolically confined by the conventions of the male dominated society and sets forth to conquer patriarchal territories. She also challenges the European concept of the inferiority of the East when she refuses to become an embellishment of Roman victory and kills herself. She is not to be ruled by anyone but only by herself:

My resolution and my hands I'll trust;
None about Caesar. (Shakespeare 99)

Thus, through his representation of womanhood in the character of Cleopatra, Shakespeare indeed transcends the stereotypes of his own time.

Works Cited:**Primary Source**

Shakespeare, William. *Antony and Cleopatra*. Peacock Books. New Delhi.

Secondary Sources

Bloom, Harold (ed.). *Bloom's Shakespeare through the Ages. Antony and Cleopatra*. Bloom's Literary Criticism.

Drakakis, John. (ed.). *New Casebooks. Antony and Cleopatra. Contemporary Critical Essays*. Macmillan.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. London. Penguin.