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Rethinking Female Disempowerment and Education through the Death of Ophelia: Reflections on the Cultivation of Student Subjectivity

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Abstract: Ophelia, a central character in Shakespeare's tragedy Hamlet, has long been regarded as a symbol of innocence, beauty, and obedience. However, her tragic fate reveals deeper structures of patriarchal oppression and the deprivation of female discursive power. This paper conducts a close textual reading to analyze Ophelia's "silenced" state within her family, romantic relationship, and broader social structure, arguing that her madness is, in fact, a form of passive resistance and final self-expression. From the perspective of educational theory, her fate prompts us to reexamine the importance of cultivating subjectivity among students—especially female students—by challenging gender stereotypes and empowering their rights to voice and agency. Through the method of textual analysis, this study aims to provoke critical reflection on student discourse rights, gender education, and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Keywords: Ophelia; discursive power; educational implications; gender roles; subjectivity; textual analysis

1. Introduction

“Character determines destiny,” but character itself is often shaped by underlying educational and cultural structures. In Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Ophelia has long been romanticized as a tragic victim of love. However, behind her madness and death lies a deeper narrative of silencing and domestication in a patriarchal society. Her death is not only a narrative device in a literary tragedy but also a profound cultural allegory—highlighting how women, when deprived of expression and educational empowerment, may fall into silence and destruction. This paper seeks to reinterpret the figure of Ophelia from an educational standpoint and explore how literary texts can inspire contemporary discussions on student subjectivity and gender education.

2. Methods

2.1. Methodology

This study employs textual analysis, focusing on the character of Ophelia in Hamlet as the central textual material. Drawing from gender studies and educational philosophy, the research analyzes the construction of Ophelia’s identity and her loss of voice within the contexts of family, love, and social hierarchy. Through close reading of key dialogues, character behaviors, and narrative perspectives, the paper reveals the cultural mechanisms behind her silence and madness and extends the analysis to implications for gender consciousness in modern educational settings.

2.2. Literature Review

A substantial body of research has identified Ophelia as a paradigmatic “silenced” figure representing gendered oppression. Zhang (2022) conducted a comparative study of Hamlet and Jane Eyre, arguing that female madness in literature is often a form of silent resistance to male-dominated discursive structures. Ye (2021), invoking Simone de Beauvoir’s theory of The Second Sex, emphasized how Ophelia’s tragedy illustrates the objectification and marginalization of women. Meanwhile, educational scholars have advocated for the integration of gender awareness into curricular frameworks to foster students’ critical understanding of gender discourse. Although

humanistic education champions individual dignity and freedom, it often retains androcentric blind spots in gender practice. Building upon these insights, this paper bridges literary criticism with educational critique, investigating how literature can serve as a medium for gender education and the awakening of subjectivity.

3. The oppression of a patriarchal society

3.1. Father and Brother

Ophelia's father, Polonius, and her brother, Laertes, assist Claudius in his plot to murder the old king, while Ophelia remains completely unaware. In her mind, the family is harmonious and loving. She always listens attentively to the words of her father and brother, never realizing that she has been kept in the dark. In the patriarchal society that enforces strict discipline and control, she is raised to be a "voiceless" ideal woman as imagined by men—gentle, obedient, and submissive to the male figures in her family, without her own will or freedom. This inevitably reduces her to a tool to be disciplined, used, and manipulated in the male-dominated power struggle.

Before her relationship with Hamlet had even formally begun, her father warned her to "set her price higher." When Hamlet's father was still king, Polonius tacitly approved and even encouraged Ophelia's affection for Hamlet. However, once Claudius ascended the throne, he immediately demanded that Ophelia distance herself from Hamlet. While this may appear as concern for his daughter's emotional well-being, Polonius's later actions reveal a deeper calculation regarding wealth and status. To him, his daughter is merely a bargaining chip to elevate the family's power and influence.

Leaving aside his questionable loyalty to the deceased king whom he had served for years, Polonius's treatment of his daughter alone disqualifies him as a competent father. Knowing full well Ophelia's sincere feelings for Hamlet, he still instructs her to test Hamlet's sanity for his own gain. After confirming Hamlet's madness, he disregards his daughter's humiliation and suffering, instead rushing to report the findings to the new king in order to curry favor. Such absurdity and cruelty are deeply lamentable.

Ophelia, obedient to her father, agrees to test Hamlet and allows Polonius to eavesdrop on their conversation—something Hamlet ultimately discovers. While it is

clear that Ophelia loves Hamlet, her compliance with her father's manipulation reflects the weakness and limitations of her character, shaped by her time and societal expectations. Her participation in the deceptive scheme contributes directly to the deterioration of their relationship.

Likewise, her brother Laertes appears hypocritical. While Ophelia and Hamlet are still in love, Laertes, assuming a righteous tone, sternly warns his sister:

“Do not give words so much liberty, nor let your passion's arrows strike you.”

Ironically, at the very moment Laertes claims that Hamlet is not to be trusted, Ophelia gently rebukes him:

“Do not, as some ungracious pastors do, show me the steep and thorny way to heaven, whilst, like a puffed and reckless libertine, you himself the primrose path of dalliance treads and reck not his own rede.”

This reveals Laertes's “do as I say, not as I do” attitude. At that time, gender discourse power was deeply unequal. Female identity was shaped and defined by the men around them. Women had no voice of their own and existed as the “Other,” a subject to be defined, hidden, and spoken for (Zhang, 2022).

Whether Ophelia's madness is genuine or not, it is both prescribed and caused by men. In terms of her role in the play and the broader societal position of women at the time, Ophelia represents the voiceless female figure who holds no meaningful discursive power. “Woman is the second sex, the Other outside of man”—this is the core idea proposed by French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, which is constructed upon a male-centered paradigm (Ye, 2021). Woman is the “Other” to man, and madness is the “Other” to reason. “Madness” is not what she chooses, but possibly the result of two fatal emotional blows—or perhaps a form of rebellion against male-dominated speech. Only in her mad state can she express her truest thoughts, but even then, her “truth” is dismissed as nonsense. This greatly diminishes the power of her voice and casts doubt on its authenticity.

Therefore, even as the play is influenced by humanist ideals that allow women to “speak,” their voices are still restrained. Dramatically, women are not allowed to speak the truth—or when they do, their truths are perceived as lunacy. This contradiction reflects the conflicted view of women in that era.

3.2. Lover

Hamlet is considered the greatest of Shakespeare's tragedies in part because it elevates the sense of guilt to its peak. A series of catastrophes unfolds one after another, and the emotional climax lies in Hamlet's direct or indirect role in the deaths of his lover Ophelia, her brother and father, his uncle, and even his mother. These characters form an ethical circle (family, friendship, love) around the protagonist, and their entanglement intensifies the tragic weight of the play.

The author believes that Ophelia's love for Hamlet surpasses Hamlet's love for her. Not only does she defend Hamlet when speaking with her father and brother, but she also disobeys them and engages in premarital intimacy with him—considered a highly transgressive act at the time. Nevertheless, shaped by a family steeped in traditional morality, she ultimately does not dare to get too close to Hamlet. Her conservatism, weakness, and indecision—fostered by a patriarchal upbringing—lay the groundwork for her tragic entanglement in political struggles and her eventual sacrifice.

Hamlet equates his weak mother with the innocent Ophelia. When Ophelia expresses concern for him, he greets her with suspicion and cruel insults. In the rigidly male-dominated society, her defense appears feeble and ineffective. Like all women of her time, Ophelia has no voice of her own. Controlled by her father and brother, and later manipulated by royal authority, she dies not of personal error but due to ignorance and helplessness. "Be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny." The oppressive weight of patriarchy crushes her pure soul, driving her mad and leaving her lifeless in the stream. Her tragic fate reveals the cruelty that can exist even in humanist thought.

As the embodiment of reason, Hamlet does not even mention his lover when dying. Instead, he requests, "Report me and my cause a right to the unsatisfied," worrying that if the truth is not known, his reputation will suffer forever. This shows his strong sense of self—his story and reputation are the true center of the tragedy.

Ophelia is both an accessory and a sacrifice. For years, audiences have focused on the prince's suffering and ignored Ophelia's. She weeps alone in the shadows, descends into madness, and drowns. People praise her beauty and pity her fate, but no one listens to her inner world as they do Hamlet's. From her first appearance, Ophelia is motherless and surrounded by male instructions and commands—her father, her brother, and Hamlet. Each man imposes his views upon her. Female identity traits,

shaped by patriarchal social expectations and literary reflections, have persisted through history as cultural norms, guiding generations.

The deeper significance hidden in the text is that such thinking operates as a form of cultural psychological norm. Women are pre-assumed to be inferior to men, and this is widely accepted as natural. After making Ophelia “the most wretched of women,” Hamlet still declares, “I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers could not with all their quantity of love make up my sum.” On the one hand, he sacrifices her in pursuit of his mission; on the other, he makes a grand declaration of love after her death—love he no longer needs. This contradiction reveals the deeply ingrained patriarchal consciousness: “It’s not that I didn’t love you, but I had to give you up for the sake of duty.” This assumption—that women are inherently secondary—makes such declarations easily overlooked and even romanticized.

4. The Absence of Independent Consciousness

“Character determines fate.” From the very beginning, Ophelia is portrayed as a figure who can only be spoken about, not as one who can speak for herself. She neither can nor dares to articulate her own thoughts, instead allowing male discourse to manipulate her. When her father instructs and admonishes her, she simply responds obediently:

“I shall obey, my lord.” (Act I, Scene III)

In her father's eyes, she is naive and somewhat frivolous, lacking worldly wisdom and easily deceived. When admonished by her brother, she is regarded as a childish and ridiculous girl, yet in his public mourning, Laertes exalts her in terms so idealized as to be nearly unreal. From Hamlet's perspective, she fluctuates between being a pure and lofty moon goddess and being no different from the frivolous women he despises. If Ophelia has any feelings of her own, they are not meaningfully expressed; they are indistinguishable from what any ordinary Dane might feel toward the prince. Her “feelings” are but an indirect echo of the words of the men around her—her father, her brother, and her lover Hamlet.

As Ann Saetre Bradley observed, “Two centuries of commentary and the image of Ophelia’s madness have left us with a picture that is beautiful, sweet, lovable, sentimental, and forgotten” (Zhang, 2022, p. 66). Ophelia, being pure and natural, shines in the midst of the corruption around her. In her death scene, she becomes a

prophetic embodiment of tragic beauty, a messenger of aesthetic sorrow. From the perspective of the play Hamlet, she has very little presence and even fewer moments of lucid monologue. When we wish to understand her inner world, to interpret her soul as we do Hamlet's and to share in her pain, we find ourselves at a loss—knowing almost nothing about her true thoughts. For women in this historical context, silence and suffering were their only fates. This reflects the deeper socio-historical reasons behind Ophelia's innocence and ignorance.

Hamlet's revenge is a classic narrative of male history within patriarchal society. As we recite his famed soliloquy—“To be or not to be”—women's fates are also entangled in the plot, yet only the wailing, stamping, and cursing of men are heard, while women's self-justifications remain unspoken. Regarding Ophelia, all we are left with are her cryptic, mad utterances, which conceal more than they reveal.

Male authors often force women into the mold of pale, delicate, and submissive “angels”—not as they truly are, but as they are expected to be. This renders female characters in the text weak and powerless. Only when women dare to break free from the male-constructed image can they truly define themselves. Madness offers Ophelia and Bertha (from Jane Eyre) the courage to challenge the inequalities brought by enforced silence.

Ophelia's suffocating life continues until her final breath. Through the queen's narration, we sense that Ophelia has found peace and release in death—a product of her own choosing. Purified in the waters, she is no longer the gentle, obedient “ideal woman,” but rather a newly awakened self, having broken through the confines of patriarchal discourse. Through madness, she finds the courage to discard her old self, construct a new identity, and finally speak. Through song, she dissolves male authority, denounces the hypocrisy and incest masked by royal power, and exposes false love.

Her tragedy compels us to reexamine women's consciousness and social independence in today's male-centered societies. Dependence or independence? Silent endurance or resistance? These are not binary choices. Women's independent consciousness must be rooted in societal acceptance and cultural recognition. It should be an organic concept formed within one's awareness, arising from full participation in thought and practice across all fields. Only in a society marked by equality and tolerance can women seek self-determination and existence—achieving true liberation of the mind.

5. Conclusion

Ophelia's death should not merely be viewed as a narrative device within the prince's grand tragedy of revenge, but rather as a profound reflection of women's lack of independent consciousness and expressive space. Her "madness" is both a symbolic label imposed by male-dominated discourse and her final trace of self-expression under silent repression. In contemporary education, Ophelia's tragedy invites us to reflect critically on the need to cultivate student subjectivity, especially among female students. They must be given the space to speak, the courage to say no, and the ability to think critically. Education, in its essence, is not solely the transmission of knowledge; it is also a process of empowering identity and consciousness. In building a gender-equitable educational environment, educators must challenge traditional gender stereotypes and encourage students to express their authentic selves, thus fostering a positive, autonomous, and critical perspective.

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