



ELOPEMENT AND EMOTIONAL TURMOIL: A LITERARY ANALYSIS

Devi Chandra M,
Assistant Professor of English,
Government Arts College,
Melur, Tamilnadu, India.

Corresponding Author's mail ID: devichandra2025@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of society and culture in regulating the lives of men and women. It traces the characters from the 16th century to the 21st century writings, in which people are bound by rigid societal structures. They cannot defy societal constraints, even if they do, they face tragic consequences. In the early periods, the term 'elopement' is common and that is substituted with the term 'challenging the societal expectation'. Because of going against societal and cultural norms, the characters face psychological disturbances which lead them to end their lives. The society does not allow people to choose their life partners if the two are from two different boundaries, the backlash of the society is harsh and the characters face unimaginable emotional struggle.

Keywords: Elopement, Societal Norms, Constraints, Cultural Studies, Oppressive Force, Forbidden love, Tragic Decision, Tradition's Backlash.

Society binds people with restrictions. It regulates people's behaviour and choices. It cannot be complete without regulations and restrictions. It is organized for the welfare of the people, and not for the happiness of the people. It challenges people's happiness when they challenge

societal laws. People cannot choose life on their own. They need to abide by societal laws. Going away from the societal laws gives disgrace to both the individual and the family. Women in most societies do not have the opportunities of choosing their own life partners. They cannot oppose or change

the opinions of their families also. They have to obey and lead their lives according to the wishes of family members. Most societies do not allow women to choose their life partners. It is evident in the writings of Victorian era English writings and present Indian and African society-based writings.

In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, Jessica, Shylock's daughter, a Jew, who loves and elopes with a Christian Lorenzo later feels sorry for having deceived her father. "Our house is hell, and thou, a merry devil, Didst rob of it some taste of tediousness." (2.3.2-3) She confesses that it is a great sin for bringing shame to her father. Knowing that it is a shame to her father and the sin she has committed, she makes a promise to Lorenzo, and breaks her father's heart. She reveals that she has a conflict within her. The only way to end that conflict is to keep his promise as her loving wife. Shakespeare has laid bare the internal conflict of the girl who has eloped with her lover. The father Shylock warns his daughter not to gaze the streets and to lock herself safe at home. Noticing her father's worry, she fears of losing her father's trust, "I have a father you a daughter, lost." (57). She plays the role of torch-bearer in the masque with Lorenzo, and she feels

ashamed of her "exchange: But love is blind, and lovers cannot see / The pretty follies that themselves commit;" (2.6.38-40)

Jessica elopes with the jewels from her father's house. Shylock worries about his daughter's misdeed. He cries, "I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear! Would she we rehearsed at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin! No news of them? Why, so: and I know not what's spent in the search: why, thou loss upon loss; the thief gone with so much, and so much..." (Shakespeare 3.1.11-14). His pain of losing her daughter is more than himself losing the jewels. Shakespeare has gone into the shoes of a father losing the daughter in elopement, while characterizing Shylock as a father. As a Jewish moneylender, Shylock is at his fault, but as a father, his pain is heavier than others' pain. It is the time of rigid boundary between Jewish and Christian communities. In Venice, religious identity was portrayed to be tied to social and cultural belonging. By eloping, she breaks the cultural norms, which are imposed by society. Her elopement brings cultural dislocation. She does not seem to be happy with her decision, instead, she is haunted by guilt. So, the cultural roots with which an individual is tied cannot be abandoned. Her love disrupts

the society's tradition. Shylock gives priority to honour of the family than happiness. As, a woman is bound by culture and tradition, her mind faces conflict of breaking the familial bond. She tries to reconcile her action, by saying, love is blind, but she cannot remove her emotional burden. She feels that being a torchbearer in the masque, her guilt is brought to light. To Shylock, his psychological pain is heavier than his material loss.

In "The Eve of St. Agnes", Keats presents the emotional turmoil of Madeline which is caused by her decision to elope with Porphyro. Madeline does not have autonomy to choose her husband. She desires to lead her life with Porphyro. So, she goes to the extent of subverting the cultural expectation, bringing disgrace to the family. Her emotional turmoil is revealed through her practice of St. Agnes' eve ritual. She too faces the guilt of betraying the trust the family has on her. Porphyro comes forward to pick her up. His action brings psychological pain. Her emotional state is ignored by him with his calculative planning of their escape. The poem finishes abruptly leaving it to the imagination of the readers, the after-scenes of her elopement. This poem cannot be seen as a portrayal of an

ideal love, but familial betrayal, cultural dislocation, and emotional struggle.

In *The Duchess of Malfi*, a Seventeenth century play, Webster portrays a widow secretly marrying her steward and has three children by him. From the beginning of the play, the societal eyes surround her and it goes to the peak, when she reveals innocently to Bosola, the spy of her brother to find the marital status of Duchess, about her plan of going to Ancona where Antonio has already gone. She asks Bosola, her steward to hand over all her money and jewels to Antonio at his hiding-place so that she can settle a life with Antonio. To Duchess, emotional turmoil begins at the time of her decision to marry Antonio for the second time which is forbidden during the period. Duchess is wrongly placed in the timeline in which widow remarriage is strictly prohibited. After revealing the plan of her escape with Antonio, the emotional turmoil intensifies. Her brothers Ferdinand and Cardinal also suffer psychologically because of their sister's secret remarriage. Her escape to Ancona is a form of elopement after her secret remarriage. Her decision of remarriage leads to the death of herself, her second husband Antonio, her children, her brothers, her attending woman Cariola, her

excitement, going far from Egdon Heath she fears that her actions will bring disgrace to her reputation. Her internal struggle is exhibited through the change of weather. Her conflict between her societal norms and longing for freedom is growing stronger at the end of the novel. Finally, she tragically drowns in the Shadwater Weir, which is symbolic of her internal struggle swallowing her. Her psyche finally consumes her. Her society and culture overpower her.

In Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine Earnshaw has romantic entanglement with Heathcliff which brings distress. In Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Anna Karenina decides to live with her lover, Vronsky after her marriage with another man. The societal exclusion and her inner turmoil lead her to commit suicide. Before her death, she writes of her emotional turmoil in letters, revealing her despair.

From these works, it is understood at times elopement leads to tragic deaths. It is clear that societal norms cannot be ignored or defied. If a person attempts to defy societal norms, they have to face serious consequences. The characters eloped face guilt, shame and regret and the people acquainted with them also face shame and regret. There is a strong conflict between

their personal desire and societal expectation before their elopement, there is a sense of shame and deaths after their elopement. The rigid societal structures drive individuals to make desperate decisions because of which the society leads them to face tragic outcomes. It is a war between individual and society, initially the individual may seem to have victory, but the harsh blow back of the society cannot be tolerated by the individual, who finally gets defeated.

In recent writings, the term 'elopement' is not mentioned, but when an individual goes against societal expectations, after their marriage, or before their marriage, if he/she chooses her own life partner, that is also considered a form of elopement. In this category, comes R.K.Narayan's *The Guide* in which Rosie, the dancer who is married to Marco, defies societal norms and begins to have a relationship with Raju. Rosie gets a sense of guilt at her decision to break her husband's trust. She says, "I realized I had committed an enormous sin." (Narayan, 150). In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Ammu and Velutha have forbidden relationship. As he is a man of lower caste, their love is defied because of societal norms. Both of them face social rejection and it finally leads to Velutha's tragic death.

By defying social literary conventions of the time period, the writers delve deeply into the psyches of their characters (Bhanu, 143). In Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan*, Jyoti, a Brahmin girl marries Arun, a Dalit man, defying social norms. It is not a literal elopement but it comes under the category of familial opposition. This play shows the emotional turmoil of the girl who makes such a decision, as she is treated brutally by her husband.

In Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*, Aku-nna marries Chike Ofulue. She is not permitted to marry Chike as his ancestors were slaves. Their union is not accepted in their Igbo community. Her marriage against societal expectations is seen as a form of elopement. As she rebelled against societal norms, by marrying Chike, who has a socially inferior ancestral background. There is a belief that a curse will fall upon any woman who marries without her family's concern and getting the bride price. 'You must accept the husband that your people choose you, and your bride price must be paid. If it is not paid, you will never survive the birth of your first child' (*The Bride Price*, 85) This cultural practice makes the marriage legitimate. The approaching childbirth intensifies her fear. "I am not afraid of dying... I am only afraid

for my child." (99) Her fear of death indicates the overpowering of cultural expectation. Her initial personal rebellious mind is not anymore with the weight of cultural constraints. In the dying moment, she says, "It was the love that had set her free, and it was the love that was now going to kill her." (138) Aku-nna also dies, symbolizing the punishment for defying traditional customs. It indicates that women cannot break the traditional constraints.

In these elopement narratives, the works centre around the tension between personal desires and societal norms. There arises the conflict. When the individuals cross boundaries the society has framed, the conflict gets intensified. In the recent writings, the elopement narratives are substituted with boundary crossing narratives i.e. for bidden relationships. In all these works, women alone face deep emotional struggle as the society blames them for defying tradition. Cultural practices do not allow women to choose between love and tradition. Their internal conflict does not allow them to live happily ever after stage. They face tragic death in their fight against tradition.

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