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Ms. R. Gomathy

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Kongu Engineering College (Autonomous)

Perundurai, Erode 638 060.

Dr. J. Rajini

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Kongu Engineering College (Autonomous)

Perundurai, Erode 638 060.

### **21<sup>st</sup> Century Competency Skills in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* – A Special Reference to the character Portia**

#### **ABSTRACT**

Shakespeare portrayed the women characters in a way that will tend the audience to focus on the characters with a scholarly interest. His female characters have a wide range of characterisations with the phenomenal qualities like intelligence, confidence, vitality, maturity, loyalty, composure and a strong sense of personal independence. Such characterisation of female characters in his dramas made him to differ from his contemporaries' stereotyped women characters. His distinguishing heroines are represented as women with high competency skills. Most of the Shakespeare's plays are remarkable examples of fostering 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. This paper is an attempt to showcase some of the competency skills that are noticed in the character Portia from the play *Merchant of Venice*.

**Keywords: analytic reasoning, competency skills, critical thinking, problem solving skills, communication skills, collaboration and teamwork**

William Shakespeare, an English poet and dramatist is widely regarded as the greatest ever writer in the English language. He is one of the most powerful and well-known playwrights in

the history of English Literature. Shakespeare, as a dramatist, has earned wide popularity and reputation across the globe. His plays are translated in many languages and are also performed on stage than any other play in the world. His way of writing plays differs from other playwrights in many ways, especially societal, political, economic, familial, and feministic issues. Shakespeare was unique from other playwrights and used the techniques of psychological theories in his plays. A deeper insight into his works reveals that he was one among a few writers who introduced unconscious motives in literature. Though Shakespeare did not know anything about psychology, his plays *Hamlet* and *Othello* showed the traces of psychological perspectives like Oedipus Complex, Castration anxiety, Procrastination, Repression and Homosexuality. His works also reveal various skills that have become essential in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Shakespeare's plays are still studied, performed, and reinterpreted in diverse cultural, political and business contexts throughout the world.

Shakespeare's greatness and pre-eminence as a dramatist are universally recognized... What is distinctive concerning Shakespeare is his combination of all gifts which were scattered in the works of other playwrights of his time. He is superior to others by his many sided curiosity and extreme diversity of his talent. His genius is flexible to a marvellous degree. He adapted himself to the most diverse material and seemed to use it all with equal skill and enthusiasm. (Hossain, Amir and et. al, 31)

Shakespeare portrayed the women characters in a way that will tend the audience to focus on them with a scholarly interest. His female characters have a wide range of characterisations with the phenomenal qualities like intelligence, confidence, vitality, maturity, loyalty, composure and a strong sense of personal independence. Such characterisation of female characters in his dramas made him to differ from his contemporaries' stereotyped women characters. His distinguishing heroines are represented as women with high competency skills. Most of the Shakespeare's plays are remarkable examples of fostering 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. This paper is an attempt to showcase some of the competency skills that are noticed in the character Portia from the play *Merchant of Venice*.

Nowadays, the global market demands a series of higher-order skills to be a successful person in the society. So it has become more important to have a required or demanding skills and abilities

of the 21<sup>st</sup> century society. But most of these skills need deeper learning to comprehend and adapt the scenario of the workplace and to deal with the problems faced. So it has become mandatory to master certain skills like analytic reasoning, critical thinking, multi-tasking, problem solving skills, communication skills, creativity and innovation, collaboration and teamwork. These skills are required for students, academicians and some of the skills have become a basic requirement even for a common man who wishes to survive in this rapidly changing competitive world.

When the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills are considered, it includes both the skills as well as the competency of the person. As it is based on the effective learning and deeper understanding of the context, it also includes the acquisition of core academic content and learning dispositions. This methodology includes the creativity, analyzing and sharing both the learning experience and the gained wisdom to the peers as well as the mentors. No doubt, it has become a necessity for the people to take a serious note of these skills. It is clearly evident that the character Portia is a master piece portrayal of Shakespeare and that she is depicted as a woman who possessed some of these 21<sup>st</sup> century competency skills.

Portia, the romantic heroine of the play *Merchant of Venice* is left with a stunning inheritance of her father. She is known for her ability to understand and analyse the situations and make decisions. When she hears the problem of Antonio's debt for Bassanio, she immediately responds for it and takes up the decision to support Antonio as he is the close friend of Bassanio. Portia comes forward to help Antonio to pay the debt and defend him. She states:

What, no more?

Pay him six thousand and deface the bond!

Double six thousand, and then treble that,

Before a friend of this description

Shall lose a hair through Bassanio's fault.

First go with me to church and call me wife,

And then away to Venice to your friend...

When it is paid, bring your true friend along... (Act: 3, Scene: 2)

Portia is ready to pay double or triple the amount of debt money for Antonio. She is willing to do for Antonio just because he is the best friend of her husband Bassanio. She is also ready to get married immediately so that Bassanio can easily take the money from her inheritance. She is concerned about her husband's emotions as she wants him to be free of stress. Her nature of readiness helps her to understand the problem and to draft a plan to defend Antonio. This sort of analysis will help to balance the high degree of uncertainty in the workplace.

The rapid technological growth has made the world to run fast and it has also curbed the skill to validate the human values. The character of Portia reminds the readers how to develop the skill of adaptability and agility to solve the problems innovatively. She also possesses the skills of problem solving and critical thinking. As soon as Portia hears the news of Antonio, she makes a quick analysis of the situation and makes arrangement to formulate the situation in order. She understands that Antonio is trapped by Shylock out of his greediness and ego. So she tends to play a role to defend Antonio in a way that no one expected on the screen. She disguises herself as a young apprentice lawyer, Balthasar and takes the command over the case and proves that she is also good at communication skills, which is considered to be a very important skill in the current scenario. In the beginning, she just agrees with the bond of Shylock to have the claim on the pound of flesh from Antonio's physique. But later Portia turns towards Shylock and goes for a deal that he can have the claim over the pound of flesh but he should not shed a single drop of blood because according to the bond only refers to the pound of flesh; with that Shylock loses his case. She says:

Therefore prepare thee to cut off the flesh.

Shed thou no blood, nor cut thou less nor more

But just a pound of flesh. If thou takest more

Or less than a just pound, be it but so much

As makes it light or heavy in the substance

Or the division of the twentieth part

Of one poor scruple—nay, if the scale do turn

But in the estimation of a hair,

Thou diest and all thy goods are confiscate. (Act: 4, Scene:1)

Portia makes a qualitative move in the case which will motivate the readers to balance both the work place and humanitarianism. In the present scenario, people are becoming more mechanical and completely failing to understand the human values. But the character of Portia will just remind the people about the human relationships and how much it is essential to be compatible with others. To be successful in life it has become more prominent to be creative by which any person can easily by the world and emerge as a leader.

Portia is next known for her leadership skills as she happens to possess various skills which clearly exhibit her leadership quality. She cleverly articulates her plan in winning the case against Shylock and she also uses her logical analysis in showcasing herself as a strong woman in front of others. Her emotional bonding is revealed when she tests her husband whether he keeps up his promise of not removing the wedding ring but he fails in it. So she plays a trick to check and reminds him that she is strong about her promise and expects the same from her husband. Portia, as Balthasar demands Bassanio the wedding ring as the fee for defending Antonio. Bassanio who is a little reckless, hesitates a little in the beginning and offers the ring later.

'You were to blame, I must be plain with you,

To part so slightly with your wife's first gift:

A thing stuck on with oaths upon your finger

And so riveted with faith unto your flesh.

I gave my love a ring and made him swear

Never to part with it; and here he stands' (Act:5, Scene:1)

After coming home, Portia asks for the ring and reminds him of the promise he made for her. Initially, Bassanio tries to convince her that he has given it as gift to Balthasar but later asks for

forgiveness. This particular scene shows Portia's strength and intelligence in making her husband to realize his mistake. Portia makes her husband to understand the importance of marriage and its promise.

Hence Portia's problem solving skills are validated through her action by taking up the challenge of her husband's problem. And her creativity is showcased when she enters the court in disguise of a man. Her comprehensive skill can be noted during her interruption of Shylock while he is about to take a pound of flesh. She can also be quoted for her teamwork and collaboration as she instruments her maid in sorting out her husband's problem. So, Shakespeare through his characters paves way for the next generation to understand the competency skills to improve the life style of the people and also to meet out the global demands for the successful career.

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