Educational Administration: Theory and Practice
2023, 29(3), 1569-1575
ISSN: 2148-2403
https://kuey.net/

Research Article

Subverting Patriarchal Paradigms: Cleopatra and Maneka's Reconfiguration of Feminine Authority

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Citation: Dr. Vivek Kumar Dwivedi (2023) Subverting Patriarchal Paradigms: Cleopatra and Maneka's Reconfiguration of Feminine Authority, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 29(3) 1569-1575
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v29i3.10361

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Shakespeare wrote *Antony and Cleopatra* around 1607, whereas Lakshmi Raj Sharma's *The Tailor's Needle* was first published in 2009. It becomes abundantly challenging as well as exciting to bring these two characters, Cleopatra of *Antony and Cleopatra* and Maneka of *The Tailor's Needle*, together to make a comparative analysis of their roles in standing against patriarchal authority in their own times and spaces. What makes their comparison rather difficult is that these two characters are separated by more than four centuries in terms of temporal expansion and are from two completely different continents considering their spatial bounds. Nonetheless, it is interesting to notice that there are glaring similarities in their attitudes, actions, and strategic romantic alliances that challenge patriarchal constraints of their times. This paper seeks to explore the parallels in these characters along with their journey through similar life circumstances. There are some unmissable resemblances in the happenings of their lives that are worth exploring. Their cross-cultural alliances make a point of comparison between these characters. Cleopatra is an Egyptian who falls in love with Antony, a Roman emperor. Similarly, Maneka is an Indian who has sexual encounters with a British magistrate, Larry Stephens.

This paper also examines how Cleopatra and Maneka utilize their intimate relationships as means of political and personal agency while simultaneously defying strict restrictive gender norms and dominant colonial narratives imposed by their respective social contexts. For the purpose of a comparative analysis, this study engages feminist literary theory and postcolonial theory to explore how these two characters function as agents of subversion within their patriarchal system and colonial power dynamics. This paper delves deeper upon these lines to probe how Cleopatra and Maneka subvert the patriarchal and colonial models in an overwhelmingly male-dominated society.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Cleopatra, Feminism, Maneka, Lakshmi Raj Sharma

Many scholars have argued that Cleopatra is one of the most complex characters of Shakespeare. One reason for her complexity is attributed to her inconsistency in dealing with public and private affairs. Lakshmi Raj Sharma, too, has confessed that Maneka has become the most striking character of the novel *The Tailor's Needle* (Tiwari, 3). Though Sharma had planned to make Sir Saraswati Ranbakshi the most prominent character, somehow he could not manage to execute his plans, and Maneka carved out her place as the most notable character (Tiwari, 10).

Cleopatra manages to make an impression on the readers even though there were plenty of negative campaigns against her by manly Roman voices. Loomba, in her chapter, "The 'infinite variety' of patriarchal discourse," contends, "The figure of Cleopatra is the most celebrated stereotype of the goddess and whore and has accommodated and been shaped by centuries of myth-making and fantasy surrounding the historical figure" (75). Romans believed that Cleopatra had turned out to be a weakness for Antony, who had a lot of manly attributes before he got in the love trap of Cleopatra. Many of her negative qualities were highlighted in Roman society, most likely for political reasons. Cleopatra was distraught by such misrepresentations, as she laments:

> Be it known that we, the greatest, are misthought
> For things that others do; and when we fall,

We answer others' merits in our name—
Are therefore to be pitied. (Act V, Scene ii, 175-178)

The Roman Empire was seen as man's realm, a strong world, whereas Egypt represented a woman's sphere, a weak world. In the Eurocentric narrative, Rome stands for power, permanence, consistency, and reason, while its "other," Egypt, stands for weakness, transience, inconsistency, and emotion. Scholars have noted "consistent inconsistency" (Jameson, 254) in Cleopatra's character. Her mood changes with the passage of time, and so does her love for Antony. A close reading of *Antony and Cleopatra* effectively demolishes this binary of consistent/inconsistent. If Cleopatra is often attacked for being inconsistent in her love for Antony, Antony too should be condemned for being excessively fluctuating in his opinion and love towards Cleopatra. He changes his view towards Cleopatra several times, which even Cleopatra observes: "I am quickly ill and well;/ So Antony loves" (Act I, Scene iii, 72-73). At one moment, Antony sees Cleopatra as the "most sweet queen"; at another, he describes her as "serpent of old Nile" (Act I, Scene v, 26). His fickle-minded utterances ascertain his ever-vacillating mood. For instance, Antony wishes Cleopatra's death, "The witch shall die" (Act IV, Scene xii, 47), and the same Antony gives his own life for her. This draws the attention of readers towards a fundamental flaw in the Eurocentric narratives, which can be at best termed as propaganda against the colonized countries that often attaches negative qualities to its "other" without sparing any time for self-introspection.

It is very likely that Bradley did not place this play among the great tragedies because he could not accept the fact that the heroine of the play is so powerful that she is no less than a hero, so he could not place it among other tragedies whose protagonists were all heroes, keeping with the Aristotelian idea of a hero. One important aspect of the play *Antony and Cleopatra* is that the play does not end with the death of the hero in Act IV but continues till Cleopatra commits suicide in the last scene of Act V. The continuation of the story till the fifth act emphatically establishes the fact that Cleopatra is successful in overthrowing Antony's position as the hero/protagonist of the play. Greene resonates with Linda Fitz's opinion that "the sexist assumption underlying traditional approaches to this play, that the "feminine" world of love and personal relationships is secondary to the "masculine" world of war and politics, [and it] has kept us from realizing that Cleopatra is the play's protagonist" (32).

Maneka's character in *The Tailor's Needle* is quite similar to that of Cleopatra in the sense that she is able to carve a place for herself in the presence of an exceedingly strong male character, Sir Saraswati Chandra Ranbakshi. Sir Ranbakshi stands for anything that is not weak or bending. There is a certain kind of manliness in his attitude, whereas Maneka is a character who, along with her defects, makes a mark for herself. She emerges as the most fascinating character of the novel. By closely scrutinizing Maneka's character, one can infer that she has been successful in rewriting the rules of engagement with "the other" and also with the marginalized castes and classes. By making Larry Stephens, a white British man who was "ruining womankind" (103), marry a brown Indian woman of poor class, she effectively dismantles the prejudiced norms as etched in Nimmi's mind: "He is male, and he is white, also he's not Indian—he can probably do as he likes!" (103). Her accomplishments reorganize sundry binaries that permeate societal norms, viz., white/colored, male/female, and occident/orient.

One can contend that Shakespeare seems to suggest that Cleopatra's romantic adventure with Antony was one very finely chiseled political strategy. Logan argues, "As a subject of enduring interest, the dynamic of Love versus Duty was embedded in the culture; all versions of the story of Antony and Cleopatra take it into account" (21). Cleopatra achieves two targets through her romantic alliance with Antony: (a) she safeguards the interest of her home country, and (b) she continues to remain its legitimate ruler in a male-dominated society. It seems she is able to camouflage her strategic moves, meant to uphold Egyptian sovereignty against the Romans' expansionary mission, under the garb of romantic relationships, as she had relationships with three Roman emperors, which is why Antony calls her "triple-turned whore" (Act IV, Scene xii, 13). Her unwavering loyalty towards her country tells a great deal about her resolve to stand tall against any impending danger towards her country. Logan's observation, "Cleopatra is too focused on her individual desires and needs" (97), can be countered by Cleopatra's own statement when she repents, "In praising Antony, I have dispraised Caesar" (Act II, Scene v, 108). Cleopatra's affair with Antony can be seen as an arrangement for the sake of the state of Egypt. Agrippa's remark, "He [Antony] ploughed her, and she [Cleopatra] cropped" (Act II, Scene ii, 237), validates this observation. It can be assumed that she was even ready to sacrifice her love and herself for the sake of her country. Her political maneuvers enlighten the path of diplomacy and offer a pattern for navigating intricate negotiations between the harsh contours of the political landscape and personal desire. Critics have often painted "Cleopatra as the stereotype of the Oriental seductress" (Loomba, 34) that profoundly undermines her other achievements as a ruler of Egypt and one who is exceptionally loyal to her country, Egypt.

One important aspect of political diplomacy is to be aware of what to say, where to say it, how to say it, and how much to say. If one studies the characters of Cleopatra and Maneka, they seem to master the art of diplomacy. For instance, Cleopatra knows how to deal with the messengers sent by Caesar. When faced with Caesar's offer of clemency in exchange for abandoning Antony, Cleopatra responds with calculated submission that masks deeper strategic thinking: "Most kind messenger,/ Say to great Caesar this in deputation:/ I kiss his conqu'ring hand. Tell him I am prompt/ To lay my crown at 's feet, and there to kneel./ Tell him, from his all-

obeying breath I hear/ The doom of Egypt" (Act III, Scene xiii, 77-82). This presents a remarkable textbook case of diplomatic flexibility when one is cornered and has a dearth of better choices. Her rhetorical conversation with the messenger gives the impression that she has surrendered herself to the unsurpassable power of Caesar, but she shifts her stance as soon as she meets Antony. Maneka's command over verbal capability also fetches similar results. With her terse and pointed questions and statements, she is able to floor Larry Stephens and is "ready to take him for a ride" (83).

Sharma's protagonist Maneka also engages in a cross-cultural romance that challenges both colonial hierarchies and traditional gender expectations. Her relationship with British magistrate Larry Stephens represents more than personal attraction; it constitutes a form of cultural negotiation that potentially disrupts established power structures. Through this relationship, Maneka asserts agency within constraining circumstances while confronting the intersection of gender, race, and colonial authority. Another woman character of the novel, Mrs. Muddleton, who is observant enough to notice that "Indian women had been suppressed so long that they had to react sometime. Maneka was only showing signs of the future for Indian women" (101). Her predictions seem to have come true when Maneka is seen as the flagbearer of modern rebellion against patriarchal and colonial hegemony.

It is interesting to assume that Sharma has named her character Maneka after a Hindu mythological character, Menaka, who is depicted as a seductress in Hindu mythology [sometimes her name is spelled as Maneka]. According to Hindu mythology, Menaka was an *apsara* (celestial nymph) who seduced Vishwamitra, a revered Hindu saint. The legend says that Indra, the king of Gods engages Menaka, who was extraordinarily beautiful, to disrupt Vishwamitra's ongoing meditation, which could bring him immense power. While seducing Vishwamitra, Menaka falls in love with him and gets married to him. One can contend that Menaka, the mythological character, too had a cross-cultural relationship, as she was a celestial creature who fell for Vishwamitra, who was terrestrial. There is another element of similarity that is worth noticing, and that is the union of Vishwamitra and Menaka led to the birth of Shakuntala, and then Shakuntala's union with Dushyant gave birth to Bharata, from which the name of the country, India, is derived. Maneka's alliance with Larry Stephens, too, was heading towards the birth of independent India, as that was a period when Indian independence movements were going on. The story of Menaka and Vishwamitra has great semblance with the stories of Shakespeare's Cleopatra and Sharma's Maneka. Vishwamitra was performing that meditation because he had the desire of becoming a *Brahma Rishi*, the highest rank in rishis (sages). He was on a mission, and he was performing austerities in which he was not supposed to be distracted by worldly pleasures. When Menaka comes and tries to seduce him, he loses his control and is ensnared by Menaka's unmatched beauty. The consequent distraction in the form of worldly pleasures derails his mission. Mark Antony and Larry Stephens, too, were on a mission. Antony was supposed to further the interests of the Roman Empire, and Larry was commissioned to do the same for the British Empire. But both get distracted by Cleopatra and Maneka, respectively, and become agents of their lost missions.

Cleopatra and Maneka, both characters, confront similar resistance from society for their romantic associations, which echoes the dark side of a patriarchal mindset. It highlights how patriarchal principles seek to control women's freedom and sexuality. It also reflects deep-seated anxiety of a male-dominated society about powerful women, as they are in a position to challenge the time-honored orders in which males have an unrivaled supremacy over females. Their cross-cultural romantic relationships become sites of resistance where fixed gender roles are contested and their position in society is renegotiated. Of course, in the process they lose a lot at a personal as well as a political level. Cleopatra faces persistent political condemnation for her amorous relationships with powerful men. At the end of the play, she loses Antony, whose loss leads to her own end, as she decides to take her own life. Maneka's sufferings too are at a personal as well as a social level. She is seen as a social corrupter for supporting an inter-caste marriage of her younger brother, Yogendra. Many of her feminist undertakings land her in rather unfavorable situations. Maneka too meets an almost similar fate to that of Cleopatra. After Mohan's murder, Maneka becomes a widow; similarly, Antony's death makes Cleopatra a widow, as Cleopatra mentions him as her husband: "Husband, I come!" (Act V, Scene ii, 286). The following lines from *The Tailor's Needle* aptly highlight Maneka's suffering because of her personal loss:

> Nimmi and Larry were settled for the time being but Maneka was not and she couldn't cheat herself into believing that she was. She had got the two married, but she was grave and withdrawn. After the initial sense of achievement began to fade, she began to feel that she had lost something, that somehow she had been fooled. (112)

Both the characters script the death story of their love life. Cleopatra betrays Antony in the battle of Actium and then transmits fake news of her death to him that leads to Antony committing suicide. Maneka too strangulates her love story by forcing Larry Stephens to marry his maid, Nimmi. Maneka must have been able to upset the colonial hierarchy by doing so, but at the same time she could achieve this feat at a huge personal loss. One shall not miss to note that the union of Larry Stephens with Nimmi is a telling example of how empire strikes back. In the novel, Larry Stephens, who is a high officer of the British Empire, is forced to make a nondescript woman his life partner, thereby giving "the other" equal partnership. Hence, his marriage overturns the binary of "we" and "they."

Both the characters are constrained for belonging to a particular sex. Even though Cleopatra distances herself from her femininity, "I have nothing/ Of woman in me" (Act V, Scene ii, 237-38), she cannot obliterate the signs of her femininity altogether. Many of her actions show that outwardly she performs the role of a male, but deep down she is a woman. Her love for finery and clothes when she is going to commit suicide is a case in point, and there are many more instances like this. Nimmi's observation, "I never seen woman like you! Are you woman or man, dressed like woman?" (104) about Maneka accentuates how the boundaries of masculinity and femininity are blurred in the attitude of Maneka. But Maneka, too, suffers the pangs of isolation and a feeling of being left out after Larry and Nimmi have tied the knot. However, Maneka and Cleopatra do not allow their femininity to come between their personal lives and larger aims.

These two characters showcase a compelling model of feminine agency that has the possibility of rewriting history, which is tilted in favor of women. The history written by males has always been too biased to give any credit to women, which they most certainly deserve. They are the legitimate owner of at least half of the history from which their names have been omitted, seemingly as a part of a sinister design. In only a cruel history, written by males, a ruler as great as Cleopatra is reduced to a coquettish seductress. Logan maintains that "the personal and sociopolitical ideals of Roman conduct, almost exclusively applicable to the behavior of males, are exalted" (23). Manly Romans ran a smear campaign against the Egyptian queen, Cleopatra, to subdue her control over the manly Roman emperor, Antony. These campaigns were run to discredit her great political acumen, her intelligence of "infinite variety." Had there been no feminist movement, such great characters would have been lost in oblivion. In the absence of feminist reading, these characters would never be revisited and given a place that they deserve. This comparative analysis is one such endeavor to bring them to the fore. It is rather surprising that male historians have acted like criminals in a syndicate who are hellbent on butchering women of power to relegate them to oblivion. It seems as if they have worked in cahoots across races, ethnic extractions, geographical expansions, and religious affinities to achieve their target of excluding women from the pages of history. Given their crimes towards humanity and feminist cause, one is inclined to recommend these historians be tried as Nazis were for their war crimes. The attitudes and feats of women in power that should have been celebrated in the annals of history, their dishonest portrayal of such women, invited social condemnation. For the achievements of such characters, society should have gone gung-ho, but they reduced such great achievers to end up being a minion. Such cases need a scholar as great as Spivak to dig out Bhvaneswari Bhaduri's episode (307) to make a case for her extreme sacrifice and make way for future historians to revisit history with an open mind, a mind that is not plagued by patriarchal conventions.

The presence of eunuchs in Egypt was another pretext of the Romans to show how "unmanly" Egyptians were. Alexas and Mardian are two eunuchs, the attendants of Cleopatra, who have significant roles in the play. They may not be the direct reason for Antony's emasculation, but, for sure, they are the conduits of bringing the great "man of men" (Act I, Scene v, 74) down and act like one of them. During those times, committing suicide was considered more of an unmanly act. Accordingly, they seem to succeed in smothering the manliness of Antony, the representative of the manly Roman Empire. Hence, their feats present a strong opposition to the European binary of manly/womanly. They also function as messengers who unsettle Antony. Cleopatra, perhaps, thought that Antony with a settled mind might think of Rome, which is why, to keep him from Rome, she plans to keep him engrossed with her own thoughts. This can be seen as a feminine ploy to keep the menfolk on tenterhooks so that men are always unsettled in whichever state they are. Keeping this tactic in mind, Cleopatra orders Alexas to report Antony of her condition according to his mood:

If you find him sad,
Say I am dancing; if in mirth, report
That I am sudden sick. (Act I, Scene iii, 4-6)

A similar trick is used by Portia, disguised as Balthazar, in *The Merchant of Venice*, when Balthazar asks Bassanio to give him the ring as a token of gratitude for saving Antonio's life from Shylock. The ring was Bassanio's wedding ring, gifted to him by Portia. Balthazar insists on getting that ring from Bassanio so that later on, Portia in her real avatar could tease Bassanio and make him cut a sorry figure before his wife for giving away that ring.

The characters of Cleopatra and Maneka are so crafted that their political intelligence and strategic manipulation outshine other characters of the respective texts. Their dialogues and rhetorical exchanges, which also highlight their motives and desires, showcase their verbal dexterity and strategic thinking. A male-dominated society always tends to label such characters as misguided and wayward entities, but a feminist reading proves that their manipulation sails them through the impermeable boundaries of the male world. If one closely examines their dialogues and characteristics, one is inclined to infer that their manipulative capabilities and political acumen dismantle gender stereotypes by asserting that femininity need not conform to passivity, domesticity, or sexual modesty. Such attributes of their character serve them in having an upper hand in their cross-cultural relationship, political standing, and the preservation of power.

Interestingly, both characters manifest their political and social sophistication through masterful use of language. The language that has traditionally been a patriarchal tool of oppression of women has been used by them to their own advantage. Cleopatra's mastery of language pervades throughout the play. In the very first scene, she sets a boundary for Antony: "I'll set a bourn how far to be beloved" (Act I, Scene i, 16). This can be termed as a telling example of strategic use of language in which she prioritizes her autonomy over her love for

Antony. It also reveals how Cleopatra is dictating the terms of her relationship with Antony. Its further implications could be argued as Egypt will safeguard its sovereignty and its interests against any Roman aggression. Cleopatra never allows her personal relationships to become an impediment to her politics. Cleopatra's excellent use of language is not confined to his romantic conversations. She speaks in the language of an empress, an authority, to her subordinates and messengers. One such example is "Cleopatra's success in compelling from the messenger a personally flattering account of Octavia" (Marshall). Likewise, Maneka, too, is adept at making use of language to elicit favorable results. The following conversation between Larry Stephens and Maneka is a dazzling example of her linguistic capabilities:

> 'Six years is a long time in a young woman's life! Isn't it?' he [Larry Stephens] said stretching that smile longer.
> 'Is it a short time in a young man's life?' she [Maneka] enquired.
> Her questioning nonplussed Larry. (83)

She actually defeats Larry Stephens in his own style of questioning and also in a language that any Brit is extremely proud of. Larry has a habit of unsettling people by darting back questions at them. In this case, he was caught off guard and gets a taste of his own medicine. This conversation sets the stage for the kind of relationship the two are heading towards. She makes it amply clear to Larry that she is not any ordinary girl by warning him, "Don't think I'm a stupid Indian girl that God manufactured for your recreation" (83).

Both characters use language, which has traditionally been tilted in favor of males, as a tool of power in redefining the male/female binary. Their meticulous use of the language seems to fix this lopsided attribute of language to cater to their needs. They speak in the language of authority, which was supposedly man's entitlement. The very first dialogue of Cleopatra with Antony, "If it be love, tell me how much," uses a language of authority. It also consolidates her position against the Roman emperor, as she acquires a masculine tone in her language. Yachnin fittingly observes, "Cleopatra's appropriation of a "Roman" language of command works to undermine Antony's authority" (347).

Maneka emerges as a contemporary form of agency of feminine subversion that functions within the particular context of early twentieth-century India, which was caught in the moral dilemma of traditional values and modernizing influences. She demonstrates her rebellion against patriarchal authority by choosing her own cross-cultural romantic partner, rejecting arranged marriage, and making her presence felt in the family decision-making processes that conventionally choose to ignore women. She refuses to accept passive femininity and subservient obedience and ensures equal participation in family affairs. Contrary to the traditional Indian daughters of that time, she revolts against her father's authoritative attitude.

Sharma portrays Maneka as a "woman of the future," a figure who transcends the intimidating boundaries of historical moment. Maneka is a woman of a certain kind who resists various forms of systematic oppression. She refuses to conform to racial and social hierarchies by forging an amorous relationship with a Brit and having sexual encounters with him prior to marriage, which was then considered an immoral act. Many a time, her actions fell short of the moral yardstick of the time, for which she was shamed and isolated too. She can also be seen as a liberating force in the family of Sir Saraswati Ranbakshi. She intervenes in her brother's marriage and facilitates him in getting married to a low-caste girl, an act that was not permitted in those days. But sometimes she also needs someone to liberate her from the clutches of the patriarchal mindset of her father, Sir Ranbakshi. When she meets Larry, she sees him as the same savior who has come to rescue her from her intimidating father. She thinks, "Had this man come to liberate her from the imprisonment of another man — her father? She felt perplexed— Maneka hardly needed a man to come to her rescue. She had the potential of rescuing a man from his own imprisonment" (85). In the case of her brother Yogendra, Maneka supports his inter-caste marriage with Gauri and therefore rescues him from societal expectations of getting married to a same caste girl. Her attitudes and actions pose an indomitable challenge to traditional social norms of that time. She seems to support individual choice over social conformity. Maneka was successful in redefining the codes of patriarchal oppression to a great extent, but not entirely victorious in her war against passive femininity. She too had to bow down before the norms and values of the society of the time; for example, she decided to terminate her pregnancy, for that would invite huge social condemnation if people got to know of it. Another instance of her compromise can be cited from the precaution she takes in the Night Club to avoid being seen with Larry Stephens, especially by her younger brother. As Sharma notes, "she may have been very advanced by the standards of those days but she was not yet equal to the British. The two were governed by different norms" (93).

For Cleopatra as well as Maneka, sexuality functions as a form of agency of liberation rather than submission, in contrast with the patriarchal belief that sees female sexuality as a mark of feminine weakness. This said weakness percolates in society through the narratives propagated by norms recognized by the male-dominated society. Cleopatra does not hesitate in acknowledging her multiple relationships with men in power. This attitude provides Cleopatra a robust platform from which she can convert what societies view as feminine shamelessness into a source of political power and agency (Saikia, 465). In a similar fashion, Maneka too refuses to conform to traditional expectations of feminine chastity that command societal dominance over individual autonomy. Both characters present a template case that showcases sexual agency as a tool of political resistance. They wield this tool to make a point that they do not abide by the definitions of appropriate feminine behavior. In this, they seem to take a feminist approach. Both characters appear to employ different *modi*

operandi to achieve similar results. Their actions seem to challenge masculine authority. Cleopatra's assertion of power and authority punctures the Roman narrative of the political incompetence of the feminine tribe. Thus, her position threatens the masculine worldview of the Roman Empire. Her political wisdom and diplomatic achievements overshadow other male characters in the play. Maneka seems to operate against domestic patriarchal authority by intervening in family decisions. She not only overrides the social landscape but also makes inroads in the political landscape of her father when she observes that her father, Sir Saraswati Ranbakshi's contribution to India's independence movement is shy of what is expected from him: "He has hardly contributed to India's freedom struggle. And I must make up for his failing" (100). Seemingly taking a postfeminist position, their actions and worldviews validate that feminine authority need not show allegiance to masculine models of power. They can rather cultivate alternative approaches that blend traditional feminine attributes with assertive leadership styles.

Their dealings with traditional masculine figures foreground the transformative potential of feminine authority when it overcomes patriarchal constraints. Cleopatra's control over the affairs of Antony alters his masculine identity and makes him "strumpet's fool" (Act I, Scene i, 13). Likewise, Maneka's interactions with various male characters modify their preconceived notions about appropriate gender roles. Both characters turn out to be catalysts for broader transformation in their respective social landscapes, implying that individual initiatives of feminine voice and rebellion can have widespread effects over patriarchal configurations.

A close examination of these characters demonstrates how both authors deploy their female protagonists to critique the specific patriarchal arrangements of their respective societies while simultaneously bringing universal themes of feminine agency and resistance to the fore. Shakespeare's portrayal of Cleopatra engages with Elizabethan anxieties about female rule and exotic otherness, while Sharma's characterization of Maneka addresses the particular challenges Indian women were facing during the colonial period and the early stages of the independence movement. Despite these different cultural settings, both characters adopt similar strategies of resistance that transcend their specific historical moments.

These characters defy not only gender hierarchies but also racial and cultural norms prescribed to feminine behavior. Their take on such issues that are pretty close to postcolonial studies brackets both works as postcolonial texts. There is a certain kind of hybridity in both characters. Cleopatra, with her Macedonian origin, was born in Egypt, whereas Maneka was an Indian with Western education and upbringing. Noticeably, both characters identify themselves with their place of birth: Cleopatra with Egyptian identity and Maneka with Indian. Cleopatra's Egyptian identity positions her against the Roman Empire, as Egypt is a perfect "exotic other" of the indigenous Roman. Her behavior upsets Roman norms of appropriate feminine behavior, whereas Maneka revolts against Western propaganda against colonized subjects. She also subscribes to the opinion that "they were Indians who had to help other Indians" (59). She embodies both Indian and Western influences to deconstruct such false advertising. It most certainly requires complex negotiations by colonized subjects while trying to define their own identities.

After analyzing both characters, one can infer that both Shakespeare's Cleopatra and Sharma's Maneka emerge as revolutionary figures who essentially disrupt patriarchal paradigms by calibrating their feminine authority. Their subversive tactics, which include political agency, sexual autonomy, and theatrical performance, demonstrate how patriarchal limitations are universal while also showcasing the various ways that women have fought against them in various historical and cultural situations. Both figures show up as forerunners of modern feminist ideals, implying that the yearning for female agency and equality cuts across cultural and temporal barriers. Their unceasing popularity stems from their ability to show that feminine authority does not have to mimic masculine power structures; rather, it may create alternative strategies that transcend patriarchal systems rather than merely fight them. Their comparative analysis informs the readers about the continuous development of feminine resistance and the enduring value of literary representations in opposing prevailing gender conceptions.

One of the most lucid examples of Cleopatra's destabilization of conservative gender dynamics is her relationship with Antony. She overturns the established gender construct by personifying many masculine characteristics that are prescribed to men while feminizing Antony, the great Roman emperor. The exchange of clothes between Antony and Cleopatra clearly indicates a reversal of gender roles. Cleopatra's confession: "put my tires and mantles on him, whilst/ I wore his sword Philippan" (Act II, Scene v, 22-23), cements the idea of reversal of gender roles. This metaphorical reversal of gender roles between the lovers extends its implication throughout their relationship. Her suicide could be seen as an act of defiance of Roman authority. This act of hers puts her on a high pedestal where she is seen as a martyr for feminine autonomy rather than a defeated enemy, consolidating her immortality. By committing suicide, she refuses to be paraded as a trophy on the alleys of the Roman Empire, which proved to be detrimental to the Roman manly ego. Postcolonial reading of *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Tailor's Needle* underscores dual marginalization of Cleopatra as well as Maneka in their respective patriarchal settings. On one level, they are marginalized for being a woman, whereas on the other, they are dismissed for being non-European. Yet their negotiations of power in a male-dominated sphere sabotage the uncontested power of men and biased European narratives. Logan views, "In trumping Antony's invitation [to supper], Cleopatra reveals some of her most salient traits: her desire to assert her control in her dealings with other people (presumably exercising a certain degree of political power as well

as personal charm in this instance), her pride in displaying a regal splendor through pleasurable magnificence, and her method of enticing Antony and holding his interest by crossing him" (110).

Maneka's rebellion against colonial and patriarchal hegemony reflects traits of Spivak's concept of "strategic essentialism" (Spivak, 11), as Maneka uses Western education to dismantle colonial and caste hierarchies. Maneka's activism reverberates the ideals of Gandhi's anti-colonial movement, though it adopts a distinctly feminist approach (Northfield). She backs matrimonial bonds across class and caste lines and manipulates the British judicial system to secure justice for marginalized women, subverting imperial patriarchy. However, the trajectory of her tragic life—marked by Mohan's murder and social ostracization—underscores the vehement retaliation against women who call attention to systemic oppression. Maneka, unlike her conventional sister Sita, opposes domestic regimentation, embodying Sharma's vision of "gradual empowerment" through education and dissent.

Both characters reject the "angel in the house" archetype. Cleopatra's naval command and political negotiations contrast with Octavia's docility, while Maneka's legal activism and inter-caste advocacy defy her mother's conventionality. Their agency disrupts the binary of public/male vs. private/female spheres, asserting women's right to influence politics and social reform. Their shared resistance to societal constraints reveals a universal archetype of female empowerment that transcends cultural and temporal boundaries.

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