

Depiction of Early Roman's Power and Social Hierarchy in Michelle Moran's *Cleopatra's Daughter*

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Abstract—Michelle Moran dives deep into a wide arena of political, cultural and geographic spheres and tend to depict the lives of powerful women in intricate historical contexts. The present study analyzes how Moran's characters traverse the treacherous landscape of ancient lands thereby reflecting larger cultural trends in which tradition, ancestry and divine association are used to rationalize and enforce discrimination. Moran depicts the characters who navigate complex hierarchies of power, showcasing how power influences everything from individual relationships to broader social and political structures. The oppressive nature of power is integral to understand the power structural acts as a framework for interpreting cultural and historical narratives. Moran uses the factors such as monarchy, imperial rule as well as gender discrimination to validate the hierarchy and power by probing into the characters across period and culture.



Keywords— Culture, History, Power Structure, Social Hierarchy, Authority and Discrimination

In Moran's *Cleopatra's Daughter*, during the ancient times of Octavian's rule, there is a hierarchical society with stratified positions. But later, there is shift and decline in the level of power whenever there is a change in the emperor either through death or dethronement. Egypt has its own dominant system of hierarchy with Pharaoh as the living God. By maintaining its own hierarchical structures, Rome gives importance to the Senate as well. According to Trafford, "If you want to hold the highest public office . . . you will need to hold senatorial rank" (2). The Senate, for example, held some level of influence and Roman citizens, particularly those of higher status, had more access to the mechanisms of power.

The emergence of Octavian from Rome marks the beginning of his efforts to assert control over Egypt following his victory over Marc Antony and Queen Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium. Octavian, positioning himself as the successor to the Pharaohs, dismantles the Ptolemaic dynasty and claims the region as his personal

territory. His temporary appointment of a governor effectively removes political tensions, curtails struggles for power and diminishes any potential local nationalist sentiments. Roman legions and auxiliary troops are stationed in Egypt for more than a decade until stability is achieved. All operations are conducted in accordance with Roman legal standards, and the local governance is transformed into a liturgical system, where property ownership is accompanied by a responsibility to serve the community.

The sight of nervousness in Queen Cleopatra, who is dressed in the traditional attire of Egyptian Queen at the approach of Octavian to take hold of Egypt shows the hierarchical power of Rome that is to be executed upon the Egyptian empire. She worriedly confesses that though she has tried to negotiate with Octavian, he is not ready to heed to it. She becomes desperate and Moran puts her state of hopelessness as "The finality in her voice is frightening. Then what do we have left to hope for?" (10) Octavian's

men try to evoke the Gods of Egypt and accept the people as their subjects. Though, the Queen Kleopatra realizes the power of the opponents, till the last minute they are not ready to yield and try to protect themselves and their property. Her attitude of aggressiveness is made clear when she yells at her servants as "If they try to break down the door, we will set fire to every piece of wood in that chamber!" (13). She exerts her power physically to resist the attack of Roman authority and till the end she retorts and resists the forces. According to Cindythyas' view on Queen Kleopatra as stated in one of her articles, "Women in Politics in Michelle Moran's *Cleopatra's Daughter*" as "She dedicated her life for her country and her family until the end of her life" (6). She tries to communicate with them regarding her demands thereby maintaining a very low power structure. But the people of Egypt start yielding themselves to the Roman forces and become the subjects of maintaining a high power culture at their arrival. She confronts Agrippa, the Roman General, who is very powerful. Though she is aware of his power, she tries to use her authority and tries to allure him to betray Caesar by accepting the richness of Egypt. She resists till the end and demands a good burial for her husband which is granted by Agrippa, the Roman General. Queen Kleopatra is powerful that she is fluent in many languages and she speaks to Octavian in a bold manner.

Octavian shows his power by confiscating every piece of Egypt, including the children of Queen Kleopatra. Though she resists in the beginning, trying to rescue her kingdom through any sort of ransom, she is forced to yield herself to his demands by surrendering everything including her children. Octavian's men confiscate all the wealth and riches of Egypt by using their hierarchical power which is explained by Moran as "Romans occupied every room, sniffing out our riches to fill Octavian's treasury. The carved cedar chairs, which had graced our largest chambers, had disappeared, but everything disappeared was being taken. Silk couches, cushions, ebony vases on towering silver tripods" (21). The crowns, which are presented to the children by their father are merely a symbol of voidness and Moran puts it as they have become "inheritors of dust" (27). But when Queen Kleopatra dies, Octavian is ready to offer her the privilege of burying her in mausoleum. The children of the Queen are taken by Octavian. However, they are treated royally on their way to Roman Empire. He makes arrangements for their travel which is explained by Moran as "Caesar's carriages are waiting on the shore. Agrippa told Alexander. The pair of you will travel with his nephew, Marcellus" (53).

Marcellus explains the system of hierarchy that prevails in the senate and explains the existence of different types of clans such as "equestrians first, and then there's different

types of senators. Quaestors, aediles, praetors, consuls. Of course, the consuls are the most powerful" (57). Though there exist a hierarchical set up, there is high power structure between them and the lower cadres have no voice to express their opinions and they are supposed to obey the higher category without questioning. When Octavian returns from Egypt, he meets Fidelius, who brings the news of Egypt. Unknowingly, he says that the people have discussed the successor in case both Antony and Octavian are dead. Octavian gets agitated when he comes to know that Fidelius is also in the list, he kills him ruthlessly. This shows his craving for power and exhibiting the hierarchical nature in his empire. The power between him and his soldiers is very high and they are voiceless to express their opinions. Even a liberal talk is serious enough to take away one's life. He kills Fidelius because of his suspicion that raises its hood within him. He leaves no identified obstacles to remain as such. Hence, Octavian nips Fidelius in the bud itself. Moran explains the mindset of Octavian as "If the Senate thought Fidelius would make a good Caesar two months ago, then what stops them from thinking the same three years from now? (63). Moran points out the superiority of the clan of Octavian through the words of Marcellus as "Our family's much higher than that. We're patricians. We live on the Palatine, where Octavian is building the largest temple to Apollo" (64). Marcellus explains the power of the clan of his uncle Octavian in the senate.

Octavian starts to address the audience about his victory over Egypt. He says he owns the top hierarchical status and strictly warns that no one is to utter the name of Mark Antony or support him. He lifts the hands of both the prince and princess of Egypt. It is really heartening for the children to watch the wax statue of Queen Kleopatra exposed with a cobra around her breast. It is a symbol of disgrace and humiliation. Hierarchy and power is exhibited less in every action towards the children that even to chain them for "The Triumph" golden chains are brought (102). Selene is uncontrollable to stop her tears for which Juba warns her that she has to be grateful for being alive. Selene is stricken with the memory of her mother maid Charmion whom she loves the most and thinks that she will be broken to watch them both sitting in this pitiable condition. The rivers of Egypt crossed by the Romans are personified in the dresses of the Roman men. Alexander tells Selene that the usage of power upon them by Octavian is for an extend very low which makes them save their lives which Moran clearly points out as "No one is ever kept alive after a Triumph" (103). Marcellus also assures them that his mother Octavia will never allow any harm to happen to them.

The authoritarian attitude of Octavian is exposed in front of his family too. During the Triumph everyone gathered together for lunch and it is pitiable to watch Marcellus and Julia remaining silent that their voice might provoke the wrath of Octavian. There is a circus show during the Triumph and Octavian will spin the toss and people will fight for him just like animals. Octavian is seen scribbling seriously something on a paper and Tiberius says that he is writing memoirs and his single writing will never get wasted and his proclaimed heir can use it after his rule is ended.

The authority of Octavian is beyond the extent that the whole of Rome is filled with slaves who are to work for them. Though they are treated meanly without any freedom there emerges some rebels among them trying to end up or wipe out the slavery from Rome. Their hostility is exhibited at times in the form of some hidden actum which is a threat to the life of Octavian. Octavian becomes furious and orders to prohibit strictly the purchase of any weapons by the slave men and to keep a check over it, they have to cautioned to produce their identity card for every purchase. Moran points out the authority of Octavian as "I want every slave forbidden from purchasing weaponry anywhere in Rome!" When Tiberius asks "But how will the merchants know 'Proof of Citizenship' Octavian bellowed" (153). There are some slaves whose hidden intention is to break the barrier of power. It is pitiable that hundreds of slaves including children and ladies are slaughtered for none of their reason. If one among the slaves commits a crime like killing their master, the whole lot of the clan has to pay for it by losing their lives. Moran explains it as "Nearly thirty-five years ago, a similar trial ended in the death of four hundred slaves. That Jury understood that a message must be sent. One that discourages any slave from killing his master for fear that everyone will be punished" (223-24). Whenever the slaves try to turn themselves into rebel by breaking the barrier of high power, Octavian orders to crush them totally with his dominant power.

CONCLUSION

Moran's depictions of characters within the framework of power and social hierarchies, in accordance with the personal or societal roles assigned to them. Moran examines the ways in which power is exerted, legalized and disputed in the early Roman society through her plot and characters.

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