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Subversive Gender Roles in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

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Abstract:

Shakespeare still fascinates us because his works reflect various shades of humanity like no other work can. Though written almost four hundred years ago, most of his plays address issues which still have their appeal. Shakespeare's comedies—with their cross-dressing and carnivalesque nature—indeed provide us with a sense of subversion. It is extremely liberating to note how Shakespeare was able to give rise queer situations, albeit at a miniscule level. Keeping this mind, this paper would be an exploration of the ways in which Shakespeare posits alterity with conviction and gusto.

That Shakespeare is a contemporary of every age is as clichéd a statement that a student of English literature can imagine. However, this paper, on the surface level, would be a perpetuation of this cliché as it would be an attempt of reading of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* with the contemporary lenses of study in order to show how the Shakespearean plays can easily be appropriated within the 21st discourses on gender and sexuality. Literatures, especially English literature, as feminist critics have often pointed out, have always been overtly phallogocentric[1]. It is in order to subvert the dominant heteropatrichal[2] norms perpetuated through literary texts that the second wave feminists like Hélène Cixous felt the need of an 'Écriture féminine', which, she thought, would bring both the body and the soul of women to the forefront and would provide an alternative to the ideological spectrum in comparison to the overtly gendered, masculinist social matrix.

That literature has objectified the body of woman is an issue unanimously agreed upon. Be it Eve or Helen or Draupadi or Sita, women's beguiling beauty is in the forefront of literary representations. However, the resentment that the feminists often show against such representations lies in the fact that these women have often been considered as 'femme fatal'.

[1] Phallogocentrism refers to a specific ideology that considers men to be superior and all societal structures are tilted in favour of men.

[2] Much like phallogocentrism. But such societal structure not only privileges men but also blatantly privileges heterosexuals.

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The patriarchal project of stereotyping women's beauty took a whole new turn in the hands of the Petrarchan[3] sonneteers who had a major impact on the Elizabethan literary scene. Take for instance Spenser's sonnet no. 81 of his sonnet sequence *Amoretti* dedicated to his lady love Elizabeth Boyle:

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,
But came the waves and washed it away:
Again I wrote it with a second hand,
But came the tide, and made my pains his prey.
"Vain man," said she, "that dost in vain assay,
A mortal thing so to immortalize;
For I myself shall like to this decay,
And eke my name be wiped out likewise."
"Not so," (quod I) "let baser things devise
To die in dust, but you shall live by fame:
My verse your vertues rare shall eternize,
And in the heavens write your glorious name:
Where whenas death shall all the world subdue,
Our love shall live, and later life renew."

The speaker here is undoubtedly trying to immortalize the beauty of his beloved whom he considers to be the epitome of exquisiteness— a dazzling, god-like beauty. However, such representations almost never take women's soul into consideration. Not only Spenser but also other sonneteers of the age projected their beloveds with the help of such exaggerated metaphors. Such stereotypical representation becomes a butt of Shakespeare's (2001) scathing criticism in sonnet 130:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know

[3] A group of English sonneteers inspired by the works of Francesco Petrarch, an Italian sonneteer, whose sonnet sequence *Laura* was one of its kind in the genre.

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That music hath a far more pleasing sound;

I grant I never saw a goddess go;

My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.

And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare

As any she belied with false compare. (p.39)

In this sonnet dedicated to a certain dark lady, Shakespeare blatantly subverts the Europeanised fantasy surrounding the female beauty. Though Shakespeare is critical of the way women are stereotypically projected, characters in his own works often eulogise the beauty of women in opulently hyperbolic terms. Romeo's eulogy to Juliet's beauty stands testimony to this fact:

Oh, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!

It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night

Like a rich jewel in an Ethiope's ear,

Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear.

So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows

As yonder lady o'er her fellows shows.

The measure done, I'll watch her place of stand,

And, touching hers, make blessèd my rude hand.

Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight!

For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night.

(Shakespeare, 2001) (Act.I, Sc.V) (Line:44-52) (p.1015)

The use of the epithets like 'beauty too rich' is a revelation of this fact. However, such overtly exaggerated description of beauty was stored exclusively for women. It is very rare to find women talking and describing male beauty. Women's desire is either neglected or relegated to the margins in the gamut of phallogocentric literary parlance. Even the languages are coded in a manner so that women, especially their body, constantly become the object of male desire and fantasy.

Many postmodern critics tend to apply Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque to read *Twelfth Night.* We are of the opinion that much like we encounter a world turned upside down under the rubric of performative space in *Twelfth Night, As You Like It* is no exception. Through its panegyric subversion of the traditional gender roles *As You Like It* leaves us with an ample scope of appreciating the sense of alterity that runs parallel to the normative understanding of gender and sexuality in Shakespeare. The cross-dressing, though a theatrical necessity, provides not only for the comic scenes but also for the subversive element in many of Shakespearean comedies. On the wake of the queer theory critics have started to interpret these

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texts from an alternative standpoint giving a fresh lease of like to the playwright's majestic body of work.

For the uninitiated, the plot of *As You Like It* goes thus: Duke Senior has been banished from his throne by his brother Duke Frederick who, however, lets Duke Senior's daughter Rosalind stay with his own daughter Celia, mainly due to their friendship. Duke Senior has now taken resort to Forest of Arden and has reconciled to his fate. There is a sub-plot though. Orlando, a young man, has been denied any fortune by his elder brother Oliver. Oliver recruits a soldier named Charles to defeat his younger brother but Orlando proves to be too strong even for a professional soldier like Charles. During the course of his wresting match he wins the heart of Rosalind. Orlando, though, is severely hated by his brother as well as Duke Frederick who hates him because of his aversion to Orlando's dead father. Fearing severe backlash, Orlando, alongwith his father's old servant Adam taken resort is Forest of Arden as well. In the meantime, Duke Frederick is angry on Rosalind for her favours shown to Orlando and decides to throw her away from the court in the same manner that he threw away her father. Celia, devoted that she is to her cousin, decides to leave her father's palace as well. Fearing the problems that might be faced by two women, they disguise themselves. Rosalind, being unusually tall, disguises herself as Ganymede and Celia as Aliena. Upon reaching the forest, they come to know about Orlando's love for Rosalind as he has decorated the trees with his romantic, lovelorn verses dedicated to Rosalind. Ganymede/Rosalind decides make him woo her as Rosalind. Various other subplots of lesser significance emerge during the play; especially involving the rustic characters who are the native inhabitants of the forest. Finally to end the play in reconciliation and happiness as Orlando marries Rosalind who shakes of her borrowed identity of being a man; Oliver—now a changed man— marries Celia, and the Duke gains back his lost throne.

When *As You Like It* was first performed, women performing on stage was an unbelievable sight. So the roles of women were generally played by young boys of 14 or 15 Years old. Keeping aside the theatrical taxonomy, Cross-dressing and the confusion regarding one's gender identity—as projected in this comedy— gives a chance to scholars and critics to read the text with the help of the emerging theories on gender and sexuality. We would use the scope of this paper to try and raise a few questions that the confusing gender identities provide to us. Doesn't the soul-clinching friendship between Celia and Rosalind reverberate a platonic synthesis, especially when it seems that they can do very well even without a romantic male companion? Don't the dialogues between Ganymede and Orlando create a unique queer space for the spectator? Then again, one may contradict us in saying that the audience must have been completely aware of the fact that Rosalind was impersonating a role and hence it might be

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inadequate to appropriate Judith Butler's view on drag and impersonation as far as the wooing scene between Ganymede and Orlando is concerned. However, it won't be absolutely preposterous to suggest that Rosalind's male impersonation is indeed effectually subversive and it marks a shift from the conventionally imagined gender roles. In this regard we may take a look at what Judith Butler (2007) says in her *Gender Trouble:*

> In *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, anthropologist Esther Newton suggests that the structure of impersonation reveals one of the key fabricating mechanisms through which the social construction of gender takes place. I would suggest as well that drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectually mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity. (p.186)

Butler (2007) goes on to quote Newton who writes:

> At its most complex, [drag] is a double inversion that says "appearance is illusion". Drag says [Newton's curious personification] "my 'outside' appearance is feminine, but my essence 'inside' [the body] is masculine." At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; "my appearance 'outside' [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence 'inside' [myself] is feminine." (p.186)

The second definition of drag is what we may use to define Rosalind. However, in Rosalind's case this practice is a matter of choice as she had to defend her womanliness in a world where she apparently had to survive without any male patronage. In spite of not being a typical butch/femme, Rosalind indeed parodies the original or primary gender identity through her cross-dressing. In that respect, Rosalind's act is indeed a politicised model of non-normative gender identity.

As stated earlier, the main aim of this paper would be to reveal how phallogeocentrism is subverted within the dramatic space of this play. In the previous paragraph I raised some questions about the queer moments that arise in the play because of cross dressing and all. The limited scope of the paper doesn't allow us to analyse the friendship between Rosalind and Celia in great detail. Hence, we will limit ourselves to analysing the queer moments and 'subversive bodily acts' that this play gives rise to. Let us look at one such conversation between Ganymede and Orlando full of queer potentials:

ROSALIND

Come, woo me, woo me, for now I am in a holiday
humour and like enough to consent. What would you
say to me now, an I were your very very Rosalind?

ORLANDO

I would kiss before I spoke. (Shakespeare, 2001) (Act.IV, Sc.I, Line: 64-68) (p.181)

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Standing in 21st century we encounter an end number of questions raised over Shakespeare's sexual orientation. Even without plunging into the debate directly we are left to ponder over the real intention of Shakespeare behind his repeated use of the motif of cross-dressing. We are left to ask the question whether Shakespeare intentionally introduced such scenes to educate his audience about the alternative version to commonly prevailing heterosexual love and desire.

We agree upon the fact that Shakespeare's queer subplots never fully bloom; yet their subversive potential cannot be blatantly ignored. Even if we consider such scenes to be mere theatricality meant for providing entertainment; the queer moments that such scenes give birth to can never be overlooked. Even if we take it for granted that Shakespeare had no real intention of projecting homosexuality on stage, his success in projecting alterity is ostensible. If we read Rosalind's speeches more carefully, we will be able to unearth an undercurrent of subversion of the phallogocentric ideals. In order to justify our stance, we, here, quote a specific section from Act III, scene IV of the play:

ROSALIND

Never talk to me; I will weep.

CELIA

Do, I prithee; but yet have the grace to consider
that tears do not become a man.

ROSALIND

But have I not cause to weep?

CELIA

As good cause as one would desire; therefore weep.

ROSALIND

His very hair is of the dissembling colour.

CELIA

Something browner than Judas's marry, his kisses are
Judas's own children.

ROSALIND

I' faith, his hair is of a good colour.

CELIA

An excellent colour: your chestnut was ever the only colour.

ROSALIND

And his kissing is as full of sanctity as the touch
of holy bread.

CELIA

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He hath bought a pair of cast lips of Diana: a nun
of winter's sisterhood kisses not more religiously;
the very ice of chastity is in them.

(Shakespeare, 2001) (Act.III, Sc. Iv, Line: 1-17) (p.178-9)

The whole conversation—read in its true context— is nonetheless extremely liberating and subversive. Women's fantasising male beauty is something that literature barely saw before this. In spite of the play's tendency to stereotype (that men don't cry) the dynamism of such scenes can never be disregarded. What is even more interesting is the fact that the beauty of Orlando is projected with the help of the quotidian of images used in the Petrarchan poems. One might argue that such images are innately Eurocentric and falls on the beaten track of Eurocentrism. We may not be that critical in this regard, especially because these lines were written before the onset of the colonial enterprise.

Laura Mulvey, in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"[4], talks about the ways in which women are objectified in cinema through a certain male gaze. Whether or not the objectification is of same magnitude, we encounter a female gaze for the first time within the parlance of the theatrical space. In the Petrarchan sonneteering tradition—where the objectification of women doubled and trebled up—the 'fair sex'[5] were merely limited to the role of the passive listeners. Shakespeare's plays, through their strong female characters, undoubtedly subvert this overtly masculine oeuvre by incorporating a voice and a desire of women which was lacking from the parlance of literature previously.

The importance of Shakespeare for anyone interested in gender studies lies in the fact that he does not shy away from projecting women convincingly. In the works of his contemporaries, it would be next to impossible to find a woman character challenging her male counterpart for attention. However, in most his comedies and in some of his tragedies Shakespeare has women characters who stir our imagination by challenging the patriarchal status-quo. In such contexts, Shakespeare truly emerges as an unparalleled master showcasing the dynamism that he possessed.

[4] The informations are taken from Jeremy Hawthorns essay. (cited below in the References)
[5] A quotidian metaphor used to describe the beauty of women. Even Pope in *The Rape of the Lock* uses this epithet.

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