

From Restrain To Release; A Feminist Note On William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

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Abstract: In the present paper an attempt has been made to view and examine William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* in the light of feminism. Shakespeare has, perhaps more than any other writer, sanctioned ample opportunities for interpretations and critical studies. Shakespeare like Kalidasa had an inveterate knowledge of humanity and its doings. The attitude of Pre-Shakespearean England to Woman was of sterner type and she was viewed as "idealised" to gain whose love the world was well lost and sometimes she was regarded as "a worthless and venomous creature, hardly, worthy soul", But Shakespeare strikes the balance and combines the "reality with refinement", though he found the task of delineating the women characters rather difficult. Verily the credit of drawing the woman out of her conventionally condemned cave and honorable entity goes to Shakespeare. This is seen very vividly in his delineation of the characters in Romantic comedies.

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No work of art is a creation in isolation. It is the incarnation of the age reflecting the social conditions and cultural contours of the time of author. And such a work receives repeated attention of the critics, gets criticized and commented from time to time. It is in this sense that the words 're-assessment' or 're-valuation' are used. Each generation has revealed a tendency to evaluate literature for its own joys, probably for its own celebration of life also.

In the present paper an attempt has been made to view and examine William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* in the light of feminism. Shakespeare has, perhaps more than any other writer, sanctioned ample opportunities for interpretations and critical studies. Shakespeare like Kalidasa had an inveterate knowledge of humanity and its doings. His miraculous craftsmanship is acclaimed throughout the world. It is really wonderful to contemplate how he exercised his authority and ruled unrivalled over the theatres of his age which was essentially an age of grand culture and gregariously interested public in classism. "Drama is a means to knowledge a journey of exploration into the countries of the mind, heart and soul" of the characters which form the basis of the components of a play. The characters rather than the other aspects of Shakespearean drama have proved an uncultivated and fertile soil and lent themselves to multiple interpretations at various times and ages. Always, "the great dramatists speak through their characters, from the depths of their own poetic experience to the depths of man's nature".

The attitude of Pre-Shakespearean England to Woman was of sterner type and she was viewed as "idealised" to gain whose love the world was well lost and sometimes she was regarded as "a worthless and venomous creature, hardly, worthy soul", But Shakespeare strikes the balance and combines the "reality with refinement", though he found the task of delineating the women characters rather difficult. Verily the credit of drawing the woman out of her conventionally condemned cave and honorable entity goes to Shakespeare. This is seen very vividly in his delineation of the characters in Romantic comedies. In order to show the assertion and audacity complied with aggressive nature of his women characters he makes use of theme of love in various forms in these plays. The characters like Rosalind, Portia and others may be cited as examples of such aggressive characters. He has created a good number of lovers among women. They can be classified, as Dr. Sorojini Shintri says, into two groups broadly 10 the lovers who are aggressive and audacious and 20 the lovers who are passive and permissive.

Rosalind, who is the pivot of the play *As You Like It* at every turn surprises and satisfies. "She is unpredictable yet supremely herself". Of the four love stories interwoven in the play, Rosalind and Orlando Story is the dominant one. Orlando is the last son of late Sir Rowland de Boys. He is ill-treated by his brother Oliver. Oliver denies him education and proper status. This enrages Orlando and there ensues a fight. In the mean time Charles the court wrestler comes and informs Oliver of Orlando's plan of challenging him. Oliver

is chuckled and pretendingly says that Orlando is insolent and does not listen to him. This brings Orlando to the arena where he meets Rosalind and Celia, who try to dissuade him from entering into fight. But Orlando is obstinate and humbly asks the damsels not to prevent him. The wrestling between Charles and himself ensues and much to the surprise of all he defeats Charles. Duke Frederick, the dispossessor of his brother Duke Senior goes off without honoring him. His brother, the Duke Senior, is banished by him and he stays with some loyal followers there in the Forest of Arden. At this juncture Rosalind, the daughter of the Senior Duke, offers Orlando her chain and reveals the benevolence apt to her status. But the victory of the Youngman still enrages his brother and instigates him to stoop to the murder of the victor, by hook or crook. But the faithful servant, Adam informs Orlando of his brother's vicious plan and accompanies him to the Forest of Arden. In the court, Duke Frederick is angry at the popularity of Rosalind and announces the punishment of banishment on her. Celia who loves Rosalind very much follows her to the forest. They dress like a boy and girl of common birth and take with them the court fool Touchstone. To the same Forest of Arden where Duke Senior stays arrives this group of characters. Orlando hangs the songs in praise of Rosalind's beauty and carves her name on the barks of trees. On tracing Orlando sticking the paper to a tree she calls it a sort of madness of love. She teases him and ultimately undertakes to cure him of the madness of love. It is quite Orlando fails to recognize Rosalind who is the dress of a Youngman. Meanwhile we see the complications developed. Silvius, a shepherd, is in love with Phebe a young girl who is scornful of Silvius. Phebe also, not knowing that Rosalind is a girl, falls in love with her Rosalind rebukes and urges her to accept the love of Silvius telling her that her love is bound to end in vain. Meanwhile we notice that Oliver is punished by Duke Frederic for his inability to produce Orlando before the court. Hence he comes to the forest in search of Orlando. It is Orlando who rescues him from a lion which was waiting for Oliver to stir as he slept under a tree. In the fight with the lion Orlando is wounded seriously. So he asks Oliver to communicate the message of his being wounded by the lion to the boy called Ganemede whom he called *his Rosalind* (emphasis added) sportively or in sport. Accordingly Oliver informs Rosalind of Orlando's injury and offers a blood stained hand kerchief to her, racing which Rosalind swoons. At this moment Oliver who sees Celia falls in love with her and immediately they decide to get married. In the meantime touchstone also decides to get married with Audry. And what about Orlando's love? Orlando is promised by Rosalind that (s) he would produce his Rosalind in her real form. Thus at the end of the play we see totally four pairs coming together. Marriage is a moment of merry making. It is at this time that Orlando's brother Jacques de Boys brings the news that Duke Frederick is converted by a holy man while he was coming to harm his elder brother. Hence he has decided to restore all the status and wealth which he has seized from his brother and Oliver's family. It makes everybody to take a plunge into the pool of happiness. Through there are court scenes in this play much of the action takes place in the forest of Arden. It is, it appears so, because the characters have an indomitable desire to be free and carefree. This can be seen in the words of Duke Senior.

“...Are not these woods

More free from the perils than the envious court? (I.i.3-4)

The forest life supplies them with good food and there are no avaricious emulators. It is in the forest that we see the characters in their real stature and talents. Because it is in the forest that we see Rosalind in her brilliant spirit, Orlando in unfathomable love, Celia's falling in love and flowering her life, touchstone's dialogues full of wit and humour and even the usurper Duke Frederick gets converted to goodness. Whereas court life is gloomy and full of flattery which hides the daggers under the arms and tries to overthrow one as soon as one gets a chance.

Duke Frederick's ordering Rosalind to quit the palace does not frighten her or push her into confusion. She takes it as it were she expected it to take place one or the other day. But her love of justice goads her to ask for the reason. Her uncle's statement that she was her father's daughter and that was enough! Does not bite her feelings and she vehemently protests and says, “Treason is not inherited, my lord,” (I.iii.58)

This shows her courage and love of justice when Celia also decides to follow her accepting the kind of punishment given to the former, they both discuss as to where should they go. Celia's proposal to move in “poor and mean attire” (I.iii.108) seems to her more prosaic, ordinary and even ugly. She has enough worldly wisdom, she knows full well the ways of the world. She says, “Beauty prouketh thieves sooner than gold” (I.iii.107). It seems her soul yearns for release, freedom and a material change full of audacity and adventure. She wants to be as free as the air of Ardens wherein she seeks radiance, therefore she suggests...Were it not better,

Because that I am more then common tall,
 That I did suit me all points like a man?
 A gallant curtle-axe upon my thigh,
 A boar spear in my hand; and in my heart
 Lie there what hidden woman's fear there will,-
 We will have a swashing and martial outside,
 As many other mannish cowards have
 That do out face it with their semblances (I.iii.111-119)

This kind of talking reveals her masculine nature nurtured in the feminine frame.

Even Celia's announcing openly

Now go we content
 To liberty and not to banishment (I.iii.134-135)

Shows Rosalinds infectitious influence working on her.

When Orlando arrives to the forest he begins to hang verses in praise of Rosalind. Rosalind finds them and undertakes to cure him of his madness of love. Since she is in the dress of man she asks Orlando to imagine her to be *his Rosalind* (*emphasis added*). He accepts it and begins to act accordingly, It is in this part the play we witness the audacity of her character.

Orlando's acceptance to take her as his Rosalind without knowing that she is really the one spreads the sunshine of laughter over the action. It is Orlando's fathom deep love which makes him to get into such a game. In the course of love-sport she says to Orlando

I take thee for my husband; there a girl goes
 Before the priest, and certainly, a woman's
 Thought runs before her actions. (IV.i.118-121)

This shows her deep love for Orlando but she is intelligent enough to hide it till the time ripens. When Orlando answers the question how long he wishes to have after he has possessed her, her counter statement:

Men are April when they woo, December when they wed:
 Maids are May when they are maids,
 But the sky changes when they are wives.
 I will be more jealous on thee than
 A Barbary cock-pigeon over his hen;
 More clamorous than a parrot against rain;
 More new fangled than an ape;
 More giddy in my desires than a monkey;
 I will weep for nothing, like Diana in the fountain,
 And I will do that when you are disposed to be merry;
 I will laugh like a hyen,
 And that when thou art inclined to sleep. (IV.i.127-136)

Shows her sportfulness and aggressive nature. Since her feminine modesty and prudence do not allow her to reveal her identity to Orlando she resorts to this kind of game. But the game cannot be continued for long. When Celia decides to marry Oliver she has to cast off the apparel of young and adventurous boy and reveal herself in full feminine beauty. Even it appears that thenceforward the game is not necessary because she is fully convinced of Orlando's faithful and unshakable love for her. Further more she has found her father. Hence the needlessness of man's apparel. Dr. Sarojini Shintri's observation "She gives at once to her father and lover... her silence after the event is full of meaning and what has Rosalind left to say or do?" is quite meaning full and apt one. She further says, "After passing through storm and stress, the ship of her fortune has found its haven. There she rests like a child that sleeps in the arms of its mother at dawn having cried all the night". But it would have still more added to the dimension her character "if her strong emotion, the sharpness of her intellect, and the depth of passion were put to any real test"

Rosalind can exercise her influence on all characters in the play. She takes Phebe to task and corrects and convinces her to accept the genuine love of Silvius for he is her ardent lover. Even Touchstone the true whetstone for other characters comes under the Rosalind. As to her influence on Celia, and as she is always with Rosalind no words are necessary.

Probably the critics' askance has pushed the character of Celia to the bleak corner. Probably the reason for this may be her modest manner and unaggressive nature. She is not forward and overt in her manners and etiquette. She has quite funny aspects also in her personality. She takes delight in teasing Rosalind and delays the announcement of the name of Orlando, which is "South Sea" to Rosalind; she is quite sportful and promises Rosalind to return the wealth and dukedom after her father's death such a gracious and generous jewel Celia is! It is really a rare record in the realm of literature that a woman sacrificing her power and self for no selfish gain. Her generosity is revealed still more when her father goes away without honouring Orlando in spite of his being a victorious wrestler. She says that she would never have done so, if she were in her father's position. Even her marrying Oliver, who is almost an evil incarnate, is very much a curious but convincing factor in the play. Because one can believe strongly that like Duke Frederick who gets converted into Goodman, she can convert Oliver in to a Goodman; she can convert Oliver in to a Goodman. Dr. Sarojini Shintri's observation, "...but who knows what such an angel wife will not do to fan the spark of goodness newly kindled in his heart". is quite considerable and candid.

The other women characters which belong to the lower group are Audrey and Phebe. Phebe is tied to Silvius whereas Audrey to touchstone. Silvius loves Phabe very ardently. But Probe does not accept him and on the contrary scorns him severely. Since she takes interest in Rosalind, since she is in the guise of Youngman, and therefore she even sends a letter to Rosalind through Silvius, who is a simpleton and carries it to Rosalind. Phebe actually expresses her love for her (Rosalind) and in it she also urges that Rosalind must send her opinion with Silvius. And if the reply is negative she would also plan for her suicide. Rosalind is very much amused at the rude style of writing and further Celia's sympathy towards Silvius makes her feel a little sorry and says that he does not deserve to be pitied because love has made him "a tame snake". She further orders him to go back and tell her (Phebe) that if she really loved Rosalind (Ganymede) she has charged Phebe to love Silvius. Thus we see Rosalind correcting Phebe and rousing manliness in Silvius. Rosalind, thus, is a curer of mental maladies of many.

Audrey is country woman. She herself confesses that she is not fair, but she is honest. Before the arrival of Touchstone into the forest of Arden she walks in hilarious harmony with William in the forest. But Touchstone's appearance makes her shift her attention from William. Touchstone's urbane appearance attracts her. Further Touchstone also asks William to go away. She does not even give a chance to William to his heart rendering. She is, it appears, quite wise in her selecting Touchstone and rejecting William. Because the former is townbred and has acquaintance with the court and has urbane and sophisticated manners ingrained in his personality. And further when Touchstone calls her 'a country slut,' her retort full of self honour shows her protective and daring nature. "I am not a slut; though I thank the gods I am foul."(III.iii.33-34) she is quite humble in her acceptance of the provisions showered by nature on her. When Touchstone introduces her to the Duke Senior, she is silent. Probably her silence means that she is dreaming of her future happiness. Again it is Rosalind's hand that helps Audrey and Touchstone to come together. Thus Rosalind emerges as beautiful earth around whom every action and character in the play revolve like man made satellites.

Of all the four women characters Rosalind is free and aggressive and capable of asserting her identity on the most obstinate and dominant male characters like that of Orlando's and Duke Frederick's. she seems to be the last person in the play to sustain the suffering and injustice inflicted either on herself or others. When the Duke gives the reason for her exile that she is her father's daughter and that itself is enough enrages her. She argues vehemently and finally decides to free herself from the shackles of the court. Whereas the other three characters, however free they may appear to be they are not absolutely free the masculine dominance. Celia, though she could have been happy in the palace if her father had wished and detained her. But his hatred and goads him to decide otherwise. Therefore her suffering in spite of her being a princess. Though her suffering is the result of her own choice, her father is equally responsible for it. Audrey and Phebe also display their spirit of freedom but they too are not absolutely free from the dominance of male characters either directly or indirectly. Thus the play shows the indomitable desire of women characters to free themselves from the shackles that surround them in diverse forms. The feature of Shakespearean comedy, that unbounded freedom is assigned to women characters, is amply seen in the play.

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