

Re-reading William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: An Ecocritical Analysis

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Ecocriticism is an ecological outgrowth of Post-structural and post modern criticism and has gradually transformed into a multifaceted and interdisciplinary study. Despite ecocriticism's parallel co-existence with feminism and ecofeminism in 1960 and 1970, the theoretical framework for ecocriticism was laid in 1996 by Cheryll Glotfelty, editor of *The Ecocritical Read*. In its consecutive growth the ecocriticism in the present, is pacing towards the fifth wave of its existence.

Like feminists, who re-read canonical texts from feminist perspective to trace the prejudices and discrimination against women, ecocritics re-read canonical texts from a nature-centered perspective. Re-interpretation of Shakespearean works in an ecocritical framework has taken its shape in the last decade of the twenty-first century. Consequently, major research works have contributed profound ecocritical insights into the works of Shakespeare. In this regard, Sharon O'Dair' argues that "ecocriticism of Shakespeare is presentist"; the presentism according to Gabriel Egan is a new approach to literary criticism, and to the same, Kiernan Ryans remarkably posits "(t)he greatest strength of presentism is its recognition that the present is the place from which critics must start any encounter with Shakespeare's works" (Egan 173). Nevertheless, Simon C. Estok reasons that ecocritical reading of Shakespeare is difficult due to a balancing act between valid Shakespearean scholarship on the one hand and real ecological advocacy on the other (Estok 8) . Further, in his edited text, *Ecocriticism And Shakespeare*, Estok says, "the more we talk about representation of nature in Shakespeare, the more clear it becomes that simple green thematicism has become old hat for Shakespeare," (Estok 1).

This research paper, "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*: an ecocritical analysis", tries to endorse Estok's view 'difficult business', since intricate analysis is the only way for the ecocritical approach and attempts to bring nexus between the play and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*², where the latter specifies and extends the apprehensions of the industrial development in the twenty-first century and the consequent, synthetic chemicals' perilous impact on ecosystem, and Shakespeare's play testimonies the root cause of the same by inundating some facts of initial imperial expansion of European nations; industrial revolution followed by destruction of nature. The article attempts to unearth and analyze the ecological impressions made in the drama, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; and gives a retrospective hint, at man's ability to bait nature, using a magic drug of a flower, and its consequence, up shot in a futile venture and eventually man baptizes the fact as a 'dream'.

An ecocritical approach to the comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* leads us to the world beyond the green ambiance, which had been epitomized till now. Gabriel Egan writes, "Shakespeare wrote nothing that we can directly call a city comedy, but he wrote of people leaving cities and constructing alternative communities elsewhere, and he wrote of people confronting

the paradoxical isolation of city life” (Egan 41). The relationship between man and his physical environment had always been interesting to ecocritics. This interest, at the basic scientific level in the allegorical form in literature, can be explained that man always exists within some natural environment or according to Buell, there cannot be ‘is’ (man) without ‘where’ (place). The Duke, Theseus, who was about to enter wedlock very shortly, ironically fails to perceive the lovers’ plight of separation. The palace, where the duke (is) residing, is a place where only commercial or power transactions happen and will not leave any vacuum for dotting couples.

Henri Lefebvre’s theory of place states that, every location effects the psyche, and furthers his explanation, “The concept of ‘place’ . . . needs to be understood as both topographical and conceptual. Particular locations in London may emblematically represent particular activities . . .” (Egan 48). As a consequence, the city-bred (immature) Lysander, Demetrius, Hermia and Helena land in a ‘placeless’ place (woods), which transits into a place of ‘market’³ serenely puts an effort, unlike the duke, to unite the prospective wed lockers. Demetrius’ comprehension on absence of hatred between him and Lysander, and duke’s consent to the conjugal relationship of Hermia and Lysander, happen in the woods. These two events endorse the ecocritical view, that as well, that the ambiance of the location always influences the psyche of the habitats:

THESEUS. I know you are rival enemies;/ How comes this gentle concord in the world,/ That hatred is so far from jealousy/ To sleep by hate, and fear no enmity?/

. . .

DEMETRIUS. . . . But, my good lord, I wot not by what power,/ But by some power it is,- my love to Hermia/ Melted as doth the snow/ The object and the pleasure of mine eye,/ Is only Helena. (4.1.128-158)

The names of the attendant fairies of Titania; Peasblossom, Cobweb, Moth and Mustardseed are part of (non-human)nature, are serving a superior human/master (Titania) to put her into the best comforts. Titania instructs her fairies “The honey bags steal from the humble-bees” (3.1.90), to lit herself and her beloved by taking off the life of non-human creatures.

Nevertheless, the usage of the word ‘steal’ struts out the fact that Titania is conscious of her feat of deceiving her co-habitats. This illustration, infers both, anthropocentric and postcolonial perspectives. Production of any art across the world is not devoid of a religion of the region; correspondingly, the Christianity had impacted profoundly on the genesis of oriental literature, Lynn, White JR. notes, “Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion . . . in absolute contrast to ancient paganism . . . only established a dualism of man and nature but . . . is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.” (White 9). Biblical approach allows us to analyze pain as an essential aspect for revitalization. Man being second to God in the hierarchy; Oberon penalizes Titania for her disobedience. Gloucester’s articulation in *King Lear* resonates the same, ‘As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods; They kill us for their sport’ (15.35-6). During the initial times of the colonial expansion, colonized subjects (like fairies) did not realize that their freedom was at stake in the future. As an extension of this, Ariel and Caliban in *The Tempest* had been captivated by Prospero, and the former had to please the master by fulfilling the obligation dispensed on him to be paid in ‘freedom’, the latter, who defied and appalled was unfit to redeem the liberty.

In an anthropocentric temperament, Orients exhausted their own abundant natural treasure to drench the prerequisites of sprouting industrial revolution. Subsequently rivaled among the neighboring European nations, to extend the vistas of draining the colonial impenetrable forestry through one of the mercantile policies⁴. The portrayal of the same in the

drama makes an unavoidable political reading. The brawl between Oberon and Titania, had been proved by postcolonial writers that it was fight between France and England to establish the control over colonies, eventually leading the nature to suffer along with colonized. Titania's words are manifestation of the fatalities/havoc caused due to their difference of opinions-two giant powers in race to launch their imperial control on the colonies to boost their manufacturing ventures- and their self-declared onus of white man's burden:

TITANIA. . . But with thy brawls thou hast disturb'd our Sport./ Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain,/ As in revenge, have suck'd up from the sea/ Contagious fogs; / The ploughman lost his sweat; and the green Corn/ Hath rotted ere his youth attain'd a beard:/ . . . No night is now with hymn or carol blest:- /Therefore the moon, the governess of floods, /Pale in her anger, washes all the air,/ And through this distemperature we see/ The seasons alter:/ . . ./ And this same progeny of evils comes/From our debate, from our dissension:/ We are their parents and original. (2.2.31- 64)

The studies⁵ have proved that the Elizabethans' grain shortage, bad harvests, cold weather and profound storms, and the great Frost of 1607-8 which had been recreated in *King Lear* was the consequence of coal burning and deforestation (Egan 64), for the burgeoning industrial revolution.

As we proceed, we could trace ecofeministic -assumed and theorized synonymity between nature and female, which, the women thinkers of 1970s christened as ecofeminism -perspective in the drama. Duke Theseus reminds Hermia that she is indebted to her father who is like God "One that compos'd your beauties; . . . By him imprinted, and within his power To leave the figure, or disfigure it" (1.1.56-60), advocates the conception of binaries, 'nature and culture'; women and nature, are indebted to man in acknowledging them into the 'cultured' society. Man, next to God in the hierarchy, has every right to dismantle/abandon his own creation. The personified phrases in the drama; "eyes are lodes starts, your tongue's sweet air, eyes busting out storms" (1.1.4) emulate that woman metamorphoses herself into a miniature universe at the time of emotional extravaganza. The concern towards nature is exemplified in Titania's quote in the article, who, like a mother looks after everyone in the forest and even the abandoned boy from India and Bottom who has been disfigured by Puck, a fairy.

The relationship between human and non-human has always been a biased one, nevertheless, woman and non-human cordiality have been depicted amicably since the beginning of the play as mentioned in the earlier explanation- the names of the fairies-. Oberon's action in the creation of an atmosphere to dote on any animal, once Titania opens her eyes; to retaliate her, signposts the approach of man towards 'other'gender and species. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin elaborate on the differences between human and non-human during the middle ages:

Legislation against bestiality- sexual intercourse between a human and an animal- has long been established in most societies . . . violations of this code in the middle ages were punishable by death, to the animal as well as the human, since the animal was also held to be morally responsible for the act. However, as people and animals became increasingly separated -by enclosure movements, by the industrial revolution, by the categorization of animals as species -their apparent lack of capacity for either consciousness or intelligence was accepted as granting them immunity from responsibility while ironically enslaving them . . .(Huggan 194).

By this, Shakespeare seems to deny the structured image that; animals do not have reasoning ability, when Bottom in a disfigured donkey's physic tries to convince Titania,

“Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason . . . reason and love keep little company together now-days . . . (3.1. 69-71).” Similarly, Satan in the form of a serpent, outwits Eve to enlighten her, about the (his version) conspiracy of God. Albeit, the brawl was between two male and Satan had won the combat (being a part of male chauvinism, wages war, and triumphs against God –another male-) by transmuting into a lowest creature–another ‘other’– exhausting his celestial knowledge via baiting Eve (‘other’). This standpoint leads us to speculate that Oberon, like Satan, was aware of the close association between these two ‘others’, hence used them as a trump card to gratify their male ego, by manifesting the irrationality of female. To elaborate the same; in both the transformed creatures, there is a man–not the real creature– who speaks to Titania/Eve, to be reasonable to degrade them, as their (female) emotionality overrules the reason. Eventually, this perspective percolates that women/animals do not have their own space in this man-subjected world, but it has been imparted to them. Despite all these accomplishments in regulating the ‘other (female)’, man desperately sought the form of ‘other (species)’. The consciousness of dearth manifests that, man could neither be independent nor overpower any species per se, the mind of man is wavering neither to accept irrational animal physic nor well-cultured or reasoned human being.

Extending the surmise to Titania’s advice to her fairies, to pluck all the beautiful wings of butterflies to fan Bottom, exemplifies dominance of human race on other species. In the contemporary world this dominance has been transformed into a systematic institutionalized oppression. To this, Lisa Kemmerer notes, “Nonhuman animals are systematically marginalized, objectified, and exploited by human beings of both sexes, of every color, . . . from every socioeconomic background” (Kemmerer 17). As a resolution Kemmerer advocates and advice in her book, *Sister Species* that at least women to follow vegetarianism and not to use leather products, as both are in the same plight of oppression by man. She uses terms like ‘rape’ and ‘trafficking’ to depict the animals’ traumatic condition in the so-called cosmopolitan culture of meat eating.

Oberon and his obedient fairy Puck were able to find the benefit of the flower drug and utilize that to comfort the Athenian youth as well as avenge the other gender (Titania) with a selfish intention to insult. According to Frank McCombie, people during Shakespearean time knew most of the herbs to self-medicate; hence Romeo used hemlock as anesthesia, and King Lear searched the ditches for remedies for . . . sickness (Egan 146). So King Lear’s garland prepared out of Cordelia’s advice might have included weeds known to have specific medicinal properties. Whereas, Oberon’s intention was not self-medication but selfish. The knowledge, if it were known to all, like the previous explanation, young love couples would have used it among themselves. Oberon might have stolen the knowledge from the residents of the woods and instructs Puck, as he (Oberon) was aware of the existence of flower and its usage. The love juice used by Oberon which was known only to him fits into a neo-colonial interpretation of ecofeminist’ contest on patented herbal medicines of developed nations; however, the source of knowledge might be from the tribal/hunter-gatherer/ from women herbal doctors (witches).

Likewise, Puck’s words to travel faster than air endorse man’s confidence on science, which has equipped human race against the pace of nature. It seems the interrogation of Titania as a symbol of interrogation to nature. Vandana Shiva comments on one of the very successful secretaries of The Royal Society of London, Glanvill; for him, the masculine aim of science was to know “the ways of captivating Nature, and making her sub serve our purposes, thereby achieving the empire of Man Over Nature”. Further he advocated chemistry as “one of the most useful arts .

. . ." (Shiva 18). Similarly, the love drug used had reacted chemically on the sense organs of the Athenians and Titania.

Nevertheless, man's venture to subjugate nature has been very subtly answered and reminded him, of his meekness before the great leveler [Nature]. Oberon's failure to bring the couples together goes beyond his super power and he needs to wipe out the fact as a 'dream'. Post-structural approach facilitates us to contest the binaries, which categorizes the centre or the privileged as manifestations of phallus or the logos and deconstructs that, there cannot be any universal centre. In the drama, Oberon, a structured centre/dominant, attempts to exemplify his power (as articulated in this article) over Titania and Athenians using the love drug, results rather in a vexed state. Eventually, he dismantles his power to nature, by repressing the fact of his failure as a dream [of phallogocentric]. Hence the article tries to exemplify that man's dream to possess control over the biosphere is deconstructed by nature as a mere dream.

Notes

- ¹ Sharon O' Dair has chaired the first of the two "Soul Food" sessions at 2009 ASLE conference in Victoria, BC.
- ² Meticulously forecasts apocalyptic hazards of pesticides on the biosphere.
- ³ According to Dillion, in medieval times, the term 'market' denoted the place where transactions took place, but in Shakespeare's time it came to acquire its modern sense of the placeless domain within which exchange occurs., in which values of each got tested. Oberon, the king of fairies, resident of nature (though in furious with Titania, the queen of the fairies on her disobedience)
- ⁴ Eileen McCracken has traced the rapidly accelerating deforestation from gradual start to the end of the seventeenth century when most of the woods were gone, marked for destruction because "they had been a serious obstacle to the Tudor conquest and colonization...
- ⁵ The Hundred Years' war (1337-1453) between France and England, enforced farmers to fight instead of concentrating on farm which resulted in weeds sprawl across the cultivable land. (Egan 147)

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