

FEMINIST READINGS OF SHAKESPEARE'S TEXTS: A PRESENTIST APPROACH

Dr. Elangbam Hemanta Singh

Department Of English

G. P. Women's College (A Constituent College Of)

Dhanamanjuri University, Imphal

Presentism is an active approach to literature since the text always actively engages with the present moment and specific place, as a reaction to new historicism and cultural materialism of the 1960s and 1980s. So, it stands in relation to and in constant dialogue with other approaches and theories. For example, Kiernan Ryan reminds us that “presentist criticism of Shakespeare will be credible only if it engages in a dialogue with futurity as open and dynamic as the dialogue it must engage in with the past” (183). Similarly, for Ewan Fernie, the text is in the past and in the present at the same time. He suggests that the text is in the present, but the presence provides a phenomenological comprehension of the present, past, and future (189).

One of the most important social movements of the past two centuries—certainly is feminism which has brought about the enduring and progressive transformation of human society on a global scale. As we all know, it was not, of course, the start of feminism. It has been a continuous agitation for women's rights and inequality since the late eighteenth century with a slogan, ‘the dignity of the female’(93) in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), with Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1927), with the voice ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman...it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...as feminine’(273) in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) My observation, feminist movement was, rather, a renewal of an old tradition of thought and action already possessing in its classic books which had diagnosed the problem of women's inequality in society and also proposed solutions that we have to trace the texts/classic books beyond the 18th century which is generally considered the hallmark of the beginning

of *women* that is the point my paper would look at, and deconstruct Shakespeare's texts through presentist approach.

Keeping in mind the topic of this paper, what the relation between deconstruction and presentism is. Perhaps, my observation, deconstruction, is more or less synonymous with presentism, a way of reading uncovers the unconscious rather than the conscious dimension of the text, all the things which its overt textuality glosses over or fails to recognise. It is a particular kind of reading and, thereby a method of criticism and mode of analytical inquiry. Barbara Johnson, in her book *The Critical Difference* (1980), defines, "Deconstruction is not synonymous with 'destruction,'...which etymologically means 'to undo'—a virtual synonym for 'to de-construct.'" (5). In short, it aims to produce disunity, to show that what had looked like unity and coherence actually contains contradictions which the text cannot stabilise. It seems to be waking up the sleeping dogs of signification and setting them on each other. In *Of Grammatology* (1976) Jacques Derrida describes the deconstructive reading, "must always aims at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer...between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of language" (158 &163).

Thus, the notion of interpretation is not only reproducing what the author thought and described in the text. Instead, it should be deconstructive 'unperceived by the writer' rather than reconstructive 'what he commands.' In *The Death of the Author* Roland Barthes proposes "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (148). The reader's task is in playing with them. It is not necessarily controlled by the author. My paper shall try to analyse women's role, gender and sexuality in the patriarchal society of Elizabethan period with reference to William Shakespeare's plays, and will be based on the presentist approach. And, I have chosen for this paper, such as, *Richard III*, *King Henry V*, *As You Like It* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

In Shakespeare's time, there was a hierarchy of sexes, similarly as they do today. A major difference is that today there are feminist movements out there to abolish gender inequality whereas during Shakespeare's time, women were fully aware of their roles in society and generally shared the same viewpoint as the men did. Gender and sexuality are

prominent themes in Shakespeare's plays. Depending on the genre of the play, they are used as either a device of direction, or a figure of propaganda. Shakespeare deconstructs them to display their ambiguity. Masculine men can play effeminate women roles which they did on stage and effeminate women can play masculine men roles either. In this aspect, Evelyn Gajowski has to say:

Woman's place was within doors, her business domestic...despite the recent precedents of Mary Queen of Scots, Mary Tudor and Elizabeth; they shared the age's distaste...for the notion of women's involvement in politics (53&186).

Many scholars and critics ask about Shakespeare's sexuality and whether or not he had homoerotic tendencies based on some of his sonnets: "Sweet love renew thy force, be it not said...Thy hungry eyes, even till they wink with fullness" [Sonnet: LVI]; "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" [Sonnet: CXXX]. These sonnets are, few examples, believed to have been written about men as being disguised. Regardless, whether this is true or not, we shall never know. We do, however, know that he deconstructed the notion of gender and sexuality within his plays, especially in different ways, so that, the message, perhaps, could accomplish to the masses through Elizabethan audience. The method he used to deconstruct them was based on the genre of the specific play that is comedy.

Shakespeare wrote a variety of genres from romance to tragedy to history to comedy. Each genre had its own way of blotting the lines of sexuality and gender. It seems each genre had its own set of rules and methods for how they were displayed and the limitations they possessed. Although there are women who face tragic fates in tragedies, they are largely dominated by men, for examples, such as *Titus Andronicus*, *Hamlet* and *Othello* where the male characters' destinies predominately rule over the plot of the plays. There is also a "detachment from sexual violence" (Gajowski: 71) in these tragedies. In *Othello* for example, when Othello murders Desdemona, Gajowski explains that the violence is uncontrollable: "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul / Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars / Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men" [V.ii.1].

Shakespearean tragedy, actually, is in favour of males, mainly controlling the plot and their fates holding the main focus. However, Shakespearean comedy shows a different

approach. In *Shakespeare's Women* (1981) Angela Pitt makes her points regarding the role of women in Shakespeare's plays. The possible reason is that Shakespeare chose women for his comedies: "If the dark realm of Shakespeare's tragedies is essentially men's territory, pride of place in the bright panorama of his comedies must surely belong to the women" (75). It is here we see the reversal of gender roles such as Titania's power in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Although Oberon is King of the fairies, he can be read as being a weaker than his wife Titania, Queen of the fairies. He bends to her will and although he argues with her and makes demands, he never truly gets what he wants. In this context, Pitt said:

Why should the women leap into prominence? One reason may be that Shakespeare found their traditional attributes of modesty, intuition and high-spiritedness highly suitable material for his comedies. They never go beyond what an Elizabethan audience would have found acceptable in a woman (75).

In *Presentism, Sexuality and Gender in Shakespeare* Evelyn Gajowski discusses why comedy can extend the boundaries and blur the lines even more when discussing sexuality and gender. She writes:

Comedy provides a safety net that allows the unfamiliar or the unacceptable to be presented in public, because the stakes are perceived to be lower than in tragedy...This allows greater free play than in work that is taken more seriously and is more closely scrutinized as a result (133).

The best example of this is in *A Midsummer's Night Dream* with Robin Goodfellow the Puck; he makes much of the chaos in the play and even goes to make Titania commit bestiality with Nick Bottom who has been transformed into an ass. This sexual taboo could be seen as offensive by the audience but, accepted and forgiven as being a comedy. Puck at the Epilogue said his famous monologue; "If we shadows have offended / Think but this, and all is mended" [V. i. 422]. With this Titania is restored her strong, dominating role as a leading woman. Take for another example, *As You Like It* in which Rosalind runs away along with Celia to the Forest of Arden; and they disguise themselves—Rosalind as a boy called Ganymede and Celia as a girl named Aliena. Phebe, unaware of Ganymede as actually Rosalind, falls in love with Ganymede. Due to an interest of situation, Phebe, Orlando, Silvius, and Rosalind fall in love in disguise among them in the forest where Rosalind said "Pay you,

no more of this; 't is like the howling of / Irish wolves against the moon... as I love no woman, [V. ii. 91-113]. It creates a metatheatre, because the character of Rosalind would have been played by a young, feminine looking boy. Therefore, not only is there a homoerotic relationship in the play between the female characters Phebe and Rosalind but, also on the stage by the two male actors portraying the women. Phebe's unawareness, Ganymede is actually a girl, shows the ambiguity of sex. It shows that male and female are alterable; and thereby, they are one in the same. Not only does Shakespeare challenge the conventions of gender roles in his comedies, but also explores the ambiguity of sexuality.

Shakespeare also uses sexuality and gender roles as a tool of manipulation. Shakespeare's *Richard III* is the best example. After killing her husband and her father-in-law, Richard successfully seduces Lady Anne (the widow of the late Prince Edward and daughter-in-law of the late King Henry VI) by explaining that he only killed them out of love for her. Despite her hurling insults at him he persists. In a notable instant when Richard opens his shirt and holds his sword to his breast telling Anne to kill him if she will not love him, because he would rather die than not have her. He says: "Nay, do not pause; for I did kill King Henry/ But 'twas thy beauty that provoked me" (I. ii.179-180). When she drops the sword he says: "Take up the sword again, or take up me" (I. ii.183). It is obvious that Richard does not truly love Anne, but he strives for her love for his own personal gain. When Anne accepts his ring on her finger and then, Richard exits and states "Was ever woman in this humour wooed? Was ever woman in this humour won? I'll have her; but I will not keep her long" (I.ii.227-229). He continues on celebrating his successful seduction of Anne. In this case, sexuality—its proper use, and gender roles have lost. Sexuality as it is known in the context of society is broken, it no longer becomes about love or lust but, for the gain of power. Although Richard is described as feminine looking, he proves the qualities of a masculine being and a symbol of power, is not ruled by his emotions, whereas Anne shows, despite the worth of an effeminate being a symbol of strong willed, is weak and ruled by her emotions. She knows that Richard is evil, yet she allows his words to captivate her and gives into his will. She allows herself to be seduced by his sexuality. In *Shakespeare and Gender* Phyllis Rackin is of her opinion:

Characterized throughout in terms of warlike masculinity and aggressive misogyny, Richard also commands the female power of erotic seduction. His monopoly of both male and female sexual energy is vividly portrayed in his seduction of Anne (Rackin: 270).

The gender roles in *Richard III* are quite reflective of Elizabethan society. Anne is angry at Richard for his heinous crimes, yet she cannot make a sound decision because of her emotions that Richard is bringing out of her. Shakespeare deconstructs sexuality by taking it out of its norms in society. Rather than it is used for seduction for sex or for love, it is seduction for love which shows that in fact it is a tool that can be dangerous if wielded by the wrong person such as Richard. Although the gender roles have not changed per se, the women of the play have been displaced. In *Shakespeare and Gender* Phyllis Rackin discusses how Shakespeare “transforms” the women of history and how they are represented, she writes:

The reconstruction of history as tragedy in *Richard III* is accompanied by a remarkable transformation in the representation and placement of female characters...Paradoxically...the female characters are ennobled...also disempowered...sympathetically portrayed (Rackin: 267).

Shakespeare not only deconstructs sexuality and gender in social conventions to use them as tools for power, but he also uses them as a form of English propaganda. During Shakespeare’s time, the English were unfriendly with the French forces and Shakespeare used his plays to disempowering the French as much as he could. “Shakespeare repeatedly represents the French forces as effeminate” (Gajowski: 70). By portraying the French as effeminate, it is a message that they are weak and able to be conquered by England. “Shakespeare represents the entire French Kingdom as a woman to be conquered by the masculine force of the English army” (Gajowski: 70). In this case, he uses gender and the attributes of it to portray a certain image about the French. This would have pleased any of the political figures in Elizabethan England who would have been watching these plays. In Shakespeare’s *King Henry V*, the French are shown as a weak force against England. The King of France says: “Thus comes the English with full power / upon us / And more than carefully it us concerns” [II.iv.1]. And the King of France continues talking about the fear that the French have for the English: “For England his approaches makes as fierce / As waters to the

sucking of a gulf" (II.iv.9-10). Here, he compares the approaching English force as huge and powerful rushing water which could destroy anything. He claims, they must be strong, but it is apparent that the French are portrayed to fear the English. This would have evoked a strong reaction from the English audience watching, showing that the French, like women, are ruled by their fear and have little might.

Shakespeare saw the social norms of sexuality and gender in Elizabethan society, and tried to deconstruct them to bring a new viewpoint on them. He was the Elizabethan version of a modern day feminist. He showed in his works that they are ambiguous tools that could be used for more than what society said they could be. He showed that men could be women and women could be men, that gender roles could be reversed and that no social norm was concrete. Depending on his genre, his method of deconstructing sexuality and gender changed and he was aware that he could go further within his comedies, because of their light-hearted plot lines. He used them not only ambiguously, but also as a powerful tool that could be wielded by one to gain power over another for political gain. Lastly, he used them as English propaganda to show that England was stronger than France and that they would always be victorious. Shakespeare's ability to deconstruct them within comedies proves that the social hierarchy is one that is not permanent and can be broken.

Works Cited:

- Barthes, Roland. 'The Death of the Author,' In *Image Music Text*, Trans., Stephen Heath, London: Fontana Press, 1977
- Derrida, Jacques. 'The exorbitant: Question of Method,' In *Of Grammatology*, Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976
- Fernie, Ewan. "Action! *Henry V.*" in *Presentist Shakespeare's* (eds., Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes) New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Gajowski, Evelyn (ed.) *Presentism, Gender, and Sexuality in Shakespeare*, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Johnson, Barbara. *The Critical Difference*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.
- Pitt, Angela. *Shakespeare's Women*. Newton Abbot Devon: David & Charles., 1981
- Rackin, Phyllis, "Engendering the Tragic Audience: The Case of *Richard III*" in *Shakespeare and Gender: A History* (eds., Deborah Barker and Ivo Kamps) London: Verso, 1995. 263-282

- Shakespeare, William. *Othello: The New Cambridge Shakespeare* Norman Sanders. Cambridge: CUP, 2003(1984).
- William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream: The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare Volume 23*. Cambridge: CUP, 2009 (1924, 1969)
- William. *As You Like It: The Warwick Shakespeare* (ed. J.C. Smith) New Delhi: S. Chand & Company Ltd., n.d.
- William. *King Richard III: The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare Volume 29*. Cambridge: CUP, 2009 (1954, 1961)
- William. *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* 15 March, 2020, <<https://manybooks.net/>> Time: 5:10 pm
- Ryan, Kiernan. "The Perils of Presentism," in *Presentist Shakespeare's* (eds., Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes) New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Women with Structures on Political and Moral Subjects: Dublin, Third Edition, 1792* (1796) Web. 14 Mar. 2020 <<http://www.books.google.com>> Time: 2:26pm

