



***As You Like It* : Study in Ecocriticism**

Dr. Bimlesh K. Singh, Associate Professor,
Dept. of English, C.R.A. College, Sonipat (HR)
Email:drbimleshksingh@gmail.com

As You Like It is one of the finest plays of Shakespearean where the dramatic genius of the ‘Bard of Avon’ works wonders. The critics like Charlton, Hazlitt, Ruskin have dwelt upon the romantic elements of this comedy such as love, music, beauty, pastoralism, feminine sensibility etc. If we probe deeply into the dramatic texture of this play, it opens out vistas of deep concerns for environmentalism. The play in general and its major parts (Acts I, II, II, IV & V) in the ‘Forest of Arden’ present an integral, an all-inclusive living of natural and cultural, emotional and intellectual, aristocratic and pastoral elements. In other words, through judicious execution of the metaphor and other poetic devices or tropes Shakespeare could be able to bring about a happy reconciliation of opposite elements of human life powerfully pleading for harmony between ecology and literature. This paper is a humble attempt to evaluate ‘*As You Like It*’ as a text which offers rich feast to build up metaphorically a valid argument for maintaining ecological balance and human goodness.



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The ecocritical perspective thus developed will focus on relationship between humans and the environment thereby creating cultural consciousness for harmonious living. The paper will implicitly and explicitly raise issues and concerns towards building up a creative & cultural awakening to overcome “the outrage done to nature”. (Wordsworth, 158)

As Ecocritics like Joseph Meeker, Daniel Botkin, Rueckert and Clark unanimously stress on the balance and harmony of human and natural world for the maintenance of environmental beauty, so great playwright like Shakespeare did intend to uphold values and beliefs for spiritual revival and social harmony through his characters. Duke Senior and his team are all devoted to live a loving communitarian life as free human beings without any malice, pride and prejudice. The kind of warmth, co-ordination, worldly wisdom, harmony and balance which all of the residents of the Forest of Arden maintain is a sure proof of their social as well as environmental consciousness. All of them are perhaps, committed to guarantee a kind of life the ecocritic Clark hints at : “A fundamental unit will be the commune, a closely knit, small community based on love, friendship, shared values, and commitment to a common life.... cooperative institutions in all areas of social life will be formed: mutualistic associations for child care and education, for production and distribution, for cultural creation, for play and enjoyment, for reflection and spiritual renewal. Organization will be based not on the demands of power, but rather on the self-realization of person as free social beings. (Clark, 108)

As Daniel Botkin observes:

As long as we could believe that nature undisturbed was constant, we were provided with a simple standard against which to judge our actions, a reflection from a windless pond in which our place was both apparent and fixed, providing us with a sense of continuity and permanence that was comforting. Abandoning these beliefs leaves us on an extreme existential position: we are like small boats without anchors in a sea of time; how we long for a safe harbor on a shore. (Botkin, 188-89)



In *As You Like It* Shakespeare does not merely romanticize or moralize the characters or situations. Rather, he conceived characters like Duke Senior, Orlando and Rosalind who lived every moment of their living in the light of consciousness which could enable them to ‘Show up’ rather than just merely “to exist” as Heidegger would suggest.

They stand up, in all hard times, with good moral and spiritual virtues to maintain harmony between nature and culture to make planet a vibrant living space as Ecocritics/ Environmentalists/Nature-lovers envisioned.

As the title goes, Shakespeare intended this play to dramatize multifaceted aspects of humanity. A creative genius like Shakespeare must have had in mind that a truly great work of art must stand the test of time by addressing the eternal questions concerning nature and culture. Critics through ages have explored romantic and imperial elements in this play. The present paper is an attempt to approach *As You Like It* from ecocritical perspective. Taking into account the multiple challenges of contemporary society like ozone depletion, nuclear war, population explosion, ‘Depth’ ecology has prominently preoccupied the sense and sensibility of artists and thinkers to highlight the ideas and opinions which may facilitate the holy task of preserving humanity through conservation of nature. Studied profoundly, Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* dramatises vital and indispensable linkage between mankind and nature.

What strikes us most immediately about *As You Like It* is the representation of nature herein various forms. Nature is here qualified as both human nature and nature as origin of edenic beauty and joy for mankind. Cruelty and blind ambition of human nature are represented by Oliver; melancholy/sadness by Jaques but simplicity and humanity by Orlando; Duke Senior, Rosalind and Celia stand for love and gentility, whereas Duke Frederick like Oliver is too selfish to be generous. Even Celia (Duke Frederick’s daughter) notices the fair and fine functions of nature in ennobling humanity in the very opening of the play:

When Nature hath made a fair creature, may she not by fortune fall into the fine? Though Nature hath given us wit to flout at fortune, hath not fortune sent in this fool to cut off the argument? (I.I. 256)

Irritated by the foul conspiracy of his young usurping brother, Duke Senior is banished. When the world of man is callous and dull to the Duke Senior, he has no lasting shelter but to resign himself to the edenic beauty and bliss which the happy and peaceful forest ensures. It is in ‘The forest of Arden’ that the Duke Senior, along with his devoted courtiers feels at ease and soothed in the green company of green pasture, flora and fauna. Contrasting between the pleasure and spontaneity in the lap of the forest between artificiality of the court life, Duke Senior outbursts:

Now my co-mates and brothers in exile,
Hath not old custom made this life more sweet
than that of painted pomp? Are not these woods
more free from peril than the envious court.
Here feel we not the penalty of Adam,
the season’s difference, as the icy fang
and Churlish chiding of the winter’s wind. (II, I, 260)

Duke Senior feels natural joy and peace in the Forest of Arden. No wonder, his sensible heart & soul grows poetic and starts humanizing the beauty and variety of nature through vivid similes and metaphors. His unsophisticated and uncorrupted heart feels natural kinship in the Forest of Arden, and no wonder, all the trees and waters appeal to him most instantly. The kind of spiritual growth that he experiences herein is the natural corollary of his inner association with bright and beautiful nature around him. Duke Senior truly declares:

There is no flattery; there are counsellors.
that feelingly persuade me what I am?
Sweet are the uses of adversity,



which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
wears yet a precious jewel in his head;
and this our life, exempt from public haunt,
finds tongues in trees, books in running brooks',
sermons in stones, and good in everything. (II, I, 260)

“Far from the madding Crowd’s ignoble strife” (Gray, 147), the denizens of this edenic life were deeply aware of the unfailing creative influences of nature on human mind. Wordsworth also realized that in the jocund company of nature, human mind receives moral and spiritual wisdom far more priceless and lasting than those of moralists/saints:

She has a world of ready wealth,
Our minds and hearts to bliss –
Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,
Truth breathed by cheerfulness.
One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
of moral evil and of good,
than all the sages caw. (The Table Turned, 89)

Amiens, a loyal Noble of Duke Senior is equally susceptible to the unique role of nature in human life. He felt that nature enlightens human nature so much so that it becomes, out and out, noble and mature. Perhaps Nature created man to have such harmony and humility as world lend it a creative style “so quiet and so sweet”. It is this particularity of nature which even Amiens talks of :

I would not change it.
Happy is your grace.
That can translate the stubbornness
of fortune into so quiet and so sweet a style. (II, I, 260)

In fact, in the lap of nature Shakespearean characters find true expression of their inmost feelings. Free from external bonds of society and law, they enjoy here the life of contentment, contemplation and freedom. The American Transcendentalists (Emerson & Thoreau) talk of this kind of life marked by harmony between nature and human nature. Thoreau, the American Sage of Concord built an abode in solitude near the Walden Pond. Thoreau explains that he himself built. He wanted to try living close to nature, apart from society in which “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation”. (Thoreau, 135) In contemporary society, we find deep awareness towards maintaining ecological balance both in literature and civic life. The artists as well as the environmentalists show profound concern towards this noble cause. The well-known environmentalist Sunderlal Bahuguna through his ardent championing of ‘Chipko’ Movement and the Bishnoi Community of Rajasthan through the ‘Khecheri’ have rendered remarkable service in the domain of creating social awareness towards ‘afforestation’ and discouraging ‘Deforestation’.

As an ecocritical text, *As You Like It* offers a green reading. The play emerges as an eye-opener for the denizens of the contemporary society who pride in being tyrannical, oppressive and fraudulent. Even the Lords of Duke Senior warn the weeping and cynical philosopher like Jaques against not finding fault with nature. He confesses sincerely that city-dwellers and court –dwellers cannot imagine to have the beauty and wealth of the Forest of Arden precisely because of their mean-mindedness:

The body of country, city, court,
Yea, and of this our life, swearing that we
Are mere usurpers, tyrants, and what’s worse.
To fright the animals and to kill them up,



In their assigned and native dwelling place. (II, I, 261)

Adams, Orlando's loyal servant equally realizes the healing elixir of life which the antique world of Arden offers. He finds that the ambience of the forest is congenial enough to awaken sense of duty and responsibility among the residents of the court. The pastoralism, the melody and the wealth of pleasure are equally felt by Amiens in the Arden when he says:

Under the greenwood tree,
Who loves to lie with me,
And turn his merry note –
Under the sweet bird's throat:
Come hither, come hither, come hither.
Here shall he see
No enemy
But winter and rough weather. (II, II, 263)

The old shepherd Corin also expresses the virtues of the simple life lived in the Forest of Arden and is ready to have it even at the cost of renouncing court life:

If you like upon report
The soil, the profit, and this kind of life,
I will your very faithful feeder be,
And buy it with your gold right suddenly. (II, II, 261)

The Forest of Arden ensures the simple living and high thinking. The residents of the Arden lead carefree, blissful and self-contained life. This kind of living pleads for a life of self-temperance beyond the materialism and possessiveness of the worldly life. All sing to celebrate this beauty and bounty:

Who doth ambition shun,
And loves to line I'th' sun,
Seeking the food he eats,
And pleased with what he gets:
Come hither, come hither, come hither.
Here shall he see
No enemy
But winter and rough weather. (II, II, 264)

The self-reliant and honest living of the forest are pollution free and there is neither seek hurry, nor divided aim. Human life is full of immoral and unnatural evils like ingratitude cruelty and rudeness as against nature which is benevolent, compassionate and truthful. Shakespeare intended this dialogue to exhort mankind about the secrets of happy and peaceful living. There seems to be a wonderful combination of literature, philosophy and ecology all intertwined. Amiens sings in full-throated ease in the humorous vein of biting preaching mankind:

Blow, blow, thou winter wind,
Thou art not so unkind,
As man's ingratitude.
Thy tooth is not so keen,
Because thou art not seen,
Although thy breath be rude.
Hey-ho, sing hey-ho, unto the green
Most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly. (II, VII, 266)

As an ecocritical text, *As You Like It* celebrates the pristine beauty and innocence. As *As You Like It* is an ecocritical text, there is an invocation of world of nature-imageries here to portray the volatile mindsets of Love-born pairs (Orlando & Rosalind) represent mankind and women respectively. The alchemy of Shakespeare's creative genius is obvious in his likening changing human emotions with



changing seasons like December, April and May. However the tone of the persona (Rosalind) is here marked by humour and wit when she pokes at man through Orlando:

... 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. (IV, I, 275)

The practical wisdom of Rosalind becomes evident when she tells Orlando that she will never lose her heart for merely emotional or physical separation from him as has happened in the mythical tales of Diana and Hyen:

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, 275)

The ecological bounty of natural/pastoral imagery seems pretty clear when in the Forest of Arden, the pages sing songs to show the intensity of love felt by lovers during springtime in the forest:

How that a life was but a flower,
 In spring time, the only pretty ring time,
 When birds do sing, hey ding, a ding, a ding,
 Sweet lovers love the spring. (V, III, 280-81)

The ecocritical text explores the possibility of unbroken harmony between nature and man. Even the God of marriage (Hymen) descends to bless in the lap of nature the long-awaited lovers to get married. Shakespeare employs apt and vivid dictions from nature to effectively present the happy wedlock of Rosalind and Orlando:

Wedding is great Juno's crown,
 O blessed bond of board and bed;
 Tis Hymen peoples every town,
 High Wedlock then be honoured;
 Honour, high honour and renown
 To Hymen, god of every town! (VI, IV, 282)

The Duke Senior takes no time to join this happy celebration and showers his benign blessings. *As You Like It* seems to be conceived in ecocritical genre. Even the protagonist who expresses his vision of a dream-life-partner, he versifies it on the boughs of a tree in the Forest of Arden. Even the romantic expression is characterized by nature-imagery and mythical reference. There seems to be an excellent interplay of nature-culture harmony.

'Twixt the souls of friend and friend;
 But upon the fairest boughs,
 Or at every sentence end,
 Will I 'Rosalinda' write,
 Teaching all that read to know
 The quintessence of every sprite
 Heaven would in little show.
 Therefore heaven Nature charg'd
 With all graces wide-enlarged.
 Helen's cheek, but not her heart,
 Cleopatra's majesty, Atlanta's better part.
 Sad Lucretia's modesty. Thus Rosalinda of many parts,
 By heavenly synod was devis'd. (Act III, Sc II, 268)



In ultimate analysis, the comedy of '*As You Like It*' is true to the calls of the natural and cultural instincts of humanity in all ages and times. The romantic critics of comedy dive deep into the ever fresh river of love and beauty in this play, but then the environmentalists as well as the champions of cultural studies get an insatiable feast of harmonious living which may alone ensure the safety and security of human race. Hence for the present world-order facing the menace and bavocs of global warming, pollution and other natural disasters, *As You Like It* offers an unfainting panacea and healing touch. This accounts for the universality and the enduring appeal of this romantic comedy.

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