


Ecopolitics and Ecocriticism in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Self, Society and Nature

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Abstract

Centuries have passed since the performance of Shakespearean plays, but still, they continue to fascinate the critics and readers for their relevance even in today's world. Recently, critics and scholars have endeavoured to interpret Shakespeare from an ecological viewpoint with the emergence of 'Environmental Humanities'. Shakespeare never used the term ecology or environmentalism in his works but his employment of natural elements somehow replicates the environmental crisis which we are facing today. Shakespeare manifested his genius in his treatment of supernatural elements like fairies, goblins, and witches and his *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has widely been acclaimed by the audience and critics for its magnificent use of supernatural creatures like fairies. The present study aims to demonstrate how the forest, the fairies and the fairy world are presented by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This paper will investigate how Nick Bottom manifests civilization's departure from the world of nature and its re-aggregation into the civilized world order after fully realizing its deep bonding with other beings of nature. In this journey of self-realization, human-turned-donkey Bottom is transformed into an ecological self and Puck or Robin Goodfellow, the embodiment of nature, heralds the nature identification.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Nature, Deep Ecology, Ecological-self, Fairies, Nick Bottom, Puck.

Introduction

The great Bard of Avon harvested a galaxy of plays centuries ago, but his oeuvres still enjoy a legacy through myriads of interpretation, appropriation and adaptation. Critics and scholars have endeavoured to scout the popularity of Shakespearean plays and strived to decode Shakespeare from new critical insights like ecocriticism. The emergence of 'Environmental Humanities' has engineered an interest in the explication of prolific writers against one of the pressing issues of the present-day that is environmental degradation and climate crisis. In this

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era of Anthropocene, Environmental Humanities has emanated the multidisciplinary study of literature, art, culture, politics, history and philosophy from an ecocritical stance.

Most of the critics and scholars generally do not peruse Shakespeare from an ecocritical point of view but they enjoy Shakespearean plays for the portrayal of the natural world- the desert island in *The Tempest*, the witches upon the heath in *Macbeth*, the fairies of the forest in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. His vaticination gave birth to marvellous characters and their endeavours which reflect the contemporary anthropocentric orientation to master nature. Recently, critics and scholars have interpreted Shakespeare from an ecological viewpoint. In many Shakespearean plays, the natural world plays a significant role in the lives of the characters. For example, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*, the characters retreat to the world of nature to escape the corrupt law and order of society. In *The Tempest*, on one hand, we can find the characters are like the petty flies in the hands of Nature and on the other, someone like Prospero tries to control the natural elements of the island. In *As You Like It*, most of the characters take refuge in the lap of Forest Arden to escape the inequity and injustice of society. Though Shakespeare never used the term ecology or environmentalism in his works but his use of natural elements somehow replicates the environmental crisis which we are facing today. Critics and reviewers have endeavoured to associate Shakespeare with environmental criticism by employing different aspects of ecocriticism in Shakespearean plays.

Discerning the belief system of his contemporary Elizabethan age, Shakespeare exhibited a mastery in his treatment of supernatural elements like fairies, goblins, and witches. In this respect, his *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has widely been commented by the audience and critics for its magnificent use of supernatural creatures like fairies. The present study aims to demonstrate how the forest, the fairies and the fairy world are presented by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It will also endeavour to explore the fairies not only as supernatural elements but also as the orators of the forest and the realm of Nature. Shakespeare has liberated these fairies from demonic associations and they have become part and parcel of the green world which has a soothing capacity. Thereby, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* becomes a festive drama of green world where the lovers can unite in the green forest. So, my paper aims to decipher the connection between Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Environmentalism, and how one should strive to interpret Shakespeare ecocritically.

Ecocriticism and Environmental Humanities

In this era of the 21st century environmental degradation has acquired an immense stir in the field of multidisciplinary research among thinkers and philosophers. Environmental philosophy surfaced in the 1970s, environmental history in the 1980s, ecocriticism in the early 1990s and eventually environmental justice in the context of the global environmental outlook gained momentum in the debate of multidisciplinary contexts. Subsequently, critics and scholars have started to elucidate the literary texts which are not evidently environmental from an ecological point of view. Lawrence Buell in the preface to his book *The Future Environmental Criticism*, points out that ecocritical studies aim to indicate the vulnerable state of life on earth and its inferences in literary and cultural texts. This ecocritical study incorporates both the literature on nature and literature composed against the depredation of the environment. Therefore, a considerable number of literary texts on nature are being interpreted from an ecocritical perspective by 21st-century readers. For example, William Wordsworth is generally considered a nature poet, but contemporary readers have analyzed Wordsworth's love for nature with proto-ecological consciousness and environmental ethics.

Ecocriticism which concentrates on the relationship between the natural world and literature, has garnered attention among critics and readers. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as an interdisciplinary field which analyzes literary works in the context of nature and environmental issues. This ecocritical study also identified as Green Studies, Ecopoetics, and Environmental Humanities is now one of the intensively discussed topics among the critics. Its primary motto is to escalate consciousness among humankind about the degrading state of our planet. There are many sub-fields of ecocriticism like Ecofeminism, Deep ecology, Ecocide etc. The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess formulated the term 'Deep Ecology' in his work "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movement: A Summary" where he proposed that plants, animals, humans and the Earth form a unified whole. This concept of 'Deep Ecology' speaks for the ecocentric approach rather than an anthropocentric one. In the Anthropocentric analogy, human beings are considered the supreme beings of this world, and they can gain mastery over nature and other animals and all the natural resources are to be exploited by human beings. However, the biocentric approach proposes that all the elements of this planet are equal in status, and all are equally important to create a harmonized state of being on Earth. So, Deep Ecology is a reformist movement that opposes the view that human beings are the ultimate supreme beings of this planet. Naess recommends a 'total view' approach for the

improvement of the Man-Nature relationship. This approach addresses the cultural, social, personal and global ramifications of our endeavours and estimates how the environment and human beings can perform harmoniously (Drengson 27). Literature, philosophy, science, and ethics come hand in hand to provide deeper wisdom for the betterment of our ecology and therefore, “Naess feels that major interdisciplinary efforts are needed to study the ecology and evolution of human and other communication systems of cultures in their home places” (Drengson 3). Deep ecology is a radical movement that proposes that we need an eco-centered attitude instead of an anthropocentric approach for the well-being of our globe (Drengson 27). We have to look for reformation concerning our exploitation of natural resources and individuals and communities need to raise deeper questions regarding environmental ethics (Devall and Sessions 2). We have to be considerate of our actions as science alone cannot bring our necessary preventions for environmental degradation. Naess points out that as long as we dissociate ourselves from nature and unnecessarily exploit natural resources, we cannot formulate a balanced ecosystem. Therefore, it speaks for a unified whole where an individual is also a part of this harmonious ecosystem. Naess explains that ecological solutions can be found “when people feel that they unselfishly give up, or even sacrifice, their self-interest to show love for nature, this is probably, in the long run, a treacherous basis for conservation. Through identification, they may come to see that their interests are served through conservation, through genuine self-love, the love of a widened and deepened self” (Naess 85). So, it speaks for man’s identification with nonhuman beings and the one maxim Naess believes is that “All life has intrinsic value, irrespective of its value to humans” (Naess 19). Therefore, through this interconnectedness between man and the natural world, one “may come to see their interests are served by conservation, through genuine self-love, the love of a widened and deepened self” (Naess 85). Naess also contends:

With increasing maturity, the self is widened and deepened [and] our self-realization is hindered if the self-realization of others, with whom we identify is hindered. Our self-love will fight this hindrance by assisting in the self-realization of others according to the formula “Live and Let Live!”. Thus, everything that can be achieved by altruism – the dutiful, moral consideration for others – can be achieved by the process of widening and deepening ourselves (Drengson 82).

So, a deeper understanding and awareness is needed among human beings about this interconnectedness of beings and here, literature can be instrumental to the formation of ecological self.

‘Ecological Self’ of Nick Bottom as orchestrated by Puck

A Midsummer Night’s Dream can be considered an allegorical study of socio-economic and ecological conversion eventuated in Europe during the Elizabethan era. It mirrors the upshots of the capitalist agricultural model on the relationship between man and nature. Shakespeare brings in here a plethora of characters who transpose between a civilized world and the green woods of fairy world. The characters like Titania, Robin Goodfellow and Nick Bottom are representatives of the interconnectedness of man and the natural world. The present paper attempts to read *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as an allegory of man’s alienation from nature and human beings’ venture to subjugate nature.

Nick Bottom, the weaver is the spokesperson of the age of mechanical revolution as the play displays the crucial role the artisans had in the age of machine and work and the subsequent “female earth and virgin spirit [that] were subdued by machine” (Merchant 2). Here, we find six workers: the weaver, Nick Bottom, a tailor, a joiner, a tinker, a carpenter and a bellows-mender whom Robin Goodfellow calls “crew of patches, rude mechanicals” (Shakespeare 3.2.9). This mechanical revolution refers to the scientific development during the Renaissance Age that resulted in industrialization, commodification, deforestation, mining etc. This machine revolution also gave birth to the subjugation of the wild, uncontrollable realm of nature. Nature is considered female, so the subjection of women can be seen in the play. For example, Theseus captures Hippolyta and says, “Hippolyta, I woo’d thee with my sword and won thy love doing thee injuries” (Shakespeare 1.1.17). Theseus’s act is identified as domination and mastery over the untamed nature.

Nick Bottom, the interceder between the green world and the world of commerce, surpasses the pastoral, fantastical woodland and the commercial, ordered society. After his transformation into a donkey, he passes his time by singing which is caught up by Titania’s attention. Titania, under the spell of herb nectar, considers Bottom not a beast but a beautiful man. She calls him, “gentle mortal, sing again/Mine ear is much enthralled of thy note/ So is mine eye enthralled to thy shape” (Shakespeare 3.1.139). She finds him a perfect one, the admixture of animal and human makes him wiser, gentle and beautiful. His transformation makes him a part of the world of nature which is evocative of one’s identification with nature. Bottom’s acquaintance with the green world is suggestive of his journey to another world: a world of dream or the world of nature. His interaction with the fairies makes him closer to the realm of nature and non-human living beings and transforms his understanding of nature. When

he meets the fairy called Mustardseed says, “Good master Mustardseed, I know your patience well. That same cowardly, giant-like ox-beef hath devoured many gentleman of your house.” He sympathizes with the Mustardseed and wants to bond with her; this is also an example of nature identification. His interaction with Mustardseed makes him realize her value in this world and he feels the urge to protect her from the ox. His deep attachment to the elements of nature makes him more connected to the green world. His journey into the fairy world helps him to discover his ‘ecological self’.

Bottom’s transformation, his journey into a dream world and his bonding with the elements of nature are orchestrated by Puck and this transformation becomes pivotal in his self-realization and identification with nature. Arne Naess talks of a total view approach to the natural world where human beings become part of a total ecosystem. Here, one “feels a strong sense of wide identification with what we are sensing... involving a heightened sense of empathy and an expansion of our concern with non-human life. Obligation and coercion to protect human life become unnecessary” (Harding 1). This transitional stage highlights his separation from the human world; the middle phase of his commune with nature; and finally, his emanation as a self-realized, new man. Puck or Robin Goodfellow is the drive that helps him to move from the commercial world to the realm of ecology. Bottom becomes the representative of the ecological identity crisis of human beings of today’s world and Puck acts as a catalyst in this transformational voyage of Bottom. Puck becomes the pivotal force in the play to make things happen and the guiding force for Bottom, Titania, the lovers and the audience leading them to the path of nature-identification. Therefore, the play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, on one hand, exhibits man’s departure from the world of nature and on another, his re-amalgamation into his society after recognizing his ecological self. The dream serves as a liminal stage for Bottom’s self-realization and Puck performs as a puppeteer in this journey as told in the final monologue of the play:

If we shadows have offended,
 Think but this, and all is mended,
 That you have but slumbered here
 While these visions did appear.
 And this weak and idle theme,
 No more yielding but a dream.

Gentles, do no reprehend

If you pardon, we will mend:

And, as I am an honest Puck,

If we have unearned luck

Now to 'scape the serpent's tongue,

We will make amends ere long,

Else the Puck a liar call.

So, good night unto you all

Give me your hands if we be friends,

And Robin shall restore amends (Shakespeare 4.1.440-455).

Conclusion

Shakespearean plays were produced more than 400 years ago, but his plays are still capable of catering to universal appeal to the audience for their relevance even in the 21st century. With the emergence of environmental degradation and climate crisis as a crucial issue in scientific research, literature also ventures to replicate these themes in its province. By engendering awareness among common folk about the issues related to nature and the environment, literature also propagates the evolution of a more balanced earth-centric habitat. Therefore, the newly emergent ecocritical humanities become instrumental in raising awareness about the effects of our anthropocentric behaviours on the environment. So, Shakespeare's use of natural elements and the green world can be interpreted as a manifestation of Arne Naess's total view approach. Thus, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can undoubtedly be incorporated into the field of Environmental Humanities.

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