

## RETURNED GAZE AND QUEER SUBVERSION IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *AS YOU LIKE IT*

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### **Abstract:**

*Gaze has been the monopoly of the heterosexual male since the beginning of the civilization. Shakespeare's England was no exception. Even though a woman herself was the monarch of the state, Elizabethan England was mired in the ideologies of heterosexual patriarchy. Women or the homosexuals were subjected to the disciplinary gaze of the heteronormative society. Keeping the gendered and sexual subalterns under a coercive gaze, the society constructed the myth of stable gender identity through ideological state apparatuses. But even within the mainstream hegemonic culture, often than not there was underlying a mode of resistance. William Shakespeare, the representative litterateur of the period, expressed his voice of dissent through his art, especially through his stage plays which reached to a wider audience. In 'As You Like It', through the garb of a pastoral romantic comedy, he obliquely critiqued and questioned the dominant ideologies of heteropatriarchy. Subverting the hegemonic gaze of the heterosexual patriarchy, Shakespeare subjected the Elizabethan audience to the returned gaze of the other. The paper also explores how 'As You Like It' as a mode of theatre creates a space for the Queer subculture to explore beyond the coercive gaze of hetero-patriarchy.*

**Keywords:** *Gaze, Queer, Hetero-patriarchy, Homosexuality, Lesbian.*

Shakespeare's England believed in the ideologies of heterosexual patriarchy, even though Queen Elizabeth was reigning on the throne. While the patriarchal culture of Elizabethan England celebrated the ideal form of masculinity in contrast to femininity, heterosexuality was the only form of sanctioned sexuality, in opposition of which any other kind of sexual desire was considered perversion and hence suppressed or punished. Homosexuality became a capital offence in England in 1553. Though during the reign of Queen Mary, it became a minor offence, sodomy was reinstated as a serious offence in 1563 under Queen Elizabeth. People were kept under close surveillance to refrain them from any kind of perversion. Even the cultural productions, especially the stage plays were kept under close scrutiny of the court to censor it from presenting anything non-normative. Rather the popular medium of theatre was used by the heteropatriarchal society to form the consent of the masses to its hegemonic worldview. However, William Shakespeare manoeuvred the same medium, but often in a contrapuntal move. In the guise of the pastoral romantic comedy, *As You Like It* which was written and first performed under the reign of Queen Elizabeth, casts a returned gaze at the heteropatriarchal authority and its culture, creating a space for the queer subculture to explore.

According to Jonathan Schroeder, "...to gaze implies more than to look at it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze" (58). In a hetero-patriarchal society, gaze becomes the right and might of white heterosexual male who turn women and homosexuals into the objects of their desiring and controlling gaze. But as Michel Foucault observes, the society while keeps its subjects under close surveillance and compels them to conform to the socially assigned roles, also leaves a space for resistance. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, Foucault explores the connection between sexuality and social power. He shows how the society constructs the myth of the univocity of sex in, suppressing the disparate and multiple sexual functions in order to maintain power

relation. To resist such form of hegemony, Foucault asks for creating such bodily pleasures that will “counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledge, in their multiplicity and their possibilities of resistance” (157). Against the restrictive regime of sexuality, Shakespeare's *As You Like It* opens up new vistas of alternative desires. Most of the action of the play takes place in the Forest of Arden, an idyllic world, where the rules of the civilised society do not apply. This pastoral setting creates a space for the socially marginalised Others to ventriloquise their voice and return the gaze of the authority. The play starts speaking from the perspective of the others. Rosalind who was marginalised and turned into a non-entity in the court, becomes the heroine of the play. Even Celia whose fortune was completely dependent upon her father's wish while she was in the court, achieves her individuality in the guise of Aliena, an alien individual to her former subservient self. The rule of the father does not apply here in the idyllic world of Arden; rather the gendered subalterns, the women, become the guiding force in the play, subjecting the male protagonist Orlando and thereby the patriarchy itself the object of their controlling voyeuristic gaze. The setting also creates a space for the two sisters to unbridle the passion of their non-normative love for each other. This is really very shocking for the Elizabethan audience who are habituated with watching a play from the perspective of heterosexual patriarchy. “These 'other' viewpoints may unsettle the central position from which the subject sees: in so far as they do so, however, they merely stand in for the gaze of the Other” (Armstrong 4). Thus the play becomes unsettling for the Elizabethan audience as they experience this gaze of the Other which curtails their imaginary mastery of the stage.

The patriarchal father figure Duke Frederick exhibits his authority not only by banishing Rosalind, the daughter of the senior Duke, but also by subjecting his own daughter Celia's all wishes to his paternal hubris. While Celia protests her father's decision of banishing Rosalind, informing how much she loves her company, Duke Frederick literally silences Celia saying: “And thou wilt show more bright and seem more virtuous / When she is gone. Then open not thy lips” (1.3.77-78). But frustrating the desire of the Duke and avoiding his coercive gaze, Celia escapes to the Forest of Arden along with her cousin Rosalind and the court fool Touchstone. In *The Four Fundamental concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques Lacan comments that the gaze emanates from the object and occurs at a point when the subject fails to gain control of its object of desire, creating an anxiety within him. The Lacanian gaze pierces the Duke as his failure to punish Rosalind and keep Celia under the paternal surveillance creates an anxiety within him and a sense of failure. This act of escape also exposes the vulnerability of the patriarchal power which enjoys only a false sense of autonomy without any resistance. After their escape, even though the Duke makes desperate attempt to capture them and punish, he fails. The great escape together with the failure to punish frustrates what Laura Mulvey refers to as the voyeuristic desire of the male subject to punish the women for violating the patriarchal code of conduct.

In her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, Laura Mulvey shows how the conventional mainstream films feed on the voyeuristic pleasure of the male audience. The same is true about the theatre, the production of which was controlled by the powerful patriarchy. She uses the Freudian term 'scopophilia' to refer to the pleasure of “... taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey 16). She continues, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly (Mulvey 19). Looking at the market economy, while most of the traditional dramatists tried to cater to the desire of the heteropatriarchy, some of them like Shakespeare however could manoeuvre the subversive potential of the theatre, without even offending the heteropatriarchal audience. Critics like Philip Armstrong in *Shakespeare's Visual Regime: Tragedy, Psychoanalysis and the Gaze*, observes “Theatrical representation appears ambiguous, then, because of its unpredictable and uncontrollable 'reflective' capacity, its tendency to reverse and turn upon the beholder, forming, informing and reforming identity and behaviour” (9). While the traditional drama portrayed the erotic heroine for the voyeuristic pleasure of the hero as well as of the audience, Shakespeare's heroines

Rosalind and Celia besmirch their faces and put on torn clothes to escape any erotic glance and have a safe passage to the Forest of Arden. They gaze at their object of desire, instead of themselves being the object of male gaze. The audience who enjoys the voyeuristic pleasure of looking at women on the stage and also find satisfaction at the patriarchal values being celebrated, are compelled to face the returned gaze of the object who become the active participating subject in the action of the play, subversively neglecting the discourses of patriarchy. At the beginning of the play the audience may develop an imaginary mastery of the visual field, identifying themselves with the patriarchal figure Duke Frederick, but the moment the action shifts to the Forest, the gaze is reversed as the patriarchal values are turned upside down.

According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, the identity or ego of a person is formed through imaginary and symbolic stages. In the imaginary stage a child is fascinated to see its image on the mirror, which appears more perfect than his actual self. Then he tries to mould himself according to that image when he enters the symbolic stage. The child becomes subject to the false perfection or the imagined gaze of the mirror. Thus the subject gradually comes into being through a patriarchal linguistic order in the symbolic stage. The theatre acts like this mirror. "The metaphor of the stage as a mirror appears ubiquitous in the Renaissance" (Armstrong 8). It depends upon the dramatist whether the theatre will reflect the patriarchal codes of behaviour or the opposite of it. In a theatre criticising the dominant ideologies of heteropatriarchy, the audience's fascinated absorption with the image on the stage is interrupted when the theatrical gaze is directed back upon the audience. This gaze which curtails the imaginary pleasure between the image and the subject, emanates from them whom Lacan calls the 'Other' who subjects the audience to their view of the world. When this gaze is thrown back, the subject becomes the object.

In *As You Like It*, Lacan's symbolic register, or what Foucault calls the "systems of power relations", fails to maintain its hegemonic norms of subjectivity, its phallogocentric worldview. Rather the play becomes a critic of the hegemonic culture of hetero-patriarchy. Rosalind takes on the disguise of a man, not to celebrate masculinity and the patriarchal culture, rather to make the values of hegemonic patriarchy turned upside down. Instead of remaining obliged and disciplined according to the patriarchal laws of the society, she dictates the life of others, whether the powerful Duke or the emotional lover Orlando. She becomes the pivot, surrounding whom the entire play revolves. Shakespeare's treatment of gaze questions the active/passive dichotomy of gaze. Rosalind gazes at her object of desire and dictates their life. She lovingly gazes at Orlando, compelling him to express his deep love for Rosalind. While like the traditional male lovers Orlando woos his love and writes verses deifying Rosalind, his attempt is cut short by Ganymede as he chastises Orlando for abusing the young plants. Rosalind criticises this deification of the beloved which not only suppresses the sexuality of women in the image of female chastity, but also silences them to express their desire for their lover. Rosalind, in the guise of Ganymede, not only gives expression to her own desire, but also gazes at the male lover as Orlando woos her. Becoming the object of female gaze, the male hero loses his mastery of the heroine. Through her cross-dressing, she changes the tradition of courtly love itself as it is Orlando, the male lover who woos her and not the vice versa. Her dual identity through cross-dressing not only helps her to engender the tradition of courtly love, but also empowers her to endanger the authority of the heteropatriarchy. Payal Khanna in her article "These Disguised Women": Gender and Identity in *As You Like It*, argues "Cross-dressing subverted normative behaviour for men and women and challenged the idea of male supremacy in society" (123).

Instead of celebrating the phallic masculinity of the male hero, the male hero is subjected to the scrutiny of female gaze. According to the popular belief of the time, Orlando's complete surrender to Rosalind was a violation of natural order, an example of perverse masculinity. Winfried Schleiner in "Male Cross-Dressing and Transvestism in Renaissance Romances" observes: ". . . there is at least a suggestion in some Renaissance romances that through subjection to women, even by infatuation or love, men become "effeminate"" (610). Orlando's subjection not only to Rosalind's love, but also to her

voyeuristic gaze, puts his masculinity in crisis. Not merely Orlando, but all other male characters are ultimately brought under her panoptic gaze in the forest. The male ego of the father figure of masculinity, whether it is Duke Senior or Duke Frederik, is put under eraser. They are tutored, chastened and turned disciplined before Rosalind discloses her actual identity and leaves them to live on their own.

Through the construction and deconstruction of her identity, Rosalind emphasises the performative nature of any gender. In Elizabethan tradition, the male actor used to portray the female role. So the actor behind the character of Rosalind is a male. However, the actor convincingly passes as Rosalind with all her feminine sensibilities. But as Rosalind takes the disguise of Ganymede, she has to suppress the feminine aspect of her character and pose as a robust young male, since feminine softness does not become a man. She faces problems to undergo such a change and her inability to completely change into the social attribute of a masculine man underscores the transvestite aspect of her character. The performative nature of her gender identity is further highlighted as she feigns to play the part of a female lover to cure lovesick Orlando. Cross-dressing helps her to substantiate the argument of Judith Butler who claims, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results" (34).

The setting of the play, beyond the gaze of heteropatriarchy, creates an opportunity for the carnival play of subversive desires. While in the Elizabethan England the practice of transvestism, especially as the male actor played the role of female character, was severely criticised, it was used by the dramatists like Shakespeare to explore the androgynous nature of human identity beyond the confining gaze of masculinity. As Winfried Schleiner claims, "... this convention in Shakespeare sometimes becomes a means of exploring erotic androgyny" (605). The boy actor's successful portrayal of both the roles of Rosalind and Ganymede substantiates the androgynous nature of human identity. Some critics have also referred to the boy actor's opportunity of indulging on the desire of homosexuality on the Elizabethan stage. From this perspective, the relationship between Orlando and Ganymede can actually be seen as homoerotic as both the actors of these two characters are actually male. On the other hand, cross-dressing also leaves a space for the characters as well as for actors, to enjoy their multiple sexualities. Leigh Bullion observes, "By cross-dressing, Rosalind reconfigures her heterosexual desire for Orlando as homoerotic" (26). Rosalind's gender ambivalence not only blurs the distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality, but it also complicates Orlando's desire which though apparently appears to be heterosexual, may be homosexual simultaneously. Likewise, Phebe's desire for Ganymede can be read at the same time heterosexual as well as homosexual. On the other hand, the relation between Rosalind and Celia also bears lesbian overtones. Their "loves are dearer than the natural bond of sisters" (*As You Like It* 1.2.253-54). Celia cannot think of her life without her cousin Rosalind. According to Charles, the wrestler, "never two ladies loved as they do" (*As You Like It* 1.2.103-4). But the coercive gaze of the masculine Duke tries to separate them as the heteropatriarchy does not allow this kind of unnatural bond between the sisters. However their non-normative desire finds a vent in their little sojourn in the forest beyond the restrictive gaze of the heteropatriarchy.

These kinds of non-normative desires and sexualities beyond the heteronormative ideas of gender and sexuality brings into play a queer subculture which is otherwise punished or suppressed. The play not only posits fixed gender identity as mere construction, but also exposes the possibility of multiple sexual identities. Establishing the notion of gender ambivalence and sexual plurality, this drama enacts a queer subversion of the heterosexual patriarchy. While any desire beyond heteronormativity is an offence in the social world of civilisation, the theatre creates a space for these kinds of queer desires to get accentuated. Even though the play ends with the consummation of heterosexual marriages, the "lesbian continuum", which according Adrienne Rich, not necessarily precludes the sexual relation, but refers to the close bonding between the women, persists even when they leave the ideal world of the Forest and enter into the real world of hetero-patriarchy. Leigh Bullion examines: "Even though the resolution of the play is

overwhelmingly heteronormative, a sense of homoerotic desire lingers due to the epilogue, which defies the complete domination of heterosexuality while maintaining fluidity between the binaries of male/female and heterosexuality/homoeroticism” (21). One can also see the play as a mode of carnivalesque resistance, since all the subversion occurs only for a transitory period and ultimately reconciles with the heteronormative world of patriarchy. We can also think of Shakespeare's decision to conclude the play with heterosexual marriages, bringing back the “natural” order as a process of “subversion-through-identification” (Zizek 22). Instead of direct collision with the regimes of heteronormativity, one can oppose the modern power structure by remaining closely adherent to its ideologies and politics, since Slavoj Zizek asserts “... an ideological edifice can be undermined by a too-literal identification...” (22).

Thus, *As You Like It* not only questions the rigidity of gender and sexuality, but also creates a space for the queer subversion in the rigorously dominant masculinist ambience of the Elizabethan England. The play, curtailing the audience's fantasy of the imaginary mastery of the visual field, compels them to witness this unsettling gaze of the Other. “Drama would therefore seem to provide an inherently unstable medium, always possessing the potential to invert the hegemonic play of the gaze, so that the audience finds itself, repeatedly, unfounded. The subject positions occupied by the play's spectators are discomfited, and the complacent relation between the individual and the social undermined” (Armstrong 17).

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