

# Politics in the Representation of Women in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*

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## Abstract

The major concern of this paper is to study on how women are represented in the comedy *Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare. In the drama, the women characters Viola, Olivia and Maria stand as a challenge to the patriarchy in the society. All of them resist the convention that dominates women. They can work equally well independently as males do in everyday life. In fact, they represent the voice for equality between men and women. The drama reflects the social situation in England during the renaissance when consciousness about women's rights and capability starts growing. The drama shows that women are also courageous, creative and competent if they are given the opportunity. This study is based on qualitative research methodology. So, I as a researcher have consulted various books and journal articles for support. It applies the concept of feminism seeking equality between men and women. This study will be a help for the coming researchers in the area.

*Keywords:* convention, equality, independence, patriarchy, women's voice

## Introduction

As Renaissance appears, there comes various changes in economy, politics, culture, art and education in the English society. People become conscious about their income, social relationship and learning. There occurs new thought and civilization in the mind and behavior of people. Regarding the women's status, Upadhyaya (2012) argues, "Even though during this period of 'rebirth,' the status of women folks in the overall environment almost remained the same, some of them at least got the opportunity to become educated and use their education in their own circle" (p. 64). William Shakespeare's dramas, either tragedies or comedies, reflect the changes in the society. In the context of man- woman relationship,

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“Shakespeare rejected the stereotype of the passive, sexless, unresponsive female and its inevitable concomitant, the misogynist conviction that all women were whores at heart” (Greer, 2002, p. 122). The women in Shakespeare’s dramas seem to be revolutionary in their role. They do not easily accept the males’ interest in them. They want to decide themselves in the matter of every day affairs like love, marriage and other social activities as Sahara Grimke argues, “Men and women were created equal; they are both moral and accountable beings, and whatever is right for man to do, is right for women” (cited in Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001, p. 1051). In the comedy, *Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare, Viola is no more submissive to males, but “She intends to disguise herself as a eunuch” (*The Oxford*, 2011, p. 491) as Cesario to challenge men in the society. Another woman, Olivia depends upon her own thought and decision rejecting pressure in terms of the man she should get married to. Both women Viola and Olivia stand as strong women who in Belsey’s (1985) words, do “generate a more radical challenge to patriarchal values” (p. 184). In this way, this paper aims to explore how women are presented as independent and strong as men in the society in Shakespeare’s comedy *Twelfth Night*.

### **Perspective of Feminism in Literature**

The term ‘Feminism,’ a theory that concerns with freedom of women from the domination of male power in the society. Our society regards male authority is the supreme power and women are always subordinated to it. Feminism is also a social movement “which aims to free all women from male supremacy and exploitation” (Jary & Jary, 2000, p. 211). The emergence of feminism is triggered by the extremity of the patriarchy that “refers to any society in which men hold all or most of the power” and dominates women “socially, economically, politically and psychologically” (Tyson, 2013, p. 139). Conventionally, women are kept under control of male authority. They are made dependent upon husbands or male power in every social, political and economic matter. Moreover, feminism connects with gender roles that are traditionally accepted in the society. According to Tyson (2013), “Men are naturally rational, strong, protective, and decisive,” whereas women are “Weak, nurturing, and submissive” (p. 142). However, these gender roles are established by the patriarchal system in society. For centuries, women had to face restrictions imposed by the patriarchy. As a result, feminist movement came as “the emancipatory efforts at different levels to free themselves from the clutches of patriarchal dominance” (Upadhyaya, 2012, p. 40). The voice for equality and freedom for women has been raised even through literature.

The famous feminist critics are Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous and so on. I as a researcher wish to explore how women characters try to challenge the patriarchy in the drama *Twelfth Night* by Shakespeare.

### **Viola's Disguise as a Challenge to the Males' World**

Viola luckily gets rescued safely from a shipwreck by the ship captain. Her brother Sebastian goes missing in the sea. She is much worried about him as she says, "O my poor brother! and so perchance may he be" (I. ii. 7). She wanders, but does not know where to go.

She happens to be in Illyria, a state ruled by the Duke Orsino. For Haniph (2017), "it was very dangerous for a woman to be on her own" (p. 329) in a strange place, but she dares to face a big challenge in her life. However, one can succeed going through any kind of difficulties and discomforts in life if he/she is ready to face them with courage. Same situation appears in Viola's life as she "decides to disguise herself as a man for a very practical purpose to assure her own protection in an alien world which would not respect a young virgin maiden" (Roberts, 1992, p. 14). She looks quiet smart in man's clothing. She exhibits her tactfulness as well. According to Pequigney (1992), she "in male disguise, correspondingly goes by an assumed name, Cesario" (p. 181) a male name in the new world.

Duke Orsino mistakes her as a young man and appoints her as his personal messenger. Viola's boldness in talking, working and dealing with situation impresses Orsino. He becomes happy in selecting her as his messenger. She does not show any weaknesses that can make him detect her as female about which Haniph (2017) argues, "The cross-dressed women always tend to be independent, strong and determined instead of passive" (p. 330). In fact, it is true in all times that boldness in every affair wins confidence and trust of people. Orsino also believes Viola to support him in his every day work well. He has fallen in love with Olivia, a beautiful countess, but he is failing to make her be in his love. He thinks Viola should be capable to woo Olivia for him as he says:

O, then unfold the passion of my love,  
Surprise her with discourse of my dear faith:  
It shall become thee well to act my woes;

She will attend it better in thy youth

Than in a nuncio's of more grave aspect. (I. iv. 23-27)

Now, Viola, known to be Cesario, as a young man assures him to work well for him as “he sends her to court Olivia on his behalf” (*The Oxford*, 2011, p. 491). Orsino is confident that she is tactful enough to influence Olivia to like and marry him. She is ready to go to visit Olivia on behalf of him, but ironically, “Viola desires Orsino” (DiGangi, 1997, p. 41). However, she maintains her honesty and fairness in her words to Orsino. She promises to help him successfully as much as possible.

Viola's Tactfulness and Olivia's Courage to Reject Orsino Olivia's strong personality can be observed in her strict rule about when to let people have her audience. Viola can not easily enter her house. Olivia boldly says to Malvolio, her steward, “Tell him he shall not speak with me” (I. v. 146). She is kept outside until Malvolio passes details about her to Olivia who is fully confident about exercising her policy upon each visitor. Viola presents her as a fair man and creates a “gender confusion” (Haniph, 2017, p. 330) to people. None can have a doubt upon her disguise that is due to her creativity and ability. Olivia, too, appears in a veil over her face. She also uses her intelligence not to show her real appearance to others. Viola as Cesario now tries her best to impress her to accept Orsino's love. Hearing Viola about Orsino's interest, Olivia responds, “Your lord does know my mind, I cannot love him” (I. v. 261). Her answer is that Orsino knows her thought well.

Forcing somebody for love and marriage is not good. So, “Olivia dismisses Orsino's suit” (*The Oxford*, 2011, p. 492). She seems to mean that Orsino does not know her in depth.

She argues that his love to her is only in surface. Olivia demonstrates her power of judging people and making decision confidently as she rejects Orsino's love outright. Olivia's independence about her life decision and Viola's honesty in duty can vividly be observed in *Twelfth Night*. Her disagreement to marry Orsino shows that she is no more submissive towards patriarchy. However, the irony is that Olivia also mistakes Cesario (Viola) as a man and gets attracted by her personality. Instead of being in love with Orsino, Mangan (2003) states, “Olivia falls in love with Orsino's ‘messenger’” (p. 243). She tries to offer money to her, but Cesario (Viola) does not accept it. Viola also exhibits her “sharp intelligence, readiness of mind and sense of honour” (Kumar, 2018, p. 960) to her duty. She does not like to be dishonest by taking advantage of the moment and having money from Olivia. In response to her offer,

Cesario (Viola) says: I am no fee'd post, lady; keep your purse. My master, not myself, lacks recompense.

Love make his heart of flint that you shall love, And let your fervour like my master's be Placed in contempt! Farewell, fair cruelty. (I. v. 288-292) Viola (Cesario) exhibits her power that she is fair in her position. She neither wants to betray her master Orsino nor cheat Olivia. She keeps her honesty towards her duty high. That is why she rejects money from Olivia. She still does her best to win Olivia's love for Orsino. She requests her to respect her master's fair love as she says, "Madam, I come to whet your gentle thoughts/ On his behalf" (III. i. 105- 106). Complication increases as Olivia is confused with the real identity of Cesario (Viola). However, Cesario (Viola) does not accept the money offer. She feels pity on Olivia as she is not a man and Olivia should love a man of her dream.

Olivia's Continuous Rejection and Jealousy of Men towards Cesario (Viola) Olivia disagrees with Orsino's love request second time, too. She seems to be bold enough to break the tradition of marrying a man who proposes her. Nevertheless, Orsino constantly tries to win her heart with Cesario's (Viola's) support. He seems to be in "frustration and despair" (De Selincourt, 1960, p. 54) because of Olivia's dislike to marry him. Comparing women with delicate flowers, Orsino remarks, "For women are as roses, whose fair flower/ Being once displayed doth fall that very hour" (II. iv. 38-39). Such dialogue between Orsino and Cesario (Viola) often stirs Viola's emotion and draws her love towards him, but she is a man in his mind. However, Viola (Cesario) makes another visit to Olivia and requests her "to bestow her love on Orsino" (*The Oxford*, 2011, p. 492). Olivia presents herself as strong as she was before and disrespects his love offer again. Instead, she again requests Cesario (Viola) to accept her love to her, "I love thee so that, maugre all thy pride/ Nor wit nor reason can my passion hide" (III. i. 153-154). She expresses her deep love towards Viola. In her words, nothing can stop her loving Cesario (Viola). In answer, Cesario (Viola) says, "Then think you are right; I am not what I am" (III. i. 143). She wants to say that Olivia does not really know about her real sexual identity. It means Cesario (Viola) is not a man and Olivia's love for her is meaningless.

Viola presents herself capable enough to work as men that makes people jealous to her. She can keep people believing her as Cesario, a man. Her way of talking, walking and dealing with issues make people confident that she is a man. Being able to hide her real sexual identity is her talent, power and skill which prove that women are equal to men. In this regard, Upadhyaya (2012) argues, "What is also distinctly

visible that women have been consistently trying to find ways to come out, or more appropriately, navigate through the problem areas” (p. 66). Other men become jealous upon her frequent visits to Olivia. Sir Andrew does not like Cesario (Viola) coming to see her again and again. He secretly loves Olivia, but Olivia does not know it. He gets support from others such as Sir Toby, Fabian (Olivia’s servant) and Maria (Olivia’s maid). Sir Andrew wants to have “a duel of weapons” (Mangan, 2003, p. 245) with Cesario (Viola) who claims, “This is as uncivil as strange” (III. iv. 254). Sir Andrew misunderstands the purpose of her visits. So, she speaks to Sir Toby,

“You mistake, sir. I am sure no man hath any quarrel to me; my remembrance is very free and clear from any image of offence done to any man” (III. iv. 229-231). However, Cesario (Viola) is compelled to face the duel. She is lucky that the duel ends soon as Antonio, a ship’s captain and a close friend of her missing brother, Sebastian arrives. Viola and Olivia’s Capability to Choose Men to Get Married with Olivia succeeds to marry Sebastian as a man of her own choice. All of a sudden Sebastian arrives in front of the house of Olivia. Sir Andrew attacks him as he mistakes him for Cesario (Viola), sister of Sebastian. Both Sebastian and her sister Viola suffer from a “traumatic ‘loss’ of” (Mangan, 2003, p. 243) each other as both get separated after the shipwreck. They look similar as they are twins. In return, Sebastian also counter-attacks Sir Andrew along with his group members. He questions, “Are all the people mad?” (IV. i. 26) because he gets assaulted without any reasons. Moreover, he does not know who they are. Olivia takes him inside thinking that he is no other than her dream man Cesario (Viola). She begs sorry from him for how bad her people behaved him. Sebastian gets surprised as he feels of being wooed by Olivia.

OLIVIA. Nay, come, I prithee: would thou’dst be ruled by me!

SEBASTIAN. Madam, I will.

OLIVIA. O, say so, and so be! (IV. i. 64-66)

He feels being forced to be in love of Olivia. She speaks politely, but leaves pressure upon him. Sebastian misses his friend Antonio whom he has to meet at the Elephant Inn. He does not know where he is now. He is “at once puzzled and delighted by her tender attention” (*The Oxford*, 2011, p. 492) as if they have already been in love. He says, “I am mad/ Or else the lady’s mad” (IV. iii. 15-16). Olivia makes him be in her love and she marries him. It is her remarkable success that as a woman she ignores love of the man who really likes her, and marries a different man of her own choice. This is an exercise of female’s power over the world of male domination.

Viola too gets married with the man of her heart, Orsino. Cesario (Viola), Duke Orsino, Curio and all other people gather there. Antonio's arrival makes Cesario (Viola) recall the duel she was forced to join in and his rescue of her from the possible beating of Sir Andrew. However, the dueling and also the rescuing tasks take place just due to the "conflict of appearance and reality" (Levin, 1988, p. 126) that brings confusion in people. Duke Orsino also knows about it from Cesario now. Sudden entrance of bold lady Olivia excites Orsino who remarks, "Here comes the countess! now heaven walks on earth ..." (V. i. 97). Olivia does not show interest in him any more, but complains Cesario for not coming on time. She speaks like this because she mistakes Cesario for Sebastian to whom she has recently been married. Cesario gets surprised hearing all from Olivia and says, "Ay me, detested! how am I beguiled! (V. i. 138). Duke Orsino also thinks that Cesario betrayed him by marrying Olivia in his place:

DUKE. Husband?

OLIVIA. Ay, husband. Can he that deny?

DUKE. Her husband, sirrah?

VIOLA. No, my lord, not I. (V. i. 144-147)

Cesario (Viola) is sure about Olivia's misunderstanding of her. She tries to assure Olivia that she is not her husband. She knows she can not marry her as she is only in disguise as a man, but she is a woman herself. Mangan (2003) reports, "Narratives are brought to a climax, yet not everything is resolved" (p. 251). Only when Sebastian arrives, things get settled. Olivia finds her real husband back. In fact, Viola too is happy seeing her brother Sebastian alive after a long time. She also discloses her real identity as a woman to all. Eventually, "Orsino agrees to marry Viola" (*The Oxford*, 2011, p. 493). He is glad to have Viola, a bold woman as his wife.

### **Conclusion**

The comedy *Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare visualizes women's real capacity to the world of patriarchy. For a long time, women suffer from male domination in the society. Renaissance women also subordinate to the male authority in their family and society. They are deprived of enjoying the social, political, economic as well as educational facilities. They are treated as the second rate human beings to men. They are believed to be weak, passive, lazy, coward and slow minded in comparison to the males. However, the drama *Twelfth Night* presents that women are not less intelligence than men. They are not weak, inactive and effeminate as the



patriarchal society think them to be. They are equal to men in doing any work well if they are given the opportunity. In the drama, Viola, a woman disguises herself as a man and performs her every task reasonably. Her disguise stands as a revolt against the patriarchy that exploits women unnecessarily. Similarly, Olivia, another woman also goes against the convention that a woman has to accept any love or marriage proposals they are offered. She boldly disagrees to marry the Duke Orsino and marries

Sebastian in her own initiation. Viola marries Duke Orsino in her own interest. Another woman Maria as a house maid takes full responsibility to support Olivia in her house works. All these women in *Twelfth Night* perform their task independently. In fact, the drama raises a voice for equality between men and women as women are equally talented, skillful, courageous and careful in tasks to the men.

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