



Re- reading Shakespeare's *as You Like It* through the Ecocritical Lens

Sadat Zaman Khan

Assistant Professor & Chair

Department of English Language and Literature

Abstract

Shakespeare's pastoral comedy *As You Like It* abounds with references to nature. This play portrays Shakespeare's bent towards nature, its (nature's) protection and preservation. In his days, the concept of environmental degradation was not a threat because the evils of industrial pollution did not show up in the way it does now. "Greenhouse Gas Emission" (EPA.gov., 2021) and the "carbon footprint" (N. Eckley, 2010) are some of the recent indicators of climate change, popularly talked about and heavily weighed in scientific world, and in the academies. However, it is surprising that even in the sixteenth century Shakespeare had thought about ecology, nature as home for the animals and its protection. Was he eco-conscious? This might be an important question to Shakespeare enthusiasts. This essay explores his concerns for ecology as the play focuses on the killing of the animals' – deer as representative – in their "native dwelling places" (2.1.175)", that is, the forest, and the "usurpation" (2.1.26) of the human being on its green spaces. Hence the essay re-reads Shakespeare's *As You Like IT* through the lens of ecocritical studies, that includes the natural world and animal, in relation to the human world.

Key Words: ecocritical, pastoral, preservation, ecology, ecofeminism, greenwood

Introduction:

Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is a pastoral comedy, set in the backdrop of rich idyllic setting where a group of convicts, lovers, ousted run-away people gather. Nature, for them, is not only an escape from the artificial and intriguing urban life, but also a prerogative to come to terms with the harmonious reconciliation. Forest is seen to be a productive force, which is

active, potent and welcoming. Here, the momentary disadvantages of the forests are not seen malignant to human entity, rather agreeable if only human beings can accept the limitations and learn to live together. Thus, Duke Senior tells: “Now, my companions and brothers in exile, /Hath not old custom made this life more sweet /Than that of the painted pomp? / Are not these woods / More free from the peril than the envious court?” (Shakespeare, 2.1.1-4). In spite of the certain inconvenience, the life in the forest, for Duke Senior, is celebratory. Duke’s conviction is strongly asserted as he repulses the vanity of “the painted pomp” (2.1.3) and accepts the “peril” (2.1.4) of the life in the green space.

Shakespeare and Ecocritical Argument:

Among all other Shakespearean comedies, *As You Like It* has the most effective thrust on some of the ecocritical arguments formed in the modern time. Pastoral comedy, in the text *Back to Nature: The Green and the Real in Late Renaissance*, the author argues that coming back to nature was a part of early sentimentalism towards nature. The author says, “[...] Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, Marvell’s “Mower” poems, and seventeenth-century Dutch painting. They were brought together by a discovery that what looks to modern eyes like early environmentalist sentiment [...] (Watson, *Ecology, Epistemology, and Empericism*, 2021). Therefore, Duke Senior might, in a way, express the late Renaissance sentimentalism to nature. However, this sentimentalism is not good enough reason to read Shakespeare ecocritically. This is the reason why brining Shakespeare in the circle of mainstream ecocriticism was not easy until ecofeminism was brought under discussion, where animals have a special place and both flora and fauna are important, interdependent, and complementary.

Even before ecocriticism had proclaimed itself a new critical method, interest in animals was on the fringes of environmentalist movements. Theories from the fringes of mainstream contemporary ecocriticism— such as those of Randy Malamud, Barney Nelson, and the increasingly supplanted ecofeminist corpus—have, however, produced significant scholarly dialogue about connections between environmental and animal issues. (Estok 61)

It is, therefore, very clear as Estok thinks that Shakespeare’s place in environmental studies had not been brought as far as his little attention to flora and fauna are concerned. With the advancement of “ecofeminist corpus”, a critical attention has been given afterwards. The idea of mother, as the nourisher, and the sustainer, happens to be the central argument of ecofeminism. Therefore, the contamination of mother-nature is not only offensive,

but also disruptive for civilization.

If we take Estok's argument, we may, very well be able to find relevance of *As You Like It* from "ecofeminist corpus". It is true that his plays abound in beast and bird images, yet, at the very back of his mind, forest or the nature has always been there as a potent force, whose shelter can save humanity. As far as the play, *As You Like It* is concerned, the Forest of Arden does not only shelter the people, but also sustain them, and consequently, reconciles. The pastoral setting is a viable alternative to the convicts and the lovers who run away off their native settings. The harmony felt by Duke Senior when their life "finds tongues in the trees, Books in the running brooks/ Sermons in the stones and good in everything" (2.1.16-17), is an integral part of environmental concern, where, nature plays an active role and has the power to impact human behavior. The human attribute of "tongue" has been imposed on nature so that the tree is an entity having a faculty to address humanity. Hence, nature is a corresponding force who has the verbal capacity to address people. "Brook in the running brooks" also another alliterative figure of speech that has the same power to voice the apparent wordlessness of nature.

In 1970s a new environmental theory emerged which is known as Gaia Theory developed by Chemist James Lovelock, co-authored by micro biologist Lynn Margulis. They propose that "all organisms and their inorganic surroundings on Earth are closely integrated to form a single and self-regulating complex system, maintaining the conditions for life on the planet" (Lotha). This theory, however, is not without controversy. Apart from all its controversy, this theory builds up a great case for *As You Like It*, especially in the context of integrated life pattern and having a "single" and "complex" system found in the "tongues" and "books"; and this corresponding force creates a complex network of addressee and the addressed. Here, the addressee is the nature and the addressed is the humanity, or the vice versa. When Jaques talks about his melancholy of his own in the following lines, he possibly refers to the human encroachment on the forest and the killing of animals in such wonderful organic structure. Here, being the representative of the nature, Jaques addresses humanity borrowing the words of the woods that he has resorted to.

[...] but it is a melancholy of
mine own, compounded of many simples,
extracted from many objects, and indeed
the sundry contemplation of my travels, in
which my often rumination wraps me in a
most humorous sadness. (4.1.L 16-21)

His melancholy results from disruption of that organic structure and breaking the single complex ecosystem through human invasion and occupation of the land of “native dwelling place” (2.1.L 175) He (Jaques) holds the entire eco system in himself and his cry represents the cry of ecosystem, metaphorically. In Act 2, we also see his grievances which expostulate the harm done on the delicate balance of nature. So, as the Gaya Theory sees, the structure is created by “organic” and “inorganic” factors, compounding and coalescing into a “system”, where trees, animals and human beings live in harmony. Jaques’ “melancholy” is extracted from “many factors”, he says (4.1.L 16-21). These factors are the experiences of his travel, and the power of internalizing the pathos when this organic structure is broken off and falling apart. Like James Lovelock, Ashton Nichols, In his text, *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism* suggests that “time has come to” get along with a new idea, which is named as “urbanature”, where “all human and non-human lives, as well as all animate and inanimate objects around those lives, are linked in an interdependent interrelatedness” (Nichols XIII). Though Lovelock and Nichols separately approaches ecocriticism with “gaya” and “urbanature”, their focus converges on the unity of the nature as the single organic structure. Jaques, being a naturalist, observes how this structure is violated. Hence his “sadness” knows no bound.

Again, Duke Senior’s consoling words in Act 2, Scene 1, “Sweet are the uses of adversity” express the central theme of bearing nature against all odds. Here, the Duke addresses human beings’ ability to acclimatize with nature, understand her limitations, and in doing so, they can get a kind of contentment. In such behaviors, the “organic structure” of nature remains intact. These two words “sweet” and “adversity” are paradoxical and connote the idea of harmonious living in nature, if only the adversities are borne. The concept that the nature is not an unmixed blessing but people need to compromise a little is also an idea very pertinent to the ecologists. Green living is a kind of concept that is becoming globally popular. Green living is not a kind of lifestyle, that people need to go to the forest for living as Duke Senior advocates, but green living is a very contemporary environmental idea where living with ecological conscience is important. “[...]a green lifestyle is a pattern of living that involves deliberation over the uncertain environmental impacts of everyday practices and a guiding narrative that makes that process personally meaningful” (Lorenzen). So, duke’s words require an understanding of twofold parameters of environmental studies. In one hand “green lifestyle” which is more of an eco-conscious living and the other is “the deliberation of certain environmental effects”. Even Amiens’ song resonates the same adversity as he sings, “Here shall he see/ No enemy/ But wither and

rough weather” (2.5.1 6-8). It is very remarkable that the life in the nature is such blissful that it is totally free of any urban malice and enmity. Yet, the words “winter and rough weather” underscore the essence of compromise. This compromise, or the teaching of compromise, as Duke Senior preaches, is important for the human entities to collaborate with the other nonhuman entities. In this compromise, the single organic structure of nature may keep up its harmony and coherence. Human may come to the nature’s space, but they don’t violate the nature’s serenity. However, Jaques observes that, it does not happen and he talks about human being becoming “usurper” and “tyrant” (2.1.61). The very behavior of being an “usurper” violates the organic structure that might harmonize human and non-human worlds together.

On the other hand, Lord Amiens’s song, can be taken an ethical approach of the modern consumerist attitude in an urban setting against unassumingly modest living with some contentment in raw nature. The concept of green living may be taken as a kind of reflection of green living that comes to a negotiating point with the environmentalists. The call to live “under the greenwood tree” (2.5.L-1):

Under the greenwood tree
Who loves to lie with me,
And turn his merry note
Unto the sweet bird’s throat,
Come hither, come hither, come hither: (2.5.1-5)

In this particular song two important things are connoted. One, of course, living in nature without transforming it; the second, conformity. Anyone who loves to live in nature must conform to the parameters set by nature. It is, therefore, is not an open invitation to all. The subjective pronoun “who” implies the tone that, not everyone, but only the ones who will be able to conform – “turn his merry note/ Unto sweet bird’s throat” (2.5.3-4). It is very natural to think that modern consumerism and life of luxury and comfort must be “shunned” as Amiens continues his song intermittently, as he converses with Jaques. Jaques with the chorus sings.

Who doth ambition shun
And loves to live in the sun,
Seeking the food he eats
And pleased with what he gets (2.5. 32 – 35)

This is an invitation to those who aspire, circumventing a relatively comfortable life in an urban setting. The most striking thing that appears here is an essential contradiction between wild and court. Shakespeare’s expert from *As You Like IT* has an undertone of nature ethics. “Shunning” the ambition is not an easy choice and thus is related to the ethics of sidestepping

consumerism, ideal for a “green lifestyle”, as mentioned in Gaia principle.

When Lord Amiens talks about “shunning the ambition” or “living in the sun” or “be content with what he gets” (4.2.1-2), we may presume that he is, in way, underpinning the necessity of contentment. If we look at the gradual destruction of ecology over the years, we find the excessive use of fossil fuel, unchecked violation and human being’s consumeristic attitude behind it. This is exactly where the question of environmental ethics comes. Being prodigal in using resources available around us, we are not only violating nature’s space by encroaching into their territory, but also leading us to an inevitable confrontation with nature. The theme of contentment as shown in the words “And pleased with what he gets (2.5. 32 – 35)”, would surely level up the tension of the confrontation. Nevertheless, this contentment as found in the songs of Amiens, remains absent in the process of human encroachment. Jaques, being the nature’s mouthpiece, would always show his concerns and the disgusts for the human actions, represented by Duke Senior and his followers. In his mockery against the song of Lord Amiens, as he (Jaques) says: “here shall he see/ Gross fools as he” (5.2.46-47), simply counter-echoes Amiens’ “Here shall he see, / No enemy” (5.2.6-7). This is a reaction towards, what Jaques believes, is appropriate because the organic structure is falling g apart.

As You Like It also abounds in references towards human encroachment on the green nature, which, in Jaques’ observation, is an invasion on a world which is not ours, and rightly belongs to the wild creatures. Because of carrying a sense of agony for human encroachment into nature and the ultimate destruction of virgin forest pasture, he is so named as melancholy Jaques. He, therefore, plays the role for a catalyst of ecological conscience, an agency, who, not only grieves by watching the human encroachment, but also protests in clear terms. In Act II, scene I when Duke Senior talks about killing of a “venison” (deer), first Lord immediately mentions the name of Jaques who is reported to be reacting in two ways – grieving and chiding. In this scene, the first lord gives a heart touching description of a stag being killed and also the way Jaques grieves. “Much marked of the melancholy Jeques/Stood on the extremest verge of the swift brook, / Augmenting it with tears” (2.1.P.168). His passionate engagement with ecosystem is a lesson for the humanity. The scientists who are envisioning an apocalyptic chapter for the earth due to temperature rise and pollution in the ecosystem, may call for the same kind of passion as Jaques has in him. Does William Shakespeare create a character like Jaques in order to envision an apocalypse to creep upon the human being in the forthcoming years, outliving Shakespeare’s time? As a Pastoral comedy, the play has an

essence of an internal tone where a caution is produced and a strong reaction is staged. Glan A. Love observes, “The study of literature’s relationship to the physical world has been with us in the domain of pastoral tradition since ancient time” (Love). Hence, Jaques plays the role of an ambassador who would delegate the danger of encroachment to the future generation.

It is very remarkable that Jaques does not only grieve as he shares the suffering of the stag, but also openly chides. His grieving is reflected in “poor deer” (2.1.47).[.] thou mak’st/ As worldlings do” (2.1.48). Jaques’ feelings for the animal hunted does not stop there, but he also castigates the human encroachment as unlawful and predatory behavior. The entire thing of human encroachment is taken as a usurpation. This term is more political as the Duke Fredrick has usurped the power and ousted his elder brother. This usurpation is as worse as the usurpation of Duke Senior’s and his companions’ usurpation into the wild. Jaques is reported to have said, “The melancholy Jaques grieves at that, / And in that kind swears you do more usurp/ Than doth your brother that hath banished you” (2.1.27-29). The hunting of the deer is most poignantly criticized by Jaques as reported by the Lord:

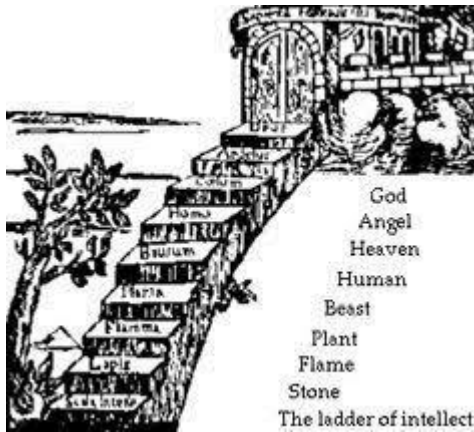
Thus most invectively he pierceth through
The body of the country, city, court,
Yea, and of this our life, swearing that we
Are mere usurpers, tyrants, and what’s worse,
To fright the animals and to kill them up

In their assigned and native dwelling place (2.1.58-63)

In these remarks of the first Lord, Jaques’ stench is very clear and unequivocal. Here the human beings are nothing less than a group of invaders on the natural world of the animals. They are like any other predators, “usurpers” and “tyrants” whose only mission is occupying wild and decimation the native population (as represented by deer). Gray Garrard quotes from Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) in the same tone. He talks about the “idealistic pastoral” ravished by the usurpation of human being. He says, “There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings ...a paint of prosperous farm green fields foxes barking in the hills, silent deer, ferns and wild flowers, countless birds and trout lying in clear, cold streams, all delighted by those who pass through the town” (Carson 1999). This pastoral peace did not last though. He further writes, “Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spells had settled on the community: Mysterious maladies swept over...Everywhere was a shadow of death” (A Fable of Tomorrow). Jaques, in the play, *As You Like It* reflects the similar statement. When Jaques talks from the nature’s perspective as she (Nature) has seen

being “pierced”, Carson’s *Silent Spring* uses almost an equivalent phrases like “mysterious maladies” and “the shadow of death”. In both cases Nature is the victim and happens to be encroached upon by the human agents. The forest of Arden, like “idealistic pastoral” of Carson’s context, has been disturbed and this disturbance has left an indelible impression upon the serenity of the organic whole. From the viewpoint of the ecofeminist corpus, nature being the sustainer and the nourisher – as motherhood is seen – plays the central role in uniting the humans and non-humans as siblings. If we look back at Lotha’s words where “all organisms and their inorganic surroundings on Earth are closely integrated to form a single and self-regulating complex system” (Lotha), then, the system is non but the mother, an entity and a uniting force. The singularity and the virtuosity of the motherhood is rightly hinted upon in the ecofeminism. Jaques’ observation of the dignity of the mother being violated, corresponds to the observations of moderns environmentalists, therefore.

Conclusion: It is a very relevant question for the modern readers to know what people thought of nature in Shakespeare’s time. In the post-industrial society, the evils of fossil fuel burning, rise in the global temperature and deforestation have caused the greenhouse effect, sea level rising by melting of the polar ice, frequent wild fires and storm surges. Because of the change in climatic patterns, the results of human action are apocalyptically apparent. There is a sense of urgency and a global call for reduction of carbon through the Climate Conference is Devos, Paris and elsewhere. However, in Shakespeare’s time these evils and the predicament that humanity is suffering from was not there. In spite of not realizing the hand-in experiences of these calamities, Shakespeare’s visionary mind could forecast the “encroachment” and “piecing” into the wild as mentioned in the play. Jaques, as Shakespeare’s spokesperson, critiques the “usurpation” in unambiguous terms. Shakespeare’s understanding of the argument of the environment is similar to the model of E.M.W. Tillyard’s the “great Chain of Being” which is a vertical hierarchy of the positioning of divine and the elements of physical nature. In this model “each kind of object in the universe is allocated a place in the hierarchy, from the lowest kind of objects (rock and other inanimate matter), through the lower and higher form of terrestrial life” (Eagen). An image of the Great Chain of being may appear as follows:



(Being)

The chain, is tough, taken from Aristotle’s idea, it later had a place in Christian theology. It is very interesting that the chain has its relevance in the systematic parameter of ecological balance. If a particular element in chain is affected, the others will naturally have the impact since the word “chain” stands for a systematized hierarchy from lifeless to supreme. As this knowledge was accessible during Shakespeare’s time, Jaques, as a mouthpiece, might express a similar notion. This notion, has its relevance to the ecological studies as the word ecology stands for “the study of the relationships between living organisms, including humans, and their physical environment [...]it seeks to understand the vital connections between plants and animals and the world around them” (ESA). In Act 3, scene 2, of *Titus Andronicus*, Marcus tells Titus, “Alas My Lord, I have but killed a fly,” Titus says “Poor harmless fly, that with his pretty buzzing melody/ Came here to make us marry – and thou hast killed him.” (2.1.59-65). In spite of the scene being comic, there is a tragic undertone. The tone connotes the very idea that the nature is in jeopardy. So, the organic structure and a proper synchronical living between living entity (man and animal) and other entity (flora) is something that is connoted in Jaques’ words and through his understanding of upholding pastoral life forms.

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