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**FEMALE'S AGENCY IN SHAKESPEARE'S *AS YOU LIKE IT*: STRIKING BALANCE BETWEEN  
'EXCESS' AND 'CONFINEMENT'**

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**ABSTRACT**

This Research investigates the aspect of "Female Agency" in Shakespeare's Play. It explores the ambivalent relationship between female protagonist's strife for individuality and the need for social confinement. The focus is on the "Conciliatory or Balancing" aspect that exists in the play; that is, the way through which the dramatist artistically is trying to make a balance between protagonist's desire for self-fulfillment and social constraints that may hinder such act. The research adds a new reading of the plays, which is situated between two important approaches; 'Liberal Humanism' and 'Feminism'. Through an exploration of these two approaches, the research elaborates on how such integration will provide a new model of female agency.

**Key Words:** Agency, Subversion, Patriarchy, Excess, Conformity, Balancing, Nurturing, Postructural Feminists, Passion, Reconcile, Cross-Dressing, Nature, Harmony, Renaissance, Humanism, Hierarchy, Gender,, Free space, Eco-feminists.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Among many female characters in Shakespeare's comedies, the protagonist in *As You Like It* evokes various interpretations by feminist critics. Critics have given various contradictory interpretations about the female protagonist's act of cross-dressing. This act, as claimed by some feminist critics, may constitute a subversive act against the hegemonic order since it challenges common conception regarding female's role in Elizabethan period. Another critical approach, however, does not consider such act to be subversive but rather another dramatic technique reaffirming social and sexual hierarchy prevalent within patriarchal order. Based on the findings of this research, the act of

cross dressing to a certain degree is subversive one, assisting in reshaping and reorganizing the old patriarchal system existed before the protagonist's undertaking of the journey. On the other hand, the same act assists in bringing about a new kind of patriarchal order which is more humane and more accommodating of woman's cause for liberty and equality. This reading takes a stand against those feminists who view the play being anti-feminist. Furthermore, It will prove how the play contains basic tenets of both Liberal Humanism and Feminism, which could provide a new type of woman's agency. Another significant aspect to be dealt with is the role of 'nature' in moving the dramatic structure of the play; more importantly, its

role in assisting the female protagonist in her quest for individuality. The protagonist's act of agency is achievable not by protagonist's taking an oppositional stand against the whole institution of patriarchy, rather by active participation within the same patriarchal social system. The active role of Rosalind in reconciling contradictory attitudes of various characters may assist the new authority to reshape and re-organize the 'Ardenian' community in harmonious way.

**Cross Dressing as a Empowerment:** Rosalind's cross- dressing may constitute a subversive act against the hegemonic order since it challenges common conception regarding female's role during the Renaissance period. Another view, however, considers female protagonist's cross dressing as another act which reaffirms "reaffirming the sexual hierarchy". Critics have given different, even contradictory interpretations, about the female protagonist's act of cross-dressing:

On the more positive side, critics such as Dusi Berre, Berggren, and Rackin ( as well as Catherine Belsey in ' Disrupting Gender Difference: Meaning and Gender in the Comedies') see at least the possibility for an escape from the constraints of femininity, an opening up of rigid gender distinctions, a playfulness with ideas of androgyny. On the negative side, critics such as Free and Howard reject the view of Shakespeare's heroines as proto-feminists and argue that cross-dressing on the stage was not in fact a strong site of resistance to traditional assumptions about gender.<sup>1</sup>

Undoubtedly, the act of cross-dressing by the female protagonist dramatically moves the plot swiftly, bringing about different dramatic situations . In these dramatic situations, Rosalind's role, from a secondary character changes into central one. One of the advantages Rosalind gains from the act of changing identity is the sense of liberty she enjoys in the Forest of Arden. The new male identity provides her with an opportunity to establish a very close

connection with Orlando. By assuming Rosalind being a male character, Orlando easily fall into the harmless trap set by Rosalind, mistaking her being a brilliant magician specialized in curing love-stricken people. Mistaken by her false character, Orlando begins confessing his troubling love situation to Rosalind. Moreover, by assuming male identity, Rosalind is able to influence other characters to change their personalities. She could easily change the attitudes of Phoebe towards Silvius. Taken within the contexts of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, Rosalind's act of cross dressing is subversive in certain way because " by exposing the fictiveness of gender difference, throws into question the hierarchization of men over women."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the easiness through which Rosalind changes her identity from female into male throws into question the fixability of gender roles as it implies constructiveness of these social roles. The act by itself is " empowering because it highlighted the performativity of gender roles"<sup>3</sup>. Change of gender roles in the play may affirm tenets of *poststructuralist theories* of gender performativity.

"As Judith Butler puts it : Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."<sup>4</sup> Most importantly, shifting gender roles in the play by Rosalind, will also shift the balance of power in the play.

However, other critics view Rosalind's cross dressing act not totally subversive. The dramatic turn of events in the final act does not seem to support the protagonist's quest for total liberty from patriarchal constraints. The new established structure requires all subjects, especially recently empowered females, to give up most of their

<sup>1</sup>Catherine M. S. Alexander and Stanley Wells.( edit) (2001). *Shakespeare and Sexuality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Goldberg, Jonathan . ( 2010) *Sodometries-Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities*. New York: Fordham University Press . 107

<sup>3</sup> Aebischer, Jacobean. ( 2010). *Jacobean Drama*. Palgrave Macmillan . 120.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, A. Jeffrey. ( 2011) *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*. University Press of Mississippi..23

*aspiration for liberty and pay allegiance to newly established order.*

Like the princes, Rosalind confronts her father in the final scene, But in her case paternal power is vigorously represented by Duke Senior and by the line of patriarchal authority established when Senior makes Orlando his heir. Festive celebration is now possible because a dependable, that is, patriarchal, social order is securely in place.<sup>5</sup>

However, enquiring whether the female protagonist's act constitutes total subversive act or not is invalid without taking into consideration the socio-political context of the play. Festivities and 'Marital Closure' was a commonly known dramatic trope during Jacobean and Elizabethan era.. Any playgoer during that time expected to witness such dramatic occurrence in any drama, while any lack of it would have been considered out of the dramatic convention.

The festive ar/rangement at the end of the play, where four young brides joined by their grooms, would necessitate incorporating rebellious figures into the restored order. This of course didn't necessitate rebellious figures to give up their aspiration for more liberty and equality, things Rosalind through her cross-dressing had symbolically acquired. Cross-dressing is shown in the play as a stage of character development than an end by itself. The aspect of Marriage for Rosalind and Celia functions as a 'mid-way' solution, that is reconciling their aspiration for total liberty with the need for conformity to old patriarchal constraints. Balancing desire for liberty and need for conformity, as a very important motif in the play, symbolically may provide a vision about the possibility of reconciling tenets of modern feminism and Renaissance Humanism. " From the humanist perspective, the fine balance between variety and order is sacred".<sup>6</sup> The dramatic motif of 'balancing excess and

*confinement'* is evident in different forms in the play, and it keeps repeating itself through changes in characters' personalities. Even the moral lesson of the play is structured around same kind of motif.

**Balancing ' Excess versus 'Confinement' :** Beyond external dangerous forces, such as nature's harsh circumstance or danger of attack by either enemies or even wild animals, characters are forced to face other forces in the Forest of Arden. These forces are within characters themselves. The conflict between passion and reason, a common theme in Shakespearean drama, is to be found in this play as well. Though that theme is more related to Rosalind and Orlando's process of character development, other characters more or less go through same kind of internal struggle in different phases of the drama. Oliver and Duke Ferdinand's excessive lust for power, for instance, is paralleled with Orlando's excessive passion for Rosalind. Similarly, Touchstone's excessive lust for Audrey is paralleled with Phoebe's extreme passion for the disguised Rosalind.

What distinguishes Rosalind from other characters, however, is not the lack of a sense of naivety or even foolishness evident in the behavior of most characters, but her sense of modesty and bravery when it comes to solving others' problems or facing challenges. The relationship between Orlando and Rosalind, posing as Ganymede, proves to be a good example of the contrast between passion and reason, or allegorically set , ' excess ' versus ' conformity' :

When Rosalind calls on Hercules to aid Orlando, she links Orlando with the Greek hero who outwrestled and defeated Antaeus---a story traditionally interpreted as an allegorical triumph of reason over passion. The reason-passion allegory is then further developed as both Orlando and Rosalind see their own struggles with the power of passionate love in terms of wrestling"<sup>7</sup>

Rosalind, as main protagonist of the play, is required to go through a long process of self-exploration.

<sup>5</sup> Edit : Bloom, Harold ( 2004). *As You Like It - William Shakespeare*. Chelsea House Publishers. 52.

<sup>6</sup> **Holmesland, Oddvar . ( 2013) *Utopian Negotiation: Aphra Behn and Margaret Cavendish*. Syracuse University Press. 89**

<sup>7</sup> J. Lynch, Stephen . ( 2003) *As You Like it: A Guide to the Play*. Greenwood Press..94

That process manifests itself in a long journey which is crucial in her character development. Another important function of Rosalind, probably, is assisting other characters to develop a sense of conformity. As a strong female character, she proves herself effective and efficient in handling difficult situations. The most difficult situation to overcome, probably, is her own love situation. Like Orlando and even Phoebe, Rosalind experiences that kind of conflict between her passion and reason. That is obvious in the 'wooing scene' in which Rosalind expresses a sense of uneasiness to her female companion, Celia:

O coz, coz, coz, my pretty little coz, that  
thoudidst know how many fathom deep I  
am in love! But it cannot be sounded: my  
affection hath an unknown  
bottom, like the bay of Portugal

The contrast between 'excess' and 'conformity', as personified in the relationship between Rosalind and Orlando is recognizable through different rhetorical style. Rosalind uses a mocking tone when asks Orlando about his love-sick situation, which can be taken as comical parody of love in general:

No, faith, die by attorney. The poor world is  
almost six thousand years old, and in all this  
time there was not any man died in his own  
person, videlicet, in a love-cause.

Rosalind's moral and nurturing guidance extends to other characters, such as Phoebe, Silvius, Touchstone and Audrey. The play magnificently establishes various parallels between different 'lov-sick' situations. Phoebe's excessive passion for the disguised Ganymede parallels Orlando's blind and unconstrained passion for Rosalind. Ironically, these two young characters are blindly in love with same person while holding wrong perceptions about her/his true identity. As she advises Orlando to confine to moderate love situation, Rosalind too, guides both Silvius and Phoebe to be reasonable in choosing the right object of their affection. Using her witty rhetoric, Rosalind mockingly criticizes both Phoebe and Silvius for choosing wrong person for their excessive affection: *'He's fallen in love with your foulness / and she'll fall in love with my anger'*. In another speech, Rosalind instructs Phoebe about the deceptive nature of love as she mistakenly fall in love with a woman in disguise *'I pray you, do not fall*

*in love with me, / For I am falser than vows made in wine*. Rosalind's moral instruction to Phoebe mainly intended to make her confine to the common moral and ethical standards expected from any woman of that age. This is quite evident in a speech in which Rosalind laments Phoebe who had turned a deaf ears to genuine love by Silvius *'But mistress, know yourself - down on your knees / And thank heaven, fasting, for a good man's love'*.

Rosalind's using of the expression *" know yourself "* is significant, for it intends to caution Phoebe to realize her limitation as well as her potentialities as a woman. The moral message as it implies; Phoebe, as allegorical parallel to Rosalind herself, should confine to certain norms and regulation and should not follow her excessive desire. Same kind of moral message is delivered by Rosalind to another character in the play in a different way. The ambivalent character of Jaques who prides himself being a traveler had not been spared from the witty criticism of Rosalind. Her reasonable argument against Jaques exhibits itself in a speech in which she laments Jack for wasting his life in useless wandering across the content:

A traveler! By my faith, you have great  
reason to be sad: I fear you have sold your  
own lands to see other men's; then, to have  
seen much and to havenothing, is to have  
rich eyes and poor hands

**Connection between Nature's 'Free Space' and 'Female's Agency'**: It is nature's harsh circumstance which makes various characters to go through a change in personality. After arriving in the Forest of Arden, Orlando is unable to discover the true reality of Rosalind. At the very beginning of his journey into the forest, Orlando is getting to become too passionate and very sentimental, making him an easy prey for Rosalind's testing, ultimately results in turning him into a better lover. The healing effect of nature has its grip on other characters as well. This can be felt in the long praising speech by Duke Fredrick once he reaches the Forest of Arden.

.....Are not these woods  
More free from peril than the envious  
court?  
Here feel we not the penalty of Adam,  
The seasons' difference, as the icy fang

And churlish chiding of the winter's wind,  
Which, when it bites and blows upon my  
body,  
Even till I shrink with cold, I smile and say,  
"This is no flattery. These are counselors  
That feelingly persuade me what I am."

Nature's healing effect, ironically, has impact on the attitude and personality of the valiant characters as well. Oliver's sense of loss and his difficulty in coping with the harsh condition of the open 'Nature' would provide Orlando an opportunity to prove himself worthy and faithful brother. Orlando's saving of Oliver in the wild nature facilitates change in Oliver's personality, and this will foreshadow another dramatic incident in the play. The meeting with a religious man changes Duke Frederick's personality, and he will be converted into a good man at the final Act of the play.

Rosalind is the *only character amongst others* in the play having established a very strong connection with nature. As symbolized by 'The forest of Arden', Nature provides the female protagonist a 'free space' to explore new way of living and experiencing new identity. More importantly, it provides Rosalind with opportunity to test and latter on reform characters. That 'free space' makes it much easy for Rosalind to move freely without constraints and make contacts with various characters. Along with her self-disguise, nature provides physical safe haven and psychological relief for Rosalind. The rigid authority of the patriarchy becomes almost invisible in the forest of Arden. Nature, thus, can be considered as a source of empowerment, especially for the female protagonist. The play's emphasis on the role of nature; it's empowering effect upon the female protagonist, may allude to certain treatise by some Eco-feminists, These eco-feminists argued " that while the woman-nature bond had been defiled and denigrated by patriarchal culture, the bond of women with nature in fact, represents a significant and empowering bridge for women"<sup>8</sup>. Beside providing a safe haven, nature does also assert the unique status of Rosalind among other characters.

<sup>8</sup> Edit : Engel-Di Mauro, Salvatore. Bauder, Harold. (2008). *Critical Geographies: a collection of readings* Praxis [e] Press. 436.

That connection between Nature's healing effect and Rosalind's reconciling function would eventually lead to changing the community into a better one. The effective role of Rosalind, as a woman, is crucial in moving the dramatic actions within nature's circular ' and harmonious ' pattern. This would reaffirm the view held by many feminists, especially 'Cultural Feminists' who "view woman as instinctually more *natural*, more closely related to life cycles"<sup>9</sup>. *The cycle of life, ironically, is referred to in a monologue by Jaques :*

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely  
players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages.

*Though the imaginary and idealistic landscape of The forest of Arden* may possess many positive traits, yet it is *not without shortcomings*. Beyond its nurturing effect, the Forest of Arden may turn into a very hostile place for characters. Upon their arrival, characters may face hunger and starvation. Adam almost collapsed when he first entered the Forest. Oliver too nearly killed by the wild lioness if it were not for Orlando's bravery. However, such unpromising dramatic incidents were simply meant to further push the dramatic plot into its happy and reconciling ending.

**Female Agency within Orderly and Harmonious Frame :** The protagonist's act of agency is achievable not by taking an oppositional stand against the whole institution of patriarchy, rather by incorporating within that system. The active role of Rosalind in reconciling contradictory attitudes of various characters may assist Duke Senior's attempt to reshape the Ardenian community in the Forest of Arden. Some feminist critics, however, view the protagonist's role in the play with suspicion. They base their critical approach on certain dramatic incident in the play. The final act of the play, for instance, in which Rosalind voluntarily submits to will of the new Patriarch as well as her male lover may constitute a good ground for critics to base their anti-feminist criticism of the play. Duke

<sup>9</sup> Dolan, Jill. ( 2012) *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*. University of Michigan Press.7.



Senior's "benevolent patriarchy still requires women to be subordinate, and Rosalind's final performance is her enactment of this subordination."<sup>10</sup> The exchange of power from the female protagonist to representatives of new Patriarchy, symbolically, demonstrated in the exchange of speeches between Rosalind and both Duke Senior and Orlando.

ROSALIND

[To DUKE SENIOR] To you I give myself, for I am yours.

To ORLANDO

To you I give myself, for I am yours.

DUKE SENIOR

If there be truth in sight, you are my daughter.

ORLANDO

If there be truth in sight, you are my Rosalind

The ending of the play may appear to assert male's 'power privilege' over female characters. "The sense of the patriarchal ending in *As You Like It* is that male androgyny is affirmed whereas female "liberty" in the person of Rosalind is curtailed."<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, the temporal acquisition of power by Rosalind ends once she leaves the Forest of Arden. Consequently, "the altered world of Arden is only superficially a release from everyday, patriarchal norms, and that as a temporary reversal of the norms Arden is never a threat to them."<sup>12</sup> As if gaining power by the female characters is only possible in illusionary utopian world than in the real world. That contrast between illusion versus reality is paralleled with the reversal of power relations between males and females :

"...the privileged status accorded to male bonds by comparing Shakespeare's treatment of same sex relations for men and for women. Men originally divided are reunited as the instance of Oliver and

Orlando, but women undergo the reverse process. ....Celia ceases to be a speaking character at the end of act 4, her silence coinciding with her new role as fiancée. The danger of female bonding is illustrated when Shakespeare diminishes Rosalind's absolute control by mischievously confronting her with the unanticipated embarrassment of Phoebe's love for her."<sup>13</sup>

However, feminist's negative evaluation of the role of the female protagonist is hampered by crucial shortcomings. Critics' overemphasis on separate individualistic act falls short of delivering comprehensive and objective analysis of the protagonist's act of agency. Rosalind's act of individuality cannot be separated from the overall change in the Ardenian community. Her act to acquire agency is strongly related to changes in attitudes and manners of other characters in the Ardenian community. Moreover, 'the altered world' of the Forest of Arden 'is not meant merely to benefit female characters but also to stimulate changes in the personalities of other characters. It is Rosalind's active engagement in the Ardenian exile community; her nurturing effect, and her educating role which assist in bringing about a new kind of system, which is more human and more sympathetic to feminist cause. This collaborative approach by the female protagonist is in accordance with basic tenets of 'Relational Feminism' approach which "view women as *relational, connected*, and intertwined with other lives"<sup>14</sup>.

Contrary to older type of patriarchy in which power was concentrated in one figure, (-symbolized in ruthless character of Duke Fredrick-), The new patriarchal order, represented by Duke Senior, would function on providing almost every character new role to play and new position in newly formed society. None of the characters in the play leaves the Forest of Arden without his/ her personality being altered into better one. Accordingly, Rosalind will not be leaving the Forest of Arden without having her own share of power,

<sup>10</sup> Bloom ( 2004)..P.52

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. P.53

<sup>12</sup> Carlson, Susan ( 1991) . Women and Comedy: Rewriting the British Theatrical Tradition. University of Michigan Press. P.46.

<sup>13</sup> Bloom ( 2004). P.54.

<sup>14</sup> Edit: Victoria Boynton, Jo Malin. ( 2005) *Encyclopedia of Women's Autobiography*: K-Z. Greenwood Press. P.481

contrary to her former status in Duke Senior's society in which she was totally excluded from playing any significant role. So, at the end of the play "the privileged status" is not solely accorded to male bonds, as some critics might suggest; rather, there are new bonds and new power relations established when the play reaches its final ending. As in the case with newly formed relationships among young couples, love bonds or marriage bonds takes over old forms of power relationships. These new forms of bonds and power relations play a very essential role in re-ordering and re-organizing the power structure of the newly formed society. This re-ordering includes not only human relationships but also the economic relationships as well. Duke Senior's announcement of making Orlando his heir would strengthen the social position of Rosalind as new Duchess.

Sharing communal responsibility and assisting one another in cruel circumstance is another crucial message delivered in the play." In economic and social terms, the play asserts social responsibility as personal responsibility."<sup>15</sup> Rosalind's sharing of social responsibility means giving up or submitting part of her private liberty for the sake of communal goodness. Following a humanist tradition, Shakespeare's female protagonists, especially those to be found mostly in comedies:

"offer a new definition of responsible adulthood, affirming a concept of marriage drawn from Renaissance humanism and the Puritan emphasis on conscience and conjugal love. Refusing to be bartered like property, these young women assert their right to consent, to think for themselves and make adult commitments."<sup>16</sup>

Preserving hierarchal society while at the same time providing a 'private space' for each character, especially females, to practice their individualistic liberty is one of the implicit moral messages the play

is trying to deliver. Ultimately, Achieving individual agency is only possible within ordered and harmonious community; the one establishes itself in the final act of the play. Every individual is part of the harmonious whole, and none should fall out of the idealist and well organized system. "Fundamental to this system was the correspondence of the macrocosm and the microcosm, and the fourfold structure of binary opposites inherent in all things."<sup>17</sup>

Parallel to patriarchal system existed in the figure of Duke Senior, there was another form of authority headed by a female in male disguise. Rosalind symbolically exercised her own authority on Orlando and other characters in different forms. The two poles of power, patriarchal and matriarchal, will get united in harmonious unity through four different marriages. Marriage as dramatic motif in the play comes as constructing balance between unconstrained desire for liberty and disciplined conformity. Balancing excess with confinement through character development of four young couples becomes a basic component of the overall moral message the play is trying to convey. The harmonious union on earth is taken as allegorical true reflection on divine and heavenly union, as it was delivered in the speech by Hymn:

*Hym.* Then is there mirth in heaven,  
When earthly things made even  
Atone together. Good duke, receive thy  
daughter; Hymen from heaven brought her;  
Yea, brought her hither, That thou mightst  
join her hand with his,  
Whose heart within her bosom is

### Conclusion

The role of the female protagonist evokes various analyses. The act of cross dressing is probably the most provocative aspect of the play, which appeals various contradictory interpretations. This issue has been investigated thoroughly in this research. Based on the findings of this research, the act of cross -dressing to a certain degree is subversive one, assisting in reshaping and re-organizing the old patriarchal system existed before the protagonist's undertaking of the journey. On the

<sup>15</sup> Edit : Barroll, Leeds ( 1995) . *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England, Volume 7*. Associated University Press. P 132.

<sup>16</sup> Dreher, Elizabeth. Diane . ( 1986) *Domination And Defiance: Fathers and Daughters in Shakespeare* The University Press of Kentucky. P 165.

<sup>17</sup> McAlindon, Thomas. (1991). *Shakespeare's Tragic Cosmos*. Cambridge University Press. P..5.

other hand, the same act by the protagonist assists in bringing about a new kind of patriarchal order which is more humane and more accommodating of woman's cause for liberty and equality. The motif of 'love situations' was also an important motif in *As You Like It*. It is through reasoning and logical persuasion the heroine able was able to change the personalities of different characters which ultimately helped in restoring harmony at the end of the play. Through different kinds of 'love situations', the dramatic contrast between 'passion' versus 'reason' had been revealed. This contrast implicitly reflects on an important issue in the play; that is, making a balance between the female protagonist's strife for individuality and the commitment towards conventional social obligations. However, at the end of each play, the protagonist was able to achieve a certain degree of agency while confining to some accepted social moral obligations. Thus, finding a safe 'female zone' or 'private feminine space' in newly re-organized patriarchal society at the final act of the play, by implication, can be taken as a proof about the possibility of establishing a harmonious coordination between Feminist's perspective regarding woman's emancipation in patriarchal society and Humanist's view concerning the need of social confinement.

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