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Forest of Arden Revisited: A Study of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* from an Ecocritical Perspective

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Conventional classroom discussion on *As You Like It* emphasizes more on considering the play as a pastoral romance, on gender identity revealed through the two disguised women, the country-court controversy and so on. The Forest of Arden, an enchanted forest with its mystic power occupies a large part of this discussion. But another very significant aspect of the play, the author's ecoconsciousness revealed time and again in the development of the plot, is never given its due importance. This essay will try to bring out the ecocritical elements latent within the play under discussion. The essay will also try to find out the purpose of the playwright behind the introduction of the character of Jaques who brings with him an ecocentric point of view into the text.

The concept of ecocriticism first arose at the meetings of WLA (Western Literature Association) in 1970s by Michael P. Branch. Later in 1989 WLA conference Cheryll Glotfelty reintroduced the term 'ecocriticism' to refer to the field of study previously known as 'the study of nature writing'. In neoclassical poetry nature played merely a scenic or ornamental role. But with the evolution of Romanticism, there was a marked transformation in nature's role in poetry – it came to emerge as the subject or focus of much poetic endeavor. The uniqueness of

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ecocriticism amongst contemporary literary and cultural theories lies within its close relationship with science and ecology. For the ecocritics, nature as an entity really exists which can affect us and which, if mistreated, can be affected by us fatally. While environmentalists argue for the preservation of natural resources for human purposes, deep ecology is concerned with the recognition of inherent worth in nature. In deep ecology, there is a shift from a human-centered or anthropocentric to a nature-centered or ecocentric system of values. On the other, traditionally defined nature writing, as summed up by John Elder at the 1995 ASLE conference, is 'a form of the personal, reflective essay grounded in attentiveness to the natural world and an appreciation of science but also open to the spiritual meaning and intrinsic value in nature' (qtd. in Armbruster 2). Jonathan Bate says about his renowned work *The Song of the Earth*, "It is about the capacity of the writer to restore us to the earth which is our home." According to Bate, Ecoconsciousness can be expressed through any of the two ways—a) by showing love for nature or b) by showing concern for nature. Within the present play under discussion, ecoconsciousness has been expressed following both the ways.

Pastoral is, as M. H. Abrams defines, 'a deliberately conventional poem expressing an urban poet's nostalgic image of the peace and simplicity of the life of shepherds and other rural folk in an idealized natural setting' (141). Greg Garrard, the renowned ecocritic, thinks of pastoral as taking decisive role in shaping our constructions of nature. In attempt to answer what 'pastoral' is, and find out its significance for environmentalism, Terry Gifford distinguishes three kinds of pastoral: i) the particularly literary tradition depicting return to the country side from the city, ii) 'any literature that describes a country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban' (1992: 2), and iii) the pejorative sense implying an idealization of country life concealing/ overlooking the realities of labour and hardship. The first kind among these are depicted in 'classical pastoral', the second kind comes to the fore in Romantic pastoral and the third sense comes into existence especially in Marxist critique of Romanticism, providing a ground for contrast of this tradition in cultural criticism with ecocriticism.

The opening scene of *As You Like It* shows Orlando and Adam conversing in the orchard adjoined to Oliver's house. Rosalind and Celia are introduced to the audience while they were wandering in the lawn. We meet the other important characters we meet in the heart of uncontaminated nature. The wrestling between Orlando and Charles again betrays the signs of

primitive animal instinct. In Act II Scene (iii) the jealous Duke Frederick, threatened by the good reputation of Rosalind among people, banishes her from the court. Celia, out of her love and compassion for her sister, deliberately takes the banishment upon herself, determining to leave the court in disguise. On the other hand Orlando, to get rid of the conspiracy of his brother to kill him, escapes into the forest, with Adam willfully accompanying him. Duke Senior, the father of Rosalind, along with his courtiers has already taken refuge into the forest after his banishment from the court. Now we have almost all the major characters assembled into the Forest of Arden. Now, according to the criteria set by Terry Gifford, to be a pastoral, *As You Like It* should consist of —i) description of nature and ii) implicit or explicit contrast between the rural and the urban.

An appreciation of the natural beauty of the forest is presented through the song of Amiens in Act II Scene (v). The song is actually an invitation to a true admirer of nature to lie down ‘under the greenwood tree’ and enjoy the sweet, joyful song of the birds. Here the only enemy is the adversities of the rough, wintry season. According to the song, this is an ideal place for a person without any worldly ambition, to live in the open air, welcoming the wind and rough weather. Again, a beautiful description of the nature surrounding the sheep-cote owned by Rosalind and Celia is provided in Act IV Scene (iii). The location of the cottage is in the valley, at the outskirts of the forest. Beside it there is a stream that produces murmuring sound while flowing. A row of willow trees, close to the stream leads the way towards the cottage. The olive trees surrounding the cottage serve the purpose of the fence. Duke Senior too acknowledges the beneficial effects of the forest—“Find tongues in trees, books in the murmuring brooks,/ Sermons in stones, and good in everything” (Act II Scene i L. 16-17). In the last scene, the Pages sing a song in appreciation of spring, depicting a beautiful picture of this lovely season. As this is the season of the lovers, they too sing in a jubilant state of mind along with the sweet, tinkling song of the birds.

Now coming to the second criteria of Romantic pastoral, there are plenty of evidences of the comparison between the forest and the court. For example, we may refer to the introductory speech of Duke Senior in Act II scene (i) addressing his companions in exile. Here through a rhetorical interrogation he asserts that their present state of banishment in the heart of nature is ‘more sweet’ than their previous life in the court. These woods are less dangerous than the

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artificially glittering court with its jealousies and rivalries. The only adversity they have to face here is the 'penalty of Adam', the icy sting of the winter wind. On the contrary, Touchstone, after entering the forest, remarks sarcastically, "When I was at home, I was in a better place" (Act II Scene iv, L. 13-14).

Greg Garrard sets out three orientations of pastoral in terms of time: "...the 'elegy' looks back to a vanished past with a sense of nostalgia, the 'idyll' celebrates the bountiful present, and 'utopia' looks forward to a redeemed future"(37). In this respect, the present text under discussion is an 'idyll'. As J.F. Cuddon explains, the word 'idyllic' commonly refers to a serene or euphoric state or environment which is 'remotely attainable and idealized'. For Thomas McFarland, the author of *Shakespeare's Pastoral Comedy*, the landscape of the Forest of Arden plays a greater significant role than being a mere idyllic background to the action of the play. It actually occupies the center stage and becomes the fulcrum in the development of the plot. It's not simply a neutral site to escape to. It's a natural space where the characters are allowed to be themselves, being free from the socio-political burdens of the court. Here they are free to create alternate identities, and perhaps the title of the play is derived from this aspect of Arden. As Garrard opines, "Pastoral often used nature as a location or as a reflection of human predicaments, rather than sustaining an interest in and for itself."(35) Arden is capable of providing everybody what he/she desires. Thus the duke with his retinue has to hunt to get their food, while Audrey could manage all her needs by keeping goats. For Orlando's poems, there are plenty of receptive tree barks. Oliver is welcomed by the snake and the lioness that help him in his reformation. And for Duke Frederick, the forest sends out an old religious man to convert him.

Orlando in Act I is a discontented young man, melancholic, bound to bear with the tyranny of his brother, and doesn't find any difference between life and death. But once he enters into the Forest of Arden, a space free from the norms of hierarchy, he asserts himself as a loyal courtier and an ardent lover. He feels free to express his passion through verses, however bad they are, engraved on the barks of the trees. Forest of Arden presents before us a renewed Orlando— elated, bubbling with vitality and energy, just like his poems, an expression of inner joy. The transformation of Oliver and Duke Frederick too are very explicit. Being a victim of the socio-political structure of the court, they too had to suppress their better selves, the feelings of

kinship and other virtues. But when they enter Arden, it allows those qualities within them to emerge. Again, this forest allows Celia to explore her potential as a successful homemaker of which she couldn't make full utilization in the court. Here she creates a family based on empathy and compassion, never disrupted by sibling rivalry, greed and power lust. . But the most notable transformation that the Forest of Arden makes is that of Rosalind. As soon as she dons men's apparel, her latent courage and potential comes out. Once she is free from the bounds of the court, she becomes the controller of the actions and emotions of almost all the characters in the play. This becomes most prominent in the climax when she regulates and directs, and even prompts the other characters their dialogues. And this empowerment of hers is actually a gift of the Forest of Arden.

Traditional discussion on *As You Like It* describes Forest of Arden as an enchanted forest. Oliver, the elder brother of Orlando, has been painted in black in the first half of the play. Apart from his misbehavior with his brother, he even plots to kill him by burning. Such a wicked fellow, when he enters the Forest of Arden, undergoes conversion after being rescued by his brother from the attacks of the snake and the lioness. Another character to experience such sudden change of attitude is that of Duke Frederick. In the beginning of the play, he is an usurper banishing his brother after snatching his dukedom. At the end of the play we find him retiring from the worldly life, restoring all his wealth and power upon his brother. The reason behind these conversions, as is explained in conventional classroom reading of the play, is the magical power possessed by the Forest of Arden. Here ecocriticism offer a more reasonable interpretation. According to it, nature itself has a benevolent influence upon all the creatures. Once you come under its soothing effect, you will find peace and rest within yourself. Such was the case of Oliver and Duke Frederick too. After the tedious ways of life in the court, when they entered into the peaceful and serene atmosphere of the forest, they realized the meaninglessness of wealth, power and lust leading nowhere but to damnation. So, they overthrew all their evil designs in order to live a new life in the lap of nature.

Now I would like to re-view the importance of the character of Jaques. As Agnes Latham thinks, in the character of Jaques, one should rather try to trace the general traits of the melancholy man than to suppose him a caricature of some real character. Bridget Lyons remarks upon the perceptions of melancholy in the sixteenth century, "(It) was clarified as a disease,

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condemned as a vice or exalted as the condition and symptom of genius... But all these diverse traditions about melancholy expressed implicitly, the idea of its social importance—it was a physical and psychological condition that expressed an orientation towards the world and society...”(qtd. in Latham xlvi). And Jaques' reflection on the strange behavior of the other characters in the play leads some of the critics to pigeonhole him as a melancholic character. According to Furness, this character has provoked a good deal of controversy of which some judgments seem to be contradictory, mutually exclusive. One such opinion presents Jaques as a misanthrope whose chief pleasure is to deride humanity and all its affairs. But Verity discards the idea of labeling Jaques as a misanthrope. For him, he is a man of 'great intellectual and imaginative power and even great sensibilities' (xxxix). Conventionally these aspects of Jaques' character are more emphasized in the classroom discussion. In this paper, we would partly accept Verity's opinion and try to find out Jaques' role in the play from the perspective of ecocriticism.

“His early positioning of Jaques as an observer and critic of life around him anticipates his role in the play”—says G. Aparna (134). The first reference of Jaques we find is in Act II Scene (i) when Duke Senior proposes to go for hunting deer. From the speech of the First Lord, we come to know about Jaques' reaction at seeing a stag wounded by the arrow of a hunter. Being separated from the main herd, it came to the riverside to die a slow death. Besides moralizing over the matter, Jaques calls the Duke and his peer intruders, unjustly taking possession of the woods and scaring away the animals from the forest which has been allotted to them by nature herself. In his opinion, “... you do more usurp/ Than doth your brother that hath banished you”. In this particular matter, the Duke fails to penetrate on the effect of their activities upon the natural inhabitants of the forest.

Jaques introduces an ecocentric point of view into the text. The previous occasion shows Jaques feeling sympathy for the wounded deer. Later in another occasion we see him chiding Orlando for marring the barks of the trees by writing love-poems on them. He feels the pain of the trees while carving the letters on them. Even the shepherds and shepherdesses, the original inhabitants of the forest, share some of his sympathetic feelings. This becomes prominent through the role he plays in the Touchstone-Audrey story. Touchstone's intentions towards Audrey are not thoroughly honorable. Though he marries her at the end of the play, Jaques has a suspect that Touchstone is not so much interested in a long-term commitment to the obsessively

moral Audrey. Led by his doubt about the matter, initially he tries to make their marital bond stronger by solemnizing the marriage not in secret, rather in the presence of almost all the other characters of the play. Thus, in his own way he tries to save Audrey, one of the original residents of the forest, from being exploited by the ‘civilized’ people as far as he could. Moreover, his banishment into the forest seems to be deliberately undertaken, not under any compulsion, unlike the other characters. He is a true lover of nature in its original essence. That’s why when everything is happily settled down at the end of the play, and all other characters are returning to the court, he is the only one who refuses to leave the forest.

Now, as we know, this particular play by Shakespeare is founded on Thomas Lodge’s *Rosalynde: Euphues’ Golden Legacy*. Obviously, some variations from the source we can observe in the play. One such variation is the insertion of the character of Jaques. Then, the question that haunts our mind is why is Jaques there in the play at all? What is the purpose of the playwright behind inserting such a character within the play who is hardly necessary for the development of the plot? This character is an original creation of Shakespeare. As A.W. Verity remarks, “In his utterance, some people hear the voice of Shakespeare himself.”(xxix). Though Shakespeare was writing a pastoral comedy, his eco-conscious mind could not accept some of the activities of the characters resulting in disturbing the ecological balance of the forest. He needed a mouthpiece to express his own ecocentric views. So, the introduction of a character like Jaques explores a new facet of the playwright himself—his consciousness for the balance in nature.

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