
Utopia Turned Dystopia: An Ecocritical Reading of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

AMRITA GOSWAMI

Junior Research Fellow

Department of English and Culture Studies,
The University of Burdwan, West Bengal,
India

Abstract:

Shakespeare's highly acclaimed romantic comedy As You Like It is set in the pastoral tradition where the idyllic natural setting of the Forest of Arden makes the drama all the more enchanting. In this play nature has been highly idealized and the Forest of Arden has been held as a sort of utopia where everything is good and happy. Yet a close reading of this play shows the insensible human attitude towards nature which accentuates the hollowness of their nature worship. The human desire for mastery over nature renders the utopian Forest of Arden into a veritable dystopia – a desolate place bearing the marks of plunder everywhere.

Key words: utopia, dystopia, ecocriticism, William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

Shakespeare's pastoral comedies like *As You like It* (1600), *A Mid Summer Night's Dream* (1595), *The Tempest* (1611), *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1595), *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1600), *Love's Labour's Lost* (1594), *The winter's Tale* (1610), *Cymbeline* (1609) are all famous for their idyllic pastoral settings. In all these plays the major characters with their problems and obstacles in life are transported from the normal world to the pastoral world where the comic resolution is

achieved and poetic justice is maintained. So the pastoral setting seems to possess a miraculously curative power that could purge off all evils and set everything aright. In this sense nature serves to be a 'utopia' – the deeply cherished ideal land where everything is good and benevolent. So, from time immemorial nature has been idealized and natural life has been considered worth imitating. Shakespeare's pastoral plays also highlight this. Yet a close and more careful reading of his plays would expose the darker undercurrents lying underneath an apparently serene surface. Read from an eco-centric perspective the hollowness of men's attitude towards nature becomes exposed. Their apparent love and idealization of nature conceal the violence they carry in their blood and which is best exerted upon nature.

The tradition of pastoral dates back to the time of the Greek poet Theocritus of 3rd Century B.C. who celebrated the life of the shepherds in his poems called "Idylls". The Roman poet Virgil imitated Theocritus and wrote pastorals known as "Eclogues". Since then numerous imitations of Theocritus and Virgil have taken place contributing to the establishment of the pastoral tradition. The Elizabethan England also witnessed the practice of this tradition in the form of pastoral lyric, pastoral elegy, pastoral romance and pastoral drama. In this regard mention may be made of Edmund Spenser's pastoral poem *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1579), Philip Sidney's pastoral romance *Arcadia* (1590, 1598) and Shakespeare's pastoral comedies. Shakespeare's comedies closely follow the pastoral conventions laid down by his precursors. The text *As You Like It* (1600) that I have taken up for analysis is based upon Thomas Lodge's pastoral romance *Rosalynde*. The objective of this paper is to read this renowned play of Shakespeare from a different angle i.e. to expose human greed for mastery over nature. In order to do this a little knowledge about the Elizabethan mindset is required.

The time when Shakespeare was writing, Elizabethan England was under the grip of the Renaissance. The Renaissance which started in the 14th Century Italy spread into England during the 16th Century. The renaissance features like 'humanism' and 'individualism' led people believe in their immense potentiality and consider themselves masters of the universe. This sense of self-confidence led them to wield power in every sphere – be it the domain of men or nature. So, if love for nature was one feature induced by the renaissance then the desire for achieving mastery over nature was a contrary feature also fostered by the renaissance. The spirit of the renaissance enhanced men's quest for knowing things and places of the world. As a result of this they started exploring new lands and establishing dominion over there. These newly discovered lands came to be known as the 'new world'.¹ The discoverers who with the passage of time became conquerors extended their domination over the native dwellers of the place, animals, vegetation and even natural resources like sea, mountains, rivers, mines, forests, pastures etc. This process of establishing domination over another land or nation which in modern critical parlance called 'colonialism' was prevalent from the ancient times and particularly became prominent during the renaissance. References to all these are strewn in many plays of Shakespeare.

In *As You Like It* the Forest of Arden serves as an alternative space where the troubled men and women from the world of experience escape for temporary relief. In this context mention should be made of the renowned structural critic Northrop Frye has studied the pastoral romantic comedies of Shakespeare and classified them as 'the drama of the green world'² (182) in his famous book *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957). His contention is that in all these plays the troubled people from the world of experience which he terms as the 'red world' move into the natural world which he calls the 'green world' where miraculously their problems get resolved

and finally they return to the red world as transformed beings. The first persons to go there are the banished Duke and 'three or four loving lords' (1.1.99-100) who have followed him even in exile. Though the court people lack the amenities and comforts of city life in the forest yet they find it better than the envious court. Like any other real place the forest has its own limitations too like the 'seasons' difference' ; 'the icy fang' and 'churlish chiding of the winter's wind' (2.1.6-7) but it is the generosity of the Senior Duke 'That can translate the stubbornness of fortune/ Into so quiet and so sweet a style' (2.1.19-20).

In the forest it becomes necessary to procure food and a chief source of food is hunting. But apart from procuring meat for food, hunting has become a sport to the lords: 'To fright the animals and to kill them up, / In their assign'd and native dwelling-place' (2.1.62-63). Duke Senior himself admits that it gives him pain to see that the native dwellers of the forest meaning the animals suffering at the hands of outsiders mercilessly. One of the courtiers, Jaques goes one step further in commenting on this barbaric deer killing. He says by deer hunting Duke Senior proves himself a more usurper than his brother. He philosophizes the event that it is the basic nature of human society where the powerful dominates over the powerless, the rich over the poor, the dishonest over the honest and so on. Thus , giving examples from country, city and court Jaques proves that human nature is everywhere the same.

The lords with their arrival into the Forest of Arden abandon their courtly robes and start dressing as foresters reminding the readers of primitive savages who chiefly survived on hunting. The courtiers also take pride in deer hunting and consider it as an worthy act. When a lord kills a deer Jaques says (perhaps sarcastically) that he should be presented before the Senior Duke 'like a Roman conqueror' (4.2.3-4) with deer's horns set upon his head as a symbol of honour. Jaques equates the killing of a deer with the victory

won by a Roman General in war and he even asks for a song to celebrate the occasion. The song too contains the latent human desire to plunder nature. It proclaims that when the deer is killed its skin and horns are to be taken. The skin would function as their apparel and the horns would be worn by them as a sign of victory. The song also forbids to take the wearing of horns slightly because from ancient times horns have not only been considered as the symbol of cuckolds (men having unfaithful wives) but also the symbol of power and mastery. So, one should not be ashamed of wearing horns but he should rather feel proud of being a part of such an ancient and glorious tradition.

But Jaques sympathy towards these sub-human beings i.e. deers gets mocked by the other courtiers. Even Duke Senior sarcastically comments: 'I think he be transform'd into a beast, / For I can nowhere find him like a man' (2.7.1-2). This tendency of debasing sub-human beings is quite common among human beings. Men always try to see everything from anthropocentric perspective and impose human attributes upon non-human entities. But they loathe to do the contrary i.e. to take up an ecocentric perspective and to impose non-human attributes upon human beings. Even if they do so it is only for the sake of debasing human beings, to show that they have lost their human qualities. So, a clear prioritization of human beings over sub-human beings, culture over nature could be discerned from such an attitude.

Unlike the noble savages³ who were innocent dwellers as well as lovers of nature the banished persons from the court are not that innocuous. They have come to the forest not out of their own will but out of force. Nor do they have the least intention of making the forest their permanent home. All of them cherish the secret desire of returning to the normal world when things become right again. Rosalind and Celia escape into the forest searching for the banished Duke and accompanied by the court jester Touchstone. Orlando and his faithful servant

Adam leave the kingdom because he has been condemned by Duke Frederick on the ground of incurring Rosalind's attention. Orlando's elder brother Oliver also reaches the forest in pursuit of the fugitives. And finally the usurper, Duke Frederick with a large army arrives at the outskirts of the forest to arrest his brother, the lawful Duke. Thus it is clear that some business has brought all of them to the forest.

The end of this play is marked by the return of all other persons to the kingdom except Duke Frederick and Jaques. Any normal reading of this play would justify the return of the lawful Duke with his band of followers to the kingdom because the very nature of comedy demands restoration of poetic justice. But a genius like Shakespeare is always careful about such straitjacketing. So, while keeping the comic vein intact Shakespeare very subtly has hinted at through this ending the repetition of a cycle – the banish of the lawful Duke from the court, his taking refuge into the Forest of Arden, his restoration to his kingdom, and finally renunciation of all worldly affairs by the usurper Duke and his self-exile into the Forest of Arden. When viewed critically this ending asserts the ambivalent human nature – that people may love the world of nature but ultimately they cannot make it their own.

Rosalind's lover Orlando also treats nature very cruelly. He thinks that he could do with nature whatever he likes. As an expression of this he makes wounds in trees and hangs papers containing verses in praise of his beloved from the trees. He announces boastfully that the trees shall be his books because in their barks he would carve the name of his beloved describing her in a hundred epithets. He makes haste for this and says to himself: 'Run, run, Orlando: carve on every tree/ The fair, the chaste, and unexpressive she' (3.2.9-10) so that every eye could see the virtues of his beloved.

So, an ecocentric reading of this play exposes the human tendency of asserting mastery over nature which renders the utopian setting into a veritable dystopia. The Forest of Arden

no longer remains the pre-lapsarian Edenic space of bliss but shows every sign of hell. It seems that in spite of men's love for nature they never want to legitimize it into the mainstream lifestyle. Therefore, it always remains a marginalized space, an alternative space, another space which only serves to fulfill the needs of human beings.

Notes

1. The term 'New world' ('Mundus Novus') was first coined by the Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci. For further information consult the URL en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_World.
2. For a fuller discussion of 'green world' and 'red world' see the subsection 'The Mythos of Spring: Comedy' under the third essay "Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths" of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957).
3. The term 'Noble Savage' is of obscure origin. It makes appearance in Montaigne's essay *Of Cannibals* (1580), Dryden's *The Conquest of Granada* (1670), Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688), Rousseau's *Emile* (1762) etc. It chiefly indicates innocence, goodness, natural behaviour uncorrupted by culture and a sympathetic attitude towards nature.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, M.H. "Pastoral". *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 8th Ed. Delhi: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007. Print.
- Cuddon, J. A. "Pastoral". *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. London: Penguin, 1998. Print.
- Egan, Gabriel. *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism*. New York and London: Routledge, 2006. Print.

Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1957. Print.

Shakespeare, William. *As You Like It*. Ed. Roma Gill. New Delhi: OUP, 2009. Print.