



A Midsummer Night's Dream: An Ecocritical Interpretation

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Abstract:

Shakespeare studies in India started as early as in the early decades of the 19th century when the Indians seldom engaged in Shakespeare interpretation and so the term 'ecocriticism' was unheard of. What we mean by the phrase 'Critical studies of Shakespeare' started in India in 1917 when Hindu College (later on Presidency College and now Presidency University) was founded. Then Shakespeare began to be evaluated from an oriental point of view. Some of those interpretations may be considered ecocriticism. The same thing was done by Purna Chandra Basu (in his article "Sahitye Khoon", D. L. Roy (in his book, Kalidas O Bhababhuti) etc. Ecocriticism as a literary movement, as Yogesh K. Tiwari and N.D.R. Chandra say, began in the 1990s. But ecocritical evaluation of Shakespeare's plays from Indian point of view is yet to flourish well. In A Midsummer Night's Dream one can find plethora of materials relevant not only for the students of literature but of environmental studies also. The aim of the present play is to reinterpret Shakespeare's play A Midsummer Night's Dream from ecocritical point of view and thereby justify the contemporaneity of the Bard. Now-a-days many in many universities in India the students have to read English and Environmental Studies as compulsory subjects, Shakespeare being a part of the former. As the students of literature they would be keen to trace out the aesthetic aspects of the dramas of Shakespeare while belonging to various disciplines they would naturally seek for the relevance of Shakespeare in the present context. So the paper is an attempt to bring out Shakespeare's anticipation of the environmental problems and thereby prove Shakespeare as a topic of both literature and environmental studies.

Introduction

Modern environmentalism began with 'A Fable for Tomorrow', in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). Mrs. Frederick Boas edited the Cambridge collection of *Tempest Essays*; Richard Kerridge N. Shammells published *Writing the Environment, Eco-criticism and Literature* (Zed Books-1998); J. Bate & L. Coupe published *The Green Studies Reader from Romanticism to Eco-Criticism* (by New York, Routledge-2000); but the most outstanding book in this field is *Green Shakespeare* by Gabriel Egan who says,

Crossing the boundaries of literary and cultural studies to draw in politics, philosophy and ecology, this volume not only introduces one of the most lively areas of contemporary Shakespeare studies, but also puts forward a convincing case for Shakespeare's continuing relevance to contemporary theory.

There is a significant school named as the Association for the study of Literature and Environment which was started in America and now has its branches in Japan and UK. It is mainly an association of the eco-critics.

The Role of Literature in Placing a Value on the Environment: As Daniel B. Botkin and Edward A. Keller say in their book *Environmental Science* (5th edition, Page No. 11) the value of the environment is based on the following justifications: aesthetic, creative, recreational, inspirational, moral, cultural and utilitarian (materialistic). Aesthetic justification has to do with our appreciation of beauty of nature. Many people prefer living in the world of wilderness to one without it. Rabindranath Tagore created an instance by leaving the clutter of Calcutta settling down in the lap of Nature in Santiniketan. In Shakespeare the Forest of Arden minimizes the bereavement of the Duke in *As You Like It*. But in the Duke's bemoaning for the subordination of the forest we hear the voice of an ecologist. It would not be a digression to say that Tagore's ecocentrism is again found in *Siksha: Tapoban* in his comment on Shakespeare's plays.

While ecology is a mother branch of science, ecocriticism is comparatively a new branch which attempts to establish a relationship between literature and the physical environment. As Greg Garrard quotes in his book *Eco-criticism* from Glotfelty's book *The Eco-criticism Reader: Landmark in Literary Ecology*:

Simply put, eco-criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness

of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, eco-criticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary study.

Garrard also adds that eco-criticism is closely related to environmentally oriented developments in philosophy and political theory. So eco-criticism may be interpreted as the analysis of a literary text from the point of view of an ecologist.

Another epoch making writing that has relevance in our interpretation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is Simon C. Estok's research paper titled *Shakespeare and Ecocriticism: An Analysis of "Home" and "Power" in King Lear* in which the author explains the key terms "Anthropocentrism", "Biocentrism/ Ecocentrism" and "Ecophobia". Agreeing with Greg Garrard, Estok says that ecocriticism

is not simply the study of nature or natural things in literature; rather it is any theory that is committed to effecting change by analysing the function – thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical, or otherwise— the natural environment, or aspects of it, represents in documents that contribute to material practices in material world.

The explanation of the term 'ecophobia' is also very much necessary in our reevaluation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Estok thinks that "ecophobia is the fear of loss of agency and control to Nature". This ecophobia, found in both Oberon and Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, gives birth to various conflicts, both inner and outer, or, to say more explicitly, psychological and social (which includes ecological aspects also) and this sociological aspects of the play justify the contemporaneity of the bard.

Some minor research works have been done on this particular topic on national and international levels. Some research papers have been published on eco-criticism in Shakespeare's dramas in some journals; mention may be made of the one written by Dr. Subh Brat Sarkar, Rishi Bankim Chandra College, Naihati, W.B. The paper already written by the present researcher and published in the *Research Spectrum* (August-2012 Issue) contains some hints of the Eco-criticism in Shakespeare's plays as seen by Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore considered it to be a kind of colonialism. According to him colonialism is not only the subordination of a weaker nation by a powerful one but the subordination of nature by human beings. Tagore also probably finds the 'ecologist Shakespeare' as in *As You Like It*, *The Tempest* etc.

According to Nirmal Selvamony, the humans have introduced a hierarchy in nature. In that the humans have placed the domesticated animals higher than the wild animals. "Even animals were ranged in hierarchic order, the domestic and the wild" (Selvamony

4). But in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the role of the dominating power is taken by the fairies and the inferior race is the human beings. The fairies have occupied the topmost position in the hierarchy of Nature and they subordinate man and they quarrel in order to decide who will 'domesticate' the Indian boy who is the representative of the colonized people. This kind of colonialism found in Nature may be termed 'Ecocolonialism' or 'Eco-imperialism'. In a supernatural drama like the present one the imperialists are the fairies but in reality they are the mighty people and the colonized ones may be the flora and fauna or even linguistically, culturally, racially, socially, politically, religiously or financially weaker section of the people.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* an ecologist easily finds plenty of materials relevant not only to the students of literature but of science, especially ecology also. The human beings in the person of the Indian boy or the European lovers are merely playthings to the mighty fairies. The fairies play with the humans for their own pleasure and showing their might and not for the amusement of the humans and they do it from anthropocentric point of view.

In his Master's Degree dissertation paper, (University of South Florida) Roy Patricia points out the environmental issues in *MND* by referring to "Folk Medicine and the Four Fairies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," by Lou Agnes Reynolds and Paul Sawyer who have recovered the fairies from evil associations by casting them as herbal doctors.

The article points to the strong early modern interest in the medicinal use of plants and finds that, by the use of this imagery, Shakespeare imbues his fairy characters and their natural remedies with beneficial, medicinal properties. Reynolds and Sawyer's points are well taken, but we can develop them even further. Not only do the four attendant fairies – Cobweb, Mustardseed, Peascod and Mote – represent fairy medicine but all the actions in the forest also act therapeutically upon the lovers. The inversion of love-roles and the dreams of the lovers depend upon Oberon's extensive knowledge of the herbal lore of his world. As Oberon himself states: "Fare thee well, nymph [Helena]. Ere he do leave this grove / Thou shalt fly him, and he shall seek thy love. (2.1.245-6).

In Act-II, scene-i of from the speech of Puck we come to know that the king, Oberon is angry with the queen, Titania as she has seized away a boy from India and made him her servant.

"For Oberon is passing fell and wrath, / Because she as her attendant hath / A lovely boy, stolen from an Indian king".

But the king wants to roam about the forests (Nature), along with the boy. As a result whenever they meet, they quarrel. Titania also alleges him of emptying of the venom of jealousy. She says that whenever they meet they quarrel and as a result the wind cannot sing the song of peace and is sucking the fog from the surface of the seas and the water level of the seas has been raised up; the natural system has been disrupted, resulting in untimely flood and thereby destruction of vast area of crops and extinct of a number of species. The ever smiling spring, the scorching summer, the frowning autumn and the cruel winter have changed their plight and so people cannot identify them. Titania confesses that they are responsible for this unholy variation of the cycle of seasons. The people cannot endure the change of the cycle of seasons; suffer from untimely winter and also various kinds of diseases due to the change and endangered bio-diversity. In reply to the allegation of the queen, the king urges her to correct the ecological imbalance as she has the power to remedy. The reason of their quarrel is also clear to the readers— possession of the boy kidnapped from India. Here the quarrel is between a power that has deprived the creature of his natural habitat and made him her servant and the eco-friendly power that is keen to roam about the forests, along with the innocent creature. But none is ready to provide the boy with absolute freedom and so their quarrel does not come to an end here. The king requests the queen to hand the boy over to him but she is too obstinate to nod. She frankly declares that she cannot lose her control over the boy even if she is given the whole fairy land. So Oberon decides to use tricks. He advises Puck to extract the juice of a certain flower which would act like black magic and leave its evil influence on Titania's eyes, if administered properly. It would also be able to invert the usual behaviour and natural instinct of a person as in the modern age we see the evil influence of narcotics especially in the third world countries. The harmful effect of the use of drugs on eco system is mainly felt in the developing countries.

Again Titania, admits that their quarrel has destroyed the usual course of the natural phenomena and nature has undergone vast changes, creating ocean of troubles for human beings. In Act-1, Scene-ii (Lines 81-117) Titania, the Queen of the fairies alleges that their quarrel has destroyed the usual habits of the natural phenomena and Nature has undergone vast changes, creating ocean of troubles for human beings. It may be considered Shakespeare's anticipation of what McKibben says in his book *The End of Nature* (1990):

We have changed the atmosphere, and thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather we make every spot on earth man-made or artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature's independence is its meaning; without it there is nothing but us.
(McKibben 1990: 54)

In this connection it may be recalled that India was a favourite commercial place to the Western countries from the time of ancient history. And for the sole possession of India several wars were fought between the English and the French and others. The Indian boy in the play is symbolically a colony, an ideal place for business. Now-a-days it may be a typical Indian plant for whose patent the economic colonialists are ever fighting among themselves and in order to supersede one another destroying the eco system of the whole globe. Recently we witnessed the war between Iraq and U.S.A. Various reasons may be found out but the naked truth is that the sole reason of the notorious war is nothing but the shameless effort of control over the petroleum mines of the Arabian countries. When the two "do square, that all their elves for fear/ Creep into acorn cups and hide them there". The peaceful people whenever get frightened, seek refuge in nature and it may be kept in mind that the best remedy of various pollutions including noise pollution is plantation. Nature is the man's ultimate refuge because only nature can provide the human beings with eternal pleasure, both physical and mental.

Puck also confesses that he, in order to make a fun and to show his prowess, perturbs the natural habits of an object both animate and inanimate. In modern age the modern Pucks very often destroy the Nature and subordinate the creatures of Nature very often out of fun. Examples may be given of the tortured animals in the circus shows, poachers' activities etc; moreover, we torture the animals in the zoo. Keeping bird cages is a favourite but cruel hobby of a kind of people even after the passage of law against it. It is not only inhuman and unlawful but harmful to bio-diversity also. Recently a television channel telecast a live show of beating thousands of innocent seals to death in Antarctica by a community as it is the annual festival of the community. The pain of the poor seals, especially the half dead ones, the fear of the eco system to be disturbed, the melting of the glaciers and thereby upheaval of the sea level cannot render them anxious of the future of the earth. In this post-Modern age *MND* is quite relevant and significant since we witness the ecological imbalance, extinction of a large number of species, climatic

change, global warming, uprising of the sea level, earth quake, tsunami, *El Nino* etc. The reason behind such troubles may be, along with the others, the wars (Gulf war, the long war between Iran and Iraq and of course the two World Wars), nuclear bomb testing and above all merciless deforestation. Here in the speech of Titania we seem to hear the voice of an environment scientist or of an ecologist. It may be noted that the more mighty the power, the more strong a destroyer is he in this post-Modern Age. Probably Shakespeare anticipated the natural problems created by the super-human power. The Titania's now-a-days are the war-mongers greedy of absolute power, who seldom think of the future of the globe. So in this age of science and technology the revaluation of the plays of Shakespeare is very much significant.

In the same Act and scene the speech of Oberon (L-176--185) is also significant. He speaks of the juice of a flower that is able to hypnotize any man or woman and make him/her fall in love with any creature seen first. But the remedy is known to Oberon only. So it may be supposed that he wants to administer the cunning trick only to destroy the natural habit of a creature and to apply his remedy and thereby to prove his power. In the post-Modern age of economic colonialism this cunning theory is felt to have come back, but with a new dimension. For example the parthenium plant has allegedly come from U.S.A. As found in an e-article (<http://www.streetdirectory.com>)

It appears that Parthenium is not native to India, but it came with the imported wheat as a mixture, when the US sent wheat to India under PL 480 (Public Law 480 passed in 1954 to give food grains to developing countries) in 1956. However this concept was contradicted by some as not the real story because Parthenium was present in India even in 1951 itself.

Some people allege that this plant causes asthma whose medicine would be made in USA and so in order to sell the medicine and to prevail over the subcontinent, the Americans sent the parthenium seeds as adulteration with wheat seeds. So the purpose is to make the Indians asthma patients and then to sell to them asthma medicine. But we should not engage ourselves in this controversy, since we are not talking of international politics but of literary criticism. Here, in the drama the role of Oberon is like that of a modern capitalist who uses his cunning method in order to prove his supremacy and thereby dominate over the comparatively weaker sections and he is doing this out of ecophobia.

Ultimately Oberon, the king realizes the harmful effect of his sports and then he feels sorry and takes the responsibility and so urges his assistant to correct the mistakes. He also pacifies his quarrel with Titania, once again with the help of the same narcotics. Here we see the constructive use of the herbs. Thus the play ends with an optimistic note and indirectly upholds the banner of Nature which is the best remedy for the revival of the impaired eco system. It also opines that man cannot remain happy by subordinating nature.

Now in the age of global warming the plays of Shakespeare deserve a re-reading. One may recall the peaceful atmosphere in the Forest of Arden (*As You Like It*) and realize that subordination of nature cannot bring us mental peace as Tagore realized. He establishes his opinion by citing examples from *As You Like It*, *Sakuntala* etc. In the concluding song Puck urges the audience to consider the play to be a dream. We may do but it would not be an overstatement to consider it to be a dream of an ecologist because in the play we see what an ecologist would think of the vast change taken place in environment due to the modern leaders of the planet.

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