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AT THE INTERSECTION OF SUBJECTIVITIES:A POST FEMINIST READING OF MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

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ABSTRACT—

One of the fundamental aims of second wave feminism was to raise the consciousness of women's identity as women, as a group sharing similar difficulties and encumbrances. It was considered important for this collective identity to transpire in order for the concept of sisterhood to materialize and for feminism to effectuate a political change. However, as feminism advanced the academic postfeminist perspective, highlighting Shakespeare's portrayal of different kinds of female characters who emerge as feminists in their own unique and independent ways in accordance with the Postfeminist rejection of a generalized category of "woman".



from being solely a political movement into a cultural theory, it started questioning the concept of a steady and fixed identity. The consensus of second wave feminism was confronted from within as well as outside feminism. One of the most pertinent concepts questioned by academic postfeminism is that of identity. The present paper analyses Shakespeare's famous comedy, A Midsummer Night's Dream from

KEYWORDS: *Postfeminism, Shakespeare, identity, Woman*

INTRODUCTION :

Since late sixteenth century till today in the twenty-first century, women writers and critics have evaluated Shakespeare's plays from a feminist perspective. Feminist critique of his work ranges from praise for his portrayal of an egalitarian society in his plays to condemnation of his texts as sexist, misogynist, and anti-feminist. While critics like Juliet Dusinberre claim that "Shakespeare saw men and women as equal in a world which declared them unequal" (Dusinberre 308), fellow critics like Kathleen McLuskie label him as "The Patriarchal Bard". Until the advent of the First Wave, Shakespeare was eulogized as a genius who had the expertise to enter into women's minds and hearts, and articulate their deepest feelings. Since early on, women writers like AphraBehn, Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot, etc. have appraised Shakespeare's work. With the emergence of First Wave feminism in the late nineteenth century, the credibility of fervid responses to Shakespeare was called into question. Critics like Virginia Woolf, while expressing their admiration for Shakespeare, also noticed that his female characters were portrayed largely in relation to men. Coming to the Second Wave, critics like Dusinberre called for a novel and advanced view of women in Shakespeare. She emphasized the Bard's ability to unveil women's grievances and at the same time, exhibiting their fortitude and resilience. Marianne Novy also discerned in Shakespeare's heroines a potential for new comprehension. In her view, the Bard's plays served as a model of mutuality between men and women enfeebling the traditional masculinist power structures. While generally seen as a progenitor of Feminism, a dramatist who delineated strong women characters and denounced inequality, for some Second

Wave feminists like Kathleen McLuskie and Dymphna Callaghan, Shakespeare was nothing but a misogynist living in a Patriarchal society. Third Wave feminism which evolved in the 1990s focused primarily on gender studies. Here too critics like Marjorie Garber, Kate Chedgzoy brought to the fore latent themes of transvestism, bisexuality and homosexuality in Shakespeare's writings. Thus, feminism in all its forms and guises can be traced in Shakespeare's plays and his myriad female characters. The present paper attempts to evaluate him from a postfeminist perspective.

Academic postfeminism, according to Ann Brooks, deals with "the conceptual shift within feminism from debates around equality to a focus on debates around difference" (4). Through post-modernist deconstruction of the subject, Postfeminism rejects 'woman' as a monolithic term as it fails to address the convolutions of gender with regards to other facets like sexuality, race, age and class. By refusing to accept the feminist concept of homogeneity, Postfeminism offers diverse and variegated ways of understanding feminism and consequently, multifarious ways of being a feminist. With Postfeminism's focus on subjectivity, Chris Weedon notes that "an awareness of the contradictory nature of subjectivity highlights the possibility of choice in different situations and between different discourses" (qtd. in Brooks 21). Postfeminism, thus, welcomes and accepts varied visions and provides a platform for the multitudinous, diverse and conflicting voices of women.

The female characters in Shakespeare's plays, in very postfeminist terms, portray divergent feminities and refuse to form a homogenous group – from Venetian Queen Desdemona in *Othello* and Egyptian queen Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* to the fairy queen Titania and Amazonian queen Hippolyta in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; from submissive and dutiful daughters like Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing* to greedy daughters like Regan and Goneril in *King Lear*; from innocent young women like Miranda in *The Tempest* to "Titus Andronicus's lusty widow" (Dorothea Kehler), Tamora, and femme fatal Lady Macbeth. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* similarly draws attention to the extraordinary diversity of female characters. Instead of presenting a homogenous picture of Elizabethan women, Shakespeare portrays four unique women – unique in their physical appearance, their choices and preferences, their view of the world, and their way of asserting their independence. These four women are - Hippolyta, the Amazonian queen from the "anachronistic court of a pre-Homeric Athens", the youthful Hermia and Helena from "the realistic population of a contemporary English countryside", and finally Titania from "the realm of fairyland in which ancient, mediaeval, and modern have broken through the limits of time to exist together in one and the same timeless moment" (Charlton 103). Thus Shakespeare's play lends possible scope for pursuing feminist enquiry beyond the male-female dichotomy and to investigate the difference among women, thereby contesting the traditional feminist notion of universality.

Hermia, the "small, dark and quick of tongue" (Charlton 116) Athenian maid, establishes her identity as a feminist by rebelling against the Athenian marriage law in the very first scene of the play. The Athenian law requires a daughter to marry the man chosen by her father. Hermia's father Egeus considers Demetrius a suitable match for his daughter; Hermia however loves Lysander and is unwilling to accept her father's command. She openly defends her love for Lysander, the man of her choice, despite the glaring consequences of her action, "Oh hell! To choose love by another's eyes" (MND 1.1.140). As Krieger notes, "The law of Athens deprives Hermia and Lysander of independence and autonomy, it considers Hermia no more than an object, a piece of property to be disposed of by Egeus" (37). Egeus presents Hermia with two alternatives - either submit herself to his will or choose death. The duke further presents her with another alternative and lays down the final verdict:

... either prepare to die
 For disobedience to your father's will,
 Or else to wed Demetrius, as he would;
 Or on Diana's altar to protest
 For aye, austerity and single life. (MND 1.1.86-90)

According to Louis Monstrose, "Theseus expands Hermia's options only in order to clarify her constraints" (qtd. in Greenblatt 37). Although he says that those who choose the life of nunnery are "thrice blessed", (MND 1.1.74) he does not fail to point out that earthly happiness lies in a married life. Moreover,

the fact that Lysander though equally worthy as Demetrius, perhaps even more worthy because of Demetrius' "inconstant" (MND 1.1.110) nature is rejected by both Egeus and Theseus highlights the fact that the two men are more concerned about exercising their authority rather than ensuring a better future for Hermia. The duke reminds Hermia that "To you your father should be as a god; / One that composed your beauties", (MND 1.1.47-48) thereby emphasizing men's control over procreation and parentage while completely effacing maternal influence. Through Egeus and Theseus the bard gives voice to the reign of hierarchy, tyranny, oppression and patriarchal mind-set in the land of Athens. Despite all the coercion however, Hermia refuses to play the expected role of a submissive girl willingly following the law of the land:

So will I grow, so live, so die, my lord,
Ere I will yield my virgin patent up
Unto his lordship, whose unwished yoke
My soul consents not to give sovereignty. (MND 1.1.79-82)

Instead of feeling disillusioned by Theseus' pronouncement, she motivates her lover by telling him that perhaps hindrances in love are as customary as "thoughts and dreams and sighs, /wishes and tears, poor fancy's followers" (MND 1.1.154-55). Moreover, she further overrules the Athenian law by running away with Lysander to the woods, "remote seven leagues" (MND 1.1.159) from Athens, where the Athenian law cannot be evoked, thus providing an easy opportunity to the lovers to enter into the bond of matrimony, "By escaping to the forest, the romantic protagonists attempt to replace an abstract, objective system with subjective, personal judgements, a 'father's voice' with their own eyes" (Krieger 38). Even when alone with Lysander, after successfully eloping from Athens, she continues to stand her ground and acts as a rational woman unwilling to bow down to the desires and wishes of men. She openly expresses her thoughts when she refuses to lie down closer to Lysander in the woods. Despite his confirmation that, "For lying so, Hermia, I do not lie" (MND 2.2.52), she refuses to yield to his demand and tells Lysander to "lie further off, in human modesty" (MND 2.2.57). This incident further throws light on her character, though deeply in love with Lysander, she does not act like a hopeless romantic willing to surrender herself completely to her lover, a sharp contrast to Helena.

In contrast to Hermia, we have another Athenian maiden, Helena, who though not directly influenced by patriarchy, is willing to submit herself fully to a man. Demetrius had previously been in love with Helena but ever since he had laid his eyes on Hermia, his affections had shifted. But despite his inconstancy, Helena continues to seek his love. As H. B. Charlton notes, Helena is "...a sweet lady, sweetly doting upon inconstant man" (115). She calls him a "hard hearted" man (MND 2.1.195); realizes his dislike for her: "The more I love, the more he hateth me" (MND 1.1.199); is aware of his feelings for Hermia: "Demetrius loves your fair: O happy fair!" (MND 1.1.182); and despite his continuous protestations of his dislike for her: "Tell you I do not, nor I cannot love you?" (MND 2.1.201) she is consciously willing to submit herself to him. She refuses to accept his betrayal of her love and devises a new and unconventional way to win him over. Upon realizing that due to Demetrius' new found love for Hermia, he may never woo her again, she takes upon herself the role of the pursuer and sets to the task of winning Demetrius' love. Though Helena realizes that traditionally men are expected to woo women, "We should be woo'd, and were not made to woo" (MND 2.1.242), in order to win her lover she is willing to adopt the masculine identity and become the pursuer. By pursuing Demetrius, Helena "co-opts the male role of lover and the male prerogative of refusing to take no for an answer" (Sanchez 505). Thus, Shakespeare seems to thwart gendered roles by portraying Helena as the pursuer and Demetrius as the object of her desire. While in the case of Hermia, one finds a conventional lover wooing his lady, in case of Helena, though Demetrius too tries to appease Hermia, he himself is continually chased by Helena.

Rieger claims that due to the hierarchical and patriarchal set up of sixteenth century where Helena's role was to submit herself to a man, she simply eroticizes her role in order to work it in her favour. He adds, "The scene, then, is superficially subversive (the lovers are playing against expected gender roles) while, at the same time, fundamentally normative (Demetrius eroticizes aggression while Helena eroticizes submission)" (74). However, Helena is a submissive who owns her submission. Her careful selection of words ("spurn", "strike", "neglect", "lose") while entreating Demetrius to accept her, points to the fact that she

covets this position of submission. Helena claims that Demetrius's "hard hearted" (MND 2.1.195) nature compels her to follow him, this compulsion however is not against her will. Though he repeatedly threatens to violate "the rich worth of" her "virginity" (MND 2.1.219), she is not in the least frightened by such warnings. She approves to accord her sovereignty which makes her the master of her submission. Her assiduous commitment and dedication towards Demetrius evinces how fantasies of female resignation, submissiveness and compliance can challenge and thwart men's privileged position to lead or dominate sexual pursuit. By voluntarily desiring the submissive stance, she disrupts the very dividing line between domination and submission. Sanchez further notes that in another Shakespearean play, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Proteus describes his love for Sylvia as "spaniel like", thereby implying that a similar type of masochism exists in male characters as well (505).

Helena's willingness to submit herself to her lover illustrates that "women's unapologetically perverse desires- whether for women or for men- can threaten the ideals of proper, 'normal' sexuality" (Sanchez 506). This can be interpreted as an advancement in women's attempt to invert inequity in the male-dominated realm of sexual-relations. Such an interpretation becomes realizable only because sexual subordination has been able to expose the patriarchal exploitation and thus, has enabled an expansion of feminist studies by incorporating a more diverse view of feminist sexuality and desires which had previously been associated with ignominy and censure (Sanchez 506).

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare has punctured and subverted the stereotypical perception of feminine beauty. The Elizabethan ideal of beauty was a woman with fair, snow white skin. Pale skin was a sign of nobility, opulence and delicacy and was thus held as the ideal of the courtly beauty of the time; "from the time of Renaissance (fourteenth century) through the nineteenth century, a pale complexion was considered desirable" (Sherrow 110). Even Shakespeare's contemporaries like Edmund Spenser propagated this perception of the ideal woman in his sonnets while eulogizing his lady love's fair skin, rosy cheeks, long white neck and ruby-eyed lips: "Her lips did smell lyke unto Gillyflowers, / her ruddy cheeks lyke unto Roses red: / her snowy brows lykebudded Bellamoures, / her lovely eyes lyke Pincks but newly spread . . ." (qtd. in Craik 230). In fact, having pale white skin was so important to women that Ceruse, a face whitener made from lead and carbon, was quite popular among the women of this age. In this play however, Hermia who is short, dark, and quick of tongue, completely antithetical to the Elizabethan perception of beauty, is considered more beautiful by Lysander and Demetrius in comparison to Helena, the tall and fair Athenian maiden, who is closer to the standard of beauty prevalent in the age. Thus, Shakespeare establishes that beauty lies in the eye of the beholder. This also holds true in case of the other female characters in the play, that is, Titania and Hippolyta. Although Titania is a fairy of small stature, yet she is desired not only by her husband Oberon, but also by other men like Theseus. As Oberon recalls in Act 2, it was because of Titania that the Athenian Duke, betrayed the beautiful maidens Aegles, Ariande and Antiopa. Hippolyta, on the other hand, is the former Amazonian Queen. According to mythology, Amazons "were reputed to be warrior women who removed one breast in order to use weapons more skilfully" (Robin, Larsen, and Levin 7). However, even such an unconventional beauty is appreciated by Theseus who is eager to marry his "fair Hippolyta" (MND 1.1.1). Thus, Shakespeare has deconstructed the traditional concepts of feminine beauty.

Titania, the queen of fairies, is representative of an entirely different world. While Oberon is a powerful king, Titania is equally resolute, self-willed and unyielding, and they seem to be fairly matched. In Titania one finds a strong and dominant woman openly challenging her husband's authority. The very introduction of Titania and Oberon, the king and queen of fairies, in Act 2 establishes a picture of equal status, "Enter, from one side Oberon, with his train; from the other, Titania, with her's" (MND 2.1). While Oberon is accompanied by Robin Goodfellow or Puck, Titania has her own independent train of fairies attending upon her, these include Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth and Mustardseed.

In contrast to the other characters in the play who struggle to reconcile themselves with their love, Oberon and Titania, the only married couple, seems to lack love and affection for each other. In fact, their relationship is marked by constant strife and struggle for possession of power. Both the king and queen have indulged in adultery and accuse each other of infidelity. While Titania accuses Oberon of his amorous advances towards shepherdess Phillida in the disguise of a shepherd named Corin and addresses Hippolyta as his "buskin'd mistress" and "warrior love" (MND 2.1.71), Oberon is quick to remind her of her betrayal, "I know thy love to Theseus?" (MND 2.1.76). He brands her as the reason for Theseus' infidelity towards his

mistresses Aegles, Ariadne, and Antiopa and accuses her of helping the Athenian King in enticing maiden Perigouna. According to Marilyn French, "There are intimations of considerable sexual freedom in the fairy folk without any concomitant suggestion of evil or pollution" (98). Thus, their infidelity hardly seems to affect their relationship because despite full awareness of their adulterous relations, they continue to live together.

Throughout the play, Oberon's chief desire is the possession of the changeling boy. However from a different perspective it may be ascertained that Oberon is threatened by Titania's friendship with her votaress and so what he truly desires is not the boy but Titania herself, thus making "the changeling as only a tangential outlet through which Oberon expresses possessiveness of his queen" (Mark 7). Her friendship with the mortal woman represents a world devoid of males which threatens the King. Moreover, in dismissing the king in favour of the changeling, Titania renounces his "bed and company" (MND 2.1.62) and shifts her court to a bower thereby establishing a separate household devoid of male authority.

When Titania establishes an independent household in the bower, he feels greatly threatened by her sovereignty and resolves to punish her for her insolent behaviour: "Well, go thy way: thou shalt not from this grove/ Till I torment thee for this injury" (MND 2.1.146-47). The spell that Oberon chants while applying the juice of love-in-Idleness to Titania's eyes exhibits the nature of his punishment: "In thy eye that shall appear / When thou wak'st, it is thy dear. / Wake when some vile thing is near" (MND 2.2.32-34).

While many critics claim that after inducing the potion Titania loses all her dominance and becomes a victim of Oberon's oppression, the fact that the only way Oberon can conquer her is by plotting an iniquitous scheme of inducing the love potion in her eyes while she's asleep is evidence of Titania's power. Apparently when her mind and her will are her own, she is an intrepid and unconquerable woman, wife and queen. As Diane Purkiss notes:

The queen's sexual unruliness is a signifier both of her otherness and her power, hence the significance of the fact that Oberon uses the Pansy juice not only to overpower Titania's otherwise indomitable will where the changeling child is concerned, but also to place her in a compromising position with a dim-witted peasant waring an ass head. (qtd. in Buccola 72)

Although by making Bottom Titania's consort, Oberon intends to humiliate and insult her, he himself is shamed by her unbridled erotic desire and sexual freedom. In fact even under the influence of the potion, she continues to take a dominant stance in relation to her experience with Bottom, the ass. Though initially Oberon is delighted by the prospect of Titania falling in love with an ass, when he actually sees her he begins to pity her plight. He even rebukes her for adorning the ass' "hairy temple" (MND 4.1.51) with flowers, "I did upbraid her and fall out with her" (MND 4.1.50) and twice in his speech refers to him as a "hateful fool" (MND 4.1.49) which highlights his jealousy and discontent. Once under the influence, Titania devotes all her love and affection to Bottom while Oberon is reduced to a vague memory.

Like Helena who challenges the accepted norm of female sexuality by voluntarily assuming a passive position, Titania too contests the normal limit of female sexuality in her own way. Her very first encounter with Oberon foregrounds one of the conventional traits in popular lore, the fairy queen's penchant for mortal men. As Oberon explains, Titania had disrupted a number of Theseus's love affairs in order to seduce him herself. Her demeanour presents a direct challenge to the quintessential good wife; chaste, silent and obedient towards her husband. The fairy queen neither silently obeys nor prioritizes her spouse. Her camaraderie with the votaress and her devotion for the changeling boy seem to hold higher precedence for her. Like Helena, Titania too actively pursues her love object but unlike Helena who voluntarily assumes the role of submission, Titania vehemently asserts her sexual dominance on Bottom. As Gail Kern Paster notes: "Bottom, whom the fairies are both to 'wait upon' and 'lead', to serve and to control, is himself a sexual victim, his body in thrall to Titania's" (139). When with Bottom, she dotes upon him and arouses in him all those desires to be pampered, fed, scratched and cosseted that make his dream a burlesque of infantile dependency and narcissism, "The fantasy of male dependency upon woman is expressed and contained within a fantasy of male control over woman" (qtd. in Greenblatt 35).

Like Titania, Hippolyta is another woman of high rank in the play depicting a different shade of feminist struggle and a unique, independent way of overcoming it. Multifarious descriptions of Amazonian mythology are present in the Elizabethan literature. Known for their strong, independent and warrior image, every Greek hero from Hercules to Theseus and Achilles, had to evince his mettle by fighting a powerful warrior queen. While William Painter describes the amazons as "most excellent warriors" who "murdered

certain of their husbands”, (qtd. in Greenblatt 36) Gail Paster notes that the amazons are known for their “emotional distance from or refusal to become absorbed into the personal and maternal gratifications, the social rewards, of nurture” (79). In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hippolyta's references to the “moon” and “silver bow” (MND 1.1.9), her keen interest in hunting, and Titania's reference to her as Oberon's “warriorlove”(MND 2.1.71) allusively evoke her past identity as the Queen of Amazons. When the play begins Hippolyta is the captive queen defeated by Theseus, making a drastic shift from the Amazonian matriarchal culture to the Athenian patriarchal society.

Hippolyta is a tenacious yet silent queen, making hardly three appearances in the play, but the marked authority in her scant lines establishes her as a strong figure. She has a unique ability to speak with her actions rather than her words, a quality that distinguishes her from the other female characters in the play. The Amazonian warrior had commanded an army in the war against Theseus but due to her defeat she was conquered by him and was taken as his wife, “Hippolyta, I woo'd thee with my sword, /And won thy love doing thee injuries” (MND 1.1.16-17). She is often labelled as a spoil of war and Theseus' slave, however Harold Bloom points out that:

Hippolyta, though championed as a victim by feminist critics, shows little aversion to being wooed by the sword and seems content to dwindle into Athenian domesticity after her exploits with Oberon, though she retains a vision all her own . . . (10)

Even as the conquered queen of Theseus, she a former Amazonian queen, continues to pose a threat to the patriarchal order of Athens and evokes fear among the mechanicals, “the mechanicals make reference to Hippolyta in terms of fear and femininity” (Merrill 124).

In the final act of the play, Hippolyta clearly exhibits her Amazonian nature when she fearlessly confronts Theseus and unhesitatingly expresses her views regarding the experience of the lovers in the wood. While Theseus simply dismisses the lovers' account as a mere fantasy, Hippolyta discerns much truth in their narration.

Thus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare portrays four women from different class, race, and even different worlds, belonging to the same age yet entirely different from one another thereby refusing to be classified in a monolithic & generalized category of “woman”. Each woman follows her own path to achieve her end and succeeds. Hermia, Helena, Titania and Hippolyta all emerge as exemplary women who refuse to cower down to the patriarchal forces. Moreover, the four women by exhibiting divergent femininities and by asserting their independence individually in their own peculiar way refuse to form a homogenous group. Hermia directly confronts the authoritarian and patriarchal Athenian system/law by abjuring the duke and her father's will and eloping with Lysander. Helena undauntedly challenges the subscribed role of women in society by refusing to passively wait for the man of her dreams to notice her. She takes upon herself the task of pursuing Demetrius and eventually succeeds. Although generally interpreted as a desperate woman blinded by her unrequited love, Helena by voluntarily assuming a submissive stance presents an unwonted view of feminist sexuality. Titania, the queen of fairies, shatters the image of the ideal complaisant wife. She emerges as a woman who even when deceptively beguiled to follow the dictates of patriarchy refuses to surrender and turns the table upside down by asserting her dominance on the very means through which she was destined to be subjugated. Lastly, Hippolyta establishes her new identity as the soon-to-be Athenian Queen who asserts her position in the land of Athens even though she is yet to marry the Duke. With her repeated references to the moon and her avid fascination for hunting she gives evidence of her past Amazonian identity which she continues to hold even in the patriarchal set-up of Athens. The variegated and divergent variety of female characters created by the dramatist corroborates the fact that he avoids the two dimensional typecasting of the woman persona. Shakespeare breaks the mould of homogeneity or any single concept of womanhood or femininity, hence, being a postfeminist even before the advent of feminism.

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