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“AS YOU LIKE IT”: ‘BALTHAZAR ALIAS PORTIA’: THE POLITICS OF CROSS DRESSING IN SELECT SHAKESPEAREAN PLAYS

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Abstract

‘Renaissance primarily being a new birth of culture, tradition and life, it was nonchalant towards the women of the time. Theoretically women were under the rule of men and legally her identity was subsumed under that of her male protector. The woman’s position of inferiority required her to strive for four virtues: obedience, chastity, silence and piety. “The good woman was closed off silent, chaste and immured within the home.” (Howard, 424) Marriages were meant to assert male superiority over the female. Her otiose effort for assuming power made her cross-dress as her counterpart. For her this was a temporary escape from reality. Apart from several exemption to be a man in the real life, fiction and carnivalesque opened doors for women to extend their horizons through a temporal escape.

Key-Words

Transvestism, Cross-dressing, Gender Queer.

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As bodily differences become a prerogative in determining ones intellectual acumen a body born with the anatomy of female needs to become one. By assuming the position of the male the female demand their roles in the society. The paper explores how transvestism help liberate Shakespearean heroines who were compelled in their own biology. In Hegel’s *‘The Philosophy of Right’*, he takes a botanical turn equating woman to a form of plant-life. He opines;

Women are capable of education, but they are not made for activities which demand a universal faculty such as the more advanced sciences, philosophy, and a certain forms of artistic production. Woman may have happy ideas, taste, and elegance, but they can’t attain to the ideal... Men correspond to animals and woman to plants because their development is more placid and the principle that underlies it is the rather vague unity of feeling....Women are educated- who knows how? - as it were by breathing in ideas by living rather than by acquiring knowledge. The status of manhood, on the other hand, is attained only by the stress of thought and much technical exertion. (263)

The female life is emasculated and is prevented from reaching out to the social sphere. This necessitated gender crossing on stage and for the Elizabethan audience such a performance and the acceptance of the young boy in the guise of girl, suggest its ability to perceive the presence of one gender in the other, and to push this knowledge further, the knowledge of gender fluidity, never finds institutional sanction and expression. Jonathan Dollimore in his work *Sexual Dissidence* (1991) shows how the literature, histories, and

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subcultures of sexual and gender dissidence can be applied to current debates of literary theory. Dollimore discusses transgression and its containment, contemporary theories of sexual dissidence, homophobia, the gay sensibility, transvestite literature and theatre of Renaissance England, homosexuality and race. For him it was a kind of resistance in terms of gender, trying to settle scores between the dominant and the subordinate- the plant and the animal. Shakespearean comedies defy the norms of heterosexuality and open its windows to the fluid nature of gender. Mills Perry in his work *Shakespeare: As You Like It* maintains;

Shakespearean comedies hold a special curiosity for feminist critics. Unlike the tragedies or Histories, women characters have the major parts, and speak as many words as men. They are witty and intelligent... and their actions powerfully influence or direct the development of plot. (97)

When Shakespeare allowed his heroes to rule the stage in his tragedies and Histories, he allowed women a certain space in comedies under the guise of men. Shakespearean woman strengthened herself through transvestism, like the nineteenth century novelist who hid under the garb of their pseudonym. Cross dressing strictly followed the constructed agenda of power hierarchy. The Damsel in Distress under the disguise of the knight in the shining armour obliterated the possibility of gender fixities.' Of the thirty eight existing Shakespearean plays one fifth of the plays involves cross dressing by women characters. Characters Portia, Viola, Rosalind, Celia cross-dress as men to enter the patriarchal world. This cross-dressing extends their possibilities and let them, under take a journey they would otherwise not opt for. When in her pseudo identity she is not restricted by the societal interventions. Dress forms the way one identify oneself, it symbolizes gender fixation. By assuming the male attire Shakespearean heroines identified themselves as a part of the power play subverting the authority of the villain and hero. Susan Gubar defines cross dressing as a way of ad-dressing and re-dressing the inequalities of culturally-defined categories of masculinity and femininity in her article '*Blessing in Disguise: Cross-Dressing as Re-dressing for Female Modernist.*'

The play *As You Like It* overthrows gender hierarchies from the opening scene till the epilogue which is a transitional scene between the fictional realm and real one. The marriage of Rosalind who transforms herself to Ganymede, the female playing at being a male, once again reverting to the first female role which is actually played by a male actor, to be finally married to Orlando who is male actor, de-centres all stabilities of gender. While subverting the gender fixities Shakespeare goes a step further defying the conventional sexuality in monogamous heterosexual pairing to a homoerotic relation which exists between Rosalind and Celia, Antonio and Bassanio. Both gender and erotic identification move beyond the circumscribed definitions. Valerie Traub makes a threefold classification in terms of gender identity. The first is the core gender identity which she

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describes as 'the persistent experience of one's self as male, female or ambivalent', the second is the manner in which one renders one's core gender identity which she calls gender roles and the 'degree to which one complies with societal expectations of 'appropriate' behaviour and the third which she names gender style which is the 'personal choice one makes daily to assert agency within the confines of gender. (16) Rosalinde plays multiple role throughout the play. Her introduction as Rosalinde and her relationship with Celia following the transgression as Ganymede and returning back to her female body by accepting the normative marriage tradition.

In Shakespeare's comedies, there are several female characters who use cross-dressing as a strategy to achieve their goals. Besides safety and greater freedom of movement, the masculine attire also offers greater freedom of expression; as Dreher (1986) points out, what may sound aggressive from a proper woman like Katherine or Beatrice seems perfectly natural from someone dressed as Rosalind who obviously enjoys her freedom and uses it for her own purposes: she escapes from the court, tests her lover's feelings and arranges the final marriage scene. But why did she come to the forest? She was forced to do it; her uncle gave her only two possibilities—to leave the court immediately, or to die. In fact, for a moment Rosalind is so overcome by the news and shocked by her uncle's sudden hostility that it is her cousin Celia, who has to start planning their escape. Rosalind is only able to join in after a while and plan some practical details, including the idea to dress herself as a boy for greater safety.

Once dressed as a boy she starts taking advantage of the physical and verbal freedom the role gives her. When a girl falls in love with her as Ganymede, she is not as unhappy as Viola but seems to enjoy the joke and easily manipulates the girl into a marriage with someone else. Only when her goals are achieved she takes a decision that the game is over and becomes Rosalind again. Although she does not manage to solve all the problems of the play (she is not responsible for Oliver's repentance and her uncle's conversion is caused by her actions only indirectly as he meets the holy man when he strives to find her and Celia) she contributes to the healing and playful atmosphere of the forest of Arden. She does not actually need Hymen in the end to help her—he is there at her service, rather a best man at the wedding than a *deus ex machina*, to bless the marriages *she* arranged. Yet her relation to the male public sphere is realized primarily through her father and his status, otherwise she remains more or less in the private sphere, the one traditionally thought more suitable for women; she is concerned with love and relationships and does not go far beyond this border. The final blessing by Jacques epitomises the socially sanctioned heterosexual unions:

(To Orlando): You to a love that your true faith doth merit,

(To Oliver): You to your land and love and guest allies;

(To Silvius): You to along and well deserved bed;

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(To Touchstone): And you to wrangling, for the loving voyage
Is but for two months victual'd. (V.iv 195-9)

The societal concerns on gender stability and normative marriage synthesise at the end of the play when the actor escapes from the textual world and address the audience. Endless fluidity in gender performance, sexual pairings and reversals persists when the actor makes an announcement regarding the ambiguity of his gender. In a nutshell the transformation of the character is willed from the first shift.

The Merchant of Venice quantitatively displays more instances of cross-dressing than *As You Like It* or *Twelfth Night*. Besides Portia, there is her accomplice Nerissa and, for a moment, Jessica. However, Jessica's cross-dressing is only formal, she uses it to defy her father and safely elope with Lorenzo. Everyone knows she is a woman; she does not have to assume male identity as well as clothes. Nerissa's disguise, then, is just imitative she only follows and supports Portia. From the three it is only Portia who can be matched with Rosalind and Viola. Her cross-dressing is briefer than theirs, but she perhaps gets further.

After her dutiful but rather reluctant compliance with the wishes of her dead father, she is in charge till the end of the play. Her submission to Bassanio is beautifully worded, but seems to be purely formal, because *she* conducts the betrothal and decides when the marriage is to take place, *she* sends Bassanio to Venice, *she* remains the mistress of the house. As for the cross-dressing, she plans the strategy and performs her part without hesitation or doubt. Back in her female clothes she carries out the rest of her plan. She leaves the domestic sphere assigned to women and not only enters the public scene, but stands in its centre and triumphs. It is *her* choice to go to Venice; the circumstances do not press her to do it. What is quite obvious is her self-assurance and her fully justified belief that she can solve the problem better than any man in Venice. Portia's triumph as a lawyer is made possible by her male attire. She makes a temporary drift from her female identity outwitting the Patriarchal system through her intelligence. She lavishes upon her the freedom to conquer the male space which is represented through the court.

Viola as her name denotes violates the gender constructs assigned by the society. She asks the captain of the ship;

Conceal me what I am, and be my aid
For such disguise as haply shall become
The form of my intent.
I'll serve this duke. (I.ii53-55)

For her the concept of cross-dressing is a blessing in disguise. Orphaned and vulnerable the guise of Cesario makes her assume as superior state in the Dukes court. She replaces the pseudo male and takes control over her life. For Viola transvestism offers her self reliance and a venue to exhibit her intelligence. She uses her wit in the service of her master and reluctantly woos Olivia for him. She does not move far from the domestic

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sphere—she just moves between the two Illyrian households uneasily as she moves between her masculine and feminine identity. The double identity is more a burden than a key to freedom. Moreover, unlike Portia and Rosalind, she has no female friend to share her uneasiness with—only herself and the audience.

Myths and legends contribute a great deal to authenticate the existence of cross dressers. Wearing the male attire somehow symbolically lifted the restrictions put upon them by the patriarchal system. The case of Portia is very much like that of Joan of Arc who had to feign a masculine attire to lead the entire French army. Unfortunate is she that her femininity leads her to betray herself and ultimately fall prey. Most of the Shakespearean heroines rise above the character in their impersonation but is tamed when in the presence of their male counterpart. Exciting is this fact that all these majestic Shakespearean Heroines where at that point of time acted out by young boys. Shakespeare portrays all the three heroines as females with great potential. The potential gets idealised only while they assume a false identity. Shakespeare throws light to the then existing society which deterred women from going out an assuming social role. The Shakespearean 'She' though took decisions uncompromising her 'Self'..... the self was again put to question. Was it the 'Self' of the Female She became or the 'Self' of the male role she assumed?

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