

FEMINISM AND SOCIAL CLASS IN SHAKESPEARE'S COMEDIES**Rutuja Pradip Ghorpade, Dr. Kulandai Samy**

Research Scholar, Department of English, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan University, Bhopal
Research Supervisor, Department of English, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan University, Bhopal

Abstract:

The study examines female agency and class structure in the comedies of William Shakespeare's *Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night*. From a feminist perspective, the study prepares to see how female characters navigate, resist, and at times subvert patriarchal constraints and conversely how class distinctions inform those actions, relationships, and ultimate fates. Shakespearean heroines such as Beatrice, Rosalind, and Viola are intelligent, witty, and resilient in the manipulation of gender roles for the fulfilment of their goals, but many times those means entail deception, disguise, or the intervention of male authority figures, thereby legitimizing the extent of female empowerment therein. Noting the intersection of gender and class, it investigates lower-class women such as Margaret and Audrey, who tend to have less agency than their upper-class counterparts and lead a life confined within traditionally defined roles. The argument is made that, despite allowing for occasional acts of female resistance and autonomy, in general, Shakespeare's comedies reassert traditional social hierarchies since most of their plotlines end in marriages that restore the patriarchal and class structures.

Keywords: Shakespearean Comedies, Feminism, Gender Roles, Female Agency, Patriarchy, Social Class

Introduction:

Such comedies-the likes of *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*-would mostly be acclaimed for their wit, humour, and detailed character portrayals. But on specific dimensions, the plays go into deeper subjects regarding gender and social classes, making them readily ripe subjects for feminist and class-based analyses. The heroines of Shakespeare usually demonstrate some signs of intelligence, independence, and defiance, although these are usually played out within the boundaries of disguise, intelligence, or through male authority figures, as against the actual challenge of societal norms. Social class has a significant impact also on the trajectory of these women's lives, with noblewomen enjoying more liberty in navigating society's expectations while lower-class women remain confined to strict structures limiting their autonomy.

As if William Shakespeare presented women in his comedies, there existed a contradiction in the society of England during the Elizabethan Age, where women were made to play "feminine roles" while women monarchs ruled dominantly over their subjects. Among the women characters in his plays, he seems to provide a different contrast to some characters like Beatrice and Rosalind, who seemed to have rid themselves of conventional shackling, while some other characters, such as Hero and Audrey, appeared to be bound into traditional passive confinement. Disguise and mistaken identity function as mechanisms through which female characters channel agency; however, this often results in their return to traditional endings, most notably to marriage, which reinstates patristic and class structures.

The complexity of social class adds to the possible empowerment image of women in Shakespeare's comedies. Noblewomen might contain them to some extent, but for the lower-class ones, their conditions mostly do not allow them to be granted the privilege of social mobility and self-expression. The hierarchy thus suggests that, even though Shakespeare grants a female protagonist some moments of defiance, power still resides with the few privileged classes in the society he writes.

This paper sets out to read Shakespeare's comedies in reinforcement or challenge against the gender and class hierarchies of Elizabethan society through a feminist perspective, together with his female characters in a patriarchal society bringing class into the picture concerning how it determines women's agency.

The objective of the Research:

- 1) To analyze the representation of feminism and social class in Shakespeare's comedies, examining how gender and class dynamics shape the agency and roles of female characters.
- 2) To investigate how Shakespeare's female characters challenge or conform to patriarchal norms, particularly through wit, disguise, and subversion of traditional roles.
- 3) To analyze how social class influences the extent of female autonomy in Shakespeare's comedies, highlighting disparities between noble and lower-class women.
- 4) To assess the role of Shakespeare's comedic devices, such as disguise, mistaken identity, and marriage, in reinforcing or challenging gender and class hierarchies.
- 5) To understand how Shakespeare's portrayal of women and class structures reflects the norms and contradictions of Elizabethan England.

Literature Review:

The theme of feminism and class was notably scholarly in Shakespeare's comedies collected critically throughout the ages. Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* was evaluated by Everett and Crick (20th century) and proved that even if she sounded defiant of the established gender dimensions, her later marriage reaffirmed patriarchal structures. For Collington (2005), the "Kill Claudio" episode was analyzed as an act of faux masculinity, as Beatrice's commentary related to it. According to Henze (1991), love and deception in Shakespearean comedies throw considerable light on the opposition one puts to society and show the ability of women through their relationships. Knight (1930) compared Beatrice to heroines such as Rosalind, stressing the fact that she could assert her intellect without disguise. Meanwhile, curriculum debates have questioned if the study of present figures compromises an understanding of the works of Shakespeare and concludes on its relevance with class and gender discussions. Together, these studies illustrate how Shakespeare's comedies negate and redefine gender and class hierarchies; thus, the subject is replete for further literary and feminist studies.

Research Methodology:

This study explores feminism and social class in Shakespeare's comedies through textual analysis, feminist literary criticism, class analysis, historical context, comparative analysis, and secondary sources. It examines how female characters navigate patriarchal

constraints, how class distinctions shape their agency, and how different class structures affect their portrayal. The research provides a comprehensive understanding of these themes.

Feminism and Social Class in Shakespeare's Comedies:

Through comedies like *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare elevates and popularizes his wit and humour as well as complicates characters. Yet, like that of other playwrights, these also penetrate the problems of gender and social class, which makes it necessary to look at them with critical weight in feminist and class-based analyses. The heroines of this playwright purposely play tricks against the ordinary definitions of femalehood, either through disguise, wit, or male intervention. According to class distinctions, fate is also decided, presenting greater freedom for noblewomen to move through a highly male-dominated world than for lower-class women to make their passage among stringent social expectations.

This paper examines how Shakespeare's comedies uphold and yet challenge the gender and class hierarchies of Elizabethan society. From a feminist perspective, the research investigates and comments upon how Shakespeare's female characters are politically active within patriarchal constraints, overriding or indulging traditional roles. It also investigates the role of class in defining the parameters of women's agency to compare noble with lower-class female characters.

Even Beatrice and Rosalind, as well as Viola, exhibit feminist qualities in the comedies of Shakespeare as they go against the ordinary definition of gender. However, by the end of the plays, they are all reduced to the traditional gender role. Marriage, in itself, where these comedies generally invite the audience to leave the theatre at the culmination of the play, brings them to a return to the patriarchal order since women turn over their independence to their husbands. Thus, the question arises whether the comedies by Shakespeare could actually create a sense of female empowerment and not just use the technique of temporary subversion as a narrative device before giving it back to the fold of societal pressures and norms.

Also, social class constitutes an equally important part of female agency in the comedies of Shakespeare since noble women may enjoy some autonomy but lower-class females are usually given very limited roles serving in favour of the upper classes as befits their sharply defined positions within the rigid social hierarchy of the time. Indeed, whenever there are heroines of Shakespeare here who rattle against gender norms, they're likely to be noblewomen, as in the cases of Rosalind and Viola, while lower-class women have to live by different codes with very little recourse to escape.

Through his disguise, mistaken identity, and comic resolution, the playwright affirms the ramparts around which it confines women while holding up to ridicule the ordering of the dominant social order. His comedies present both progressive and conservative points of view on gender and class, making them as rich a text as any for subsequent feminist and literary analysis.

Feminism in Shakespeare's Comedies:

It is typical of Shakespeare's comedies that there are strong female figures who defy societal ratios typical examples: are Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Viola in *Twelfth Night*, and Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*. These characters exhibit intelligence, wit, and

independence, enabling them to disguise themselves, manipulate language, and control their stories. And yet the fact that they ultimately yield to marriage and conformity complicates their status as feminist icons.

An important stage for every Shakespearean comedy is disguise which allows women to emerge from the gender roles assigned to them and acts as a powerful instrument for asserting their autonomy from those roles. Apart from the transformation of Viola into Cesario in *Twelfth Night*, the assumption of Ganymede's name and character by Rosalind in *As You Like It* enables them to trespass areas normally assigned for men only, exercise power by shaping gender hierarchies, and use such strength to subvert gender roles. Yet they are forced to return to their assigned gender at the end of the drama, thus reinforcing the social order. This duality invites us to debate whether Shakespeare defies gender roles by not seeming to do much with his disguise while also holding the use of disguise only for comedy by not exposing the patriarchal system at all.

In Shakespearean comedies, marriage generally comes to seal the resolution, and this resolution can be seen in a variety of lights. Marriage does not always really guarantee such bright perspectives; it can be said that there is a necessity for man and woman, marriage can be called yet another consolidation of patriarchal control and add women's subjugation to male authority. There are, however, exceptions such as the inclusion of Beatrice and Benedick, who are a couple shown to have a different approach in marriage based on shared respect and affection: 'A more equal union based on wit and love'- such a Beatrice would never marry otherwise. She is a woman who possesses a sharp tongue and is very different from a blandly sexually passive female that one is accustomed to imagining. Contrary to the preference of many, she gives herself up to matrimony on her terms; consequently, she can be deemed one of the most advanced female characters of Shakespeare.

The most radical and at the same time most conservative way of dealing with feminist themes, as in many other Shakespearean comedies, is the vision of that possible female future sometimes placed before the audience, which very often leads them to believe that women can really step out and pour scorn on all traditional gender roles before giving it all up for the structures the time endorsed.

Social Class and Female Agency in Shakespeare's Works:

The plays of Shakespeare disclose the complex relationship between class and female agency. High-born women like Portia and Rosalind are freer to challenge traditional roles, while women like Audrey and Maria have constricted lives due to economic realities and social realities.

Shakespearean comedies typically feature aristocratic women who strongly influence others through wit, intelligence, and social status; all of which help them to enter the real-world structures by intellect and strategy. Portia, for example, is courageous and extremely powerful in *The Merchant of Venice* because of her capability to show legal acumen and navigate the male-dominated patriarchal court. The fullest blood would allow Rosalind to impersonate a male by taking the name of Ganymede to confer at an equal level with Orlando and position herself as a powerful orchestrator of events.

"The ambitious and ruthless of Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* are indications that even noblewomen could exercise power, though such power operates in a very manly sphere.

However, the limits of female agency in a patriarchal society are highlighted as she descends into guilt-induced madness.

The low-class women characters in Shakespeare's works do not possess enough external strength to challenge the patriarchal society but survive the oppressing system with cunning and pragmatic means of humour. For instance, Maria in *Twelfth Night* employs sharp intelligence in planning Malvolio's downfall using words and schemes to attack authority. However, at the end of the day, she has to find herself responding to social demands by commanding security within the institution of marriage, which consolidates the social hierarchy.

Audrey, the simple countrywoman in *As You Like It*, epitomizes lower-class women and their limited freedoms, as those women are often subject to the whims of men, especially Touchstone. Mistress Quickly, in *Henry IV* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, manages to exert a modicum of influence with some degree of agency in her commercial dealings and her understanding of human nature.

Shakespeare's plays prove that female agency ties directly to class: born and bred into higher echelons, women use their status and enlightenment in disguise to counter or manipulate gender roles. For working-class women, they need to rely on wit and 'tricks' to survive within a very rigid hierarchy.

Conclusion:

Shakespearean comedies engage in some feminist analysis and commentary on social class; they depict women who challenge gender expectations while simultaneously exposing societal constraints. He typically creates female characters with poetic wit, disguise, and subversively humorous performative power, who proclaim their intelligence, agency, and independence. However, these proclamations frequently uphold patriarchal and class-based systems of value. *Much Ado*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Taming of the Shrew* show scenes wherein women use cleverness and resourcefulness to gain some footing in a male world. Beatrice, Viola, and Portia carry an early feminist spirit, resisting all passive roles previously assigned to women. But the very structure of the Shakespearean comedy dictates that ultimately the social order is restored at the end of the play, usually through marriage, which reinstates traditional gender roles. The class also differentiates the various sets of opportunities and constraints faced by female characters. Noblewomen enjoy certain freedoms, while those of lower status are largely confined within their assigned roles, thus demonstrating the close intersection of gender and class oppression. Shakespearean comedies thus build double-edged positions, siding with the strength, wit, and intelligence of women, all the while demonstrating the constraints imposed by a weighty social and gender hierarchy utterly ingrained by that time.

References:

- 1) Amelang, D. J. (2019). Playing gender: Toward a quantitative comparison of female roles in Lope de Vega and Shakespeare. *Bulletin of the Comediantes*, 71(1), 119-134.
- 2) Anderson, W., & Damle, S. D. (1987). *The Brotherhood in saffron: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu revivalism*. Westview Press.
- 3) Barton, A. (n.d.). Introduction to *As You Like It*. In *The Riverside Shakespeare* (2nd ed., pp. 399-402). Houghton Mifflin.

- 4) Bloom, H. (1988). William Shakespeare's As You Like It. Chelsea House.
- 5) Costa, M. (2012, January 17). "The Taming of the Shrew: 'This Is Not a Woman Being Crushed'". The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com>
- 6) Dusinberre, J. (1975). Shakespeare and the nature of women. Macmillan.
- 7) Dusinberre, J. (1986). Shakespeare and the nature of women. Palgrave Macmillan.
- 8) Erickson, P. (1991). Sexual politics and the social structure in As You Like It. In G. Waller (Ed.), Shakespeare's comedies (pp. 156-167). Longman.
- 9) Friedan, B. (1963). The feminine mystique. W.W. Norton.
- 10) Hazlitt, W. (1817). The merchant of Venice. In Characters of Shakespeare's plays (EBooks@Adelaide). Retrieved from <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/h/hazlitt/william/charactersof-shakespeares-plays>
- 11) Hill, J. L. (1986). "What, are they children?" Shakespeare's tragic women and the boy actors. Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900, 26(2), 235-258.
- 12) Howard, J. (1988). Crossdressing, the theatre, and gender struggle in early modern England. Shakespeare Quarterly, 39(4), 418-440. JSTOR. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org>
- 13) Ibrahim, G. A. N. T. (1983). Patterns and themes in Shakespeare's early comedies (Doctoral dissertation, University of Glasgow).
- 14) Jonson, B. (1987). Volpone. Penguin.
- 15) Jonson, B. (2008). Epicœne, or The silent woman (R. Dutton, Ed.). Manchester University Press.
- 16) Karamat, H., & Khalis, A. S. (2023). Shakespeare's universality: Exploring the timelessness and relevance of his works across cultures and societies. Global Social Sciences Review, 8.
- 17) Leggatt, A. (2006). William Shakespeare's Macbeth: A sourcebook. Taylor & Francis.
- 18) Leggatt, A. (1974). Shakespeare's comedy of love. Methuen.
- 19) L'Engle, M. (1980). The young unicorns. Dell Pub.
- 20) Markham, S. A. (2012, January 13). Shakespeare's women | Feminism and Shakespeare. What's It All About Shakespeare. Retrieved from <http://whatsitalaboutshakespeare.blogspot.com>
- 21) Nimavat, S. (2017). Shakespeare's concern about women: Feminist perspectives in Shakespeare's plays. International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews, 4(2), 145-150.
- 22) Newman, K. (1987). Portia's ring: Unruly women and structures of exchange in The Merchant of Venice. Shakespeare Quarterly, 38(1), 19-33. Retrieved from JSTOR
- 23) Shakespeare, W. (2010). As You Like It. Friends Book.
- 24) Shakespeare, W. (2010). The Merchant of Venice. Friends Book.
- 25) Shakespeare, W. (2010). The Taming of the Shrew. Friends Book.
- 26) Shakespeare, W., Kean, C. J., Booth, E., & Edmonds, T. W. (1936). Twelfth night, or, what you will (p. 86). Pellegrini & Company.
- 27) Snider, D. J. (2009, August 20). Exploring the nature of Shakespearean comedy. Shakespeare Online. Retrieved from <http://www.shakespeareonline.com>
- 28) Tasmia, F. (2016). Women in Shakespearean comedies: A subversion of gender norms (Doctoral dissertation, BRAC University).

- 29) Thompson, K. F. (1952). Shakespeare's romantic comedies. PMLA, 67(7), 1079-1093.
- 30) Tasmia, F. (2016). Women in Shakespearean comedies: A subversion of gender norms (Doctoral dissertation, BRAC University).
- 31) Wells, S. (1997). Shakespeare: A life in drama. W.W. Norton & Company.
- 32) Wells, S., & Orlin, L. C. (2003). Shakespeare: An Oxford guide. Oxford University Press.
- 33) Williamson, M. L. (1986). The patriarchy of Shakespeare's comedies. Wayne State University Press.