

Ecological Sensitivity In Shakespeare: A Recherche Research**Dr. Debashis Mandal**

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Email- deb.rhs@gmail.com**Abstract**

Creation of a society of ecologically sensitive and caring human beings can be done not only through scientific research and publications alone but also through the environmental humanities which also include literary scholarship and representation. Reading and understanding of literature with an environmental perception has a didactic, pedagogic and inspiring effect on people. In this regard, Shakespeare can be considered a major exemplum from the literary past. His depiction of the natural world and his use of ecological settings and landscapes in some of his plays can be read in terms of an environmental awareness. While in his comedy, misrule affects the weather, misrule in his tragedy is caused by the weather, and climate, therefore, acts as an agent of fate. In his mature tragedy *King Lear*, he presents the influence of weather upon man, and of man upon weather. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the weather is clearly disturbed by human behaviour while in *Romeo and Juliet*, weather dictates the mood and the fate of the characters. *As You Like It* can be read as an environmental allegory. Like *Twelfth Night* in *The Tempest*, the characters reluctantly find themselves at the mercy of nature, and are forced to endure its challenges. His ecological sensitivity can also be witnessed in Ophelia's catalogue of flowers in *Hamlet*. Thus, there is no iota of doubt that Shakespeare registered his ecological sensitivity through most of his plays in which interactions between man and nature are in delicate and intricate balance.

Keywords: Shakespeare, play, ecological sensitivity, environment, man and nature.

Full Paper

The environment has become a common ground where both literature and science converge in order to instruct and enlighten us so that we may live in a sustainable harmony with the natural world. Creation of a society of ecologically sensitive and caring human beings can be done not only through scientific research and publications alone but also through the environmental humanities which also include literary scholarship and representation. By arousing our interest, literature contributes indirectly to the enhancement of our environmental sensitivity and through its varied representations of nature it has enabled us to reshape and broaden our sense of a sustainable environment. By problematising and discussing environmental issues literature urges us to revisit our cultural values and assumptions about nature and its conservation. The literary studies with relation to environmental representation in texts are instructive and upgrade our awareness of the natural world and reading and understanding of literature with an environmental perception has a didactic, pedagogic and inspiring effect on people. In this regard, Shakespeare can be considered a major exemplum from the literary past.

Discussions on Shakespeare from the viewpoint of ecology and environmental criticism center on Shakespeare's imaginative explorations of the world of nature whose presence is strongly felt in many of his plays. Though neither the term ecology nor environmentalism appears in any of his works, the critics have tried to relate Shakespeare with a kind of eco-criticism or environmental criticism as Shakespeare is found to be thinking ecologically in certain ways that resemble our own perceptions of the environmental challenges we are facing today. Shakespeare was certainly not an environmentalist in the modern sense. He was an ecologically sensitive playwright and can therefore be related to our environmental literacy. His depiction of the natural world and his use of ecological settings and landscapes in some of his plays can be read in terms of an environmental awareness. While in his comedy, misrule affects the weather, misrule in his tragedy is caused by the weather, and climate, therefore, acts as an agent of fate.

The relationship between man and nature is much more ambivalent and much more subtly treated in *King Lear*, a mature tragedy in which the playwright presents the influence of weather upon man, and of man upon weather, in an acute awareness of the environmental problems posed by man's behaviour. In Shakespeare's play there is no God behind the storm. Thunder, water and wind are, so to speak, the agents of truth in the play. They wake up Lear and they at last make him a self-conscious, clear-sighted man. Thunder acts as a consciousness-raiser, which leads Lear to a new understanding of the reality around him. He is literally enlightened by the flashes of lightning when the sun had always blinded him. The tragedy conveys the eco-phobia of an audience traumatised by bad harvests and cold weather, and the play proves particularly vivid in its foregrounding of environmental unpredictability and in its dramatisation of a fear of nature. Lear's final moments, when he breathes his last while searching for Cordelia's breath eventually dramatise the centrality of moving air — the Greek *pneuma*, which means both wind and breath — in the creation of a coherent, yet ever-shifting, self.

Shakespeare who manages to put to the fore a complex, changing, and interactive relationship between man and nature gives us a clear indication of the impact of harsh weather on early modern habits, so that it seems worthwhile to explore the relationships between climate and the early modern society as they are represented in Shakespeare's plays. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the weather is clearly disturbed by human behaviour while in *Romeo and Juliet*, weather dictates the mood and the fate of the characters and the dog days described in the play signal the forthcoming end of the eponymous lovers. In *King Lear*, the weather is presented in an anthropomorphic way. Lear exclaims, "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!"^(III.ii.1) The wind is both a generative and a destructive force, depending on man's ability to adapt and evolve. Climate, here, bridges the gap between man and nature. It becomes an actor and is no longer a simple excuse for powerful stage effects. It is a force to be reckoned with, a major element of the world's balance. Ultimately, if climate owes nothing to supernatural causes, it proves an experimental, technical and a sensual experience at the same time.

In plays like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*, the characters escape to the natural world as the codified life of law and the court has gone morally and ethically awry. Although *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has been traditionally regarded as one of Shakespeare's festive comedies, ecologically it also problematises man's relationship with the natural world and hence, can be read as an environmental allegory. It is found that Titania first alludes to the beauty of nature, and then refers to an experience which is reflective of seasonal disorders of some kind during the period in which Shakespeare wrote this play. As the entire world has been struggling with global-warming and the most visible climate changes the Titania's monologue^(II.i.80-115) perhaps become more suggestive in today's contexts. Again, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* almost immediately starts with a reference to the moon — "how slow / This old moon wanes,"^(I.i.3-4) and what is described as a "cold fruitless moon"^(I.i.73) by Duke Theseus — that influences the weather on earth (the sublunary world) and in the play one of the main tasks of the moon goddess consists in "[d]ecking with liquid pearls the bladed grass"^(I.i.211) i.e. in spreading humidity in Athens and its green surroundings. Far from being endemic, Shakespeare's green world is presented as an anti-pastoral one marred by chaos and bad weather. The climate of fairyland is disrupted as there is no such thing as harmonious love in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In other words, like the atoms evoked in Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, Puck perpetually moves in a vacuum where he freely exerts his power on the outside world. Shakespeare's *Dream* thus seems to be atomist *avant la lettre*, something particularly worth noting in connection with *King Lear*, another anti-pastoral, albeit much darker, play.

In *As You Like It*, the festive comedy of Shakespeare the social and moral values of the country are metaphorically indicated and celebrated against the moral decadence and political deprivations of the city through the depiction of an idealised and romantic pastoral setting. It can be read as an environmental allegory as ecologically it problematises man's relationship with the natural world. Again, it becomes a metaphorical amalgamation of the pastoral, on the one hand, as a stylised and literary environment and the wild on the other as a biotic formation of the physical environment. The Forest of Arden, in which the action of the play is set, in fact becomes an ambivalent epitome of the natural world; it is not only idealised and romanticised in pastoral terms but also depicted as a kind of wilderness manipulated and exploited by human beings. In this play most of the characters retreat to the Forest Arden to escape the discriminations and injustices of real life. *As You Like It* is embedded with a remarkable amount of environmental reference and that explicitly displays some degree of ecological sensitivity. The ecological sensitivity displayed by Jacques and parodied by Rosalind as such can also be seen in the environmental attitudes of the other urbanites in the play. Indeed, for Jacques, the Duke Senior's hunting of the animals in the forest is essentially an act of exploitation and, hence, his usurpation of the animals' habitat. He therefore calls the Duke Senior and his hunting nobles "mere usurpers [and] tyrants"^(II.i). Jacques further protests that ecologically it is unacceptable "to fright the animals and to kill them up / In their assign'd and native dwelling-place"^(II.i).

In his Tragi-comedy *The Winter's Tale* Shakespeare presents through a pastoral setting a similar kind of dichotomy which involves another juxtaposition of the country and the court in terms of moral values and excellence. Shakespeare once again reveals his ecological sensitivity, which can also be witnessed in Ophelia's catalogue of flowers in *Hamlet*. Also by the depiction of Ophelia's suicide by drowning herself in the water of a stream Shakespeare seems to have intended to play down the horror of Ophelia's tragic death and turn the scene into a pleasance where Ophelia with her garland of flowers and her touching song becomes part of nature and ultimately attains peace and comfort in it through death. Although Shakespeare uses the flowers here as a metaphorical reference in order to illustrate, from Ophelia's point of view, certain human characteristics such as faithfulness, infidelity, repentance or frustrated love, his choice of them certainly indicates some careful observation of the natural world and a closely sensitive relationship with it.

Undeniably, Randall Martin is right when he calls Shakespeare our eco-contemporary.

Again we can find the reference of deforestation, England's first and the most major environmental crisis of the then time by newly emergent fuel-intensive cannon-making industries in *King John* or *Othello*, or glass-firing for windows like the bays and bows in *Twelfth Night*^(IV.ii.37-8) and *Troilus and Cressida*.^(I.ii.106) Through his writing we get the information that the common householders of his time found coal as cheap alternative to fuel due to increased cost of woods. Thus, Shakespeare knowingly or unknowingly, tried to provide insights into the horrific shift towards fossil fuels that increased the CO₂ level into the environment which is one of the biggest challenges in front of the environmentalists in today's world. Shakespeare's humorous reference to fishes like herrings, pilchards, and cods foreshadows early modern expansion of the European fishery which eventually endangered the entire marine species like fish, dolphins, and whales which are compelled to exist at the mercy of a global co-operation to preserve oceanic biodiversity today.

Like *Twelfth Night* in *The Tempest*, the characters reluctantly find themselves at the mercy of nature, and are forced to endure its challenges. *The Tempest* is set in an environment which is ecologically most attractive but is dangerously vulnerable to human manipulation and exploitation. This is a play of indefinite setting, and for that reason lends itself to uncommon transportability.^(Vaughn 73) Critics find nature in his comedies not limited to a forest retreat just outside the boundaries of the court, Shakespeare transported the characters to an exotic island via a Shipwreck in *The Tempest*. Prospero's orchestration of the tempest itself signifies the mysterious phenomena and limitless power of the natural world. It has been broadly discussed by many that the island finally helps the characters in the play to know what/who they are, and what/who they ought to be. The mysterious and supernatural nature of the island is reinforced by the "subtleties o' the isle".^(Sherwood 67) Much of what we learn about the ecological aspects of the island are from descriptions by the characters: "this most desolate isle"^(Ariel, III.ii.80), "this bare island"^(Prospero, Epilogue, 8), and "this fearful country"^(Gonzalo, V.i.106). In reading *The Tempest* as a supernatural play, we cannot help but become aware of man and man's fate on the island. Nature itself is part of this action. And as Wolfgang Clemen writes in his book *The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery*, the natural scenes of action have a deeper meaning and that "the enchanted island which becomes vivid through such a wealth of single features and of concrete touches is more than merely a well-chosen locality."⁽¹⁸²⁾ The natural scenes in *The Tempest* represent an environment which acts upon men as they act upon it. Prospero is the one, after all, who is the enchanter of the island and conjures up the storm which sets all subsequent events in action, events in which Prospero, by supernatural means, controls nature. As Clemen notes, "this not only applies to the storm itself...but it also holds good of the majority of the plants and animals mentioned." The "negative capability" we find in *The Tempest* allows us to read the play in context to our current era and reflect upon our own interactions with nature. Shakespeare refuses and refutes any idea of divine intervention: far from being supernatural, as is sometimes apparently the case in *The Tempest* for instance, thunder is the voice of a harsh nature endowed with human features. The natural scenes in *The Tempest* represent an environment which acts upon men as they act upon it.

Thus, there is no iota of doubt that Shakespeare registered through his plays the interactions between man and nature which are in delicate and intricate balance. Just as we do not know fully the consequences of our actions upon the environment or how it will react in response, we do know that we need to leave something of nature behind, and allow the environment which we have damaged to heal. Prospero was aware of this, and we must be also. There is still time for us to drown our own books and allow our indulgences to set us free.

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