

Women in Shakespearean Comedies: A Feminist Perspective

Ramji Hamal¹, Dr. Naresh Kumar Yadav²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English Literature, Singhania University, Pacheri Kalan, Bari, Rajasthan 333515, India

²Associate Professor, Department of English Literature, Singhania University, Pacheri Kalan, Bari, Rajasthan 333515, India

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14566672>

Published Date: 28-December-2024

Abstract: The selected paper takes a feminist stance when analysing how women are portrayed in Shakespearean comedies. Scholars have studied Shakespeare's female characters since the Elizabethan period, highlighting their wit, charm, and crucial part in the story. The idea that his comedies focus more on heroines than heroes stem from the fact that these ladies frequently eclipse the male protagonists. This study examines how Shakespeare's female characters negotiate both autonomy and subordination in a patriarchal culture, employing various techniques to exert their own authority. Characters like Hero, Beatrice, Kate, and Rosalind exhibit varied degrees of independence and disobedience, as evidenced by scenes from *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *As You Like It*. There is also discussion on the usage of cross-dressing as a strategy for empowerment. In the end, Shakespeare's comedies present a complex and feasibly contradictory picture of gender roles that are limited by the social mores of the day.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Comedies, Feminist Stance, Cross-dressing, Autonomy, Gender Roles, Social Mores.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the Elizabethan era, women in Shakespearean comedy have attracted considerable critical attention. Scholars have extensively examined various aspects of these female characters: their allure, wit, broad understanding, and especially their prominent role in celebrating life. It is often believed that the male characters in these comedies pale in comparison to the dominant presence of the heroines, giving rise to the popular notion that Shakespeare's comedies feature no heroes, only heroines (Zerar 2010). These women have been analyzed from historical, cultural, and social perspectives within the context of Elizabethan values.

2. DISCUSSION

In Shakespeare's major comedies, female characters exhibit varying levels of independence and submission, depending on the thematic direction or plot demands rather than their innate characteristics. This paper explores the picture of women in the comedies, examining how they experience autonomy and personal power despite the patriarchal constraints of the Elizabethan era. The autonomy, however, does not come easily—they must navigate complex relationships with men, including uncles, fathers, husbands and suitors. As a result, Shakespearean comedies present a classified message concerning female empowerment, with the characters using a variety of strategies to confront and challenge male authority (Tasmia 2016). For instance, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Hero represents a dutiful daughter fully under the control of her father, Leonato. Her father dictates her actions, especially in matters of courtship. When Leonato believes that Don Pedro is interested in Hero, he orders her to comply with his advances, even though there is a significant age difference (II.i.61-63). Hero's words and actions are tightly controlled by the men in her life, as demonstrated when she is wooed by Don Pedro, pretending to be Claudio. Despite her cousin Beatrice's more liberated influence, Hero shows little sign of autonomy throughout the play and is easily undone by Claudio's accusations of infidelity (IV.i.30-41).

On the other hand, Beatrice is depicted by way of a quick-witted and assertive lady who rejects to submit to patriarchal prospects. Beatrice witty banter with Benedick in the 'merry war' (I.i.58) highlights her independence, and she frequently challenges the male characters' authority. Beatrice even advises Hero to follow her own desires when it comes to marriage, defying contemporary customs. Although Beatrice eventually accepts Benedick's proposal, she does so on her own terms, emphasizing that their union is based on her consent, not his dominance (V.iv.72-95). This juxtaposition between Hero's submissiveness and Beatrice's assertiveness underscores the complex representation of female agency in Shakespeare's comedies.

In the play *The Taming of the Shrew* Kate is portrayed as a strong-willed Baptista's daughter, and her defiance drives much of the drama's action. In divergence, Bianca, her sister is depicted as the dutiful and dutiful daughter all through the play: "[W]hat you will command me will I do/So well I know my duty (II.i.6-7)." Bianca's submissiveness is further emphasized by the stage directions, as she enters and exits scenes only when instructed by a masculine character or Kate in Act 2nd and again in 5th Act. Bianca's subordination to her father is particularly apparent in relation to her latent suitors, with Baptista stating that Bianca cannot be courted till Kate is married (I.i.49-51). Bianca even appears so compliant that she offers to let Kate choose from her various suitors (II.i.10-18). However, by the concluding scene, these initial character roles are subverted. After her marriage to Lucentio, Bianca becomes more assertive and defiant, choosing not to respond when he calls for her.

Bion: Sir, my mistress sends you words that she is busy and she cannot come. Ret: How! She's busy, and she cannot come! Is that an answer (V.ii.79-85).

In contrast, Kate demonstrates her sense of duty when Petruchio calls for her. At his urging, she goes to fetch Bianca and delivers a lengthy speech about the responsibilities of a wife:

A woman moved is like a fountain troubled

Muddy, ill-seeming, thick, bereft of beauty;

And while it is so, none so dry or thirsty (140)

Bianca feigns obedience to attract a wealthy suitor, but once she secures a marriage, she drops the facade, revealing her spoiled and willful side. In contrast, Kate uses her intelligence to fend off suitors she does not respect. When Petruchio persists in marrying her, Kate realizes he is a partner with whom she can find contentment, leading her to willingly become a devoted and compliant wife, whether to please him or because she genuinely desires such a relationship. This theme of disguise aptly suits a play where both Kate and Bianca use their roles to wield influence and power.

In *As You Like It* Rosalind and Celia take on central roles. Similar to Beatrice's dynamic with Benedick, Rosalind has full control over her relationship with Orlando; throughout the play, he follows her every desire, even though he believes she is merely an imitation of Rosalind. For instance, during a pivotal scene, Rosalind instructs Orlando on how to propose to her, demonstrating her authority over the situation:

Rosalind: You must first say, "Orlando, are you willing...?"

Celia: That will suffice. Orlando, are you willing to take this Rosalind as your wife?

Orlando: Certainly.

Rosalind: Yes, but when? ...

... Orlando: I take you, Orlando, as my wife.

Rosalind: I could ask, "Who gave you permission? but instead, I will say, I take you, Orlando, as my husband (Act IV, Scene I).

In an era when marriages were typically arranged between the bride's father and the groom, Rosalind manages to orchestrate her own marriage to Orlando, albeit while disguised as a man. Additionally, she also arranges the union of Silvius and Phoebe. The play's comedic action is underpinned by the dramatic irony that Ganymede, who exercises so much influence over others, is actually a woman. Rosalind's cleverness enables her to achieve her goals, but this empowerment is largely facilitated by her male disguise.

Duke Frederick, who represents both a literal and archetypal uncle to Rosalind, undermines her autonomy when he banishes her from his court. However, Rosalind shows potential for empowerment even in exile. When the duke justifies her banishment by stating, “Let it suffice thee that I trust thee not... Thou art thy father’s daughter” (I.iii.53, 56), it indicates that he perceives Rosalind as a threat, which suggests that only an empowered woman could pose such a risk. Celia’s only significant act of independence occurs when she decides to accompany Rosalind into exile, motivated more by her loyalty than by her own desires. In the final act, when Oliver expresses his intention to marry Celia, it is Orlando who is granted the authority to decide her fate. Although Celia appears to have agreed to the marriage, she is not genuinely involved in the negotiations.

Shakespeare’s plays intricately weave together feminine and masculine discourses. In *As You Like It* Rosalind only begins to assert control over her own fate after she adopts a male disguise, while her companion Celia remains largely unable to influence her own circumstances without such a transformation. This highlights the different levels of agency both characters experience, with Rosalind’s male persona providing her greater freedom to shape her destiny. Rosalind’s transformation into Ganymede, along with their journey to Arden, unlocks her inherent strength, reflecting the themes of empowerment present in characters like Bianca and Kate. Celia, however, remains constrained, not due to her choice to be a woman, but because of her role as a dutiful daughter. The depiction of women in the play portrays them as forces of renewal rather than self-destructive figures (Tasmia 2016). They navigate and simultaneously critique the norms of a male-dominated society, motivated by diverse reasons for their actions—some for enjoyment, others out of necessity, and some to assert their rights in choosing partners. Their strategies include verbal assertiveness, clever manipulation, defiance, and cross-dressing, which serves as a powerful tool against patriarchal dominance.

Cross-dressing in Renaissance literature has critical implications, allowing women to challenge male authority. This theme appears most vividly in Shakespeare’s romances, showcasing strong heroines who often disguise themselves as men. Feminist scholars, including Juliet, suggest this device allows for a more nuanced exploration of female strengths and societal critiques. While some argue that such gender inversion can seem radical, it ultimately falls short of instigating lasting change, as these characters revert to their traditional roles as married women. In cross-dressing, women often adopt lower-status roles, which offers them safety and freedom of expression. This is illustrated in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, where Rosalind utilizes her disguise to navigate challenges and orchestrate relationships, highlighting her resourcefulness. Although she does not resolve all conflicts, her actions contribute to the overall harmony of the forest, while her connections to the male sphere remain primarily through her father’s status, keeping her within the traditionally female domain of love and relationships (Dusinberre 1975).

The Merchant of Venice features more instances of cross-dressing than either *As You Like It* or *Twelfth Night*. While Portia is the primary figure engaging in this practice, she is joined briefly by Nerissa and Jessica. Jessica’s cross-dressing serves a specific purpose; she uses it to escape her father’s control and elope with Lorenzo, making her disguise more symbolic than transformative. Nerissa’s role, on the other hand, merely mirrors Portia’s actions without any real agency of her own. Portia, unlike the others, is characterized by her decisive and well-executed cross-dressing. Although her disguise is shorter, it is intentional and allows her to step into the male-dominated public sphere with confidence. She makes a conscious choice to go to Venice, demonstrating her belief that she can resolve the legal issues better than any man. While she undertakes a significant challenge in resolving a complex legal case, she still adheres to certain feminine expectations, such as obeying her deceased father’s wishes regarding her marriage (Dreher 1986). Even as she dresses in masculine attire, she eventually reverts to her feminine identity while maintaining control over her household.

In contrast, Viola from *Twelfth Night* is the least proactive of the three heroines. Her motivations for cross-dressing stem largely from the need for survival in a foreign land after being separated from her brother. Unlike Portia and Rosalind, Viola’s disguise is primarily for protection, and she struggles with her dual identity. While she remains resourceful and optimistic, her cross-dressing leads her into a complicated situation where she must woo Olivia for Orsino, further complicating her feelings. Her identity as a female is evident even in disguise, and she feels uncomfortable with her role, unlike her more assertive counterparts. Viola’s journey culminates in her reunion with Sebastian, reinforcing her femininity. The absence of her feminine garments delays the play’s resolution, creating a somber tone in the final act. Meanwhile, in *As You Like It*, the cross-dressing narrative is intricate, involving a boy actor portraying a girl who disguises herself as a boy. Rosalind, however, thrives in her masculine role, commanding attention in the epilogue—an unusual position for a female character in Elizabethan theater. Her resourcefulness shines through, though she displays moments of vulnerability

that connect her to her femininity (Nimavat 2017). Eventually, her transformation back into feminine attire signifies not only her return to her identity but also her reliance on male authority to ensure the marriages she orchestrates are blessed.

3. CONCLUSION

The discussed plays reflect the evolving attitudes toward women during the Renaissance, a period marked by significant shifts in gender dynamics. This transformation allowed playwrights to create heroines who challenged male authority. In such comedies, the female protagonists struggle against the patriarchal systems of their society even though they frequently seem to be influenced by men, whether they be dads, uncles, husbands, or suitors. This complexity reveals that Shakespeare's comedies present a nuanced view of female empowerment. The female characters navigate multiple roles and conform to societal expectations, illustrating that women's greatest power lies in their ability to adapt to the roles assigned to them. Shakespeare's comedies thus serve as a vehicle for exploring gender politics, although he is constrained by the societal norms of his time, a period when patriarchal dominance defined power relations. His work suggests a progressive yet conflicted perspective on women's positions within the power discourse, highlighting the tension between conformity and rebellion in the portrayal of female characters.

REFERENCES

- [1] Zerar, Sabrina. William Shakespeare: Patriarchal Faces Vs. Feminist Faces. In conference on Gender, Negotiation and Resistance, University of TiziOuzou, 2010
- [2] Tasmia, Fiza. Women in Shakespearean comedies: a subversion of gender norms. Diss. BRAC University, 2016.
- [3] Dreher, Diane Elizabeth. Domination and Defiance: Fathers and Daughters in Shakespeare, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky. 1986
- [4] Shakespeare, William. The Complete Works, Pearson, 2013.
- [5] Dusinberre Juliet. Shakespeare and the Nature of Women. Plgrave Macmillan: NY, 1975.
- [6] Nimavat, S. "Shakespeare's Concern about Women: Feminist Perspectives in Shakespeare's Plays." International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews 4.2 (2017): 145-150.