

## **Shakespeare and the Inculcation of Modern Traits in Renaissance Women with special reference to *As You Like It* and *Merchant of Venice***

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century England was a patriarchal society. Women were considered to be meek submissive, obedient and also inferior to their male counterparts. As a result, they were known as the weaker sex. A man was supposed to be the bread winner of his family; on the other hand the woman of the family was supposed to take care of the home and hearth. The primary job for women was to bear and rear children. Unmarried woman was kept in the custody of her father or other male relative. After marriage her loyalty shifted towards her husband. Only women of higher status were given education at home. Women could not take up professions like law and medicine. They remained engrossed in activities like carding of wool. Unmarried women could either become nuns or domestic helps. They were not even allowed to act on stage. In times like these William Shakespeare dauntlessly projected the picture of a young woman Rosalind escaping her uncle's house with her cousin to live life at her terms in his Romantic comedy *As You Like It*. In Rosalind we find a woman of urban, calculated calm and immense practicality. Though she is inwardly melancholic yet she makes the best of what she has on the

platter. We see a thread of Rosalind's 'irrepressible vivacity' and 'wit' run throughout the play- *As You Like It*. We come across Rosalind's extremely calm yet practical nature in Act II Scene IV of the play when she says:

*I Prithee, shepherd, if that love or gold  
Can in this desert place buy entertainment,  
Bring us where we may rest ourselves and  
feed*

*Here's a young maid with travel much  
oppress'd*

*And faints for succour. (AYLI, 62)*

In trying times when she has left her uncle Fredrick's house along with her cousin Celia. She is super cool in disguise of a man and she talks in terms of money. She is new to the place so love is out of question. Thus, she lays emphasis on money by juxtaposing money against love. She questions Corin that with money can they get a place to 'rest' and food to 'feed' themselves. She treats Celia like a damsel in distress just as modern women cash on their gender in umpteen difficult situations. Rosalind says "Here's a young maid with travel much oppress'd and faints for succour." Hence, she is a true opportunist making the best of whatever is available to her in the present circumstances.

As Hudson points out further when Rosalind asks her cousin where are they going? Celia Replies "To seek my uncle in the Forest of Arden" (ACT I Sc III). On the contrary, on having arrived there and also after purchasing the sheep farm and a cottage, neither the duty bound daughter Rosalind nor the loving niece of the banished Duke "seem to trouble themselves much to inquire about either father or uncle."<sup>2</sup>In Act III Sc. II we come across Rosalind discussing Orlando with modern women like serenity. And when she is reading out the verses composed in her praise by Orlando rather than being overwhelmed by Orlando's love for her or paying heed to him she uses her power of judgement and analysis in calling the verse defective in feet.

*Ay, But the feet were lame, and could  
not bear themselves without the verse, and  
therefore  
stood lamely in the verse.*

So, we can see Rosalind's active wisdom working with fineness all over the play. When Orlando cross questions Rosalind about her accent she again lets her brains do all the talking. Orlando says in Act III Sc.III,

*Your accent is something finer than you  
could purchase in so removed a dwelling.*

To, this comment Rosalind quickly supplies the explanation that an uncle who was brought up in the city taught her this accent. Which exemplifies that she is extremely quick witted and sharp. Throughout the play we see Rosalind testing Orlando's love for her. As Turner points out Rosalind "contrives often by some sally to remind the audience that she is a woman disguised as man." She comes across as a daring figure who assumes the garb of a man to use situation to her advantage. In Act III Sc.II Rosalind talks about the difficult pace of time betwixt engagement and matrimonial alliance for a young maid. Hence, she gives a clear cut excuse to hide the fact that she weighs her pros and cons before coming to any

decision. She almost appoints Orlando in her assumed disguise to court her. She also plots the course of the action of the play to her will. In Act III Sc.IV she almost directs Phebe's love towards Silvius to avoid any further complications. In short it can be said that Rosalind acts like a true master planner. It seems that the action of the whole play *As You Like It* revolves around Rosalind. Jagat points out that though Shakespeare borrowed the storyline of Lodge's *Rosalynde*- a pastoral comedy; still his play *Rosalynde* "has been obscured by the brilliance of Shakespeare's own invention."<sup>6</sup> It's traits like realization of her own self and independence that make characters of *Rosalynde* and *Portia* stand apart. Both *Portia* and *Rosalind* are young, intelligent, independent and self-reliant. Their ability to focus on their wishes and wants and specially the 'individual I' makes them stand apart among all the characters in the plays under consideration. Though Shakespeare created extremely sharp witted and strong women in form of the characters of *Rosalind* and *Portia* 400 years back as if they were a premonition of the prototype of 21<sup>st</sup> Century modern women yet he had to make their characters suitable to the sensibilities of the audience of his times. This he does effortlessly. We come across *Portia* as a young and beautiful woman in sync with the Renaissance ideals. As *Bassanio* says in Act I Sc.I

*In Belmont is a lady richly left,  
And she is fair, and, fairer than that word,  
Of wondrous virtues.....  
and her sunny locks*

*Hang on her temples like a golden fleece;*  
Fair complexion and blond hair were signs of beauty in Renaissance women. So, far looks- wise she seems to conform to the Renaissance ideals and like a duty bound daughter she is loyal to her father's wishes but her character stands apart in the play *Merchant of Venice* as an epitome of wisdom, intellect and eternal

charm. Though she follows her father's will without any violation yet she is possessed by love for Bassanio. And she neither hides her love nor is she ashamed of it: like a typical modern woman she admits and accepts her love for Bassanio as she says:

*I could teach you  
How to choose right, but then I am  
forsworn;*

The traits like self realisation and independence that make Rosalind and Portia stand apart as female characters. For centuries women were defined by men; the world was male-centred and male-dominated." It is said umpteen number of times about Shakespeare's women characters that his female characters are weak in comparison to their male counterparts. "Doubtless in some respects they are so; they would not

be female characters if they were not". If they were not they wouldn't be female characters. But Shakespeare's genius as a playwright lies in the fact that he could still inculcate wit and determination in Portia's character so much so that she dominates the action of the play Merchant of Venice. In the trial Scene(Act V. Sc.I) Portia's self-assurance and command act as an agent of success for her and she is able to protect her husband's honour. Portia's wit and inborn intellect make her a prototype of modern women. Of course Rosalind and Portia were in disguise to speak out their mind. As Johnson wrote in his Preface to Shakespeare his characters are "progeny of common humanity".<sup>10</sup> Which is surely true in case of Rosalind and Portia but rather than being the progeny they are the prototypes of 21<sup>st</sup> Century modern women.

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