

## WOMEN'S STRUGGLE IN A *MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*: DE BEAUVOIR'S FEMINISM PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of Shakespeare's comedies assumed to be written between 1590- 1597. It can be regarded as one of the comedies because it is full of silly funny things and also has a happy ending although there is seriousness within the work for instance the representation of patriarchal society. This paper aims at describing the women's struggles in the play based on the theory of Simon de Beauvoir regarding the situation of married woman to see the phenomenon found in the work better. As the result of the analysis, it can be concluded that there is a gender awareness which has been presented by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He shows that there is gender difference in the play presented by the male and female characters in a restricted patriarchal society of Athens.

**Keywords:** struggle, feminism, comedies

### INTRODUCTION

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of Shakespeare's comedies assumed to be written between 1590-1597. It can be regarded as one of the comedies because it is full of silly funny things and also has a happy ending although there is seriousness within the work for instance the representation of patriarchal society. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the patriarchal society can be seen from the society of Athens that has their own laws or rules based on male-domination society. In this kind of society, men have higher position than women. It means men mostly decide everything for women; what to do and what is forbidden. In family, father has the highest position so he can order his daughters to do something as well as forbid them to do anything as they wish since in Athens the laws have been made for men's benefit. The practices of the laws can be seen when a father plans for his daughters' marriage, he will give his daughters to the man who has his eyes on; the man whom he wants to be his son in law. It is

in sync with the condition between men and women during Elizabethan era that "in early modern England, male dominance was reinforced through a fully articulated political theory of patriarchy in which the function of men as heads of households and as fathers was believed to be analogous to the role of the monarch." (Eales 1993, 4).

However, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, through characters of women such as Hermia and Helena, Shakespeare has shown that women can also struggle by having courage to actively act against men's domination although during early modern England "women were described by male authors as morally, intellectually and physically weaker than men" and "according to humoral medicine, men were believed to be hot and dry and women were cold and moist, making them passive, intellectually unstable and lacking in courage" (Eales 1993, 3). From this assumption, this paper is going to unveil how women struggle is described in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* using Simone de Beauvoir's

conceptual theory of the situation of married woman.

## LITERARY REVIEW

### The Situation of Married Woman

In this paper, the theory that has been chosen is Simon de Beauvoir's *The Situation of Married Woman* to see the phenomenon found in the work better. She has proposed that women everywhere have faced the same problem, it is called marriage. For women, marriage is not a choice but a destiny traditionally offered by the society they live in which is actually constructed by the patriarchal society. Beauvoir has also believed that the marriage is actually not between the women to be married and the men to be their grooms, instead it is between the father of the bride and the son in law. Women have been regarded as property of their fathers. A marriage will happen if their fathers and their future husbands have made a contract. Thus, when the woman gets dowry from the husband, it is going to be possessed by her father. They are objects that cannot decide anything without their father's or brother's consent, and if they get married, they are going to be their husband's consent. That thing has been argued by Beauvoir as shown below,

But man does not address his appeal to woman herself: it is men's society that allows each of its members to accomplish himself as husband and father; woman, integrated as slave or vassal into the family group dominated by fathers and brothers, has always been given in marriage to males by other males. In primitive times, the clan, the paternal gens, treats her almost like thing: she is part of payments to which two groups mutually consent her condition was not deeply modified when marriage evolved into a contractual form; dowered or receiving her share of an inheritance, woman becomes a civil person: but a dowry or an inheritance still enslaves her to her family; for a long period, the contracts were signed between father-in-law and

son-in-law, not between husband and wife; in those times, only the widow benefited from an economic independence. A young girls' free choice was always highly restricted; and celibacy – except in rare cases where it bears a sacred connotation – ranked her as a parasite and pariah; marriage was her only means of survival and the only justification of her existence. (de Beauvoir 2011, 503)

From the citation above, it implies that the young girl does not live freely as man in the society. She is the least important member of the cult but she can help her family financially by marrying someone who has made a contract with her father as the family man in charge. Ontologically through her argument, Beauvoir has showed that women in patriarchal society have been constructed to believe that they were born to get married to the men have been chosen by their family. Epistemologically it can be seen from the practices that have been done in patriarchal society that the young girls have been forced to get married whether they like it or not, whether they want it or not, because “for young girls, marriage is the only way to be integrated into the group, and if they are *rejects*, they are social waste” (de Beauvoir 2011, 504). Thus, according to Beauvoir for women in order getting freedom from this situation, they need to understand that they are actually being constructed by the male-dominated society. It will make women have the ability and responsibility to decide actively what they want to do in life, instead of being object of men's domination forever. On the other hand, women can also decide to get married to the men their families want, but the most important is they need to free themselves from all justification so that they can be exist as an individual, not just as property or object of marriage. Women can also decide to marry those they fall in love with. Regardless of the sex, class, or age, with the individual

responsibility, it comes freedom which actually requires the situated individual to struggle in showing her (his) existence within the ambiguity of the situation. It is all on women struggle to decide what they want their life to be.

### Gender and Subordination

Men and women can be classified into those two categories because there is gender construction in society. Gender is then seen as forms of being either male or female that represents what socially acceptable and socially acquired (Wolfreys, Robin, & Womack 2006, 45).

Society constructs what kind of clothes women should wear or how they should behave as women. It is what is called femininity for women and masculinity for men. Society has its own standard in classifying women's femininity and men's masculinity. Therefore, gender is different compared to sex. Gender is constructed by society meanwhile sex is the biologically term to define an individual based on his/her genital organ (Fakih 2008, 8).

According to their sex, women then are being grouped into those who have vagina, uterus, and breast (to feed babies). It is different from the men as they are grouped by having penis and producing sperm. While in gender, women are constructed into those who are weak, fragile, beautiful, emotional, and have the quality of being a mother.

On the other hand, men should be strong, rational, and manly. These constructions can be different from one society to another society, like having been elaborated in previous part mentioning that Elizabethan era had its own standards too in constructing gender that women were intellectually and physically weaker than men and had no courage, passive, and cold.

That kind of comparison between gender shows that there is gender relation. The gender constructions are like binary opposition of men and women that involves a hierarchy

(Bennet and Royle 2004, 13). If men are regarded as the strong, women are seen as weak or fragile ones. If men can go public, women should stay at home. If men can make rules, women tend to obey it. The gender differences like this create injustice that mostly makes women to be subordinated under the domination of men. Fakih (2008) has argued that when men see women as emotional ones and have no abilities to rule, they place women in the unimportant position in the society (p. 15). As stated by de Beauvoir (2011, 502-506), women subordination makes them to be the object of men. Everything happens upon women is oriented for men's benefit as can be seen in the situation of married woman showing that the marriage actually happens as a contract between the woman's father and his son in law. Women have no freedom to decide whom she will marry, that condition causes them to be oppressed.

### DISCUSSIONS

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Athens society has the law of patriarchy. It has been shown through the dialogue among the characters, below:

*The.* What say you, Hermia? Be advised, fair maid:

To you, your father should be as a god,  
One that composed your beauties, yea,  
and one

To whom you are but as a form in wax,  
By him imprinted and within his power  
To leave the figure or disfigure it.

Demetrius is a worthy gentleman.

(Act 1, Scene 1)

The quotation implies that Athens has made law for women based on their fathers' domination. Hermia loves Lysander but her father wants Demetrius to be her husband. Hermia's father and Demetrius seem like have already made a contract of marriage between Hermia and Demetrius. It is what has been argued by de Beauvoir that woman belongs to her father's property. The marriage

contract is made for her father's benefit. This is what is called by the situation of married woman where woman was born and raised to get married to the man chosen by her father. The Duke of Athens takes side on Hermia's father because it is how Athenian women have been ruled for ages that she takes after her father, that good quality of woman is inherited by her father's gen so she must obey him or she will be punished by being a nun or sentenced to death. This punishment shows that she will be a 'social waste'. This portrayal shows that women in Athens have been treated as subordination towards men and unimportant as they can be easily punished if they do not obey the rule made by men, especially their fathers.

Besides Hermia, there is other woman character in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* whose name is Helena. She loves Demetrius but has been rejected. Based on Helena's portrayal, it can be seen that the stereotype of pretty women is like Hermia who has rosy cheeks, it is like what has been said by Lysander below:

*Lys.* How now, my love? Why is your cheek so pale?

How chance the roses there do fade so fast?

(Act 1, Scene 1)

The quotation above implies that a woman with rosy cheeks is regarded as the beautiful one. Therefore when she looks pale, she will not look interesting. That thing belongs to the stereotype given by the men to the women in "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*". Hermia who is described as a beautiful woman has fulfilled the standard of beauty made by the men. It is like what has been said by Helena to Hermia below:

*Hel.* Call you me "fair"? That "fair" again unsay.

Demetrius loves your fair. O happy fair!  
Your eyes are lodestars, and your tongue's sweet air

More tunable than lark to shepherd's ear

When wheat is green, when hawthorn buds appear.

Sickness is catching. Oh, were favor so,  
Yours would I catch, fair Hermia, ere I go.

My ear should catch your voice. My eye, your eye.

My tongue should catch your tongue's sweet melody.

Were the world mine, Demetrius being bated,

The rest I'd give to be to you translated.

(Act 1, Scene 1)

Hermia is a woman who fulfills the standard of being beautiful made by men. Besides loved by Lysander, Hermia is also loved by Demetrius. Those two young men in the play, Demetrius and Lysander, love Hermia. It is like there is knowledge in Athens society that beautiful woman who is desirable to be loved and to be married is someone like Hermia. This kind of stereotype among them constructs a difficult condition for women without that kind of figure to get husband. Stereotyping towards gender especially women is mostly oppressive because being labeled as woman itself makes them being 'the other' in the patriarchal society and now they are even being grouped into two classifications of being pretty or not. It makes the not beautiful ones, like Helena, become in the lowest position in Athens society that none wants her because she is regarded not pretty enough although she may have other potentials that might be better rather than just being beautiful. This kind of situation represents how powerful a man is as he can choose whom he wants to get married and can reject the woman having crush on them easily because there is no rule and punishment tying them. Meanwhile, for woman it is not easy to just reject a man who has been chosen by her father to marry her because there is the law in Athens that will end up punishing her if she violates it. Or, it is not easy for a woman to just make marriage contract to marry a man she loves, for instance it

is impossible for Helena to make contract or promise with Demetrius' father in order to marry him but it's possible between men (father and his daughter's suitor) to make marriage contract. Put it in simple way, man has more freedom while woman has no freedom to choose what she wants to do in life.

### Women's Struggle

As having been proposed by de Beauvoir that to get freedom from the situation of married woman, women must understand first that they are actually in the situation of being oppressed, of being "the other" in the society, of having no existence for themselves. With this understanding whether comes from education or just realization of the situation coming to them, it will be the first step for them to try freeing themselves from the subordinate position. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, this condition is showed by Hermia when she cannot marry Lysander, she knows that she is being ruled by her father and the laws of Athens making her realize the only way to get rid from that condition is by running away with Lysander to the place that cannot be touched by the laws, as described below,

*Lys.* A good persuasion. Therefore, hear me, Hermia.

I have a widow aunt, a dowager  
Of great revenue, and she hath no child.  
From Athens is her house remote seven  
leagues,  
And she respects me as her only son.  
There, gentle Hermia, may I marry  
thee.

And to that place the sharp Athenian  
law

Cannot pursue us. If thou lovest me  
then,  
Steal forth thy father's house tomorrow  
night.

And in the wood, a league without the  
town-  
Where I did meet thee once with Helena  
To do observance to a morn of May-  
There will I stay for thee.

*Her.* My good Lysander

I swear to thee by Cupid's strongest  
bow,

....

In that same place thou hast appointed  
me,

To-morrow truly will I meet with thee.

(Act 1, Scene 1)

From the quotation above, it shows that Hermia has the thought of planning to run away and also has the courage to do it and even suggests it to Lysander. This description is different compared to the woman as a gender constructed by the society where Shakespeare lives or during the Elizabethan era that woman is intellectually weak and having no courage.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it is shown that there is an idea of woman struggle within it. Hermia realizes that if she wants to get what she desires, she must act upon it by generating a choice whether to stay and to be forced marrying Demetrius or run away in order to get married with Lysander, a man she loves. Thus, she makes a decision to run away from Athens to be able to marry Lysander. With this courage, Hermia has freed herself from the situation that has oppressed her. She realizes her existence as a woman who wants to be Lysander's wife, not Demetrius' wife.

On the other hand, Helena also shows the struggle towards the male domination stereotyping her. As what has been explained before that Helena loves Demetrius but she is rejected because she is not as pretty as Hermia, she does not show discourage instead she keeps pursuing Demetrius' love as it is shown below;

*Hel.* I will go tell him (Demetrius) of fair  
Hermia's flight.

Then to the wood will he tomorrow  
night.

Pursue her. And for this intelligence  
If I have thanks, it is a dear expense.

But herein mean I to enrich my pain,  
To have his sight thither and back  
again.

(Act 1, Scene 1)

Based on the citation, it can be elaborated that Helena is actually similar with Hermia in any case. Helena has intellectually thought and has the courage to operate her plan. In the play, it has been told as well that Helena realizes that she is not as pretty as Hermia. It proves that Helena has come to the realization of being constructed by Athens society to be not beautiful and she decides to never give up and keep working on getting Demetrius' love. Helena knows what she wants so she does not want to be surrendered to the situation of being unwanted. She has decided for her own self the best thing to do in order to satisfy her wish. It makes her create her own existence as a woman who wants to work towards Demetrius' love.

Although both women in the play, Hermia and Helena, have been obsessed towards marriage but they have bravely and actively struggled to get the kind of marriage they want. They do not surrender to the faith which constructs them being the passive members of the society. They have been against the custom of Athens during that time by taking courage to disobey the rule in order to marry the men they love, not based on marriage contract made by the men. They have tried to free themselves of being property, of being nothing in the society, of being 'the other' that cannot decide what is the best with their own consideration.

The women struggle showed by Hermia and Helena is a very good insight for women to free themselves in choosing what they really want, instead of being led by their fathers or brothers. It is in sync with de Beauvoir's thought that being responsible for their own selves will make women find their existence in the society as a person who has free will and actively decide for themselves, not as a part of society where she should be passive and may feel oppressed.

In the end of the play, Shakespeare has made Hermia and Helena won in

fighting for what they want using the character device of the supernatural beings in the play such as the fairies.

By seeing this phenomenon, we can see that fairies are appeared in order to avoid any scandal of being too prominent in delivering the women struggle which is actually opposite the society's law during that era.

In other words, Shakespeare has made it more tamed. Although it is the struggle purely made by Hermia and Helena, the result is not on their control but on fairies' hands. It shows that Shakespeare has already unveiled the quality of women struggle but it will not have been done as how Hermia and Helena's wish if there is no higher power than Athens patriarchy society.

It indicates that Shakespeare had brilliantly thought to deliver his idea of women struggle without being too controversial or too shocking by making *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in a funny way for his audiences who had been strictly living in the patriarchal society of Elizabethan era.

### **The Related Contemporary Issues**

Shakespeare's works have been known with their universal themes, it means that everyone who reads them can somehow relate them even into modern era like nowadays because there are some issues which are still relatable. Like in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for instance there is issue of women struggle that can be widely found nowadays.

A lot of women nowadays have struggled for their own life and dreams. However, women today do not cling themselves on marriage only (like shown by Hermia and Helena) but they have wider interests such as education, politic, and career. It does not mean women in modern era do not want to get married. There are a lot of women who get married very early too and have happy domestic life.

In these recent decades, women have a wider freedom to do what they

want although there are still patriarchal societies that construct them but they can struggle for their own life. It can be seen from the way women have chosen their own clothing by up to date fashion, political rights and many more, in order to find their own existence and self-actualization.

The concrete example of women struggle nowadays is a woman who decides to continue her higher study abroad. Although it does not deal with a struggle to choose a man to marry like the issue found in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it is a form of women struggle too as it deals with a courage to decide something great for a woman's life.

By deciding to continue the higher study abroad, a woman realizes that she will live far from her family and will take any problem as her own burden. It is a kind of struggle for women as they have to prove that they are able to do hard things by relying on their own selves, not relying on others includes the men. Women have to struggle for good things in their life to reach their self-actualization and to build an insight that the decisions made by women should be respected as the men's.

Nowadays, women's struggle is not showed by fighting against male dominance only. Women can choose anything what they want to reach. They can reach anything to do by their own ability for the sake of self-actualization that finally shows that man and woman have the same rights to be better and well developed through education, politics, economics, and any field they can get in.

## CONCLUSION

From this research, it can be concluded that there is a gender awareness which has been presented by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He shows that there is a gender difference in the play presented by the male and female characters in a restricted patriarchal society of Athens.

The play shows the condition of Elizabethan era generally when he lived because during that time gender had already been constructed by the society which was mostly based on the assumption of religion and medical study that have been passed from the former generation to the next generation that made women to be subordinated.

However, in the play, Shakespeare gives insight of women struggle to the spectators or readers by presenting Hermia and Hellena who show women of courage and thinkers. It is very different compared to women construction during Elizabethan era who were intellectually weak and had no courage. In the modern world like today when there are feminism critiques, we will realize that Shakespeare has implicitly wanted to educate the Elizabethan women and also nowadays women with an insight that women have the right to struggle for their existence in this world, against all prejudice, especially that comes from male domination.

It can be concluded that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* shows that Shakespeare had a futuristic thought about women. He shows it in the play through Hermia and Helena who struggle for their freedom as they are oppressed by male dominance. We can see that Shakespeare seems to give the women characters of this play a chance to decide what they want to do; to decide their own life.

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