International Journal of Innovative Language, Literature & Art Studies 14(4):13-15, Oct.-Dec., 2026
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DOI:10.5281/zenodo.23143033

Subaltern Voices and Queer Identities in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*: A Re-reading through Subaltern Studies and Queer Theory

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ABSTRACT
William Shakespeare's Twelfth Night remains one of the most critically discussed comedies because of its complex treatment of gender identity, desire, and social hierarchy. While traditional criticism has emphasized its comic resolution through heterosexual marriage, contemporary literary theory reveals deeper tensions surrounding marginalized identities. This paper re-examines Twelfth Night through the combined lenses of Subaltern Studies and Queer Theory. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's concept of the subaltern and the South Asian Subaltern Studies project alongside Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the study argues that Shakespeare's play exposes the voices of socially marginalized identities while simultaneously repressing them through patriarchal and heteronormative structures. Viola's cross-dressing as Cesario destabilizes fixed gender categories and creates homoerotic and lesbian possibilities in the relationships between Viola, Orsino, and Olivia. However, these possibilities are ultimately neutralized through the restoration of heterosexual marriage at the play's conclusion. The paper contends that Twelfth Night both challenges and reinforces dominant ideological structures, making it an important literary text for examining the intersection of gender, sexuality, power, and social marginalization.
Keywords: Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, Subaltern Studies, Queer Theory, Gender Performativity, Judith Butler, Homoeroticism, Cross-dressing.

1. INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* occupies a unique position among Renaissance comedies because of its sophisticated exploration of identity, gender performance, and sexual desire. Although traditionally celebrated as a romantic comedy culminating in multiple heterosexual marriages, the play simultaneously presents moments that challenge fixed assumptions about gender and sexuality. These moments have attracted increasing scholarly attention within Queer Theory and Postcolonial criticism.

This study combines two complementary theoretical approaches—Subaltern Studies and Queer Theory—to examine how Shakespeare constructs marginalized identities within the play. Originating from Antonio Gramsci's notion of the "subaltern," Subaltern Studies seeks to recover the voices of those excluded from dominant historical and cultural narratives. Queer Theory, particularly as articulated by Judith Butler, challenges essentialist understandings of gender and sexuality by arguing that gender is socially performed rather than biologically determined.

Viewed together, these theories reveal that *Twelfth Night* dramatizes the experiences of characters whose identities exist outside dominant social norms. Viola's disguise as Cesario not only questions

binary gender categories but also produces homoerotic desires that threaten the heterosexual order governing Illyrian society.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Subaltern Studies

Subaltern Studies emerged from Antonio Gramsci's writings and was later developed by Ranajit Guha and the South Asian Subaltern Studies Collective. The approach seeks to rewrite history "from below" by recovering the experiences of marginalized communities excluded from elite historical narratives.

According to Azad (2014), the subaltern refers to oppressed groups denied political representation and cultural recognition because of class, caste, gender, religion, or colonial domination. Rather than treating these groups as passive victims, Subaltern Studies recognizes their agency and their contribution to history.

Applied to literature, Subaltern Studies examines how texts represent—or silence—the voices of socially marginalized individuals. Within *Twelfth Night*, characters whose identities challenge patriarchal and heteronormative expectations can be interpreted as occupying subaltern positions because their desires and identities are ultimately subordinated to dominant social structures.

2.2 Queer Theory

Queer Theory emerged during the 1990s from feminist criticism, poststructuralism, and gay and lesbian studies. Rather than viewing sexuality as biologically fixed, Queer Theory argues that sexual identity and gender are socially constructed and continuously performed.

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity remains central to Queer Theory. Butler argues that gender is not an innate biological essence but a repeated social performance that appears natural through continual repetition. Consequently, distinctions between masculinity and femininity become unstable.

Queer Theory therefore pays particular attention to cross-dressing, gender ambiguity, bisexuality, homosexuality, and identities existing outside heterosexual norms. Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* provides fertile ground for such analysis because Viola's disguise destabilizes conventional understandings of gender throughout the play.

3. Viola as the Subaltern Subject

Viola occupies a uniquely marginalized position throughout *Twelfth Night*. Shipwrecked, isolated, and lacking social protection, she adopts the male identity of Cesario as a strategy for survival. Although this disguise grants her temporary access to male privilege, it simultaneously silences her authentic identity.

From a Subaltern Studies perspective, Viola represents a subject denied the freedom to express her true self because patriarchal society restricts women's agency. Her voice becomes mediated through the masculine persona of Cesario. Like many subaltern figures, Viola can only participate in society by assuming an identity acceptable to dominant power structures.

Her disguise illustrates how marginalized individuals negotiate systems of exclusion through adaptation rather than direct resistance.

4. Gender Performance and Queer Desire

Viola's transformation into Cesario illustrates Butler's argument that gender is performed rather than naturally possessed.

By successfully convincing everyone that she is male, Viola demonstrates that masculinity itself consists largely of socially recognizable behaviours rather than biological reality. The play repeatedly blurs distinctions between appearance and identity, suggesting that gender categories are unstable.

Viola's gender ambiguity generates multiple forms of desire that exceed heterosexual norms.

Orsino and Cesario

Orsino develops an unusually intimate relationship with Cesario, repeatedly expressing emotional attachment that borders on homoerotic affection. Although Orsino believes Cesario to be male, his emotional dependence reveals that desire exceeds rigid heterosexual boundaries.

Olivia and Cesario

Similarly, Olivia falls passionately in love with Cesario despite believing him to be a young man. Her attraction demonstrates that desire can emerge independently of biological sex.

Together, these relationships expose the instability of compulsory heterosexuality and illustrate Butler's claim that gender performance continually exceeds the social norms intended to regulate it.

5. The Suppression of Queer Possibilities

Although Shakespeare allows these queer possibilities to emerge, the play ultimately suppresses them through conventional comic resolution.

The revelation of Viola's biological sex transforms Orsino's apparent homoerotic attraction into heterosexual romance. Likewise, Olivia's love for Cesario is redirected toward Sebastian, whose physical

resemblance restores heterosexual order without requiring Olivia to confront the implications of her earlier attraction.

This restoration reflects what Butler describes as the continuous reassertion of heteronormative ideology. Queer identities briefly disrupt dominant structures but are eventually contained through marriage and patriarchal social order.

From a Subaltern perspective, this ending demonstrates how dominant ideologies absorb and silence marginalized voices. The queer possibilities that briefly emerge never become socially legitimate but are instead rewritten into acceptable heterosexual narratives.

6. Discussion

Reading *Twelfth Night* through both Subaltern Studies and Queer Theory provides a richer understanding of Shakespeare's treatment of identity.

Subaltern Studies explains how marginalized identities struggle for visibility within dominant cultural systems. Queer Theory demonstrates that gender and sexuality are unstable social performances rather than fixed biological realities.

Together, the two approaches reveal that Shakespeare simultaneously exposes and suppresses alternative forms of identity. Viola's cross-dressing creates a temporary space where conventional distinctions between male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, become blurred. Yet the comic ending ultimately reinstates patriarchal authority by reaffirming heterosexual marriage as the only socially acceptable resolution.

Consequently, *Twelfth Night* becomes a site of ideological negotiation, simultaneously resisting and reinforcing dominant social norms.

7. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* can be productively interpreted through the complementary perspectives of Subaltern Studies and Queer Theory. While Subaltern Studies illuminates the marginalization and silencing of identities excluded from dominant discourse, Queer Theory exposes the instability of gender and sexuality represented through Viola's cross-dressing and the homoerotic tensions among the principal characters.

Viola's performance as Cesario reveals that gender is socially enacted rather than biologically predetermined, creating possibilities for same-sex desire that challenge compulsory heterosexuality. However, Shakespeare ultimately neutralizes these disruptions by restoring heterosexual marriage and patriarchal order, thereby silencing the queer potential the play initially celebrates.

Rather than simply reinforcing conventional gender norms, *Twelfth Night* exposes the fragility of those norms, making the play a remarkably modern exploration of identity, desire, and social power. The combined application of Subaltern Studies and Queer Theory therefore provides a compelling framework for understanding how literature both represents and regulates marginalized identities.

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