



Forms of Resistance in William Shakespeare’s “*As You Like It*” and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “*Ode to the West Wind*”: A Postcolonial Comparative Study

Dr. Anjela S. Kujur & Mr. Tabish Nazmi

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Education, Sai Nath University, Ranchi, Jharkhand.

Ms. Shreyashi Shreya

Student, Department of Education, Sai Nath University, Ranchi, Jharkhand

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20093548>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 17-04-2026

Published: 10-05-2026

Keywords:

Postcolonial Theory, Resistance, Oppression, William Shakespeare, P. B. Shelley.

ABSTRACT

This research paper delves into a comparative analysis of two canonical texts: William Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Ode to the West Wind*, applying postcolonial theoretical frameworks of resistance against oppression. By analysing four critical pillars—**Theme, Symbol, Setting, and Narrative Movement**—this study identifies four distinct forms of resistance: **Environmental, Ideological, Spatial, and Transformative**. The purpose of this study is to reveal how resistance adapts to varying contexts and media. While limited to these four forms, this research paves the way for future endeavours to explore broader dimensions of resistance in literary discourse.

Introduction

Literature serves as a vital medium for articulating resistance against diverse forms of oppression.¹ Across historical periods and cultural contexts, writers have utilized literary works to challenge dominant power structures, expose mechanisms of control, and imagine possibilities for renewal.² Within postcolonial discourse, resistance is viewed not merely as confrontation, but as a symbolic, ideological, and transformative act embedded within narrative structures and imagery.³

Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* and Shelley’s *Ode to the West Wind*, though separated by genre and era, both engage deeply with the dynamics of power. Shakespeare depicts political and patriarchal oppression



through banishment and authoritarian rule, countered by a retreat into the margins. Conversely, Shelley portrays oppression through stagnation and the "heavy weight" of mortality, seeking resistance through the elemental force of nature and the prophetic poetic voice.⁴

Analysis of Setting: Spatial Resistance

***As You Like It* (The Court as Oppression)**

Duke Frederick's decree, "*Within these ten days if that thou be'st found so near our public court... thou diest for it*" (1.3), establishes the court as a site of surveillance and lethal authority. From a postcolonial perspective, this mirrors colonial spatial control, where the "center" defines who belongs and criminalizes the "other."

***As You Like It* (The Forest as Resistance)**

Rosalind's query, "*Are not these woods freer from peril than the envious court?*" (2.1), signals a shift toward **Spatial Resistance**. By choosing the "margin" (the Forest of Arden) over the "center" (the Court), the characters reclaim agency. The forest becomes a "counter-space" where social hierarchies dissolve, allowing for the negotiation of identity outside of surveillance.

***Ode to the West Wind* (Stagnation as Oppression)**

Shelley describes himself as "*chain'd and bow'd*" by a "*heavy weight of hours*" (Stanza 4). Here, the setting is a psychological and temporal prison. The oppression is not physical walls, but the stagnation of the soul.

***Ode to the West Wind* (Nature as Resistance)**

The plea, "*O lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!*" (Stanza 5), represents a desire for relocation into an unrestricted natural setting.⁵ This is **Spatial Resistance** through the refusal of terrestrial confinement, seeking the vastness of the sea and sky as a means to bypass the "weighted" reality of human suffering.

Narrative Movement: Transformative Resistance

***As You Like It* (Authoritarian Stasis)**

Duke Frederick's declaration, "*I trust thee not,*" functions as a narrative dead-end. In the court, the logic of power is static; there is no room for dialogue. This mirrors the colonial act where suspicion replaces law, and the marginalized subject is judged based on perceived disloyalty rather than action.



***As You Like It* (The Shift to Liberty)**

The transition occurs when Celia rebrands their exile: "*To liberty and not to banishment*" (1.3). This is **Transformative Resistance**. By redefining the linguistic meaning of their displacement, the characters collapse the Duke's power. Banishment—intended as punishment—is transformed into a site of regeneration.⁶

***Ode to the West Wind* (The Trumpet of Prophecy)**

Shelley moves from the "thorns of life" to the demand: "*Make me thy lyre...⁷ Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth / The trumpet of a prophecy!*" (Stanza 5). This marks a shift from passive endurance to active agency. The resistance here is found in the **diffusion of ideas**. By scattering his "words among mankind," Shelley ensures that his resistance survives through the collective future rather than a singular, failed rebellion.

Environmental Resistance in the Forest of Arden

In the postcolonial framework, **Environmental Resistance** occurs when the natural world is used to deconstruct human-made hierarchies and subvert the "civilized" authority of the colonial or imperial center. In *As You Like It*, the Forest of Arden is not merely a backdrop; it is an active participant in the resistance against Duke Frederick's court.

1. The Neutralization of Social Rank

The forest acts as an environmental equalizer. Duke Senior, despite being a dispossessed ruler, claims that the woods are more honest than the "envious court." He notes that the "penalty of Adam"—the cold wind and changing seasons—does not flatter him as his courtiers once did.

"Here feel we but the penalty of Adam, / The seasons' difference, as the icy fang / And churlish chiding of the winter's wind... / This is no flattery: these are counsellors / That feelingly persuade me what I am." (Shakespeare, 2.1.5–11)

Through a postcolonial lens, this is a form of resistance where nature strips away the "artificial identity" imposed by the dominant power structure. In the court, identity is a performance of rank; in the environment of Arden, identity is reduced to the biological reality of survival. The environment resists the court's ideology by forcing the characters to acknowledge their shared humanity.

2. The Inversion of the "Wilderness" Narrative



Colonial discourse often characterizes the wilderness as a place of savagery that requires "civilizing." However, Shakespeare uses environmental resistance to invert this trope. Orlando, expecting the forest to be a site of "desert city" and savagery, enters with a drawn sword to demand food. He is met not with violence, but with the Duke's civility:

"Your gentleness shall force / More than your force move us to gentleness." (Shakespeare, 2.7.102–103)

The environment here resists the "barbaric" label. It provides a sanctuary that is more ethical and peaceful than the "civilized" court. This mirrors postcolonial resistance; the colonized space is reclaimed as a site of superior moral value, challenging the center's claim to cultural or moral superiority.

3. Ecological Autonomy and Subsistence

The act of living off the land is a material form of resistance. By hunting and gathering (even with Jaques's guilt expressed regarding the "poor dappled fools," the deer), the exiles achieve economic independence from the court.

As Michael Mayer suggests, the movement into the forest represents a "migration" that allows for a new social contract to be written—one based on the land rather than the decree of a tyrant. This environmental autonomy is a direct threat to the court because it proves that life—and a meaningful one—can exist entirely outside the reach of the Duke's authority.

Comparative Analysis:

While William Shakespeare and Percy Bysshe Shelley occupy different historical eras, their works—specifically As You Like It and Ode to the West Wind—converge on the necessity of resistance as a transformative force.⁸

Analytic Point	As You Like It	Ode to the West Wind	Form of Resistance
Theme	Political/Social Exile: Characters find freedom by being cast out of the corrupt court into the forest.	Spiritual/Creative Stagnation: The poet resists intellectual "death" by seeking a revolutionary spark.	Environmental: Resistance is enacted through and within the natural landscape.
Symbol	The Forest vs. The Court: Arden represents a	The Wind/Lyre vs. Thorns: The wind is a "destroyer and	Ideological: Nature acts as a vehicle for challenging



Analytic Point	As You Like It	Ode to the West Wind	Form of Resistance
	restorative space that defies rigid social structures.	preserver" that breaks the poet's internal "thorns of life.	established power or personal despair.
Setting	Hierarchical Control: The tension between the structured dukedom and the fluid, liberating woods.	Physical/Temporal Decay: The landscape of autumn and "dead leaves" awaits a seasonal revolution.	Spatial: Change is physically mapped onto the movement between repressive and open spaces.
Narrative	Redefining Banishment: Banishment is flipped from a punishment into a journey of self-discovery.	Prophecy and Renewal: The poem ends on a defiant, hopeful note: "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"	Transformative: The narrative arc moves from suffering to empowered redirection.

Conclusion:

This study demonstrates that resistance in literature is a dynamic process shaped by context and form. Through a postcolonial lens, we see that both Shakespeare and Shelley empower the marginalized—whether they are political exiles in a forest or a stifled poet in a decaying world. By categorizing these as Environmental, Ideological, Spatial, and Transformative, we can better understand how literature functions as a tool for subverting dominant power structures. Future research may expand these categories to include linguistic or economic forms of resistance. While both works have distinct ways to express the oppression and resistance, marking the alignment in the rise of resistance in response to domination. The shared analytics point of theme, symbol, setting, and narrative movement resonate across the work of Shakespeare and Shelley, despite being different in historical context, genre, and medium. Influenced by the Postcolonial theory's core concept of resistance, this study identifies the distinct forms of resistance: " Environmental resistance, Ideological resistance, spatial resistance, and transformation resistance". This study marks that the resistance is not fixed, rather it changes according to the nature of oppression and the narrative structure by which it is expressed. Although this study is limited to a limited form of resistance, it opens the scope for future research endeavours to mark the various distinct forms of resistance across literary genres, culture, and theoretical frameworks.



Reference:

- Bhandari, Nagendra Bahadur. “Resistance and Postcolonialism: A Critical Review.” *Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2022, pp. 1–15.
- DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/jps.v22i1.43042>.
- Cross, Ashley J. “‘What a World We Make the Oppressor and the Oppressed’: George Cruikshank, Percy Shelley, and the Gendering of Revolution in 1819.”
- Mayer, Michael. “Migration, Exile and Home in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* and Its Animated Adaptation.” *Journal of Adaptation Studies*
- Rahman, Sanzida, and Farjana Khanum. “Nazrul’s ‘The Rebel’ versus Shelley’s ‘Ode to the West Wind’: Revolution and Freedom.” *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, year unknown, Bangladesh.
- Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*: Vintage Books, 1993.
- Shakespeare, William. *As You Like It*. Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, Folger Shakespeare Library, Simon & Schuster, 2003.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. “Ode to the West Wind.” *The Major Works*, edited by Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill, Oxford UP, 2003