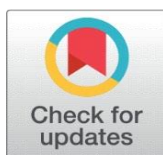


## SUBCONSCIOUS GASLIGHTING: COVERT ADMINISTRATION OF CONTROL OVER WOMEN IN A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

Shalini Kaushik<sup>1</sup>, Yogesh Kumar Dubey<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English, Govt. Postgraduate College, Guna, Madhya Pradesh Higher Education Department, MP, India

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Delhi, Delhi, India



### Corresponding Author

Shalini Kaushik,  
[shalinikaushik1817@gmail.com](mailto:shalinikaushik1817@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

Gaslighting, as a verb, is defined as a type of conscious manipulation that hits the gaslightee at the emotional and psychological levels. The concept of gaslighting seems to have evolved from the play *Gas Light* (1938), which was later adapted into a film, *Gaslight*, in 1944. Gaslighting is considered a colloquial term, but its implications are grave. While comedies were intended for the masses, the psychological manipulation inflicted upon the recipient cannot be dismissed as mere entertainment. Evidently, the term "gaslight" in its current usage did not exist before 1938; however, the concept has long been present in society. The male characters, namely Theseus and Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, do not consciously manipulate the women but inadvertently gaslight them, as the men are unaware of their actions' impact on the women. The subordination of the female sex has historically been presented as normative. There is a redefining of the idea of gaslighting by adding the element of the subconscious to it, contrary to conscious manipulation, which implies gaslighting proper. This subconscious gaslighting could point towards the disguised administration of control that men in the play have over women, namely Hippolyta, Titania, Hermia, and Helena, thus infiltrating the psyche of women, defiling their sisterhood, and normalizing the patriarchal notions.

**Keywords:** Subconscious, Gaslighting, Perpetrator, Psychological, Abuse

**INTRODUCTION.** The word "gaslight" works at two levels, as a noun it is defined as "a light that uses gas as fuel, or the light that is produced by this" and as a verb "to trick or control someone by making them believe that their memories or beliefs about something are wrong, especially by suggesting that they may be mentally ill" (Cambridge Online Dictionary, n.d.). As a verb, gaslighting is a performative act. The individual who engages in gaslighting is referred to as a gaslighter, while the person manipulated in this process is termed the gaslighted. Generally, gaslighting is a term not commonly employed in academia; rather, it is used in colloquial language. The emotional and psychological implications it carries render it worthy of academic discourse. Even within academia, the distinction between classics and popular culture is blurred. These categories are fluid and subject to temporal shifts. Shakespeare, for instance, wrote for commercial purposes, and his comedies were intended for the masses. Today, he is considered a classic. Similarly, gaslighting demands an inclusion in academic discourse. Gaslighting can be categorised into two types: intentional and unintentional. Intentional gaslighting occurs when an individual consciously deceives another into believing that they are mentally

disturbed and that their perception of reality is false. Unintentional gaslighting produces similar effects as intentional gaslighting, but the gaslighter does not act consciously or intentionally. Intentional gaslighting is referred to here as gaslighting proper. Gaslighting as a term comes from a play titled *Gas Light* by Patrick Hamilton (1938) which was later adapted into a film, *Gaslight* (1944). Every text is a product of its age. The concept of gaslighting did not exist during Shakespeare's time; therefore, there has been a deliberate effort to employ the term subconscious gaslighting. In this context, it refers to the covert administration of control over women in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1600), which is either unintentional or resides in the subconscious of the gaslighter. This covert control manifests in various ways, including elements or signs of gaslighting, such as countering, withholding information, diverting from the point the other person is attempting to make, employing denial tactics, and trivialising the ideas of the other person. These signs could be analysed in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. To preempt potential contestations regarding the applicability of gaslighting to this research, it is important to note that the use of subconscious gaslighting is employed to demonstrate that while gaslighting proper may not be explicitly highlighted in the text; one can observe signs of covert control that could potentially lead to gaslighting proper. Given that the concept of gaslighting emerged significantly after Shakespeare's era, an analysis of Shakespearean plays could be conducted based on the signs associated with or leading to gaslighting. Subconscious gaslighting may be considered a precursor state that potentially lays the foundation for explicit gaslighting.

TRACING THE ROOTS OF GASLIGHTING PROPER. In the play *Gas Light*, Mr. Manningham uses his female servants as instruments to gaslight his wife, Mrs. Manningham, and attempts to disrupt the bond between women by creating discord among them, "Or are women too jealous of their discoveries to pass them on to a rival?" (Hamilton, 2018). His actions extend beyond this, as he endeavors to isolate her from her family as well, "When I was married I was cast off by all my relations" (Hamilton, 2018) and he conceals all correspondence from her cousin. Additional incidents include questioning the female protagonist Bella's perception of reality, imposing falsehoods as truth, attributing her perceived madness to heredity from her mother, and isolating her from the outside world to the extent that she believes herself unfit for social interaction. These actions collectively contribute to her psychological distress. It is only when a police officer named Rough, who is covertly investigating her husband's case, elucidates the situation:

You are not going out of your mind, Mrs. Manningham, you are slowly, methodically, systematically being *driven* out of your mind. And why? Because you are married to a criminal maniac who is afraid you are beginning to know too much – a criminal maniac who steals back to his own house at night, still searching for something he could not find twenty years ago. . . For the same reason, perhaps, that he employs this mad, secretive, circuitous way of getting rid of you: that is, by slowly driving you mad and sending you into a lunatic asylum. . . (Hamilton, 2018, p. 39)

In the film *Gaslight*, Gregory makes Paula, the female protagonist, a "prisoner" to him. This scenario exemplifies gaslighting properly. An individual may not always be cognizant of being subjected to gaslighting. When experiencing gaslighting, one may encounter frequent emotional fluctuations. A gaslighter may provide positive reinforcement interspersed with negative statements, for instance, "you're wonderful, you're horrible, you're so smart, you're so dumb", creating a state of confusion for the gaslightee (*SheThePeople TV*, 2020, 1:21). In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the initial indication of gaslighting could be observed as the play commences with a jubilant Theseus celebrating his impending marriage to Hippolyta. Theseus could be interpreted as a gaslighter and Hippolyta as a gaslightee, as Hippolyta is not depicted expressing opposition to the wedding. The union is not portrayed as a conventional marriage, but rather one predicated on the glorification of conquest and captivity, with Hippolyta potentially confined within a psychological prison. The normalisation of sexual assault has existed in history, especially in Greek mythology where instances of rape have resulted in unions between the perpetrator and the victim. For instance, Zeus, in the form of a swan, sexually assaults Leda, resulting in the birth of Helen, renowned for her beauty. This normalises rape by disregarding the element of consent. It also implies that Leda must comprehend the significance of the assault or the "divine penetration" that would initiate a historical era. "Being so caught up, / So mastered by the brute blood of the air / Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" (Yeats, 2012, p. 29). The perpetrator remains indifferent to Leda, yet Leda is expected to perceive the rape as justified due to its divine origin. In such cases, victims appear to have accepted rape as normative. In Indian history, Rajput queens and women, along with their children, practiced Jauhar, a term denoting mass self-immolation to avoid capture, rape, and enslavement following military defeat. An article in *The Quint* discusses about Jauhar, "Even as the practices no longer exist and the incident of Padmavati's Jauhar is recognised as more folklore than fact, one of the biggest celebrations of the year in Rajasthan's

Chittorgarh is the “Jauhar Mela” that happens in February-March” (Paracer, 2017). In the former instance, women endured suffering, with their bodies serving as sites of abuse and in the latter, women feared their bodies to become sites of abuse. This physical abuse subsequently leads to psychological abuse.

**IMPACT OF GASLIGHTING.** The psychological abuse occurs from the position of a narcissist who traumatises the victim by undermining their sense of safety and security. This results in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), deception, betrayal, rejection, retribution, a persistent state of heightened tension, shame, forced paralysis by fear, depression, and powerlessness in the victims (Chan, 2020). These experiences inflict mental wounds on the victim. The trauma persists throughout the victim's life, becoming torturous for both body and mind. When a victim is compelled to ostracize themselves from society, it generates emotional flashbacks, leading to social anxiety, extensive self-criticism, misconceptions about the gaslightee, and a firm belief in good-bad binaries, and self-harm. The terms dislike, discard, disgrace, disloyal, disable, disgust, dishonest, disconnect, disappoint, disown, and disapprove dominate the vocabulary of the gaslighted individual. The abuse cycle includes: idealise, devalue, discard, destroy, hoover (Chan, 2020). In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hippolyta, an Amazon woman, is defeated by Theseus in war, captured, and made his bride. Hippolyta appears to have accepted her defeat and normalises marriage to her captor. She is given minimal dialogues, with only fourteen lines in the play. Theseus could be interpreted as exhibiting narcissistic and manipulative traits. The power imbalance leads to this psychological manipulation. Hippolyta, as an Amazon, is conditioned to perceive herself as perpetually inferior in comparison to masculine strength. The reality of the patriarchal world is made her reality. Geographically, she transitions from her Amazonian society to the sphere where male authority supersedes female autonomy in all aspects. From a patriarchal perspective, she might be perceived as moving into the symbolic world. Her idealisation as the Queen of Athens comes at the expense of her individuality.

A characteristic of gaslighting involves isolating victims from their social connections and society at large. In the film *Gaslight*, an early incident where Gregory questions Paula for smiling at a stranger, Brian Cameron (a police constable), can be interpreted as an attempt to isolate her from the world. Her husband labels her as absent-minded, forgetful, and suspicious (Cukor, 1944, 30:37). This parallels Hippolyta's removal from her Amazonian world. Theseus severs her connection to her people by relocating her to Athens. Hippolyta's acceptance of this is evidenced by her lack of references to her family throughout the play. The Amazonian world she originates from is not depicted even through Hippolyta's dialogue. The defilement of sisterhood in the play can also be interpreted as a form of gaslighting. The woods, once a shared space of childhood play for Helena and Hermia, become a place of escape for Hermia and Lysander, with Helena informing Demetrius of their flight. Helena betrays Hermia for a man. Robin's negligence leads to animosity between Hermia and Helena due to their romantic interests, culminating in Hermia's desire to harm Helena physically. Oberon attempts to end the relationship between the deceased mother of the changeling boy and Titania by seeking to make the Indian boy his henchman. Upon Titania's refusal, he employs a magical potion as a means of subduing her. Through this substance, Oberon attempts to control both Titania and Bottom. He functions as a facilitator of sexual violence (Willis, 2019). Titania, being a strong-willed woman, could not be overtly controlled by Oberon, hence necessitating his use of the potion for covert manipulation. Bottom, belonging to a lower social stratum, experiences sexual violence at the hands of Titania, who is herself under Oberon's influence. By taking the Indian boy, Oberon severs the bond between the deceased vot'ress and Titania. It is Oberon who punishes Titania for her disobedience by causing her to fall in love with Bottom, who has been transformed with an ass's head, thus subjecting her to ridicule. Punishment is also an aspect of gaslighting when the victim disobeys the perpetrator of violence. The perpetrator is not always cognizant of the violence inflicted upon others; one can serve as an instrument of violence unknowingly (Willis, 2019). Titania is unaware of her role as an instrument of violence, while Oberon orchestrates the events through the use of magical juice. Gaslighting encompasses both malicious intent and actions on the part of the perpetrator. Oberon embodies both of these characteristics. The play's patriarchal nature has already silenced certain female characters, such as the vot'ress and Lysander's aunt. These women are merely referenced without elaboration on their names or personalities, possibly due to the male authorship. The absence of Shakespeare's *Sister* (Woolf, 2000) in the Elizabethan era reflects their practical insignificance and lack of representation in reality.

In an era where gaslighting is prevalent, it is essential to identify potential abusers. Such individuals may exhibit traits such as excessive need for control, attention-seeking behavior, use of sarcasm to demean others, employment of silent treatment, and stonewalling. It is crucial to recognize these covert manipulators. The psychological entrapment of the

gaslighted individual stems from the internalization of self-doubt and the eventual erosion of self-identity. Self-care, self-trust, and confidence-building are key elements in identifying and rejecting gaslighting. Stockholm Syndrome originating from a robbery of a bank in Stockholm, Sweden, where the hostages developed a psychological bond with their perpetrators rather than the rescuers, police can be observed in Hippolyta's behaviour. She eagerly anticipates marriage to her captor, Theseus, who conquered her through violence, who has won her by his sword by giving her injuries (Shakespeare, 2008). Hippolyta says to Theseus,

Four days will quickly steep themselves in  
night; Four nights will quickly dream away the  
time And then the moon, like to a silver bow  
New bent in heaven, shall behold the night  
Of our solemnities. (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 132)

Theseus refers to his wedding day as the "sealing day" which will demonstrate the "everlasting bond of fellowship" (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 138) between himself and Hippolyta. Hippolyta acquiesces to this arrangement despite her injuries, and Theseus has a history of sexual violence, as revealed in the dialogue between Oberon and Titania. Hippolyta's defeat in battle has led her to internalise a sense of inferiority to Theseus. Demetrius, who later falls in love with Helena because of the influence of magic, remains under Oberon's spell till the end of the play. Although Demetrius and Helena marry at the end, Helena's acceptance of violence has been normalised. She has internalised the notion of domestic violence as an aspect of love. Her words to Demetrius, when he expresses disinterest in her, illustrate this ideology:

I am your spaniel, and Demetrius,  
The more you beat me I will fawn on me.  
Use me but as your spaniel: spurn me; strike me,  
Neglect me, lose me; only give me leave,  
Unworthy as I am, to follow you.  
What worser place can I beg in your love-And  
yet a place of high respect with me  
Than to be used as you use your dog? (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 166)

In the aforementioned lines, Helena appears to extend an invitation for a master-slave dynamic. Demetrius alludes to "mischief in the wood" (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 167), which suggests the potential for sexual violence should Helena persist in her pursuit of him. Helena exhibits low self-esteem, a lack of self-trust, and diminished self-confidence, emotions that have developed as a result of her rejection by Demetrius. She expresses a profound sense of inadequacy, lamenting, "Happy is Hermia, wheresoe'er she lies; / For she hath blessed and attractive eyes. . . I am as ugly as a bear, / For beasts that meet me run away for fear. / Therefore no marvel thought Demetrius / Do, as a monster, fly my presence thus." (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 174-5). In Hermia's dream, the serpent, in doubleness and tonguiness, says what Hermia would want to say about her false Lysander. She delineates the Oedipal figure of Lysander into two distinct dimensions: one that is characterized by sexual aggression and intrusive hostility, positioned closely to her, and another that embodies a more subdued yet still antagonistic demeanor, situated at a greater distance (Holland, 1980). Throughout the play, this dream ultimately fades from Hermia's consciousness. Furthermore, Oberon achieves his objective of acquiring the Indian boy. He successfully manipulates Titania into submission, rendering her irrational and foolish by causing her to fall in love with Bottom. In the dialogue, "And now I have the boy, I will undo / This hateful imperfection of her eyes" (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 217), Oberon's intention to "undo" does not pertain to the concern he has for the strong-willed Titania, who initially resisted Oberon's demand for the changeling child rather, it signifies Titania's eventual submission to Oberon following the dissolution of the enchantment, which restores harmony through their reunion and reconciliation. Titania is portrayed as a subdued figure, led to believe that her previous experiences were merely a dream. In the final act, Hippolyta seeks validation from Theseus, as evidenced by her remark, "'Tis strange, my Theseus, that these lovers speak of" (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 230). Theseus promptly dismisses their accounts as fabrications, categorising lovers, madmen, and poets together as individuals who conjure illusions. Furthermore, Hippolyta, the Amazonian queen, is depicted as inquiring of her partner in a manner reminiscent of a child, exemplified



when she asks Theseus during the performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, "How chance Moonshine is gone before Thisbe comes back and finds her lover?" (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 248).

**CONCLUSION.** The thematic coherence of the play is predicated upon the psychological subjugation, that is, subconscious gaslighting, of its female characters. Hippolyta is extracted from her Amazonian heritage and conditioned to fulfill the role of an obedient wife, suggesting a satirical portrayal of the Amazonian society. She is made to believe that it is her reality and truth. Where masculine power did not work, a drug to exert control over the women, as evidenced by Oberon's manipulative tactics towards Titania. Ultimately, Titania is conveniently induced to forget her attachment to the changeling boy, while Hippolyta's subjugation remains unaddressed, and the narrative concludes with women expressing heightened affection for their manipulators. In Hermia's dream, she experiences a disturbing vision in which a serpent consumes her heart and breast, while Lysander observes from a distance, smiling. This unsettling imagery is notably overlooked. The restoration of friendship between Hermia and Helena is not thoroughly explored following their reconciliation. These dynamics may be interpreted as manifestations of subconscious gaslighting, which could potentially evolve into more overt forms of manipulation. The play underscores relationships founded on violence and manipulation, revealing that the female characters remain oblivious to the covert coercion they endure. It is imperative to interrogate the foundation of the celebratory conclusion, which is rooted in unhealthy power dynamics between the genders.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

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