

Various attitudes to love in Twelfth Night

In Shakespeare's Mid Summer Night's Dream Helena has said –“Things base and Vile, holding no Quality,/ Love can transpose to form and dignity,/ Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind;/ And therefore is wing'd cupid painted blind.” In Helena's speech is reflected Shakespeare's ideal vision of love. He believed in the transcending qualities of love and in the bonds of friendship which forms the basis of man's relationship to men. Hence a Shakespearean comedy is primarily a tale of love. However in analyzing the immense varieties of love exhibited by different characters, Shakespeare attempted to seek the nature of true love. And this makes Twelfth Night a study of love on various planes.

Shakespeare's treatment of love was much influenced by Elizabethan conventions and traditions. There was the tradition of courtly love, of romantic love and also the literary tradition which treated love as a sort of disease. Now the tradition of 'courtly love' idealized love and glorified women as goddesses. There is a trace of this kind of love in the Duke's attitude to Olivia. He loves her not as a man loves a woman, but as a worshipper might adore a goddess- “O, when mine eyes see Olivia first/ Me thought she purged the air of pestilence.”(Act I sc.i)

Romantic love resembled courtly love in the way that, it too tended to idealize the beloved. But at the same time, unlike the courtly love, Romantic love was normally based on physical attraction and often led to marriage. It was often love at first sight. In Twelfth Night we have three instances of love at first sight. The Duke fell in love with Olivia in the 'instant' when he saw her for the first time. Viola too falls in love with the Duke instantly. And Olivia realizes that she loves Cesario the moment he leaves. Thus Olivia says-“...Even so quickly may one catch the plague/ Me thinks I feel this youth's perfections/ with an invisible and subtle stealth/ To creep in at mine eyes...” (Act II sc.i) Sebastian too falls for Olivia at first sight.

Moreover according to the literary tradition, love can be a type of melancholy and thus an illness. In Twelfth Night Shakespeare shows the ill effects of love through the medium of Orsino and Olivia. However apart from such conventional treatment of love, Shakespeare attempts in his plays to explore the nature of ideal love. True love according to Shakespeare, could not be limited to such traditional ways of treating it. Rather it is imminently a personal experience, the very basis of which is uncalculating selflessness. Hence Shakespeare makes a disinterested study of the various attitudes displayed by his characters towards love to enlighten his readers about love's true character.

Shakespeare believed that love is about togetherness and sharing. And unlike Orsino's attitude to love, it is a mutual phenomenon of give and take. In Orsino's love lit dream world, music is the food of love on which he feeds to excess. In the very next moment however Orsino had had enough of it and wants no more as “ 'Tis not so sweet now as it was before.” (Act I sc.i) Then again in his very first speech Orsino tells us that “full of shapes is fancy” –(i.e. his 'fancy' which he has mistaken for love.) Indeed Orsino's love for Olivia is actually a fancy and so full of shapes is his fancy that he sees Olivia as Diana, the classical goddess of chastity. Not only this, Orsino fancies himself as the hunter Actaeon who fell in love with her and was like the hart trapped in her love and pursued by cruel hounds. Orsino's flamboyant grandiose language however reveals his fickle mindedness. One moment he compares himself with the hunter and the next moment he becomes the hunted. Hence, Orsino's love and his views of himself as the ideal lover are a result of his passionately fanciful nature. He is highly imaginative and sentimental and most importantly he is in love with the idea of love itself. Thus there is a yawning gap between what Orsino actually is and what he tries to play.

Through the medium of Orsino Shakespeare therefore wanted to show that the Duke's idea of love and the beloved are beyond all realistic perceptions. The Duke has built up erroneously romantic ideas about Olivia being some divine entity and himself as an ideal lover, the role of which he constantly tries to play. But it is impossible for any human being to play the role of an ideal lover if he is not a natural lover. And the Duke is not a natural lover as he mistakes his love for the image of love to be his love for Olivia. Orsino's love for Olivia is thus artificial and the fancies of this artifice have trapped him in a world of illusion whereby he is cut off from the world of reality.

The first scene of Twelfth Night also contains a picture of Olivia who is unwilling to return Orsino's love as she has taken the extravagant vow of abjuring 'the company and sight of men', for seven years. Hence Olivia too feeds to excess on her brother's 'dead love' and pretends to be the world's greatest sister.

Now to teach Orsino and Olivia the nature of true love, Shakespeare brings in an outsider Viola. For the edification of Illyrian characters, Viola is brought to act as a catalyst in the reformation of these self-indulgent characters. So in order to teach them love's true language, Shakespeare presents Viola as the perfect foil to Orsino as well as Olivia. Indeed Viola has the quickness which endears her to the readers from the very start. In contrast to Olivia's self-indulging grief, Viola displays immense resourcefulness in the face of a crisis. Even Viola could abjure the company and sight of men as Olivia has done. But obeying her heart's intuitions and guided by the common sense Viola decides to put on the disguise of a man to serve the Duke.

Thus Viola is the one who will generously give and expose herself to the hazards of love. She will do her best to woo Orsino's lady love though she herself would be his wife. When Olivia asks, what Cesario would have done if he were in Orsino's condition, Viola ardently describes a lover's restless activities which appear to be in direct contrast to Orsino's self-indulgent passivity. And it is this description which brings Olivia out of her idealized private world. It awakens in Olivia willingness to rouse herself to meet Viola's abounding energy with an equally passionate response. Olivia's falling in love with Cesario is the first step towards her edification.

Furthermore, we are also shown how Viola tries to teach Orsino the language of true love. Through Viola Shakespeare shows that the outward manifestations of love are not always true. Viola says to Orsino-**"We may say more, swear more; but indeed/ Our shows are more than will: for still we prove/ Much in our vows, but little in our love."** (Act II sc.iv) Viola teaches Orsino that swearing does not make one's love stronger. Thus we witness that in contrast to Orsino's bragging, Viola's silent love is more true as Shakespeare believed -**"That love is merchandized whose rich esteeming/ The owner's tongue doth publish every where."** (Sonnet 102) Truly giving is Viola's only resource and the rest she commits to time. Through Viola Shakespeare further focuses on the enduring qualities of love which enables the spirit of love to stand the test of time.

In the sub-plot, Shakespeare explores the true basis of friendship- the bond that holds together mankind. Herein we see the friendship between Sebastian and Antonio which transcends every personal interest. Indeed we find that the spirit of love finds its reflection in this all pervasive friendship. As we witness when Sebastian goes to look at the sites of Illyria, Antonio freely and without any hesitation offers Sebastian his own purse asking him to keep it for the sake of crisis. Not only is this, Antonio is even ready to go with Sebastian despite the fact that his life will be in danger if Orsino's men arrest him. Now in this way Shakespeare does show the ideal friendship displayed by Antonio and Sebastian which demands uncalculative generosity and affection.

In Sebastian too Shakespeare enthrones love's ideal notions. He too like his sister is guided by the wisdom of his heart while dealing with the issue of love. Thus Sebastian, though baffled by the suddenness of everything is ready to take risks for the sake of love. And perhaps this is the reason why he is duly rewarded in the end.