

Shakespeare's Conception of Love in *Romeo and Juliet*

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ABSTRACT

Love is one of the pivotal concerns in Shakespeare's plays, and in excogitating on love in Shakespeare one must start with *Romeo and Juliet*, for it seems to be the sublimate depiction of the phenomenon of love and description of its destiny in the world. Shakespeare is a middle ground between the Classical poets whose tragedies barely addressed of love and Romantic poets whose doleful stories involved only love. Earnest authors in antiquity with the unique exception of Plato, did not exhibit men and women in love as the most wistful of beings confronting the most tragic of calamities. Whereas the Romantic poets created love their subject incisively because of their choice for the passions over moral excellence and logic. Christian world, in fact, has uncertain and evasive history so far as love concerns, but surely the authorised perspective vilipends erotic passion in privilege of agape. This is a query that pursuits Shakespeare immensely. *Romeo and Juliet* are the flawless pair of lovers. They are charming, they are blossoming, they are stately, and they are abundant. Man normally longs a flawlessness that he cannot accomplish. But at least constituent of that completeness comprises in our capability to perceive it. When reading the exquisite and splendiferous words in their balcony scenes, only the most depraved reader would cast off the text aside because it wounds overmuch to ruminate that one will never have anything poise so sweet and lovely. Love in *Romeo and Juliet* knows no limitations of correctitude, whether established by family or country.

Keywords: star-crossed lovers, teenager-love, perfect lovers.

This paper, on *Romeo and Juliet*, lays down a basic premise of the meaning of love in Shakespeare's mind around 1595-96, when Shakespeare completed writing this play. There has been much talk about concepts like libido, infatuation, and attachment (White 6) but much still remains to be stated in this regard. For Shakespeare love was neither a stable entity nor something easily definable. It was too complex to fathom in exact terms; more easy to feel and experience in the context of particular plays at particular points of time. Shakespeare kept evolving his perception of love as he matured as a writer. *Romeo and Juliet* contains one of his early perceptions about the nature of love. It is, therefore, a significant document containing the Bard's understanding and conceptualisations related to the nature of love at that point of time.

It should not be thought that *Romeo and Juliet* is a play about infatuation, desire, libido and attachment alone. The play is much more than the basic tenets of young love. It shows how a lover is gripped by suffering, fear and darkness until it settles down into his being with some sense of finality. The word finality does not refer to permanence in any sense. Instead it indicates the limit to which Shakespeare's imagination could stretch when he dwelt on one of his favourite subjects like love. *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the many plays that shows how far the poet's mind and imagination could go in search of the meaning of love. This search took him towards several directions in his various plays. Even before the play actually begins there is "The Prologue", which warns us of the grim nature of this love-tragedy. The length of the prologue is exactly that of a sonnet – fourteen lines. It is full of tragic images and grim perspectives. It informs us of an "ancient grudge" that can "break to new mutiny". The scale on which things seem to be going wrong is big involving "civil blood and uncleaned civil hands" (line 4) then emerges a powerful image that spreads through two lines: "From forth the fatal loins of these two foes/ A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life," (lines 5-6). Shakespeare speaks of

“fatal loins” and shows how “star-crossed lovers” take their lives from the physical unions of couples belonging to two enemy-families. From these lines it emerges that love can be a reaction against hatred and results due to the plans of Destiny that lie beyond the control of individuals. Nothing less than the deaths of their own children can transform their hatred into love.

The Prologue written in the form of a Shakespearean sonnet can be read as a statement on people who extend their hatred for long and taught lessons by Destiny. Their hatred is wiped out by their children’s love, but not without a heavy price. Thus Destiny and love closely bound together. The acts of a generation pass over into the lives of the next. Thus love comes not for no reason; it comes to wipe out hatred. At least this is the initial statement given by Shakespeare. The first scene of *Romeo and Juliet* contains a great deal of what Shakespeare had probably been thinking about love. It therefore comes out in neat sections of this scene, throughout. In the first forty lines of the scene we discover two servants of the house of Capulet, Samson and Gregory. The scene begins with Samson and Gregory quibbling on words. Their quibbles soon change into crude, vulgar and bawdy comments that have sexual innuendos. Because the two men belong to a class that is by no means refined. Their words reflect the lowest form of love that lacks deeper or higher love. For instance, Samson Says: “My naked weapon is out” (line 33) in reply to Gregory’s advice – “draw thy tool – here comes of the house of Montague’s” (lines 30).

In the next section of the scene there is the possibility of violence because of Benvolio’s and Tybalt’s confrontation. The hatred of two-houses emerges when the Capulet’s and Montague’s join quarrel. It is prince Escalus whose entry puts an end to the different situation. Romeo’s father and Romeo’s friend Benvolio are left together on stage after the Prince has left. Their conversation now centres on the cause of Romeo’s dejection, seclusion and “deep sighs”. Romeo is in love though his father

and friends do not know about it. His love has saddened him. This love is not for Juliet. It is for Rosaline who has not given any signs of sharing this emotion with Romeo. Already we are moving towards the grimness which must accompany love. Romeo and Juliet seem to project love as something which is deeply entangled with suffering. As Allan Bloom writes: “the strange mating of love and death” (14). *Romeo and Juliet* can be considered Shakespeare’s most significant document on the discourse of love. His other love tragedies, *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra* come much later in his life when he has attained a certain detachment on his perceptions and understanding of love. In the early part of the play the language of the play in general, of Romeo in particular, seems artificial. As the play builds up towards tragedy the language becomes more and more smooth and far from artificiality. This point has been made effectively by Marjorie Garber in *Shakespeare After All* (189-195).

The first scene of the play contains much of Shakespeare’s discourse on love, a discourse that comes from personal experience because it is closer in time from the point in the young poet’s life when he was attracted by the woman he married and lived with for a brief period in his life (1.1. 116-128). Lord Montague further informs how Romeo is seen “with tears augmenting the fresh morning dew”. Romeo’s saddened condition is compared beautifully with clouds and other natural phenomenon: “Adding to clouds more clouds with deep sighs/But all so soon as the all-cheering sun” (1.1. 131-132). Several lines that follow show how Romeo is sad either because he is in love or out of love. Romeo then informs Benvolio that he is sad because he is out of favour where he loves. This suggests that love can inflict pain even when a love affair has not begun. Romeo’s suffering has been so well sketched by Shakespeare that it shows rather clearly how unrequited love torments the lover. Even before Romeo’s actual love with Juliet can commence, he has already learned enough about love and can almost define it poetic terms (1.1. 183-192). Shakespeare shows again in the very

next few lines (through Romeo's condition) how a lover's mind is not where he is physically present: "Tut, I have lost my self I'm not here. / This is not Romeo, he's some other where" (1.1.195-196). Romeo's anguish is not being returned the affection he has given to Rosaline continues in the rest of the scene, in poetic, rhetorical terms. Benvolio, who is not in love can sit back and talk about how love troubles and how the troubled lover can try to transfer his affections on another. Later in the play we meet Juliet who is coaxed by her mother and nurse to accept Paris as husband. Both women believe that love for a man can be inculcated if it does not exist.

The Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* is a very fascinating character. She has accepted Juliet as for own daughter and loves her as such. She has been able to transform her affection on to Juliet after her daughter, chosen, is dead. The nurse's love for Juliet is selfless and pure and can rank with the love of a mature lover or beloved. Through her character Shakespeare has demonstrated that love does not rely on either blood or social relationships; it can exist in the hearts of any individual who have learnt to accept each other entirely. The love of Juliet's mother for her seems much less in comparison to the Nurse's love for her. Perhaps what Shakespeare shows by implication is that the love of a mother may arise simply out of duty that has been given by society. But the love that does not accrue from a social responsibility can indeed be deeper. In Act 1. Scene 4, particularly towards the end of the scene, we are taken to a situation in which love is treated utility. Juliet is being made to develop and acquire a taste for Paris; she is being taught the utility and gain of acquiring such a love for Count Paris. The Nurse's advice to Juliet is highly utilitarian: "Go, girl, seek happy nights to happy days" (1.3. 105). Such advice is given by women to young girls so that they can live life comfortably and conveniently. The Nurse knows that if Juliet marries Count Paris her days and nights will get adequate comfort. She will get all that a woman desires from home and a husband. What the

Nurse does not perhaps know is that Juliet does not need to be just a wife who settles down into a home with a worldly husband, like Paris. Juliet is that kind of person whose desire goes deeper than a socially well-placed, but not sufficiently feeling individual. She needs a passionate husband who can fully even if that love will only lead towards a fatal end. Act 1, scene 5 is significant for certain reasons. A) It is the scene in which Romeo and Juliet meet for the first time. B) It serves as a significant pointer to the initiation of true love. C) The spiritual nature of true love and the actual experiences related to the emergence and growth of true love in the hearts of lovers. D) Initial Platonic love which will later change.

Shakespeare has intelligently and skillfully managed the situation in which Romeo and Juliet meet for the first time as strangers. Even though Mercutio has been advising Romeo to dance in the banquet given by the Capulets, he refuses to dance and wants to be a torch-bearer. He claims that he has heavy feat. It is in this position that he is able to observe Juliet for the first time. The first conversation between Romeo and Juliet shows initial attraction between them. This is by no means the conversation between lovers who have comfortably settled into each other's hearts. The conversation is rhetorical. People use a little rhetoric to impress others, even if it is to impress a lover. This initial conversation raises love to a spiritual plane, comparing it with pilgrimage, devotion, "this holy shrine" etc. (1.5. 92-110). The "higher love" that emerges through the dialogues of Romeo and Juliet initial meeting (which was the subject of satirical treatment in G.B. Shaw's *Arms and the Man*) is what was necessary in Shakespeare's times at least for the initiation of a lover's relationship. These initial dialogues needed to have a formal quality. In Shaw's times such a formality in a lover's conversation may have seemed artificial, but in Shakespeare's times it was the right way of beginning a relationship particularly if the lover's belong to an aristocracy.

During this conversation Romeo kisses Juliet twice. Juliet then becomes less formal towards him and informs him: "You kiss by the book" (109). From this line of Juliet it is easy to see that within course of eighteen lines spoken between the two Juliet, has to a large extent shed her formality with him. She now speaks not in a rhetorical manner but in a natural expressive way. The saintly nature of the earliest lines is gradually replaced by a lover's true voice of feeling. A little later she asks her Nurse to find out whether Romeo is married or not and announces that: "If he be married, / my grave is like to be my wedding wed" (1.5. 134-135). The above statement is somewhat prophetic as the play will show. There is irony in this star-crossed relationships Juliet points out: "My only love sprung from my only hate, / Too early seen unknown and known too late! / Prodigious birth of love is to me / That I must love a loathed enemy". (1.5. 137-140)

Act 2 is slightly different to act one because now Romeo knows that he loves Juliet and not Rosaline. His cousin Benvolio and his friend Mercutio also know that Romeo is in love. These two young men speculate on the nature of love and in Act 2.1 in the process they add to the discourse on love that the play contains. In Act 2. 2 a great deal of discourse on the nature of love is contained. Juliet and Romeo meet in her Balcony and Romeo talks about her eye discourses and continue to tell how Juliet's eye communicate to him even though she remains quiet. When she begins to speak her words, though just (Aye me) have the same effect on the Romeo which her eyes have not. Juliet is sad that her Romeo is a Montague and wishes that Romeo did not bear the name of a Montague. As she says: "O Romeo, O Romeo, Wherefore art thou? / Deny thy father and refuse thy name, / Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, / And I'll no longer be a Capulet" (2.2. 31-35). These lines indicate the urgency of the two lovers to possess each other. Shakespeare's lines indicate how well he understood the cravings of lovers. From the above it is easy to see the meaning of true love as expounded by Romeo and Juliet. Romeo is prepared to change

his name if it comes in the way of his union with Juliet. He tells her that if she calls him "but love", then he'll be newly baptised: "Call me but love and I'll be new baptise. / Henceforth I never will be Romeo" (2.2.50-51). He goes to the extent of telling Juliet that his name is hateful to her because it contains in it the name of her enemy. On being asked how he was able to scale the high walls of her orchard to reach her. He replies: "with love's light wings did I o'erperch these walls,/ For stony limits cannot hold love out,/ And what love can do, that dares love attempt;/ Therefore thy kinsmen are no stop to me." (2.2.66-69) when Juliet says that her kinsmen can murder Romeo, he replies: "Alack, there lies more peril in thine eye/ Than twenty of their swords". (2.2. 71-72) Shakespeare has shown how much risk lovers are prepared to take. For the sake of few moments together lovers will risk their lives. Therefore Shakespeare has compared the lovers with a madman in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (5.1. 4-20)

What is wisdom for most people ceases to remain wisdom for lover. What is socially wrong for most is not so far lovers; society and nature are at variance with each other. To be social need not be right in the world of lovers. Tybalt, Juliet's cousin is angry with Romeo for being present at the Capulet's feast because Romeo does something that is not permissible in society, namely, entering the territory of an enemy. It flows naturally even into an enemy's side when the need arises in the heart. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare seems to have made an opposition between love and marriage. Marriage is a social institution, performed through religion and community support. Love is the connecting bond between two, or more, individuals, requiring no social or community support. *Romeo and Juliet* keep returning toward rhetorical statements. Perhaps, these statements keep the act and expression of love alive and fresh for people falling in love. After marriage this kind of rhetoric seems unnecessary and even unnatural. But before marriage the discourse of love is made up of a large part of rhetoric. The language of love needs to be persuasive and even flowery and sweet. Romeo personifies

love when he states: "By love, that first did prompt me to enquire. / He lent me counsel, and I lent him eyes." (2.2. 80-81) He says this in reply to Juliet's question, "By whose direction found'st thou out this place?" (2.2. 79) Romeo claims that love will guide the lover's to the beloved even if she is at the seashore, which is the limit of where human beings can be living.

Juliet is conscious of the fact that she has accepted his love to soon. She tells him that he must be faithful to her instead of agreeing to accept her love too quickly. She says that if Romeo so desires she will show disapproval to him for sometime before saying yes to him: "O gentle Romeo, / If thou dost love, pronounce it faithfully, / Or if thou think's I am too quickly won, / I'll frown and be perverse and say thee nay, / So thou wilt woo, but else not for the world." (2.2. 94-98) she tells Romeo about the depth of love for him, again through a lover's rhetoric: "My bounty is as boundless as the sea, / My love as deep; the more I give to thee, / The more I have, for both are infinite" (2.2. 134-135). Once Juliet is firmly implanted in Romeo's heart, he forgets Rosaline and the woe that her name brought about with it for him: "With Rosaline, my ghostly father? No, / I have forgot that name and that name's woe" (2.3. 40-41). Friar Laurence notices the great change in Romeo and asks him how the one he loved so dearly has been so soon forsaken. He can see that Romeo's infatuation for Rosaline was not love: "Young men's love then lies/ Not truly in their hearts but in their eyes." (2.2.63-64)

The critic Kate Chedgzoy has pointed out the pain that accompanies love in its initial stages. Boys are initially virtually in love with each other and then they begin to transport this love on to someone of the opposite sex. Perhaps, Romeo suffers this pain when he encounters Rosaline. Mercutio is also somewhat hurt when he discusses Romeo's transformation, which is Romeo's movement from male such as Mercutio towards female (Chedgzoy points Mercutio Queen Mab Speech). In this context Chedgzoy writes: "Mercutio mocks and diminishes Cupid at a

moment when he and Benvolio are concerned to reassert the claims on Romeo of Homosocial bonds among young men against the heterosexual desires drawing their friends away from them" (Henderson 147). The above instance of Mercutio, Benvolio, Romeo, and Juliet can be looked upon as a part of Shakespeare's discourse on love, which is contained amply in *Romeo and Juliet* and a number of other plays. Since Shakespeare's discourse on love forms a significant part of this thesis, it may be good idea to first examine nature of discourse in literature as envisioned by Foucault and others. Sara Miles informs us that when thinking about discourse that has effects, it is important to consider "the factors of truth, power, and knowledge, since it is because of these elements that discourse has effects" (Miles 16).

R.W. Desai has pointed out in his seminal essay "The Negation of Marriage in *Romeo and Juliet*" that Romeo and Juliet should not merely be seen as "star-crossed lovers" as pointed out in the Prologue to this play. The play contains a kind of discourse about the wayward male. He is of the views that love between Romeo and Juliet is responsible for double misunderstanding that leads them to suicide (64). Romeo's sudden switching off affection from Rosaline to Juliet is a feature introduced by Shakespeare into Arthur Brooks' narrative poem *Romeo and Juliet* (1562) which is consider to be the source of the play. The reason for Shakespeare's induction of Rosaline into the original story seems to be this: Shakespeare probably wanted to provide some kind of knowledge about the nature of love, as it turns out to be in certain social power structures. He possibly wanted to tell us about the wayward male when he wrote this play. His son Hamnet had died that some year and had already suffered being trapped in a bad marriage. Julia Kristeva informs us that succumbing both to Nostalgia for the adolescent love that had produced Hamnet and to hatred for his abandoned wife, Shakespeare idealised youthful love in *Romeo and Juliet* and transforms his hatred to the fending parents (Kristeva 101).

With Kristeva opinion and mind it is easy to see how Shakespeare could have created Romeo as a wayward male. He introduced Rosaline only to suggest that a male, like Romeo can rush towards love and, if he doesn't find it in one woman, he can try to seek it in another. Thus according to Desai it cannot be ruled out that Romeo may have left Juliet for other woman if had settled down after comfortably with Juliet in marriage. Further, Desai writes that Juliet, like typical female is different to Romeo. She is more stable and even realises this in her relationship with Romeo. She does not expect him to remain a perfect lover for long and fears this: "O swear not by the moon, the inconstant moon, / That monthly changes in her circled orb, / Lest that thy love prove likewise variable". (109-11) Juliet is captivated by Romeo's manner and falls in love with him too quickly even, she understands that his love for her could be "variable". Shakespeare could have seen in the man-woman relationship the larger pattern that exists in the animal world. The male is drawn to the female, as he himself was drawn to Anne Hathaway; there is then a coupling that may not survive beyond a reason, the male tray away from the female. Friar Laurence also finds Romeo's behaviour with Rosaline and Juliet not quite right. His remarks on Romeo's change of affection to Juliet are worrisome. In Shakespeare's play Friar Laurence's remark show Romeo as a fickle shallow and inconstant male.

Though most critics have seen Romeo and Juliet as Shakespeare greatest lovers, it is possible to perceive, in their relationship, Shakespeare's discourse on love. Though in sonnet 100 and 116 Shakespeare has said that love "love is not love which alters when it alterations find" (116). To deconstruct these lines is to encounter a lover that alters and is variable. Romeo's behaviour could match with Shakespeare own in his love/marriage relationship with Anne Hathaway. Though nothing can be said in definite terms about the future of Romeo and Juliet marriage, if they had lived on. It is highly likely that Romeo would have behaved like any other male in the animal

species that does not stick to the female because Romeo's actions are impulsive as those found in animal world.

Shakespeare's plays should not be interpreted merely in the light of what one or two scholars have said. They are too complex to be reduced to such a simple level of perception but *Romeo and Juliet* is a play that makes such things about the nature of love, the arranged and love-marriages as well as the role of impulse and infatuation in the relationships of the young people. Even a writer like George Bernard Shaw has a view on the nature of love in a play like *Arms and the Man*, and he has discourse on love when some of his other plays like *Pygmalion*, *Candida*, and *Mrs. Warren Profession* are put together along with *Arms and the Man*. Shakespeare definitely does have a discourse on love. It is for this reason he has written so many love tragedies, love comedies, romances and love sonnets. Even his narrative poetry, particularly the *Phoenix and Turtle* contains his perception of love. It is not for no reason he kills his lovers in the love tragedies at the moment when their love for each other is cemented on their deaths. In the love comedies, which end in marriage we do not get to know what would happen to their love relationship after they are settled on marriage.

Much of what Shakespeare writes about love in *Romeo and Juliet* and some other play could be no more than the rhetoric of the Petrarchan tradition that come before him. It is important to segregate that rhetoric that he has uses from the genuine beliefs that he seems to have had on the nature and course of love. It is not surprising that he bracketed love with the behaviour of lunatics and the poets or he considered it the subject matter of dreams in his early plays. It is only towards his mature work after, *Hamlet* that Shakespeare gives us rather negative view of love. Gertrude and her true husband represent this variable. Even the Young Hamlet's behaviour towards Ophelia seems to be like the one R.W. Desai speaks of in relation to Romeo. Like Romeo, Hamlet too has drifted towards Ophelia irresponsibly in

a moment of impulse, perhaps. His love for her is there no doubt, but his other political and familial considerations that he values above love. Romeo couldn't be considered either a great lover as several critics have believed him to be or he could be considered like the variable male. Just as Desdemona seems to be more faithful than Othello in their relationship, Juliet's love could be given greater credence than Romeo's. This could be said on the ground that she dies a slightly more noble death than Romeo does. Romeo's death results from the shock of seeing her dead this shock becomes more intense because he has sense of guilt she has died for his sake. It was he who went to her balcony and convinced her that she should marry him. Now he sees her dead as a result of a plan he himself has initiated even though Friar Laurence is the immediate reason for things giving wrong. Juliet's death results from more simple cause. Like Romeo, she also cannot live without him. But she has just consented the plans of two males one: Romeo and duo Friar Laurence. She is less guilty than Romeo when she dies. Like Desdemona and Othello, Juliet and Romeo too seem to have the balance tilted in the favour of the female. Juliet tells Romeo: "And all my fortunes at thy foot I'll lay, / And follow thee my lord throughout the world". (2.2. 147-48) she goes even beyond the word, following him, when she sees him dead because of her.

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