

THEMES OF LOVE AND MARRIAGE IN THE COMIC PLAYS OF SHAKESPEARE AND BHASA : A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Dr R.J. Raval

Lecturer in English

Government Polytechnic

Rajkot

Comparative literature aims at studying different literatures crossing the spheres of one particular country. In particular context, it tries to establish the relationship between literature on one hand and other areas of knowledge, customs and beliefs on the other hand. So, rather than discipline, Comparative literature should be simply a method of approaching literatures and texts should be understood not only as the history of the moment of actual textual production but also as the history of the reception across the Time. A text is to be re-read taking into account the socio-political context and hence the re-reading may demand some concession on the part of the reader. To some extent, the purpose of this paper is to address the canonical status quo of the texts of both the playwrights-especially in the light of the themes of love and marriage.

The deeper study of the comedies of Bhaasa and Shakespeare reveal the fact that within their sphere, they encompass a wide variety of levels and perspectives of comedy. The common trait shared by the dramatic milieu of both the dramatists is the evocation of genuine humour without indulging in witty showism. Another obvious similarity between the plays of both seems to be their approach- both do not limit themselves to any particular perspective on comedy. And hence, the humour that arises out of their plays is spontaneous and without bitterness. Though there is a difference of cultural background, there are many similarities in both the dramatists pertaining to the handling of plot, art of characterization, thematic concerns, the diction employed and other dramatic techniques.

Comedy originated from the seasonal festivities. Regarding this, Langer's remark is an advocacy: "comedy is an art form that arises naturally when people are gathered to celebrate life, in spring festivals, triumphs, birthdays, weddings or initiations."¹ Life needs rejuvenation and such celebrations provide renewal and rhythm to life. As a part and means of renewal, comedy treats the theme of love leading to marriage, because it symbolically represents the theme of rebirth and the perpetual renewal of life. This fact seems justified in the comedies of both the Western and Sanskrit dramatic repertory. Northrop Frye calls Shakespeare's comedy "the drama of the green world" and states that "its theme is the triumph of life over the waste land, the death and revival of the year."² The theme of love is a recurring phenomenon in the comedies of the Western dramatists from Aristophanes to those of the present day. Because Shakespeare's comedies are the curious mixture of varied strains and spirits, it becomes a difficult, or say impossible, task to define them in a singular formula. Appropriate to this, Kenneth Muir is lead to comment that "there is no such thing as Shakespearean Comedy; there are only Shakespearean comedies."³ Nonetheless, it is possible to bring out certain recurring topics that he time and again discusses and highlights in his comedies. Among many others, the most recurrent theme is that of romantic love. Regarding the theme of love in Shakespeare's plays, Salinger observes that "his comedies are essentially celebrations of marriage, which he presents in a social and personal aspect."⁴ In this way, the variety of love themes can be perceived. Through the courtship and romance, the young lovers achieve the desired end. However, the world of love is not without the impediments but these impediments are overcome with poise and the opposite forces at last also approve and accept their love.

In this respect, they are quite similar to the comedies in Sanskrit literature. Sanskrit drama usually is a celebration of two dominant attitudes to life- the simplicity of the Dharmaic (duty-bound) life and the splendour of a courtly life. The first one involves a heroic theme in which Vira rasa predominates and the second one, an erotic theme which has Shringara as its basic rasa. The first category includes the play like *Pratijyaayaugandharaayana*, while the romantic comedies like *Avimaaraka* and *Svapnavaasavadatta* come under the second category. The treatment of love theme in Sanskrit dramas differ from that the Shakespearean. For instance, *Avimaaraka* deals with the love at first sight motif presented in a delicate manner and developed through the mutual

infatuation of Avimaaraka and Kurangi. This love suffers separation and finally enjoys the reunion. In Sanskrit the motif of love in separation is termed Vipralambha Shringaara which is love in its fulfillment. This variation of love has greater appeal and hence Sanskrit dramatists have exploited it abundantly. Another example of such a love theme (Vipralambha) can be found in *Svapnavaasavadattaa*. It depicts conjugal love in most exalted form. Regarding the beauty of Vipralambha in this play, Dr.Sukathankar observes:

The aim of the dramatist is to portray on the one hand the complete self-abnegation of the noble queen, who suffers martyrdom for the sake of her lord with cheerful resignation, and on the other hand, to depict her husband as at heart true to his love, while unwillingly submitting to the exigencies of the life of a king. The burden of the story is the triumph of steadfast, unflattering, undying love for which no sacrifice is too great.⁵

The Pramadavana scene in *Svapnavaasavadattaa* brings out the beauty of love in separation, however in an ironical way. When Vidushaka asks Udayana who is dearer to him- Vaasavadattaa of yesterday or Padmaavati of today, Udayana answers that he admired the beauty, charm and virtues of Padmaavati but still she had not won his heart bound to Vaasavadatta. Ironically both, Vaasavadattaa (disguised as Avantikaa) and Padmaavati are present there. Hearing this, Vaasavadattaa becomes overjoyed and thinks that she had finally been rewarded. While portraying this ideal love between Udayana and Vaasavadattaa, Bhaasa also highlights the nobility of the character of Padmaavati.

In the comedies of Shakespeare also this Vipralambha Shringaara can be seen. For instance, in *As You Like It*, Orlando and Rosalind fall in love with each other at the very first meeting but their love develops in their separation through their mutual longings. In the memory of his beloved, Orlando composes poems and hangs them on the boughs of trees as an expression of his love. Similarly, Rosalind also craves for the company and love of her lover and the moment she knows his presence in the Forest of Arden, she is overwhelmed. But at last, this yearning on both the sides comes to fruition and turns into their marriage.

The early comedies of Shakespeare have Italian motifs like mistaken identity, cross-wooing and deceit and hence in them love is largely treated as intrigue. Luciana's love in *The Comedy of Errors* is of this type. But in the middle and later comedies, we find an idealized kind of love. The most copious forms of love can be found in the middle comedies like *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night* and *Much Ado About Nothing* wherein the celebration of courtship

and romance are most vividly expressed. These comedies share close affinity with the Sanskrit comedies since both present an idealized form of love; obstructed by some impediments and finally emerging triumphant.

Throughout his comedies, though Shakespeare has elevated the theme of love, he has also criticized and mocked the excess of romance. Shakespeare is seen putting a censor on the exaggeration sometimes indulged in by some young lovers. For example, during her love-prattling with Orlando, Rosalind retorts that “Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them- but not for love” (IV, i, 55-57).⁶ Similarly, the verbal war that takes place between Benedick and Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* runs counter to all established ideas of romance. This casual anti-romantic attitude of Shakespeare is totally absent in the plays of Bhaasa. This is so perhaps Bhaasa never shows his characters exaggerating about their love. The feelings of the lovers are shown so pure and intense that an idea of exaggeration even can never arise in the minds of the readers. Thus, in that way Bhaasa’s plays are more realistic. Apart from the plays in which Bhaasa treats love as the main theme, there are those in which he portrays the nature of true love with subtle touches. In *Pratimaanaataka*, Raama, referring to the nature of his relationship with Sitaa, says that “rarely are couples born with natures so alike” (Act-I).⁷ In *Pratijyaayaugandharaayana* the depth of the love between Princess Vaasavadattaa appears vividly from the conversation between the disguised Yaugandharaayana, Vasantaka and Rumanvaana.

The theme of daughter’s marriage and its various implications are discussed in the comedies of both. Regarding the marriages of the daughters or wards, the patriarchal or parental dominance respectively can be seen in the plays of Shakespeare. The parents generally managed the marital affairs. The evidence of such activities can be seen in the cases of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* and Hermia in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. They can’t choose their spouses for their life. It was sometimes a matter of social and political alliance of the wealth. As Tennenhouse observes:

It was considered an overtly political activity, certainly not something to be left to the whim of the children- often barely in their teens- by means of whom alliances were made and the value of the blood perpetuated.⁸

In Shakespeare’s comedy like *Twelfth Night*, this social implication of marriage is hinted. Marriage was also a means of getting richness and hence rich heirs and heiress in their

minority sometimes were married off by their uncles within the days of their parents' death. Sir Toby's incessant attempts to get Olivia married to Sir Andrew in this play are possibly the upshot of such a practice.

Marriage of a daughter as a means of the expansion of political power is also portrayed in Bhaasa's plays like *Pratijyaayaugandharaayana* and *Svapnavaasavadattaa*. In *Pratijyaayaugandharaayana*, the father and mother of Vaasavadattaa are much worried about the proper bridegroom for their daughter. Pradyota Mahaasena aims at fulfilling his political goal by getting his daughter married to Udayana who is noble, virtuous and brave. So, more or less, it was a political alliance and hence Wells is lead to conclude that "*Pratijyaa* is a political fable."⁹ In *Svapnavaasavadattaa*, Yaugandharaayana plans to regain the lost kingdom of Udayana by getting the king married to the sister of the king of Magadha-Padmaavati. This idea of Yaugandharaayana seems to have found inspiration from the Arthashastra. Pusalker observes:

The influence of the Arthashastra, even on the personal lives of the kings, would be evident from the number of political marriages contracted during the period. The marriage of Padmaavati with Vatsaraaja (Udayana) forms part of the *Svapnavaasavadattaa*.¹⁰

Contrary to the patriarchal dominance and prerogative regarding the marriage of the wards, the picture in Bhaasa's plays is somewhat genial and affirmative. The regret that Portia expresses: "O me the word 'choose'; I may neither choose, who I would, nor refuse who I dislike..." is not found in the case of Vaasavadattaa. Females had their say and decisive voice in the matrimonial affairs. Pusalker observes:

Bride's parents consulted each other in regard to the selection of a son-in-law, and not only did the mother exercise her right in the affair, but her view carried weight with her husband. The marriages of Vaasavadattaa and Kurangi were postponed in deference to the wishes of their mothers. It appears that the brides had some voice in the selection of their husbands.¹¹

The minute difference regarding the selection of bridegroom by the parents is- in Shakespeare's comedies, it is a kind of forceful imposition whereas, for the brides in the dramas of Bhaasa, it is an accepted and cheerful resignation borne out of their reverence and love towards their elders or parents.

Recreational attitude is the basic motive and common ground for both the theories. However, this is perhaps not the sole purpose of the drama, because it also has didactic motive. But the ultimate

experience in drama is one of pure joy; it is an act of celebration. Thus, the primary objective of drama, as understood by the Western and Sanskrit playwrights, seems to be identical- the celebration of life through the experience of pleasure. In a way, the exalted level of aesthetic experience corresponds to the ultimate end of comedy. The aim of comedy consists in liberating the man from the influence of violent passions and brings him to a stage of calm and lucid survey of all that surrounds him and ultimately smiling at the absurdities than shedding tears and feeling anger at the sight of the wickedness and follies of man.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Langer, Susanne K., 'Feeling and Form', *The Comic in Theory and Practice*, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1960, p.218.
- 2 Frye Northrop, 'The Argument of Comedy', *Shakespeare's Comedies*, Ed., Laurence Lerner, Penguin, London, 1967, p.321.
- 3 Muir, Kenneth, *Shakespeare's Comic Sequence*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 1979, p.1.
- 4 Salinger, Leo, *Shakespeare and the Traditions of Comedy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1974, p.17.
- 5 Sukathankara, Dr.V.S., 'Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society', 1925, p.143.
- 6 Shakespeare, William, *As You Like It*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2003.
- 7 *Pratimaanaatakam*, Ed., with Introduction, Notes and Gujarati Translation by P.C.Dave and S.J.Dave, Saraswati Pustak Bhandar, Ahmedabad, 1998, p.10.
- 8 Tennenhouse, Leonard, *Power on Display*, Methuen, London, 1986, pp.26-27.
- 9 Wells, H.W., *The Classical Drama of India*, Bombay, 1963, p.24.
- 10 Pusalker, A.D., *Bhasa- A Study*, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1968, p.403.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p.375.