

The Element of Love and Beauty in Spenser's Creation

- Dr. Priyanka Singh

Spenser was the greatest poet of Elizabethan age. His creations have a beauty as found in the Elizabethan period. They not only have elements of love and beauty but also moral values and sensuous beauty. Spenser held the view that beauty and goodness are interrelated with former being the indicator of the latter. The true poetic genius in Spenser makes him one of the most remarkable poets of English literature.

Key words: - Spiritual excitement, Godliness, Spousal verse, Platonic turn, Spenser

For one hundred and fifty years after Chaucer's death, poetry worth its name seemed to be almost non-existent in England. From the year 1400 down to the birth of Spenser in 1552, there is no poetical genius of the first or even of the second rank, in the history of England. But, with the Elizabethan Age (the age of Spenser), dawned early morning on the literary scene of England, the freedom of feeling and expression which English lyric had not attained earlier.

Spenser is regarded as the poet's poet and the second father of English poetry (Chaucer being the real father) because he rendered incalculable service to English poetry in variety of ways and left behind him models of poetic excellence to be imitated and followed by a host of poets who came in his wake.

Spenser, the greatest poet of Elizabethan age, kept the Elizabethan period's tradition of beautiful poetry alive. He was just like a rising sun of Elizabethan age. The Elizabethan lyric is not heavy. It is an expression of the holiday mood of its author. It is light and airy and refreshes even when it says nothing in particular. Love is the first subject of Elizabethan lyrics. In the sonnets, it is refined, elaborate and romantic as with Spenser and Sidney, or deep, passionate and perplexed as with Shakespeare. Through these lyrics sound the pagan love, the Renaissance love, and the love of English man and maiden. The Elizabethan lyric is a form of pure art-poetic emotion stirred by the sense of beauty and musical delight, with the slightest possible admixture of the temporal and the adventitious.

In Spenser's creation, one finds the element of love and beauty in prominence. Love and beauty always appealed to the young heart of Spenser. He embellished his connects with the elements of love and beauty which evoke various emotions in reader's heart. Spenser not only discussed the moral values but also described sensuous beauty in a marvelous way.

Spenser's expression of love and beauty in his poems has many shades. Sometimes he describes his heroine's beauty with chastity and treats her as a chaste goddess whose beauty and love illuminates the world and sometimes, he makes her portrait sensuous which evoke various sensations in reader's heart. William Hazlitt expresses his opinion about Spenser's poetry in the following words: "The love of beauty, however, and not of truth, is the moving principle of his mind, and he is guided in his fantastic delineations by no rule but the impulse of an exhaustible imagination. He luxuriates equally in scenes of Eastern magnificence, or the still solitude of a hermit's call--in the extremes of sensuality or refinement."¹

Spenser has taken his theory of love and beauty from the dialogues of Plato in "The Phaedrus" and "The Symposium." He has also borrowed freely from the Italian Platonists. Like Plato, Spenser described love and the excitement produced by the sight of beauty. On seeing beauty here upon earth, a man is transported by it to the divine beauty seen in the world above. According to Socrates in The Phaedrus, love is essentially the excitement and rapture produced by the sight of beauty. Beauty moves so powerfully because of its resemblance with its heavenly prototype and also because of its appeal to the clearest of the senses. Its sight reminds one of the heavenly beauties also. The excitement produced by the sight of beauty is a state of inspiration or divine madness. This excitement is of two kinds namely the sensuous excitement which has no reverence and the spiritual

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Singh

Senior Lecturer, Deptt.
of HAS, SMSIT,
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excitement which is full of modesty and awe. These leading ideas of Phaedrus form the basis of Spenser's theory of love and beauty.

Spenser's attitude towards women is guided by Platonic considerations and is essentially poetic in character. All of Spenser's heroines-including his beloved in the 'Epithalamion'- are types of pure abstract virtues, and he has deliberately shut his eyes to any defects and blemishes that might have been present in their character. He is a worshipper and a fluttering admirer of the weaker sex. They appear to be more like goddesses than like ordinary women of flesh and blood. However, in spite of their godliness of character, they are also human beings, to whom the readers spontaneous love and admiration go forth.

Spenser held the view that beauty is indicator of goodness. Goodness and beauty are closely associated with each other and there is a close affinity between the two. The view is expressed by Spenser in the following lines:

For all that is fair is by nature good.

For all that is good is beautiful and fair.²

Spenser also embodies the essentially platonic love between souls, an idea which he had taken from the Italian neo- Platonists. The following lines of Spenser are platonic in thought:

Love is a celestial harmony
Of likely hearts composed of stars consent
Which joint together in sweet sympathy
To work each other's joy and true content³

Like Plato, Spenser is also both spiritual and sensuous. He delights in abstractions and perceives them so vividly that he is able to clothe and make them real.

Spenser's early poetry was influenced by the ideas of Plato but after twenty years of his writing, his ideas about love and beauty changed. During his journey of writing poems he not only portrayed beauty as a heavenly beauty but also emphasized its sensuous character.

In the year 1579, Spenser published 'The **Shepherds' Calendar**' under the name of 'Immerito.' It was modeled on the artificial pastoral Tradition popularized by the Renaissance and inspired by Virgil and Theocritus. In this poem Spenser combines his humanist's tastes with his love for the soil. There are twelve Eclogues in the poem, each of them corresponding to a month in the year and having a certain more or less apparent fitness to its appropriate atmosphere and season. The poem is cast in the form of dialogues between shepherds, who converse on such subject as love, religion and old age. In 'The **Shepherds' Calendar**' the whole plan from January to December is intended to reflect the course of human life from youth to old age along with the course of human love. Spenser inserted elaborate songs too in his 'The Shepherd's Calendar'. They give a musical touch to his expression of love and beauty and present Shepherds' loves and joys of country life. '**The Shepherds' Calendar**' portrays shepherds' engagement in romantic, though innocent, love affairs with a great sense of beauty.

"**Daphnaida**" which came in existence in 1592 presents the tragic form of deep love. It presents the description about a lady's love marriage and early death. The seven divisions of Daphnaida lead up to a brief conclusion and have as their subjects the lady's beauty, her death-bed address to her husband, the letter's contrast between past joys and present sorrows, her expression of bitterness and resentment, and the voicing of her hatred of all things that led to her tragic state.

Spenser's sonnets are unique for their purity. They tell stories of love without sin or remorse. There is a pure atmosphere and the sonnets are bathed in white light. Coleridge named this quality of Spenser's sonnets 'maidenliness': his love of the virginal in woman. The chastity of these sonnets is neither shyness nor reticence. In many of them the poet extols his mistress's beauty with a great sensual wealth of detail and colour and does not conceal the ardor of his desires.

In "**The Amoretti**", Spenser resumes the lyric theme of love. The Amoretti sonnets are typically Spenserian. These are written with an ease and familiar grace, at once clear and melodious, capable of the lover's fortune or of voicing the rare ecstasy. As a series they are incomplete, for when the lover seems already to have reached the goal, venomous tongues cause misunderstanding and separation and the last four sonnets are in the minor key. The consummation is read in the Epithalamion, the most magnificent lyric ever penned as love triumphant.

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Coming after the lyrics of 'The Shepherds' Calender' and 'The Amoretti', The Epithalamion marks the culmination of his development in the personal and intimate poetry of love and is a remarkable poem. In amplitude and splendor, it excels all other compositions of the same kind. Its 23 stanzas of 17 to 19 lines, merely describe enthusiastically the whole of the poets wedding day, from the dawn of the sun which lit its glorious hours to the night which left the bride in her husband's arms. Actually, Epithalamion is the portrayal of Spenser's feeling for his bride. Spenser's bride is a paragon of beauty and her physical charm has been described at length. But her physical charm is the reflection of the beauty of her soul. There the lover reveals in abundance the descriptions of his mistress's physical charms. In 'Epithalamion' Spenser has described the beauty of his wife in these words:

So sweet, so lovely, and so mild a she,
Adorned with beauties grace and virtues store,
Her goodly eyes like Saphyres Shining bright,
Her forehead youry white,
Her cheeks lyke apples which the sun halt rudded,
Her lips lyke cherries charming men to byte,
Her brest like to a bowle of cream uncrudded,
Her paps lyke lyllies budded,
Her snowice necke lyke to a marble towre,
Her snowic necke lyke to a marble towre,
And all her body like a pallacc fayre.⁴

Spenser's beloved is perfectly beautiful. None of the features of conventional beauty are wanting to her portrait-her complexion like a blend of lilies and roses, her fair colored hair, her blue eyes: she is the young girl, all blushes, all modesty and shame fastness-without a single irregularity in her looks or person, without one jarring note in the absolute harmony of her perfection.

Spenser does not miss the opportunity of giving a full inventory of her bride's charms. In Spenserian stanzas, the abundant and voluptuous description of the bride's beauty is finally interpreted as the mere outward sign of her perfect virtue. The scene itself is full of suggestion where there is a bridal procession passing along the main street, between two rows of tradesmen's daughters on the steps of their shops, gazing on the bride in silent admiration. Then one has the most admirable expression of Spenser's Platonic conception of outward beauty which, he says, leads from the mind. "With many a stately stair," to the seat of perfect, divine beauty. In 'Epithalamian' Spenser's bride is more beautiful than ever, and the beauty of her body is exceeded by the beauty of her spirit over which virtue reigns. Nowhere else, is there a more tragic union of the lover's passion with deep religious feeling, of a free and ardent joy with a deep and tender reverence Spenser considers the virtue of chastity as the noblest virtue in woman's character:

There dwells sweet love and constant chastity
Unspotted faith and cornely womanhood,
Regard of honour and mild modesty,
There virtue rayness as Queen in royal throne⁵

Another ideal cherished by Spenser for the glorification of women is purity combined with innocence. In his view, the flower of womanhood should be rooted in the fragrance of purity, innocence, meekness, humility, devotion, sincerity and loyalty and should serve as torch bearers of these noble virtues. Spenser's bride in the 'Epithalamian' is meek and modest, sincere and devoted and far from being proud.

Spenser has surely, according to his promise, made her beloved immortal, but one may wonder whether he has made her truly live. His description of his bride mounts from sensuous appreciation of each detail of her body to total enjoyment of her physique as an expression of spiritual glamour. It is his own ecstasy and rapture, his life long adoration of feminine beauty that he sings at his wedding time. Spenser presented the perfect blend of sensuality and chastity in his beautiful bride. His aim was to reconcile his senses and his conscience by following Plato, so he identified beauty with goodness. He believed in the reality of a heavenly beauty which could only be known and felt by the soul as contrasted with earthly beauty which could be known and experienced by the sense. Thus, in his creations, he wrote about heavenly beauty as well as earthly beauty.

Spenser dedicated all his work to Elizabeth, his future wife. This poetic devotion to the betrothed may seem to the readers the most natural expression of love, but in former

ages it was rare, even exceptional. The theme did not seem sufficiently dramatic to the earlier poets. Their heroine was usually a married lady from whom they were separated by an insuperable barrier-the jealousy of a husband, or the moral code. Hence, arose two contrary conceptions: either pure, sublimated, Platonic love, a sort of exalted friendship in which the lover only hungered for his lady's beautiful soul and bowed to her in pious reverence as to an unapproachable angelic being, or a wild passion that would break all marriage bonds and set morality at defiance. That Sidney, noble-minded and chivalric, had sought to possess Lady Rich, married though she was and that the relations between them were looked upon by one and all as the pinnacle and pattern of pure love-this opens up curious vistas into the morals of the age.

Spenser's originality, then, was this, that he dedicated his verse to a maiden he could and did marry in the end. Hence, the sanity, the purity in his Amoretti sonnets and Epithalamion is nowhere found in that century. Also, Spenser is distinguished among his compeers for the quality of "maidenliness" which is found in his creations.

In spite of Petrarcha disappointments, frustrations, hopes and darkness connected with the love affair, the relationship in the Epithalamian is not just a ritual piece of courtly Love, nor is it the doomed and clandestine passion of two married lovers. The affair, and the sequence, proceeds to marriage and solid domestic satisfactions are its end.

One finds in the Amoretti and the Epithalamian not that conflict between conscience and passion, between reason and will, which makes the dramatic interest of Sidney's *Astrophel* and *Stella*, but the story of a long and innocent love-suit, wherein the poet, at first dejected by his lady's indifference, is finally enraptured when she accepts his homage.

In 1595, Spenser's creation '**Astrophel**' came in existence. '*Astrophel*' became another example of Spenser's genius. It gave a new height to the expression of love. Mr. Todd's remark is worth quoting, that, "The earthly love of Sir Philip Sidney for Lady Rich is converted into a beautiful fiction in Spenser's *Elegy of Astrophel*"

More or less, Spenser wrote about love and beauty in all his poems. In some of his creations readers feel that the music which actually go through with his poems is because of the love between the two lovers and the beauty of the heroine gives it colour, the colour of life.

Spenser spent a very important part of his life in the court of Queen Elizabeth where he learnt a lot from his sweet and bitter experiences and gave a new direction to his poetry. His Journey and experiences at court were recorded in a poem '**Colin clouts came Home Again**' (1595)- these included Raleigh's visit to him at Kilcolman, their Journey to London, his reception at court and his impression of all he saw there.

In '**Colin Clouts Come Home Again**', after another eulogy of Cynthia, Colin touches for a moment on the satirical note of 'Mother Hubberds Tale'. But from these dissonant notes Colin is soon diverted by Hobbinol, who reminds of the true men of the court, especially of Leicester, dead but unforgotten. Then with a rare felicity, Colin turns from the account of the court to remember, at the close, Rosalind, his shepherdess, and to discourse on love with a flash of that platonic inspiration that reached its climax in his last two Hymnes.

In *colin clouts*, the shepherds who talk about Cynthia, review in detail and ponder about her virtues comparing her to other shepherdesses - Neaera, Stella, Galathea, Amaryllis etc. in terms of perfection in beauty and love.

The broken pipe of '**The Shepherds' Calender**' asserts that love is a barren and destructive power. Piers's outburst in the October eclogue and Colin's rhapsody in '*Colin clouts Come Home Again*' state the contrary proposition, that love justifies its inherent pain by stimulating and ennobling the lover, by generating virtuous and heroic deeds and by maintaining the coherence and the life of this worlds.

At the time of Spenser, Shepherds engaged in romantic, though innocent, love affairs and the pastoral was conventional. Thus, he presented '**The Shepherds' Calender**' and '**Colin Clouts Come Home Again**' with the same beauty and passion.

In 1595, Spenser published '**Prothalamian**' a lovely ode on the marriage of Lord Worcester's daughters, and his four Hymns on love and beauty, Heavenly love and Heavenly beauty. The first two hymns are early poems, and the two latter maturing work embodying Petrarch philosophy, which teaches that earthly love is a ladder that leads men to the love of God.

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Prothalamian is a spousal verse made in honour of two daughters of the Earl of Worcester. Metrically this poem is, perhaps, as beautiful as his own marriage ode, but it does not have a concentration upon its avowed theme, nor does it voice the same ecstasy of passion. The poem is, however, filled with smooth images and harmonious lines. It presents the element of love and beauty in an effective manner.

If Spenser's pastoral poems are marvelous, his romantic poetry should be considered as amazing creations. After writing the poems like '**The Shepherds' Calender**' and '**Colin Clouts Come Home Again**' when Spenser published '**Epithalamion**', '**Prothalamian**' and '**Fowre Hymnes**', it was the time when Spenser passed from pastoral to chivalrous poetry. His sense of beauty and love took a platonic turn, and the poet regarded beauty of woman, which inspires love, as the reflection and index of divine beauty.

The **Fowre Hymns** are (i) A Hymn in Honour of Love (ii) A Hymn in Honour of Beautie, (iii) A Hymn of Heavenly Love, and (iv) A Hymn of heavenly Beautie. The hymns about earthly love and beauty, according to Spenser, were written by him "in the greener times" of his youth, and since they "too much pleased those of the like age and disposition, "feeding their strong passions, he was moved to add the hymns of "Celestial" love and beauty "by way of Retraction." The two later hymns are designed to gain strength and meaning from the two former ones. The method is complex system of parallels and contrasts. Each hymn begins with an invocation and ends with a paradisaical vision. The two hymns of love are linked by their common concern with motive; the hymns of beauty by their common concern with the goal toward which that motive drives. But between earth and heaven there lies a great gulf.

Both hymns of love invoke the God, but the home of earthly love is Venus's lap while that of heavenly love is "heavens height." The search for true beauty discloses similar contrast. The movement of the earthly hymns is down, whereas of the heavenly hymns is up.

In Elizabethan period, love is the expected theme. Its apotheosis is reached in Spenser's '**Hymn in Honour of Love**'. He has described wonderful tasks likely to be performed by men and women for the sake of love in the '**Hymn in the Honour of Love**'. Spenser quotes the example of Achilles and Orpheus. The vulgar lover loves the inconstant body, so he is inconstant in his love. He does not love the soul. When the bloom of youth is over, his love takes wings and flies away in spite of all his words and promises. The base love as described by Spenser is concerned with the body. The noble love of mind is both constant and steadfast.

Spenser portrayed love and beauty in two forms - sensuous and divine (noble). He believed that earthly beauty and love find their consummation in divine beauty. Beauty was not only an image of the divine mind but an information power of the soul. Spenser embodied this idea in his '**Hymne to Beautie and Love**."

Spenser remained in the influence of Plato's philosophy of love and beauty for a long time and he used his ideas of divinity in his creations. According to Plato, the lover of beauty passes through six definite stages. Spenser has used this idea in the '**Hymn in the Honour of heavenly Beautie**' and '**Heavenly Love**'. He simply says that, the lover admires a reflection of heavenly beauty in the beloved as a mirror. This was the commonest of Neoplatonic notions, not foreign either to the Christian idea that God is seen in his creatures as in a glass. In the '**Hymn of Heavenly Love**', however, he does not continue the platonic ascent, but breaks away to set down the central tenets of Christianity.

For literary reasons, Spenser was trying to follow out the movement of the Hymns of Love and Beauty. In the Platonic scheme, the process is simple and logical: beauty is the cause of love. Heavenly love is the reaction of the soul to heavenly beauty, which is indeed proved to exist by the mystical experience which is termed Heavenly Love. But in the '**Hymn of Heavenly Love**' Spenser's treatment of a conception of Love was quite out with the platonic process, in it he has reached his climax, the highest of his faith, and yet, his literary parallel demanded a fourth Hymn which by no logical process could follow from his third.

In the year 1596, Spenser published '**The Faerie Queen**.' It is the great work on which Spenser's fame rests. The original plan of the poem included twenty four books, each of which was to recount the adventure and triumph of a knight who represented a moral value. In a letter addressed to Raleigh, Spenser described the plot and theme of this poem.

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In this poem, prince Arthur was to supply the hero and his search for the fairy queen (who had appeared to him in a vision), the action in this poem. Arthur was to represent magnificence or one can say a brave knight, perfect in the twelve private moral virtues, as Aristotle hath devised, and the fairy queen glory in general and Queen Elizabeth in particular. In this way Spenser intended to celebrate the greatness of his nation and its sovereign just as Virgil celebrated Rome and its emperor. One can say that it was Spenser's way to express his love and gratitude towards his country.

In the first book of '**The Faerie Queene**', Spenser showed that his adoration of the Platonic conception of beauty and truth are identical as in Una's personality as Una stands for the union of truth and beauty. Spenser believed that, wisdom is the highest beauty and this beauty can be felt by the soul. It is the soul that, can perceive the heavenly beauty. The Red cross Knight perceives the true beauty of Una at the end when he looks at her, not with earthly eyes but, with heavenly eyes of contemplation.

Spenser viewed the beauty of the visible words as a symbol of divine beauty. He gave a new dimension to the portrayal of love and beauty. To a profound moral tone he added, the graces and charms of beauty, loveliness, decoration and picturesqueness, so that those who are interested in getting lessons of morality and virtue can find them as profusely in Spenser as those who are after the gratification of the physical senses. Spenser beautifully blended the message of the Renaissance and the Reformation in his poetry. He can be regarded as the writer for artists because of his insistence on beauty, love, richness, exuberance and pageants.

The true poetic faculty in Spenser is so abundantly and predominately present that one can not think of any other poet save Spenser to occupy the pride of place among English poets. Many poets came and went but no one could touch the heights where Spenser stood. He set a tradition for the expression of love and beauty for other poets. He will always remain in the heart of his admirers in the form of love as he sung the song of lovers with great intelligence.

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SHODH SANCHAYAN