

The Role and Character of Viola

Shakespeare's sense of kinship with the idiosyncrasies of human nature led him to adopt a tolerant attitude in his treatment of human follies. As a keen observer of the rich diversity of human nature, Shakespeare found the form of comedy the best way of subtly demonstrating his vision of life. Shakespeare never laughs at his characters, nor does he convict them of any faults. He does not explicitly state things as good or bad, but lays bare the follies of men through comic exposure. And in this way allures his audience to some kind of moral response for the purpose of their edification.

Remarkable it is, that Shakespeare chose women as instrument for society's edification, promoting them to the realm of comedies of which they are the uncrowned queens. Shakespeare believed in the wisdom of heart more than the power of intellect. He believed that perplexed or pervert intellect can lead a man astray but wisdom of heart always saves him from committing errors in judgments. Therefore the great dramatist wrote- "In nature there's no blemish but the mind;/ None can be called deform'd but the unkind." (*Twelfth Night*) Hence in Shakespeare's women the qualities of head and heart appear to be in perfect equilibrium. Viola in *Twelfth Night* is certainly not an exception as she too like Rosalind and Portia possesses the qualities of wisdom, responsibility and self- control.

Viola first makes her appearance in Act I sc. ii, where we find her ship wrecked and companionless in a strange country named Illyria. She acts as a foil to the two main plot characters- Orsino and Olivia. Like Olivia, she too has lost her brother and perhaps is in a more dangerous situation, as she is a stranger in Illyria. But Viola displays immense courage and resourcefulness in the face of provident peril. Impressively enough, unlike the other two main plot characters, Viola does not indulge in self- pity and nor does she mindlessly drown herself in the sea of sorrow. When she understands that she can not serve Olivia, she immediately decides to serve the Duke as his page. Indeed, this ability to take quick decisions for self- preservation makes Viola intellectually much superior to both Orsino and Olivia.

Another interesting quality in Viola is her positive view of life. Noticeably, Shakespeare's heroines are essentially "generous, guiltless and of a free disposition", and their attitude to love is natural and realistic. Thus, Viola is the only lover in *Twelfth Night* whose love is not her passion's folly. Her love is a more pleasant and tangible experience, the intensity of which not only changes her, but also changes, or rather cures Orsino and Olivia of their self- love. She is the only one who generously gives her love, and in the process, puts herself in jeopardy to restore love's true order. Viola therefore reminds us of Juliet who says- "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." (*Romeo and Juliet*) Viola's role in *Twelfth Night* as Shakespeare's romantic heroine is therefore not only to propel the action which is the outcome of mistaken identity, but her presence also serves as a scale of balance whereby Orsino's and Olivia's faults become conspicuous. Her youthful buoyancy as Orsino's love messenger puts the Duke's effeminate passivity to shame. Again, Viola's (Cesario's) passionate speeches compel Olivia to abandon her cherished vows and fall in love. And in the process Olivia gets liberated from the dark house of 'self'.

Viola as portrayed by Shakespeare in *Twelfth Night* remarkably has a tolerant attitude and a sense of forbearance towards human follies around her. The fact becomes evident as we find throughout the play, she handles Orsino's 'sentimental nature' with much care and patience, though there are occasions when she tries to show reason to the Duke. Therefore Viola says- "Sooth, but you must. / Say that some lady, as perhaps there is, / Hath for your love, as great a pang of heart/ As you have for Olivia: you can not love her: / You tell her so. Must she not then be answer'd?" Again, when Malvolio comes to her (Viola) to give her Olivia's ring, she at once detects Olivia's love for her. But, even in such a moment, Viola displays remarkable tolerance, as she chooses not to disclose the truth to Olivia's servant. She impressively uses her presence of mind and accepts the ring. Even at the end, when she is threatened by both Orsino and Olivia, Viola does not reveal her true identity, and chooses to wait for the right moment to do so.

Indeed, Shakespeare's heroines serve as ideals and archetypes who proclaim the great dramatist's vision of life. But the sole factor why Nature fulfils their dreams and endows them with choicest blessings is their generosity of heart. Shakespeare believed, Nature is generous to those, who are generous to mankind. Shakespeare's heroines are indeed generous, guiltless and of free disposition, which are essential to attain a happy state of being. Viola in *Twelfth Night* indeed attains happiness, as she is elevated from being her 'master's man' to his 'fancy's queen'. This is the poetic justice meted out to Viola who is the quintessence of Shakespeare's ideal vision of love and life.
