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## **COURTLY LOVE: EMERGENCE OF A NEW LOVE ORDER**

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**Abstract:** The idea that humans can love each other appears very normal and familiar in the age and time we live in, although it was not before the emergence of the love strand which is being dealt with in this paper. Claimed to have different possible origins, the tradition of Courtly Love emerged as a reaction to the prevalent religious and feudal practices of the time. The first of these made love too restricted and idealistic, while the latter reduced it to a petty bargain. Coupled with this was the strand of Classical Philosophy on the subject that supported the views of the religious elite and made it easier for them to strengthen and enforce their views. In this paper a brief introduction of this reactionary movement that introduced democratic norms in the sphere of love will be discussed. Effort has been made to briefly trace its whereabouts along with its treatment by important scholars of the field particularly with the viewpoints of Plato and Aristotle.

**Key Words:** Courtly Love, Platonic Love, Feudal Society, Irving Singer, Gaston Paris.

### Introduction

Love is one of the most important and basic ingredients in this universe. It is not only the sustainer of life on this earth but also a guarantor of peaceful and happy living on our planet. Without it, we will perish and become extinct. Starting from birth till the moment of death, love is involved in the life events of all the civilized races. But what is that essential attribute that makes love; love? Historically, a variety of answers have been presented.

For Plato that essential aspect is the desire to attain 'the Good'. Every pursuit of love that instantiates this desire is noble according to his idealistic Philosophy of love. He distinguishes between heavenly and earthly love in his *Symposium*<sup>1</sup> on the basis of the directedness of desire either towards nobility or lewdness. He considers kinds of love base that are enslaved by the bodily passions and instant gratifications. This view is clearly presented not just in the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* but also in *Phaedo* amidst the discussion on soul. He talks about bodily pleasures but only in the negative sense. Along with this he highlights the positive aspect of love using his famous 'ladder of love'<sup>2</sup>.

Aristotle, on the other hand, works with a solid teleological base throughout his philosophy and love is not an exception to it. Aristotle who is a realist finds the essence of love in the aspiration of 'virtue' and equates it with happiness, prosperity and goodness. The concept of love, according to Aristotle, is not the domain of an individual as it has unavoidable links with the social, political, legal and economic structures of the state. The general formula of his teleological philosophy has been well described in the following words:

The well being of all men depends on two things: one is the right choice of target, of the end to which actions should tend, the other lies in finding the actions that lead to that end.<sup>3</sup>

He believes that '*logos*' govern all human relations and it is the characteristics of human relations that they involve the sense of being just and good instead of being unjust and evil.<sup>4</sup> Religious and theological traditions follow this Aristotelian Teleological conception of love. With the approval of God only, individuals are allowed to cohabit. Love is only a sub-field of the religious social life that is strictly legal and aims only at the favour of God.

What is different in the realm of Courtly Love is that it gives central importance to the desire for the other person for the first time in the history of Western thought. Before the emergence of the courtly tradition this idea was not only unacceptable but was also considered heretic. It differs from the classical conception of love in that it considers 'the person' an end and not the tool towards some higher end. Apart from this, it also introduced the democratic norms in the arena of love.

### **Courtly love**

The expressions, 'Courtly love' was coined in the nineteenth century, it is a signifier of a revolutionary stance of twelfth and thirteenth centuries<sup>5</sup>. It kept on flourishing in Europe for almost four hundred years.<sup>6</sup> Courtly love humanizes the platonic idealistic approach to love. The basic idea is that not only God but humans are also capable of true love. Intersexual bonding in this tradition assumes the status of an ideal with an ennobling force. Sexuality in this tradition was considered something more than an exercise with libidinal motives. Although all these ideals were fit to be practiced in a marital relationship, the difference was that marriage was not considered a necessary condition for this type of love. Courtly tradition legitimized the extra-marital intimacy as a result.

The term courtly love is derived from *amour courtois*. The word amour has Latin roots and it means, "to hook". It has a sense of 'capturing' or to be captured. This term is used to describe that the lover after getting captured by his desires makes an effort to capture the beloved. Desires in this sense are fundamental in developing any sort of ambitions about the other person. This moral mechanism helps the lover in attaining the noble character by freeing him from the clutches of his own self. We cannot equate it with mere sexuality as it also has a moral aspect attached to it that is of central importance. Irvin Singer has described the mechanics of this moral elevation in the following words:

Through love a man restricts his sexual appetites to a single woman, and in his relationship with her they are made to serve the ends of moral aspiration.<sup>7</sup>

The term 'Courtly Love' is the representative of cultural along with the literary expression of the feudal society. The factors that were responsible for the emergence of such an anti- social and anti- religious<sup>8</sup>

form of love include arranged marriages. These marital relations were formed between unequal partners owing to political and economic necessities. Marriages of this kind were arranged by feudal lords or the couple's relatives without consent. Such enforced marital relations were destined to fall short of supplying any satisfaction to the desires and ambitions of the couples. All this was coupled with the religious condemnation of human love and sexual desire for its own sake. This deprivation resulted in a secret institution of love separate from that of marriage. Unlike marriages based upon economic and political aims this secret love was based upon suppressed human feelings and desires.<sup>9</sup> Denomy describes it in the following words:

It is sensual and carnal in that it allows, approves, and encourages the delights of kissing and embracing, the sight of the beloved's nudity and the touching and lying beside her nude body, in short, in all that provokes and fans desire. For it is desire that is the essence of pure love.<sup>10</sup>

The ideological basis for courtly love was provided by the medieval conception of medicine and psychology. The prevalent view of soul that was dominant at that time is of cardinal importance in this respect. The immortality of the soul along with its pre-existence is presupposed by this form of love. The soul connects the lover and the beloved as love is considered to be the search for the lost part of the soul that was once connected with its other half.

#### **Characteristics of courtly love**

Introduction of the term 'Courtly Love' is attributed to Gaston Paris (1839-1903). He coined this term in 1883 while describing the Relation between Lancelot and Guinevere. The word that he used in his writing was *amour courtois* that was later translated as courtly love. Paris described courtly love as furtive, illicit, ennobling, and idolatrous. The tradition was radically against the established religious and social norms. Due to such opposition of the established order and institutions it was supposed to be kept secret. Paris also accepts the ennobling feature of this type of love:

There are four distinctive traits of that love: 1) It is illegitimate and furtive; 2) The lover is inferior and insecure; the beloved is elevated, haughty, even disdainful; 3) The lover must earn the lady's affection by undergoing many tests of his prowess, valor,

and devotion; 4) The love is an art and a science, subject to many rules and regulations- like courtesy in general.<sup>11</sup>

C. S. Lewis in his book, *The Allegory of Love*, characterized courtly love as having the features like humility, courtesy, adultery, and the religion of love.

The sentiment, of course, is love, but love of a highly specialized sort, whose characteristics may be enumerated as Humility, Courtesy, Adultery, and the Religion of love.<sup>12</sup>

The definitions of both Paris and Lewis are misleading according to Singer<sup>13</sup>. An influential philosopher in the field of love, Irving Singer, has compiled the philosophical history of love and has outlined the following attributes as essential to the courtly love tradition;

1. Acceptance of sexual love
2. Ennobling character of love
3. Sexual love as something more than a mere libidinal exercise
4. Courtesy and courtship
5. A passionate relation resulting in the union of the lovers

#### **Acceptance of sexual love**

Sexual love before the courtly love tradition was not considered an ideal that could be pursued for its own sake. If we talk about Plato, he gave more weightage to homosexual love relations for an understanding of true love. Even in such relations the consummatory interests were considered a hindrance in the path of pure love. As a result, he suggests *a ladder of love* according to which a lover's soul must keep on climbing to reach the Good. In that path, the lover liberates himself from a particular body (the starting point), from a person, and finally from all the illusions of the empirical world. He goes beyond the particularities to achieve the Good (his resting abode). The schematization of this ladder has been summarized in *the Symposium* in the following manner;

Starting from individual beauties, the quest for the universal beauty must find him ever mounting the heavenly ladder, stepping from rung to rung – that is, from one to two, and from two to every lovely body, from bodily beauty to the beauty of institution, from institutions to learning, and from learning in general to the special lore that pertains to nothing but the

beautiful itself – until at last he comes to know what beauty is.<sup>14</sup>

Christianity was hostile to the acceptance of sexual love. The only object that could be loved at all was God according to the Christian theology and there was nothing beyond that. Love not only originated but also terminated in Him. Any activity of human love was possible only under the umbrella of love of God without which it could only be an act of sin. St. Augustine defined lust as any relation with other human being that aims at enjoyment without any reference to God.<sup>15</sup>

Even the thinkers like Aristotle and Cicero considered friendship as a supreme virtue. Although they hinted at the possibility of transgender friendship that was devoid of any sexual streaks. There was nothing like union of men and women in such a relation. Aristotle describes love in terms of friendship in *Nicomachean Ethics* as; "...since love tends to be a sort of excess of friendship, and it is felt towards a single person..."<sup>16</sup>

Just as Plato translates love in terms of virtue, Aristotle translates it in terms of justice. The concept of justice plays the central role in his theory of ethics and love. In *Nicomachean Ethics* he equates love and justice as:

How a man should live in relation to his wife, and in general how one friend should live in relation to another, appears to be the same question as how they can live justly.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast to all this, courtly love tradition gave place and importance to heterosexual love relations between men and women. It was a radical viewpoint at that time. The tradition celebrated heterosexual love relations as an ideal. It was possible to love another human as a man or a woman without any appeal to an external authority or reason.

### **Ennobling character of love**

An extremely important characteristic of courtly love is its ennobling character. The spiritual union of man and woman was considered to ennoble both of them. Contrary to the prevalent philosophical and theological traditions of the time, it believed and propagated that sexual love has the capacity to make people finer and better. Moreover, it leads to a better realization of their nature. Pausanias in his speech on love in *the Symposium* also talks about the ennobling character of love with the

difference that such ennobling is aimed at spiritual elevation alone (184-c).<sup>18</sup>

The blessed love in the Platonic discourse is an activity longing for the wisdom and the related virtues. Anything this worldly is considered illusionary. In the same speech, any love that is aimed at or is due to financial or political considerations is considered immoral (184-b).<sup>19</sup> Courtly tradition, in opposition to this, gives space to this-worldly considerations also. Along with giving place to moral elevation of the lover as a result of love activity it also justifies the political and economic benefits resulting from the beloved. The tradition idealizes a beloved who is of a high social, political, and economic stature in contrast to the lover.

### **Sexual love is not merely a libidinal exercise**

Courtly love not only gives space to sexual love but also considers it a tool for ethical as well as aesthetic attainment. It does not reduce it to an impulse for libidinal purposes. Ancients thought of love as a calamity for the involvement of sexuality in it.<sup>20</sup> Lucretius considered love between the sexes as slavery imposed by the corporeal beings of humans. The most important speech in *Symposium* that was delivered by Socrates also describes sexual activity as a longing for immortality.<sup>21</sup> He describes sexual involvement as a means of propagation and procreation on the basis that it is the only way we can hope to be immortal. Socrates describes it as:

...Those whose procreancy is of the body turn to woman as the object of their love, and raise a family, in the blessed hope that by doing so they will keep their memory green...<sup>22</sup>

Under all circumstances, sexual love was considered unfit for the attainment of any higher ideals in the classical thought. Plato, for example, does not reduce love to sex only. This provides the base for that idealist tradition which remained prevalent not only philosophically but also in religious and mystic spheres. Courtly love, although, was sexual explicitly but was different from mere sexual attachments. Unlike such sexual attachments, courtly love does not consider the other person as a sex object that is aimed at personal gratification alone. Such objectification is against the ethics and nobility as well as the ennobling character of courtly love.

### **Courtesy and Courtship**

Essential ingredients of courtly love are courtesy and courtship without marriage being essential for it. Neither the absence nor the presence of marital relation is necessary for these. Courtesy and courtship can very well exist in a marital relation also and can lead to marriage but courtly tradition accepts and celebrates them without marriage as well. It is based on the principle of free choice of one's partner wholly independent of any social, economic, political, or family consideration. In it only personal considerations are considered to be worthy of leading towards the right choice of partner.

We do not find the freedom of courtesy and courtship in Aristotle's thought. On the basis of his principle of justice, he condemns any such thing and considers it illicit. Only what is accepted and sanctioned by the laws is just according to him. Thus he describes justice in his *Nicomachean Ethics* as: "For what is just exists only among people whose relations are governed by law..."<sup>23</sup>

He rejects the possibility of any such love even more explicitly in the second book of 'The Politics' where he considers it a virtue to show temperance towards women and says "...it is a fine practice to keep off another's wife through restraint".<sup>24</sup>

### **Passionate love resulting from the union**

Courtly love allows room to be passionate even in heterosexual relations. Love, according to this tradition, is a holy oneness between the partners. This union is achieved by the aid of resonance among the souls of the people involved in the relation. At our age and time, this looks like a normal thing to talk about love and passion with respect to human relations but it was not at that time. Before the emergence of courtly love tradition, passionate oneness was only an area of religious love and it had nothing to do with any type of human love. Although Plato in *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* talks about oneness and merging of the souls or the lost parts of the souls, the Platonic conception of pure love it cannot be equated to sexuality. The passion was always reserved for the higher abstract principles and the Good. In the case of theologians, it was reserved for God alone. But here in the courtly tradition, room was provided to be passionate in human love affairs that were considered sinful and illusionary prior to it.



Furthermore, in Platonic tradition heterosexual love relations are considered bad. It is a characteristic of the earthly Aphrodite's love to be attracted by the opposite sex (181-b).<sup>25</sup> In the speech of Pausanias, where he distinguishes between earthly and heavenly love, love of boys is considered to be heavenly in contrast to the love of woman. While describing the heavenly love he says; "...those who are inspired by this other love turn rather to the male...."<sup>26</sup>

Likewise, Aristophanes while talking about the sexual disposition of the lost halves glorifies the boy lovers (homosexual) in following words: "...And these are the most hopeful of the nation's youth, for theirs is the most virile constitution."<sup>27</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The concept of love in the courtly tradition is an affirmation of the radical view that love between human beings is in itself real and splendid. It was based upon natural human inclinations. Additionally, it gave importance to the sexual desire by directing it towards an ethical and aesthetic value system of its own. It showed the compatibility of noble idealist traditions with the sexual reality. This tradition is the naturalization as well as the humanization of both Platonism and Religion as it emerged to fill the emotional vacuum of that period. Heterosexual and humanistic aspects of love so prevalent in the modern world are also an outcome of the tradition under study. It was not only the accommodator but also the preacher of those ingredients of a love affair that were considered wicked formerly. The superiority which it gave to the neglected and supposedly weaker creature in a patriarchal setup can be seen as the beginning of the dawn of women's rights.

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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Plato, Edith Hamilton, and Huntington Cairns. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 535.

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters*, 561-562.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, Trevor J. Saunders, and T. A. Sinclair. *Aristotle: The Politics* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1982), 427.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Aristotle: The Politics*, 60.

<sup>5</sup> Singer, *The Nature of Love: Courtly and Romantic*, X.

<sup>6</sup> The Western scholarship traces the foundational sources of Courtly love in the texts of Ovid, Ibn Hazm and Troubadour poetry but an evaluation of *Kamasutra* establishes a counter-narrative that Indian Philosophy presented the idea long before any of the aforementioned sources. In *Kamasutra* one can find exhaustive rendering of the theme especially in Chapter 5 of the text.

<sup>7</sup> Singer, Irving. "Andreas Capellanus: A Reading of the Tractatus." *MLN* 88, no. 6 (1973): 1293.

<sup>8</sup> Singer, *The Nature of Love: Courtly and Romantic*, 21.

<sup>9</sup> Singer, Irving. *Philosophy of Love: A Partial Summing-Up* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 33.

<sup>10</sup> Denomy, A. J. "Fin' Amors: The Pure Love of the Troubadours, Its Amorality and Possible Source." *Mediaeval Studies* 7 (1945): 142.

<sup>11</sup> Moore, John C. "'Courtly Love': A Problem of Terminology." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40, no. 4 (1979): 622.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis, C. S. *The Allegory of Love; a Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Singer, *The Nature of Love: Courtly and Romantic*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Plato, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters*, 562-563.

<sup>15</sup> Singer, *The Nature of Love: Courtly and Romantic*, 24.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, W. D. Ross, and J. O. Urmson. *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 180.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 160.

<sup>18</sup> Plato, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters*, 538.

<sup>19</sup> Plato, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters*, 538.

<sup>20</sup> Singer, *The Nature of Love: Courtly and Romantic*, 27.

<sup>21</sup> Plato, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters*, 559.

<sup>22</sup> Plato, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters*, 560.

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 92.

<sup>24</sup> Aristotle, *Aristotle: The Politics*, 115.

<sup>25</sup> Plato, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters*, 535.

<sup>26</sup> Plato, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters*, 535.

<sup>27</sup> Plato, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters*, 544.

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