

The Paradoxical Theme of 'Love unto Death':

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and the Christian Perspective of 'Self-Gifting' Love

- Rev. J.C. Paul Rohan

Abstract:

All religions and cultures have developed concepts of love. The age-old question of love's plurality creates ambiguity and confusion. All the living beings need love and therefore make love. The concept of love becomes more elevated when viewed metaphysically. Love which is seen as essential for life can also be a 'love' destined to death, which means death can be used as a proof of the real love. Here soars a paradox in the concept of love: 'love unto death'. Christianity is a religion built on the paradoxical theme of 'love unto death'. "Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her." (Ephesians, 5:25) Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, though a romantic literary text, in a way renders this Christian perspective of self-gifting love to a secular situation. This paper examines the secular romantic love of Romeo and Juliet and the Christian religious perspective of self-gifting love to demonstrate that two extreme concepts of love are converging on the paradoxical theme of 'love unto death'. Attention is drawn here that in any way, it is not an attempt to compare Christ's self-gifting love with the secular romantic love of Romeo and Juliet. The focus is on the theme of 'love unto death' which is apparent in religious as well as secular situations. Thus it is more of a metaphysical study on love and the paradox of love and death.

Keywords: Agape; Romantic; Self-Gifting; Denigration; Ransom; Death-Marked Love;

Introduction

Love is a universal concept found in all religions and cultures. Practically all religions affirm that 'God is love' and stipulate the love of God as their basic commandment. All cultures have developed concepts of love between and among the sexes. (Alan Hager, 1999, p.147) Love is a collection of emotions and experiences related to a sense of strong affection or profound oneness that is common to all human beings.

Love is essential for life. Love and life are indispensably connected in all the living beings. All the living beings need love and therefore make love. Love is the livewire for their being in this world. However, the concept of love becomes more elevated and abstract when viewed metaphysically. Love which is seen as essential for life can also be a 'love' destined to death, which means one is ready even to die as a proof of the real love. Here love is seen as an agent of life. Nevertheless it can become an agent of death also where one observes a paradox in the concept of love: 'love unto death' or 'death-marked love'.

Christianity is a religion built on the crucifixion and resurrection of its founder Jesus Christ. His love for humanity is based on the paradoxical theme of 'love unto death'. Paul, one of the early proponents of Christianity, writes, "Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her." (Ephesians 5:25) Jesus Christ is divine, son of God and the redeemer; therefore his love is far more superior to all the percepts on love. However, Paul uses a conjugal metaphor where Jesus Christ is portrayed as the bridegroom and Church as the bride to pinpoint the elevation of the marital-romantic love to a self-gifting 'love unto death'.

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, though a romantic literary text, represents a perspective of self-gifting love; a 'love unto death'. The historical context of the play is an exploration of the nature of love and the love of Romeo and Juliet includes a discussion about the concept of love the religions preach. Though the play is often read as the epitome of romantic love, there is also an indication of self-immolation or self-sacrifice on the part of the lovers. Both were ready to embrace death in order not to part from their loved one. The background of the story is taken from the middle ages where such type of love was called 'Religion of Love' or 'Courtly Love'. (Paul N. Siegel, 1961, p.379) At that time, such type of love was considered to be a powerful and god-like force which permeated all humanity. Though suicide was condemned in Christianity, Romeo and Juliet's love and suicide were seen as an expression of this 'Religion of Love' rather than the Christian condemnation of suicide. Finally the 'love and death' of Romeo and Juliet brought an end to the long-running animosity that existed between their families and brought reconciliation.

This research is a succinct reading of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* through the optics offered by the Christian perspective of self-gifting love. It examines the secular romantic love of Romeo and Juliet and the Christian religious perspective of self-gifting love to demonstrate that two extreme concepts of love are converging on the paradoxical theme of 'love unto death'. It has to be noted that this research in any way is not an attempt to compare Christ's self-gifting love with the secular romantic love of Romeo and Juliet, since both belong exclusively to different realms; Christ's love is divine and belongs to the religious domain whereas Romeo and Juliet's love is romantic and belongs to the secular domain and thus cannot be compared at all. Therefore the research focuses on the theme of 'love unto death' which is apparent in religious as well as secular situations. Thus it is

more of a metaphysical study on love taking into consideration the paradoxes of 'love and death' found in human life contexts.

Literary Survey

There have been researches done comparing the Christian perspective of love and the romantic love expressed in the Shakespearean plays. Waters Douglas, in his *Christian Settings in Shakespeare's Tragedies* has clearly brought out this comparison. Attempts were also made to show the Christian background of Shakespeare which directly or indirectly had its influence on his plays. Pearce Joseph, in his *Shakespeare on Love: Seeing the Catholic Presence in Romeo and Juliet*, shows that the Christian perspective of love is religious, divine and based on the love of Jesus Christ for his Church, whereas the romantic love expressed in Shakespearean literature is secular, human and based on the infatuation between male and female.

Many researches on the theme of love on Shakespeare compare love in the religious and secular, divine and human planes. Paul N. Siegel in his *Christianity and the Religion of Love in Romeo and Juliet* compares the Christian notion of love with the 'Courtly Love' prevalent during the middle ages. Alan Hager in his *Understanding Romeo and Juliet*, relates the love of Romeo and Juliet to the notion of reincarnated love such as that of *Rama and Sita* in the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana*. He brings out the romantic aspect of love found in Christianity and other religions and compares it with the love of Romeo and Juliet. (Alan Hager, 1999, p.148)

However, this paper is confined to the Christian perspective of love that can be traced in *Romeo and Juliet*. Basing on the researches already done on this aspect, I am trying to bring out the theme of 'love unto death' which is basically Christian but also inherent in the romantic literature *Romeo and Juliet*. The concept of love becomes more elevated when viewed as a 'love' destined to death, which means death can be a proof of the real love. Since the concepts of love and death represent the opposites, a paradox ascends here in the concept of love: 'love unto death' or 'death-marked love'. Christianity is a religion built on the paradoxical theme of 'love unto death' of Jesus Christ who loved the Church so much and died for it. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, though a romantic literary text, in a way translates this Christian perspective of self-gifting love to a secular

situation. This paradoxical theme of ‘love unto death’ is brought out as a uniting factor of love in the religious and secular, divine and human planes.

The Concept of Love in General: Love’s Plurality

The age-old question of love’s plurality creates ambiguity and confusion. The word ‘Love’ incorporates multiple ideas and nuances: the protective love of a mother for her child, the romantic love of those fallen in love, the deep love of long-term companions, passion for animals or some special food, the divine love of God, etc.

But we can ask whether there is anything that is universal behind the diverse understandings of ‘love’? In light of this plurality, Pope Benedict in his first encyclical ‘*Deus caritas est*’ asks, “Are all these forms of love basically one, so that love, in its many and varied manifestations, is ultimately a single reality, or are we merely using the same word to designate totally different realities?” (Benedict XVI, 2006, p.18)

There are many kinds of love, which are induced by a collection of varied motives. Depending on the context, love can have a wide variety of meanings. This diverse range of meanings in the singular word *love* is often contrasted with the plurality of Greek words for *love*, reflecting the concept’s depth, versatility and complexity.

The philosophical study of love transcends all other sub-disciplines of philosophy like, epistemology, metaphysics, religion, human nature, politics and ethics. The statements or arguments concerning love are interconnected within the central themes of philosophy.

The Nature of Love

The philosophical discussion regarding love logically begins with questions concerning its nature. This implies that love has a ‘nature’. In English, the word ‘love’ is broadly defined and hence imprecise, but this problem can be resolved to some extent by the reference to the Greek terms, *eros*, *philia* and *agape*.

Eros

The term *eros* (Greek *erasthai*) is used to refer to that part of love constituting a passionate, intense desire for something which is often referred to as a sexual desire. Thus the modern notion of ‘erotic’ (Greek *erotikos*) has its origin in *eros*.

Eros signifies the passive aspect of love, which is proper to romantic love and is conveyed by such expressions as “falling in love” or being “love sick.” It is powerfully experienced in the “love between man and woman which is neither planned nor willed, but somehow imposes itself upon human beings.” (Benedict XVI, 2006, p.8)

In Plato’s writings, however, *eros* is held to be a common desire that seeks transcendental beauty. The particular beauty of an individual reminds us of true beauty that exists in the world of Forms or Ideas. Thus, according to the Platonic understanding, love has an intrinsically higher value than appetitive or physical desire. Physical desire, for Platonists, is held in common with the animal kingdom and hence of a lower order of reaction and stimulus than a rationally induced love. Accordingly, physical love cannot be a proper form of love because love is a reflection of the *Ideal* beauty, which encompasses everything.

Philia

Contrary to the desiring and passionate yearning of *eros*, *philia* entails a fondness and appreciation of the other. For the Greeks, the term *philia* incorporated not just friendship, but also loyalties to the family and the political community. The English concept of friendship roughly captures the notion of *philia*.

Agape

Agape refers to the paternal love of God for man and the filial love of man for God but is extended to include a brotherly love for all humanity. It expresses the active aspect of love proper to the biblical conception of love and conveyed in such expressions as “love seeks not its own”. (1 Cor 13:5) *Agape* arguably draws on elements from both *eros* and *philia* in that it seeks a perfect kind of love. It is transcendental in nature and a passion without the necessity of reciprocity. While *eros* is a desire to possess the other, *agape* is a concern for the other that seeks the other’s good even to the point of renunciation and self-sacrifice.

Denigration of *Eros* and Exaltation of *Agape* in Christianity

Christianity down through its centuries, especially during its dark ages had developed a mentality that *eros* is a corrupted form of love and *agape* is the ideal. This gave rise to the denigration of the bodily aspects of human beings. Human feelings, sympathies and sentiments were neglected. The spiritual experience, ascetic and mystic union with God were emphasized. Human beings were considered as mere spiritual incarnate beings and their being in the world through their bodies was ignored. This was due to the adoption of Platonic philosophy by the early proponents of Christianity and the Fathers of the Church.

However, during the modern era, with the advent of anthropocentric perspectives, Christianity has changed many of its views regarding the corporeal aspect of human beings and affirmed the substantial union of the body and soul in the human reality. The body and the soul are essential components of a human being and the body makes a human being a historical being - a being in the world and of the world. Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical on love corrects the confusion created in Christianity in this regard. He notes that the purpose of *eros* is to foster a true nature of the divine fellowship. Therefore, he says that the *eros* must be purified if it is to attain its goal that is to unite humanity with divinity: “*Eros* tends to rise ‘in ecstasy’ towards the divine, to lead us beyond ourselves; yet for this very reason it calls for a path of ascent, renunciation, purification and healing.” (Benedict XVI, 2006, p.9)

Although there have been some trends of thought in Christian history that have degraded the bodily aspects of *eros*, the true goal of the Christian message is to purify, not to destroy *eros*. Jesus Christ exalted *agape* as the supreme love and at the same time recognized other types of love existing among the human beings: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:12) One’s capacity for love is tested by one’s capacity to suffer in order to enhance the one who is loved. The unique Christian contribution to the understanding of *eros* emerges when one considers the nature of the purification that *eros* requires and elevated as *agape*. (John Rist, 1961, p.19)

Eros and Agape: The Sanctification of Desire

When Pope Benedict XVI discusses *eros* and *agape* in '*Deus caritas est*', he insists on the unity of these two forms of love, as well as the continuity between them. He is particularly concerned to refute the widespread notion of the Christian tradition to suppress *eros* and to exalt *agape*. (Benedict XVI, 2006, p.19) For him both are necessary and complement each other. Further he asserts that *eros* is ever reaching out towards its fulfillment in *agape*. The powerful dynamism of desire is itself a sign that human persons are made for and directed toward a love that never ends. That is why he says, "the entire activity of the Church is an expression of a love that seeks the integral good of man." (Benedict XVI, 2006, p.46)

Further Conceptual Considerations of Love

Since love has a nature, it is describable within the concepts of language. The epistemology of love inquires how man may know, understand and express love adequately. Is it really possible to make statements about the love that we have or of the love that others have? Love may have a nature, yet we may not possess the proper intellectual capacity to understand it. This is what is argued by Socrates, the central interlocutor in *The Symposium* of Plato. Love may be partially described but never understood in itself. Love may therefore become an epiphenomenal entity, generated by human action in loving, but never grasped by the mind or language. Thus love may be so described as a Platonic Form. Accordingly, the romanticists understood 'love' as something belonging to the higher faculties of humans and to the higher classes of the society - to a priestly, philosophical or poetic class.

Romantic Love

Romantic love is seen to be of a higher metaphysical and ethical status than sexual or physical attractiveness alone. Romantic love is probably the most intricate of all the kinds of love. It does not seem to follow many of our decision-making rules. One can fall in love with anyone, at anytime and without any precedents. That is why the saying 'love is blind' is commonplace. It is this aspect that made Romeo and Juliet fall in love at first sight.

The idea of romantic love initially stems from the Platonic tradition where love was considered a desire for beauty - a value that transcends the particularities of the physical body.

Theoretically romantic love is not interested in consummation, for such love is transcendently motivated by a deep respect for the loved; but modern romantic love returns to Aristotle's version of the special love where two people find in each other some virtues - one soul and two bodies, as he poetically endorsed it.

Romantic Love and the Western Civilization

Human societies have idealized love throughout the history. The historical development of the concept of love in western societies has followed some kind of periodical fashion throughout the centuries. Greeks and Romans perceived love, as an interesting force which had no connection with marriage. Courtly love, in the pre-Renaissance period, promoted the idea of romance and included some concepts which were unique to a man - woman relationship. Such love was considered a challenge and virtue by knights, but still there was no relationship with marriage. (Martin S. Bergmann, 1987, p.101) With the development of Christianity, romantic love was restricted and lust viewed as a transgression by society.

With the Renaissance, the idealization of a woman as the object of love was the starting point for a shift of perspective and the concept of love in marriage developed. Classic literature played its role in finding a reciprocal meaning in the marital relationship. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is better understood against this background.

Physical Love, Emotional Love, Spiritual Love

Some may hold that love is physical, that is, love is nothing but a physical response to another whom the agent feels physically attracted to. Thus behaviorists would say that love depends on actions like caring, listening, attending to, etc.

Others (physicalists, geneticists) reduce all examinations of love to the physical motivation of the sexual impulse - the simple sexual instinct that is shared with all complex living entities, which may, in humans, be directed consciously, sub-consciously or pre-rationally toward a potential sexual relationship or sexual satisfaction.

Love seems also to derive from a blend of environmental and genetic factors. Those who affirm this position claim that love is reducible to the physical attractiveness of a potential partner or to the blood ties of family and kinfolk, which is identical to *eros* but not *philia* or *agape*.

The spiritualist vision of love incorporates a mystical as well as traditional romantic notions of love, but rejects the behaviorist or physicalist explanations.

The Concepts of ‘*eros-thanatos*’ or ‘Love-Death’ or ‘Pleasure-Pain’

Greeks represented their gods of love and death, *eros* and *thanatos*, with blindfolds over their eyes. They not only suggested these gods’ random or accidental presence in human existence but also their enduring mystery. For the Greeks, love and death were the mysteries, which even the gods could not unravel. If the gods do not know, then how could the mortals know? (Alan Hager, 1999, p.149) Pleasure and pain are essential parts of love. There is no love history, which did not have a touch of suffering. Love and pain are interrelated concepts in many aspects. When one loves someone, he or she becomes emotionally vulnerable to that person. So acceptance of any suffering for the sake of love becomes very normal among those who are in love. This endurance of suffering can also reach its climax, which is death. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare shows this paradox of love and pain (death) realistically as well as romantically. Christianity shows how Jesus Christ loved humanity even up to the death on the cross. Here the love of Christ is divine and therefore *agapaic* whereas the love of Romeo and Juliet is human and therefore romantic.

Shakespeare and the Concept of Love

After viewing the concept of love in general together with its nature and types, it is convenient to analyze the Shakespearean concept of love in relation to the general notions of love and specifically in light of the changes that were taking place during Renaissance.

One can very well note a complicity and close connection between love and death in Renaissance literature. (Lloyd Davies, 2003, p.59) Shakespearean plays have to be understood against the background of the Renaissance where courtly love took a different shape and the romantic nature of love began to assimilate a reciprocal denotation. Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* is based on romantic love, but its historical context lies mainly in the universal background of the Romantic era (1770-1833) that glorified nature and love.

Sources of Shakespearean Concept of Love

Shakespeare's concept of love derives from three major sources: Platonism, Christian tradition and the Provencal poetry (love lyrics from the south of France).

Plato wrote the large part of his philosophy in dramatic dialogues. *The Republic* is a dialogue with Socrates about the importance of the *ethos*, or about the nature of man as a political animal. *The Symposium* also has Socrates at its center, assumes the universal importance of *eros*, in the individual human being and in the universe regardless of any social contract. Here, Plato asserts that love conquers all. '*Symposium*', in the Greek language means a banquet or drinking party. It is a frame narrative by Aristodemus, one of the interlocutors who represents Plato. Aristodemus had attended a dinner party hosted by Agathon. In that party all were drunk and the narratives delivered a sequence of speeches, as agreed upon by the participants, in praise of the Greek god of *eros*. Here Plato stresses that humans are always doomed to long for and seek their other half, in and through love. For him even gods are not free from this longing and they even fall in love. Further Plato affirms by the mouth of Aristophanes, another interlocutor that the nature of love is a divine mystery but that love invests human beings with the power of longing for and achieving a dynamic combination. (Plato, *The Complete Works*, 181b, 1996, p.535)

Such explanation of the dynamic combination of love by Plato, which is enjoyed by the lovers, was taken by Shakespeare as the point of departure to bring out his philosophy of love. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* often evoke in their poetic statements this dynamic combination of love. Romeo and Juliet formerly were two individual persons. But later they sing of their fatal contact, union and their absolute devotion to their soul mate.

As a practicing Anglican, Shakespeare would have heard from the readings of the Scriptural versus and from Church of England's common prayer book regarding the love of Christ for his Church which was depicted through a conjugal metaphor where Christ is the bridegroom and Church is the bride. (Waters Douglas, 1994, p. 232) The Anglican marriage liturgy, for example, asks one to worship the body of one's mate and see the ritual of human mating as providing a mystical glimpse of Jesus' marriage to the Church, or of the soul with God.

The Provençal poetry, the love lyrics from the south of France, promoted the 'Courtly Love' tradition in Europe during the initial stages of Renaissance. This tradition started spreading a new gospel of love throughout Europe which also influenced Shakespeare's concept of love which was later portrayed as the 'Religion of Love'. (Paul N. Siegel, 1961, p.380) Thus Platonism, Christian tradition and the courtly love tradition of the Provençal poetry have left their imprint on Shakespeare.

Love Concepts in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

Generally the stories of Shakespeare can be divided into five groups: those dealing with romance, marriage, family life, politics and public life. (Von L. Maguire, 2003, p.29) *Romeo and Juliet* is classified as a tragic romance. The tragic love story of Romeo and Juliet has touched the hearts of young and old for nearly four hundred years. Popular culture indicates that Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* has become almost universal and it is one of world's favorite stories.

Obviously, one of the central subjects dealt with in *Romeo and Juliet* is the subject of love unto death. This interpretation attempts to find out whether there are distinct ideas of love beyond the level of a simple sentiment. But this question may immediately lead to inconsistencies, as we do not know if there is a clear and constant idea of a complex issue like love unto death.

Romeo and Juliet's relationship develops in a decisive manner. Their background was something of enmity and hate. The Montagues and the Capulets were in constant fight. Despite these obvious obstacles, the love of Romeo and Juliet comes about. When Romeo meets Juliet for the first time during the feast held at the Capulets', the language and form of the dialogue shared by Romeo and Juliet shows that their private sphere is totally different from public life. Their first conversation is a sonnet, a poetic convention very popular in the Elizabethan age. When Romeo catches sight of Juliet, he imagines 'touching hers, make blessed my rude hand'. In the pilgrim sonnet (I v 92-105), the focus of attention is also led to touch, by means of language of love. The words 'hands' and 'lips' appear four times each, 'kiss' and 'touch' twice each. Besides, there are expressions with physical implications like 'tender', 'mannerly' and 'palm'. Thus the formal convention of a sonnet and the stressing of contact and physical closeness create a totally new atmosphere in the middle of Capulet's feast.

Next time they meet on Juliet's balcony (II ii). Romeo has entered Capulet's ground and Juliet is aware of the danger: 'and the place is death, considering who thou art... If they do see thee, they will murder thee'. Romeo answers Juliet's fears claiming that their love is stronger - and probably more dangerous - than the physical power of Capulet's kinsmen: "there lies more peril in thine eye than twenty of their swords". Romeo's answers to Juliet show that he does not completely consider the situation as part of real life: 'With love's light wings did I o'er perch these walls'.

In the play, there are only two persons who are really involved in love: Romeo and Juliet. Besides, Paris appears as a wooer to Juliet, but Shakespeare shows already in the first two lines which Paris speaks in the play that he is not a lover as true as Romeo: 'of honourable reckoning are you both'. Paris has the role of an ordinary wooer and not of an emotional and individual lover. In a way, Friar Laurence deals with love because of his role as a counselor and as the priest who performs the marrying rite.

Though Romeo and Juliet share the experience of hindered love, they both have a distinct character. In the balcony scene (II. ii.), Romeo tries to prove his love to Juliet by using a vow, again a conventional form of speech. But Juliet immediately interrupts him and explains that not any convention but only his 'gracious self' can guarantee his true love. She says "O swear not by the moon, the inconstant moon, that monthly changes in her orb, lest that thy love prove likewise variable." When Romeo made his helpless question 'what shall I swear by?', he left the line open, which must be completed by Juliet's advice: 'Do not swear at all'. After Juliet has reaffirmed her opinion, her next topic of dialogue is the haste with which their love has blossomed.

The way in which Romeo's love to Juliet is expressed in the play reveals that there is something different in their love. Romeo and Juliet meet only four times in the play until they lay together dead in the last scene of the play. It is amazing to note how Romeo and Juliet meet for the first time without any preparation who were not known to each other before. The confidence they show towards each other in the sonnet and the first kiss, shortly after they have met, are totally unconventional. Their encounter is obviously different from Romeo's relationship to Rosaline and Paris' trial to marry Juliet. Romeo and Juliet meet and fall in love at first sight. They find means to

meet again and even to marry. Their relationship is not as planned as the ones that we see in stories that involve conventional love.

Romeo and Juliet's Affair: Success or Failure?

Though the circumstances led them to the death, both their deaths are brought about by their own decision. They both prefer death to a life without each other. When Romeo hears about the false message regarding Juliet's death, his reaction is immediate and resolute: 'Then I defy you, stars!'. His man Balthasar unwittingly has the correct suggestion: 'I do beseech you sir, have patience'. But Romeo's decision has been made, though he has not got any affirmation of Juliet's death. After that, he decides to kill himself in Juliet's tomb. When Juliet awakes from her pretended 'death', she finds Romeo dead and kills herself. Thus this play is not simply a moving tale of 'Love and Death'; it is based on more than a romantic death-wish, a love unto death. Here Romeo and Juliet proof themselves as responsible lovers.

'Love unto Death': A Christian Perspective

The perspective of 'love unto death' expresses the 'self-gifting' and unconditional love of Jesus Christ. Ultimately it is a Christian perspective. The death of Jesus was his extreme sacrifice, the climax of his dedication and love for God and humanity. It was the ultimate expression of his love. As he preached "greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends", he showed his love by his death. (John 15:13)

The all-embracing sign of Jesus' love led him even to the point of death. His suffering and dying on the cross are the manifestations of the breaking of life which he entrusts to his God the Father. Thus he proved that love is the only reality which has a future beyond death - an indefinite future. One's capacity for love is tested by one's capacity to suffer and die in order to enhance the one who is loved and to prove the real love. This is clearly shown by Shakespeare in the double suicide of Romeo and Juliet. (Pearce Joseph, 2013, p.373) The action of Romeo and Juliet occurs between two speeches proclaiming the couple's love and death: the prologue and the prince's closing summary. With the lovers' deaths announced from the start, the attention of the audience is directed to the events' fateful course. Here the question is not what is happening but how it is happening. The play

shows the unfulfilled love of the lovers and shows death as the force that unites the loved ones. . (Lloyd Davies, 2003, p.57) Shakespeare as a practicing Christian understood Jesus Christ's love for humanity who loved the world so much that he gave himself up to be hanged on the cross as a ransom for many (Mathew 20:28) and the expiation of the sins of humanity to reconcile the world with God. (1 John 2:2-4) The criterion for this love of Jesus Christ is, "laying down his love for his friends". (John 15:13) Christianity takes this self-gifting love on the basis of Jesus Christ's love to the point of death.

The theme of love coexisting with death is echoed in Shakespeare's play and is vividly seen in the form of an oxymoron in the following passage: "O brawling love! O loving hate! ...O heavy lightness! Serious vanity! Mis-shapen chaos of well-seeming forms! Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health! Still-waking sleep..." Shakespeare uses the aforesaid images to describe the state of love that is leading the lovers to death. (Pearce Joseph, 2013, p.377) The concepts of love and death do not naturally go together, but represent the opposites. However, death becomes the agent to unite the loved ones and bring an end to the long-running family feud and bring reconciliation to their families. According to the Christian belief, the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross reconciled the world with God and brought peace to mankind. From this point also it is proven that the theme of 'love unto death' is a Christian perspective which is used by Shakespeare adequately in this play.

Conclusion

This study, as mentioned in the introduction, focused on the paradoxical theme of 'love unto death' as clearly expressed in the Christian religion as one of its core messages and later vividly dramatized during the Renaissance in one the Shakespearean romantic tragedies *Romeo and Juliet*. It is necessary to have a warning note here. The study in any way does not compare the 'love unto death' of Jesus Christ with the 'death-marked love' of the romantic couples, Romeo and Juliet. The theme 'love unto death' is of course *agapaic* and divine in nature, which is explicitly found in the Christian perspective of self-gifting love. The purpose of the study is to bring out that the *agapaic* nature of 'love unto death' can also be found in *eros* centered romantic love of the human beings. The Shakespearean literature *Romeo and Juliet* is selected to show this phenomenon.

Romeo and Juliet are a couple driven by ordinary desires, but they undertake a dangerous but great attempt to make love conquer the hate (of their families). At the center of their experience is the paradox that only through the body can the limits of the body and the self could be transcended. Thus Shakespeare shows that the real love which is spiritual in nature was proven by the death of the physical body. This is the truth, though paradoxical, found in the concept of 'love unto death'.

It becomes clear that there is a 'love concept' which is spiritual and *agapaic* in nature at the center of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The play does not primarily provide a didactic message but only shows how 'Love' and 'Fortune' lead Romeo and Juliet to 'Death'. The plot also shows that 'Fate' and 'Death' are powers that take place in the life of Romeo and Juliet. Love is the motif for the important decisions they make in the play, including for their decision to die. 'Song of Songs' one of the Old Testament Books in the Bible which exalts the human love says that 'love is as strong as death'. (Song of Songs, 8:6) Thus the paradoxical theme of love and death as announced in the prologue transforms into 'death-marked love'. The plot of *Romeo and Juliet* encompasses only five days in the lives of the characters. The decision to love and the decision to die take place within this short span of time.

Since tragedy emphasizes a character over fate, the characters become responsible for their own destruction. However, it is fate that manipulates the characters' decisions and movements. Chance, coincidence, circumstance and change are all dramatic means by which fate is given its influence in the play. But it is not certain how one could depend on or believe in fate realistically in his or her day-to-day life. The human beings have the power to overcome the fate because of their reason and free will.

The love of Romeo and Juliet was so overpowering that it seems to transcend all bounds of convention and reason. This type of love, experienced by Romeo and Juliet, is the opposite of the restricted, courtly love that was prevalent in fourteenth century Europe. The lovers broke all the conventional rules and customs of their time and proved that there is a possibility for a self-sacrificing love. (Waters Douglas, 1994, p. 250)

In the contemporary world where consumerism, materialism and individualism have their autonomy, the theme 'love unto death' may seem paradoxical and mere utopia. There is a scarcity of

true love in all circles. Love has become a commodity and fashion. In this crisis situation, reminding the existence of the unconditional, altruistic and self-gifting *agapaic* love is necessary for humanity. It is important to sanctify the selfish love that dominates the world today and begin to see love in its original form. This comparative study of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and the Christian perspective of self-gifting love attempted to demonstrate the values of altruism, self-sacrifice and compassion that are to be enshrined by humanity.

References

- Alan Hager, *Understanding Romeo and Juliet: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources and Historical Documents*, New York, Greenwood Press, 1999.
- Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est: Encyclical Letter*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006.
- John Rist, *Eros and Psyche: Studies in Plato, Plotinus and Origen*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1961.
- Lloyd Davies, *Death-marked Love: Desire and Presence in Romeo and Juliet*, New York, Blackwell Publishing, 2003.
- Martin S. Bergmann, *The Anatomy of Loving: The Story of Man's Quest to Know What Love is*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987.
- Paul N. Siegel, "Christianity and the Religion of Love in Romeo and Juliet," in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 12 (2), 1961, pp.371-392.
- Pearce Joseph, *Shakespeare on Love: Seeing the Catholic Presence in Romeo and Juliet*, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2013.
- Plato, *The Complete Works of Plato*, trans. Michael Joyce, ed. Edith Hamilton, et al., New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 181b, 1996¹⁶.
- Rozett, M. T., "The comic structures of tragic endings: the suicide scenes in Romeo and Juliet and Anthony and Cleopatra," in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 36 (2), 1985, pp.152-164.
- Schalkwyk, D., *Shakespeare, Love and Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Von L. Maguire, *Studying Shakespeare: A Guide to the Plays*, New York, Blackwell Publishing, 2003.
- W. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet: A Tragedy in Five Acts*, London, The Arden Shakespeare, 1980.
- Waters Douglas, D., *Christian Settings in Shakespeare's Tragedies*, London Associated University Press, 1994.