“A VALEDICTION: FORBIDDING MOURNING”: SUMMARY & INTERPRETATION

Though a poem of parting, the poem expresses the poet’s positive attitude towards love. The summary of the poem is as below:

The poet tells his wife that wise men die gently without making any fuss. They ask their souls to gently pass out of their bodies quietly when the time comes for it. But many of their friends are afraid of death; they are unhappy people. They do not joyfully submit to the inevitable fact of death. The poet says that parting of lovers is like death. Hence, though the others may mourn, his beloved should not mourn over his parting with her.

Meeting and parting are part of human life, and his beloved should not take his parting with her seriously. It would be like desecration of their love to express feeling of loss in tears over this apparent separation. They have experienced spiritual bliss in each other’s company and ruing over this would be a blot on their mysterious union. It is only they who can understand the mystery of higher love. Therefore, they should not behave like the other people, who are not aware of the spiritual bliss in genuine love. The poet then points out that when there is an earthquake, it causes destruction of life and properties and fills the heart of men with fear. But the damage and loss resulted from a disaster like an earthquake can be calculated. When one compares the movements of the planets with the earthquake, he finds the former is incalculably stronger; though it does not bring any harm to the world. In the same way this separation is not of earthly nature; - it is spiritual.

Their love belongs to higher regions and so his wife should not grieve like an ordinary earthly person over the departure of the poet. According to Donne, the universe is of two worlds: the world of change and alteration, -of the body of man; and the world of the unchanging or constant, -of the soul of man. Donne points out that the love of the earthly lovers is of the senses. They are ignorant of the higher states of love. They do not realize the essence of love since they do not feel the existence of soul within themselves. Such lovers, says he, cannot endure the separation. Since their love depends on their physical perception of the eyes, cheeks, hair etc., they become miserably sad over the absence of their beloved. The love between the poet and his beloved is of metaphysical nature and since there is sublimity to their union, she should not express any sorrow in physical terms. She should rather bid him farewell cheerfully and with a confident mind.

The poet says that their mutual love and trust has led them to such a heightened state that they themselves do not know what their love is. It has become a divine mystery. They have risen above worldly lovers whose delight is limited to the beloved’s beautiful eyes, sweet lips or soft hands.

The poet says that the bodies of the lovers belong to the sublunary world. Therefore, they remain separate. But their souls belong to an unchanging world. So, if the poet goes away, it is indeed the body of the poet which goes away. Their souls being one, they cannot be separated from one another. He says that the gold can be beaten to lend it a shape as thin as air; thus it can be expanded to a great extent. Similarly, their love is as valuable in nature to be stretched out without breaking.

The poet then says that if their souls are two, they are like the two legs of a firmly joined geometrical compass- which is used for drawing circles. The beloved is the foot of the compass, and the lover is the moving foot drawing the circle. The fixed foot apparently remains fixed, but when the other foot moves, it also moves, though nobody notices its movement.

He next says that though the fixed foot dwells in the centre, it leans when the other foot starts to make the circle. But when the circle is completed, the foot comes back; it stands erect and resumes its original position.

With reference to the image of a compass engaged in drawing a circle, the poet now says that his wife , is the fixed foot of the stiff compass. He is like the moving foot of the compass. Now, if the moving foot has to draw the circle, the other must remain fixed at a place or in other words remain true in her love for him. Further, as far as he goes away from the circle, he can draw as much a greater circle. Thus, he carves his path of life on the basis of the firmness or strength of love of his beloved. If she remains fixed or true to him, he will complete his course of life as truthfully, without deviating from the path of love.

-Thus, Donne proves that it is their firmness in love which makes their love sublime.

Interpretation:

1. The poem brings out Donne’s philosophy of love beautifully. His love is natural and metaphysical. It has given him spiritual satisfaction.
2. In metaphysical poetry emotions are shaped and expressed by logical reasoning and this poem is also illustrative of this important characteristic.
3. In the third stanza Donne uses medieval scholastic philosophy for poetic purpose when he says about the movement of the earth round its axis and movement of the sun round the earth.
4. In the fourth stanza also he carries forward the above ‘concepts’. Here he compares the love between him and his wife to the movement of heavenly bodies according to the philosophy of Ptolemy.
5. In the sixth stanza, he adopts the image of gold being beaten to airy thinness- which is a farfetched simile. It shows his wide knowledge of the various sciences as they existed in the Middle Ages. This is an example of how Donne’s similes are scholarly and require intellectual grasp.
6. The last three stanzas of the poem-in which Donne develops the simile of the compass, are the most remarkable in English poetry. They reveal Donne’s power of conjuring up a beautiful, though scholarly image.
7. There are generally two kinds if image in Donne’s poetry: the primary image and the secondary image. The primary image pervades the whole poem, while there are different subsidiary images (these are secondary images).
8. Each poem of Donne has a dramatic setting. In case of “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning”, the stage setting is in the scene of separation of the lover and the beloved and in the poet’s reacting to the agony of the others at his departure. The dramatic is also to be found in the development of a clash, an argument and also a counter-argument vis-à-vis the concept of true love. At the end, the poet adopts the odd image of the compass making a metaphysical conceit to illustrate the metaphysical nature of the lovers’ union in love. With the help of the conceit it is resolved logically that thanks to the truth of their love, there will be the union of love even when they are separated.