

LOVE, LOSS AND THE GEOGRAPHICAL IMAGINATION IN THE POETRY OF JOHN DONNE

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ABSTRACT:

John Donne's poetry has been a seminal contribution in bringing to fore the concept of love, the complexities involved in exploring characters in expressing love, the role of religion and how it reinforces love, various moods, emotions and expressions while true love is being exchanged, including the sexual favours. This paper analyses the various underlying themes in Donne's poems and how they came to shape the concept of love as portrayed in English literature.

The paper also analyses ways in which Donne's approach has been different in explaining various facets of love and loss of separation and how various facets of a romantic relationship exhibited itself. The paper lays emphasis on the literary tools employed by John in expressing his ideas – conceits, paradoxes, metaphors, similes, contradictions, juxtapositions, heterogeneity etc. For him, love was all pervading – nothing could exist without love, and gave more emphasis to love than the material, worldly affairs. Juxtaposed against the restoration era, he explored various moods in which lovers engage in and connected them to the way love can be a panacea for all.

The paper also analyses various poetic works of John Donne – The Flea, The Good Morrow, Songs and Sonnets, The Sun Rising, The Indifferent etc. – in order to derive the various moods in which the works are prepared, and how through an intelligent combination of wit, wisdom, religion, reason and passion of love, Donne presents his own unique take on the theme of love. Though there have been criticisms about his works, but there has been a realization about the richness of his works and how they had an indelible impact on the English literature.

By wading through seemingly paradoxical themes and complex immutable concepts, John elucidates how love connects them all. The paper explores the underlying themes in his works, and how geographical imaginations are intelligently used to arrive at a sensual romantic world, when compared to the monotonous voyage discoveries made in the post Industrial Revolution Europe.

KEYWORDS: Love, Conceit, the Flea, Ovidian, Petrarch an, metaphysical poetry.

INTRODUCTION:

The British poet John Donne is considered to be a pioneer representative of a group of poets, who came to be known as metaphysical poets. His poems strongly resonate with sensual tones and romantic flavours, taking multiple forms such as sonnets, epigrams, elegies, love poems etc. Metaphors and similes were the common thread which ran strongly through his prominent works, which took the user to a land of romantic adventures, intermittently laced with dislocations, paradoxes and ironies. In fact, love for him was all pervading, and nothing could ever exist without the notion of love. His poems had influences from his life– starting from his school days and early life, then the love for his wife (Ann More) and then, the Love for the Supreme Being. Somehow, each and every detail in his poetic works were related with love and their varied expressions, and all other details, were, in fact only pass-by references. The central themes of his works was thus the idea of love, its pre-occupations, omnipresence in every sphere of life and through love, an exploration and journey into life. This was made possible through his sincere, intelligent nuances by examining love through every angle, embracing the negativities and sorrows of loss and coping and embracing the true identity of love.

It is ironical that during the period of Restoration, and during much of 18th and 19th centuries, his poems went out of favour and he was considered inept and crude in his writings, lacking the lustre and finesse of an accomplished poet. It was only in the 20th century that his poetic glories were re-established, rising from the ashes as though a phoenix, and rose to as what Ben Jonson judged him: "the first poet in the world in some things." His place among the best that English literature has ever seen seems secured. His poems have stood the test of time, and even after 4 centuries, speak to us in such an affirmative fashion that it becomes rather a complete fulfilment to read his works for the craving of a true literary soul.

MAIN ELEMENTS IN DONNE'S WRITING:

Usually involving two people in direct, intimate and romantic conversation, his poems bring out the true

purpose of their love, and the purity of the relationship is displayed innocuously to the readers. Joan Bennett has remarked that his poems are true testimony to the “work of one who has tasted every fruit in love’s orchard”. His style is reminiscent of somebody who yearned for philosophizing the idea of love through his works and showed to the world about his creativity, beaming through his imaginations about love. Not a person to be too worried about the truth of his idea, he believed more in their presentation, and how through the idea of an unqualified love that idea may be made more enticing, full of emotions and intricacies of a romantic relationship are explored to their very depth.

Donne also dealt psychologically with the idea of love, sometimes in a sacred manner, rather through metaphors and sometimes profanely by expressing it through marginally erotic terms. Ovidian and Petrarchan traditions of erotic love story served as the true inspirations of his compositions, defined his complete outlook towards philosophy of love, and in fact marked the deviations and tensions which was introduced through his poems in a sexually charged manner.

Wariness and quick-wits have been skillfully employed at various poetic works of Donne. In fact, often his protagonists met each other at their own peril, which was stylized and presented in such a backdrop that it seemed they have more zest for the romantic pleasures, their attempts in standing against the larger community’s wish against in their serene journey and their soulful link-ups forever. He had the uncanny knack in representing the human’s natural life as a complex melange’ of flux and momentariness. In such a scenario, the way in which we may view the world is not absolute but is relative to their individual endeavours, in relation to the love-hate complex we have against one another. This is beautifully put by Donne in his work “*Metempsychosis*”:

“... There’s nothing simply good, nor ill alone,
Of every quality comparison,
The only measure is, and judge, opinion...”

The sifting cultural patterns had a profound impact on the works of Donne who drew on the inspirations from the cultural undercurrents and the prescriptions from Christianity in his poems. Be it passionate romantic poems, doctrines of Platonism, or Ovidian traditions – all assume that user is a devout Christian and an overarching acceptance of the ethics of the secular religion is followed.

Donne also explores the complex psyche thinking of our mind and the flexibilities and ironies that it goes through that within a single assertion, there may be multiple, quite contradictory thoughts brought to the fore, as in *Satire 3*. It talks about the deeply confronted

theory of religion v/s reactions to it – should the corrupted notions of religion provoke our anger or grief? What devotion do we owe to religion, or which religion owes our devotion? Do the fathers owe anything to the pious upbringing they have accomplished through their children? The mode of reasoning adopted to bring about an answer for these seemingly difficult questions is the test of weighing one against another so that a single claim may be weighed against a whole range of “unlike possibilities”.

J.B. Leishman has been one of the most outspoken supporters of Donne’s works through his work “*The Monarch of Wit*” (1965), where he speaks at length the influence which Ovid, the romantic Roman writer, had on Donne, most visible in his Elegies, Songs and Sonnets. The subtle analogies used, syllogisms reproduced and the exploration of true ends of love catches attention of user in one way or another.

Like in “*Songs and Sonnets*”, Donne does not bring forth a singular idea about love, but in fact explores emotions, attitudes and experiences through the poetical work, as though he himself is experiencing it. Ecstasy, despair of loss, the connection of both body and soul to internalize the love is explained through a series of poems, which have to be seen in totality, rather than in silos. This helps users in realizing the concept of love better through multiple angles – religious, sensual, soulful, materialistic etc. But nowhere in his poems does he express sexual desires explicitly – it is through skilful repertoire of words and metaphors that each reference can be concocted to the greater whole.

JUXTAPOSING LOVE AND RELIGION:

John Donne is distinctly known for his successful juxtaposing of physical love with the religion’s sacredness through resemblances, and makes them stand apart from the usual love poems preceding his age and even by his contemporaries. His poems “*The Flea*”, “*The Good Morrow*” are the most notable poems which explain this stance. Metaphysical poetry, which flourished in the first half of 17th century England, is attributed by TS Elliot and Herbert Grierson in their essay on Metaphysical poets majorly on works of Donne. His upbringing in Catholic environment when it was strictly restricted, a secret love story without the acceptance of his parents and his journey towards Dean of St Paul Cathedral in the Church of England all obviously have their reflections in his poetical adventures as well. All this mix into an intelligent mixture of wit, wisdom, commotion of love and adventure and bring out the elegance and grace of Donne’s writing style. Paradoxes inherent in his writing bring out the inherent beauty in his writings – the

being tried to be addressed through the poetic ruminations.

The suffering caused by the death of a loved one and the mortal loss of somebody so close is explored well in "*A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day*", in which a powerful evocation is done to the realm of absolute nothingness, which is beyond the level of suffering that the lover can't imagine, explained through these words "But I am none". They stir the emotions of the readers more often than not, and in fact reader thinks as though the author has himself experienced a loss.

MOTIFS, SYMBOLS AND CONCEITS:

An extended metaphor known as conceit was intelligently utilized by Donne in his poems. Imageries from art, religion and philosophy were used to convince and startle readers with paradoxes, arguments, exacting words and exploratory theme elocution. Voyages and discovery and conquest illustrate the mystery of protagonists' love affairs, and through them the ecstasy attained in their feelings. As expressed in "*To His Mistress going to Bed*", there is great indifference in undertaking voyages to faraway lands, and greater preference in "...seeking adventure for lovers' in each other's arms" – demonstrating the lover's body as "my America! My new found land!" The sexual escapades are thus compared to the conquest of exploration.

"*A Valediction: Of Weeping*" shows Donne making indirect motifs in explaining the pain of separation between two lovers through their tears. While taking leave, the lover cries and it shows as tears, which separates from her eyes, as though the lover is also separating from her, until they are completely away from one another. The lover's image reflected in the tears is thus lost. Same is the case in "*Ecstasy*" too, wherein the lovers stare into each other's eyes, and get so intermingled as though the reflections of you in their eyes acted as a gateway into their innermost being as well.

Angels symbolized divinity for John, for they acted as mediators between Gods and Humans. In "*To His Mistress Going to Bed*", the speaker compares his lover to an angel, as he experiences paradise on earth. Her love governs him, as the angels governed the spheres, influenced by Ptolemaic conceptualization. Compass is another conceit used often in metaphysical existence by John to symbolize relationship between two lovers – separate yet joined bodies. A metaphor for staying close even if physically apart, as a compass helps sailors sail sea, and like the compass the speaker can trace a perfect circle even if apart from lover.

The protagonists in any of Donne's poems is least concerned about exploring other worlds, and most

concerned about exploring the universe of love. "Let us possess one world; each hath one, and is one". Though both beloved and the lover is of two identities, their soulful love leads them to converge into a single world.

Donne is vivid enough to use biblical analogies in bringing his viewpoints clearly, as in reference to *Seven Sleepers Den* in "The Good Morrow", alluding to the Seven Christians who fled to avoid persecution and slept away in a cave and woke up two centuries later. He refers to his love being awakened after such a long "snorting" and a spiritual awakening happened after meeting with ladylove. The lover's room, as small it may be, is realised as a microcosm of the larger world outside. The depiction of the lover's bed almost always appears as a centrepiece in Donne's works.

COMPARISON WITH CONTEMPORARIES AND CRITICISMS:

As was the case with Michelangelo, whose works were not appreciated well during his time, in fact despised, as his ideas were well ahead of his time's belief systems, same applies to John Donne as well. He left a deep and all-pervading imprint on readers and influenced many with his witty, reasoned and satirical take on ideas of love. In fact, Browning considered him "King of Wits".

Yeats made a fitting tribute to the genius of Donne when he said to Herbert Grierson, "at last I can understand Donne... Poems that I could not understand or could but understand are now clear and I notice that the more precise and learned the thought the greater the beauty, the passion; the intricacy and subtleties of his imagination are the length and depths of the furrow made by his passion". T. S. Elliot considered John Donne as a great reformer of English language and praised his poems for "unification of sensibilities".

CONCLUSION:

Paradoxes in themes, contradictions in characters between different poems in seemingly same settings, obscure writing style and handling complex matters like religion and love together were some of the most outstanding features of John Donne, who was hailed many years after his works were published. Though there have been many criticisms, chiefly by C.S. Lewis who has termed his works as "ostentatious and unsatisfying poetic food", J.E.V. Crofts' dismissal as "an ugly cross-hatching of verbal noises", Donne's works were well ahead of his time, and came to be fully understood and appreciated much later after they were published. His contribution to metaphysical school is seminal and matched by only few in the annals of English literature. His usage of Conceit and motifs to explain

complex topics with lucidity have continued to amaze and enthral enthusiasts. In majority of his poems, wit, wisdom, reason and religion all came together in the pursuit of proving that “Love” is everywhere and undeniable.

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