

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN 2321 – 3108

JOHN DONNE: THE LEGACY OF A METAPHYSICAL POET

MD. KAWSER AHMED

Lecturer, Department of English, Z.H. Sikder University of Science & Technology,
Madhupur, Kartikpur, Bhedergonj, Shariatpur, Bangladesh

ABSTRACT

Article Info:
Article
Received:14/12/2013
Revised on:23/12/2013
Accepted for
Publication:26/12/2013

John Donne is unanimously acknowledged as a true metaphysical poet because he made an unlike conceptual thought against the Elizabethan poetry, showed an analytical pattern of love and affection and displayed an essence of dissonance in words and expressions. This paper concentrates on the exploration of the characteristics of Donne's metaphysical poetry highlighting extended form of epigrams, conceits, paradoxes and ratiocinations. Donne in respect of the manifestation of metaphysical beauty was an unparallel and super ordinate among all poets such as Richard Crashaw, Henry Vaughan, Abraham Cowley, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell and many more. Donne, in fact, gave a breakthrough about the initiation of a new form of poetry-metaphysical poetry. He was natural, unconventional, and persistently believed in the argumentation and cross analysis of his thoughts and emotions through direct languages. He also concentrated on love and religion through intellectual, analytical and psychological point of view. His poetry is not only scholastic and witty but also reflective and philosophical.

Key Words: Conceit, Elizabethan poetry, Epigram, Metaphysical poetry, Paradox and Ratiocination.

INTRODUCTION

The metaphysical poets have immense power and capability to wonder the reader and cajole inventive perspective through paradoxical images, subtle argument, innovative syntax and imagery from art, philosophy and religion implying an extended metaphor known as conceit. The term "metaphysical" broadly applied to English and European poets of the seventeenth century was used by Augustan poets John Dryden and Samuel Johnson to reprove those poets for their "unnaturalness". John Dryden was the first to use the term metaphysical in association with John Donne as he "affects the metaphysics." Goethe, likewise, wrote, "The unnatural, that too is natural" and metaphysical poets are studied for their intricacy and originality. It will not be irrelevant and absurd to say, "Metaphysics in poetry is the fruit of the Renaissance tree, becoming over-ripe and approaching putrescence" (C. S. Lewis). Scholars

described the characteristics of metaphysical poetry from different point of view. They, in fact, lay out the essence of metaphysical poem, as does R.S. Hillyer to call, "Loosely, it has taken such meanings as these--metaphysical poetry as difficult, philosophical, obscure, ethereal, involved, supercilious, ingenious, fantastic and incongruous."

EPIGRAM AND DONNE'S METAPHYSICAL POETRY

Concentration is one of the features of metaphysical poetry especially in Donne's poetry because he introduces the readers to the new realm of argument and the closely interwoven thought, emotion and affection. We can find the communion of two souls of lovers into one existence in "The Ecstasy" where Donne intended to explain the different acts of love and the function of man as worthily performed man. The concept, here, of concentration on mutual but powerful setting of

love gets strength without digression. The poet expresses thus:

“Our hands were firmly cemented
with a fast balm, which thence did spring.”

An extended form of epigram (a short poem or phrase that expresses an idea in clever or amusing way) fructifies the essence of metaphysical poetry where no words or expressions are not wasted and poet's emotions get logical solution. The verse forms are small and simple and bring about strong sense through examples from science and religion. For example, John Donne used epigram in his poem “Hero and Leander” when he writes thus:

“Both robb'd of air, we both lie in one ground
Both whom one fire had burnt, one water
drown'd.”

Though there is no apparent humour in this poem, there is a contradiction, which indicates limitless inquisition in poet's heart. There is a question how could two people die by both fire and water? The readers stand before the confusion, which definitely leads to the long-awaited solution.

METAPHYSICAL CONCEITS AND DONNE'S POETRY

The concept of metaphysical conceit is another but most appealing and brilliant aspect of metaphysical poetry and Donne's poetry gets stages of development through the scientific implications of metaphorical conceit where he showed profusely his analytic genius through the convinced conceit. Conceit (a clever or sharp expression in writing or speech that involves a comparison between two dissimilar things) is an enticing and essential part of Donne's poetry that strengthens the basement of argument and allures far-fetched concepts with logical supposition. Dr. Johnson called conceits, “the most heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together.” In this sense, Donne may well be claimed to be emblematic of metaphysical poetry. “The most immediate striking feature of Metaphysical style forged by Donne is its use of the conceit” (Mackenzie, 1990:54). Donne's conceits are instrumental in a sense that they retain the attentiveness of readers and help the emotion pass through different dimensions. Ben Jonson's criticism is prominent regarding Donne's poetry as it is concentrated on the use of metaphysical conceits. He prophesied, “The poetry of Donne would perish for lack of being understood” (Redpath, 1966:202).

The thought of metaphysical conceit, perhaps, finds its most convinced expression in the words of Gardner: “In a metaphysical poem, the conceits are instruments of definition in an argument or instruments to persuade. The poem has something to say which the conceit explicates or something to urge which the conceit helps to forward” (1985:21). In terms of conceits, John Donne remained an invincible and unparallel as his conceits got refinement through experiential point of view and gave the references from every discipline of knowledge including science, religion and medicine. Donne cannot be held illogical and absurd in defining love through conceits because he addressed the concept through the reality of love in a concrete and similarly appalling way with the aid of the conceit of the compass. The most striking and influential instance of conceit is found in Donne's “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” “in which the souls of the two lovers are compared with the points of a compass” (Watts, 1990:9). The poet evokes thus:

“If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two,
Thy soul the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if th'other do.”

The poet, however, manifests his beloved through the geometrical explanation as it is most vivid and persuading like one part of compass moves around and the other part revolves in central point and the two souls of lovers get freedom to roam in the infinite vista of love and emotion. Donne's songs and sonnets as “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning”, “The Flea” and “Love's Alchemy” possess strong position in the possible extremely distinctive aspect of the love poetry of Donne. He showed his outstanding poetic genius and capability to retain and evoke the essentially multifarious aspects and quality of manly love- love between men and women. The readers of his poetry especially love poetry “must share, in some degree, his own capacity for associating widely diverse themes and feelings” (Bennet, 1964:14). Donne exhibited the variety of conceits through the numerous moods and was capable of portraying and analyzing “a wider range of emotion than any other English poet except Shakespeare” (Bennet, 1964:13). Furthermore, he added, “Donne travelled from one

type of experience to another" (1964:14). Donne cannot be considered as a poet of singular taste as he variegated his options with multiple ones. As Watts suggests: "Look for consistent doctrine in Donne and you'll be disappointed; sometimes he's a Platonic lover, sometimes he is a cynic; sometimes he is a sensualist; sometimes he is an idealist" (1990:15). Donne's conceits are pregnant with dramatic movement that explains the relationship of character and the relationship of ideas.

DONNE'S WITTICISM AND SUBTLETY

John Donne earned supremacy in the domain of metaphysical poetry through powerful and striking wit, subtle speeches, complex comparisons, varied moods, mental vitality, ironic expressions, exaggerating statements and refined paradoxes. His wit and subtlety in verses bring about the communion of logicity and ratiocination and images used in poems get full-fledged revelation of inward beauty. In addition to focusing on witticism and subtlety, Donne applied a set of appealing allusions that are concentrated on cosmology, medicine, myth, contemporary discoveries, history, science, religion, art and law. Donne's "The Flea" bears the testimony of argumentation through the consummation of physical love into spiritual one where the body of flea contains the blood of lover and beloved and lays out ardent passion for sensuous desire. The poet expresses the idea thus:

"Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare
Where we almost, nay more than married are
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;"

Donne is regarded as "the monarch of wit" (J.B. Leishman) and so Dryden relevantly told: "If we are not so great wits as Donne, we are certainly better poets." Donne's wits are spontaneous, bizarre but not artificial and they lie in the sophisticated or ingenious use of expressions. T.S. Eliot assembles his wits in the synthesis of opposite expressions like the merging of thought and feeling, what he calls 'sensuous apprehension of thought'.

Grierson, however, admired the logic of Donne and he commented, "It is a strange choice to our mind, but apparently the poem was greatly admired as a masterpiece." The implication of swaying words in different poems especially "The Good Morrow" is noteworthy where Donne entices people to enjoy

and roam around the world and the lover and the beloved do not require to be bothered about these because they are the epitome of the whole world. The poet, here, expresses his vision thus:

"Where can we find two better hemispheres
Without sharp north, without declining west?"

Donne, to some extent, appears to be realist by admitting mutual betrayal where lover is the ruler, beloved is the ruled, and vice versa. The lovers in Donne's poetry are superior to earthly lovers; they are transcendental and ethereal where there is heaven. In "The Anniversary" Donne says such:

"Here upon earth we are kings, and none but we
Can be such kings, nor of such subjects be."

Besides, the influential use of imagery in "The Canonization" bears one of the exquisite instances on witticism and subtlety of Donne. The lover and the beloved are imagined as fly chasing light one after another and they are ferocious like eagle as well as innocent like dove. The poet says thus:

"And we in us find the eagle and the dove."

Leishman says, "Donne's monarchy of wit was not a trick or fashion but one of the achievements of the poetic intelligence." Leishman is right in the sense that Donne's wits do not only imply symbolic spirit of interrogation and discovery but also the embellishment of inner reflection and intellectualism, the rebellion and the conflict in the mind of Donne.

The blending of witty and subtle remarks with emotion and feeling exposes John Donne's scholasticism as a metaphysical poet and brings the whole of experience into his poetry in which profound interest of experience can be analyzed to meet up the psychological curiosity of writing love and religious poetry.

EXPERIMENTAL EXPLORATION OF LOVE IN DONNE'S POETRY

John Donne, like the Elizabethan and the Romantic poets, did not give indulgence to emotional praise and overstating comparison of the beauty of beloved, rather he subtly used rational and intellectual languages to legalize his arguments solid. Love, though it is about the fantasy, imagination and surrealism in the Elizabethan poetry, it is a superb blending of ratiocination and originality on the one hand, hyperbole, and

eneration of beloved on the other hand. He made a discontinuity of high esteem and overstatement of beloved's physical beauty in his poetry like Shakespeare and used different objects through similes and metaphors to justify his love which is the chemistry of logical and compelling emotion. In "Love's Alchemy", there lies an argument, though in terms of alchemy, of the fact of love and woman within the framework of marriage through the conceit of alchemy which has appalling, convincing metaphors as "chemic", "elixir" "pregnant pot" and "mummy". Donne with an inquisitive mind about love did not present himself as an idealistic but as a realistic and experiential. Thus, the very first lines of the poem are obvious in expression:

"Some that have deeper digged love's mine than I,
Say, where his centric happiness doth lie,
I have loved and got, and told,
But should I love, get, tell, till I were old," (Love's Alchemy)

Donne, in this poem, attempted to show assertive approach to the reality of love just as a 'chemic' did to the metal of gold. In this regard, alchemy being a pseudo-science was basically an "attempt to transmute base metals into gold or silver" (Coulson, 1982:17). Donne's poems, in fact, are less restrained and spontaneously annotated background of passion or irony, tenderness or teasing, a number of love-affairs before marriage and permanent friendship. He did not follow the compassion and sentiment of his heart rather he put forward jurisdiction, hyperboles and paradoxes from medicine, cosmology and references from the Greek mythology. The beginning of his poems catches readers' attention and shows abrupt start chiding different objects like the sun or the friends for their interference in his love affairs with beloved. "The Sun Rising" and "The Canonization" show the hasty beginning without any prediction or background. The poet starts thus:

"For God's sake, hold your tongue and let me love"
(The Canonization)

"Busy old fool, unruly sun,
Why dost thou thus," (The Sun Rising)

Though the poet seems to be harsh and direct initially, he presents his love and emotion towards beloved with logic and ratiocination that distinguish Donne from the Elizabethan poets.

CONCLUSION

Metaphysical poetry with its beauty and enigma combined with Donne's feelings and attitudes distinctively appalling, questioning, passionate, sincere and extremely sensitive mind furnish this genre of literature. John Donne, duly said, is the harbinger of typical metaphysical poetry and, instead of cajoling the physical beauty of beloved like the Elizabethan poets, instituted cogent and scientific viewpoint on the dimension of love and affection with superb manifestation of argumentation and ratiocination. Donne espousing the exaggeration of beloved's beauty in songs and sonnets materialized his experimental and analytical attitude by comparing imaginary love with rational one and brought about authentic aspects of metaphysical poetry. He influenced the readers with his wit, intellectualism, cross analysis and indulged to sudden attack of emotion through the originality of speech. Besides, he is prominent for inequality, obscurity and violence, which function as a catalyst to uphold the rudimentary quality of such poetry. His love poems that are full of intense emotion and sharp logic combined with convincing presentation refer to images, allusions and settings picked out from science, religion, philosophy, medicine, law and so on. Donne as a poet of metaphysics emerged to follow ingenious strategy of depicting love and holy sonnets and was unparallel to gather examples from common life like the flea, the compass and reference of geography and science.

REFERENCES

- Bennett, Joan, 1964. *"Five Metaphysical Poets"*. Cambridge: Cambridge Up
- Coulson, J. et. Al. eds 1982 *The Oxford Illustrated Dictionary*. Oxford:Clarendon Press
- Eliot, T.S. 1950. *"Selected Essays"*
- Grierson, Herbert J.C. 1962. *"Donne's Love-Poetry"*
- Gardner, Helen sel&ed 1985 *"The Metaphysical Poets"*. Middlesex Penguin Classics
- James, Trevor.1988. *"The Metaphysical Poets"*. Essex: York Handbooks
- Leishman, J.B. 1951. *"The Monarch of Wit"*
- Payne, F.W. --- *"John Donne and His Poetry"*
- Redpath, Theodore.1983. *"Songs and Sonnets of John Donne"*

Watts, Cedric. 1990. "The Conceit of the Conceit"

Waller, Gary. 1993. "English Poetry of the Sixteenth Century"

White, Helen C. 1937 "The Metaphysical Poets"
