



TREATMENT OF WOMEN IN JOHN DONNE'S POETRY

Mohd Ishaq Shah

SET MA English University of Kashmir
Srinager J&K.

Abstract

The poetry of John Donne is incomplete without the mention of women. His poetry is wanderer after the theme of women as he is wanderer after fair sex.. Every thought for him was an experience (Eliot). So he has depicted different and complex experiences of women's love. Accordingly he treated women in his poems. His treatment of woman in love is cynic (misogynistic), erotic (Ovidian) and spritual (christain platonic). Donne has objectified women ,exploited women and eternalised women by treating them respectively through the lines. Being metaphysical and affected by renaissance, Donne depicted pragmatism through poetry .He interminngled profane and divine, physical and spiritual, the love of god merges with the love of woman ultimately. .Donne's Verse Letters shows that Gender dynamics' were central to Donne from the beginning.

Key words: Misogyny , platonic love, amorous ,canonization

John Donne(1672-1731) was a trend setter in english poetry. He invented a new kind of poetry in 17th century and installed a milestone in the history of english literature .His bold departure from contemporary conventions in the style, themes and treatment of subject earned him a badge of metaphysical poet. His obscurity, ambiguity, complexity and wit all contributed to this end. Donne was known as a 'ladies' poet. Infact his poetry is encompassing the subject matter revolving around the women. In creating poetry that seems to demonstrate intimate relationship with the women mastery of John Donne is worth to be examined. When we give Donne's ambiguous, enigmatic language the close attention it demands, his attitude towards women, sexuality, and gender becomes more multi-faceted, more complicated, and less predictable than it might at first sight. One can see Donne as a staunch misogynist, a great devotee of women in mutual love, or a lover willing to risk everything for the woman he adores.

In his earlier career as a poet Donne was wandering after women. He was crazy after them therefore wanted to have an intimacy with them but surprised. The character of these women, as he experienced urged him to take a stance that made him a perpetuator of misogyny. According to sociologist Allan G. Johnson, "misogyny is a cultural attitude of hatred for females because they are female". Johnson argues that: Misogyny is a central part of sexist prejudice and ideology and, as such, is an important basis for the oppression of females in male-dominated societies. Misogyny functions as an ideology or belief system that has accompanied patriarchal, or male-dominated societies for thousands of years and continues to place women in subordinate positions with limited access to power and decision making. Same ideology was prevailing in 17th century England and Donne experienced and reflected it in his earlier poems. Donne attacked infidelity of women. John Donnes earlier poems are cynical. It is the time when he used to wander after the women and recieved their coldness and infidelity. So in the poems of this period he favoured the thought "frailty thy name is woman" . In "Go and catch a

falling star" Donne expresses his misogynic tune about infidelity of women. He exaggerates this by giving us a list of impossible tasks so as to make his point. In strong argument he boasted that it is as impossible to get a faithful woman in this world.

Go and catch a falling star/Get a child with
a mandrake root
As it is impossible to catch a falling star, get child from mandrake root so it is impossible to find a beautiful and faithful woman. Donne is cock sure that such type of woman is difficult to exist,

And swear/ No where
Lives a woman true, and fair.

It clear from the same poem that Donne didn't criticise women as gender but as women who commit infidelity and are cheating dishonest and faithless. In 'Twickham Garden' too Donne laments the faithlessness of women but here too of infidel woman and praises her mistress as truer and faithful. Oh perverse sex, where none is true but she,/ Who's therefore true, because her truth kills me. And Alas ! hearts do not in eyes shine,/Nor can you more judge women's thoughts by tears, Than by her shadow what she wears..... In Love's Alchemy Donne degrades women as mind less creatures as mummies . Hope not for mind in women; at their best/Sweetness and wit, they're but mummy, possess'd.

Subjugation of women in male dominated system is reality of time. John Donne has used daring conceits to show mastery over her beloved. In a colonial view she is treated as a state conquest. Like a ruler he has conquered state and now ready to exploit; O my America! my new-found-land,/My kingdom, safest when with one man mann'd, My Mine of precious stones, My Empirie,/How blest am I in this discovering thee! In 'Sun Rising' too the exploitative tone is revealed when Donne writes: She's all states, and all princes, I,/Nothing else is./Princes do but play us , The poet doesn't want to be disturbed to exploit the moments of love even by sun rays. Like a dictator he directs even natural entities to follow his directions and be not a hurdle in his path. Modern critics have changed the stand Donne is being viewed. They see Donne's boldness in depiction of sexual act as realistic as anything. If the woman is his kingdom and his empire, he is her king and emperor, reveling unabashedly in his masculine dominion over her.

Donne at times treats women as equals of men. Though his beloved is always a silent passive listener, he tries to make her active. If male is proud of his masculinity why can't be a woman of her femininity. Is not this in tune with present feminist arena? In depicting the erotic love Donne is director of his beloved. He teaches him how to be while in love act. For Donne sexual act was a passion than a prudence. It gives him exetasis and spiritual comfort. In 'To His Coy Mistress Going To Bed' he gives vivid sensuality of her beloved to get ready for intercourse. But a far fairer world encompassing /Unpin that spangled breastplate which you wear, That the eyes of busy fools may be stopped there /Unlace yourself, for that harmonious chime, This carnal treatment of women love has been passion for Donne as lustful and erotic. But being Ovidian disciple, he clings to his sensual realism: His sincere and pragmatic emotion he expresses as;

Licence my roving hands, and let them go, /Before, behind, between, above, below. O my America!
my new-found-land , /My kingdom, safest when with one man mann'd, My Mine of precious stones, My
Empirie, /How blest am I in this discovering thee! To enter in these bonds, is to be free;

In creating poetry that seems to demonstrate intimate relationships between men and women, seventeenth century poet, John Donne has often been criticized for being crude. His use of detailed descriptions of women's bodies has caused him to pick up much negative criticism. As critic Andrew Hadfield explains, because of its content, Donne's work was not always readily accepted. In taking his inspiration from the Roman poet, Ovid he at times wrote with what Hadfield refers to as a "frantic lust". In 'Flea' he becomes more erotic and carnal. His persuasive tune urges his beloved to yield. The intermingling of profane and divine is distinction of this

poem. Petrarch had loved Laura and sighed his unrequited love in sonnets. This became a tradition to be followed by Spenser, Sidney and Shakespeare. Donne modified Petrarch in his own end. Donne's love is a flash of fire to be quenched in a physical consumption. There is no sublimity of Petrarchan love but a common realm and immediacy.

Petrarch had an influence on Renaissance England that created a wave of poetry that portrays the speaker as a "submissive, yearning, endlessly devoted, and frustrated lover" who idealized an unattainable and chaste woman. By rejecting this Petrarchan subject position and instead using Ovid's influence, Donne used intimate details about women's bodies to portray an intimacy that is both physical and spiritual. But no doubt there are instances of Petrarchan courtly love both implicitly and explicitly. The Petrarchan poets sang about the pains and sorrows of love, the sorrows of detachment, and the pains of rejection by the cruel mistress. But Donne, in sharp contrast to the Petrarchan poets, considered love to be mutual and self-sufficient. In the poems 'The Canonization' and 'The Sunne Rising', he expresses the delight of mutual love-making, without reference to outside interference, and with no hint of inadequacy in the beloved. Donne often tells about separation but in an unconventional way. For example, A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning Donne tells us about the mystical union between him and his beloved despite their discreet position;

So let us melt, and
'Twere profanation of our joy/ To tell
The Platonic vein is high when speaker says her beloved
Care less, eyes, lips,

make no noise,/No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;
the laity our love.
That our selves know not what it is/Inter-assured of the mind,
and hands to miss.

His beloved is having

such an exalted character that her firmness and constancy makes him to move around her to complete his circle and terminates him where he has begun. (Valediction: Forbidding Mourning)

In the poems of Donne's Petrarch influenced peers, woman is placed upon a pedestal on which she is adored for her soft bosom or her fair head. By rejecting the Petrarchan subject position his work reflects the beliefs of a man who believes this type of empty adoration should be abandoned and replaced with intimacy. What makes Donne so innovative is the way his poems describe an intimacy between the speaker and addressed. He does this through his detailed descriptions of women's bodies (as in "The Comparison") as well as in poems in which he focuses on their spiritual connection.

For Donne spiritual union which is hallmark of Petrarchan love is subservient to physical love. Souls can't unite until bodies do not copulate. Unless hands don't touch beloveds hands, eyes can't reflect relationship and when eyes don't souls can't be one. Therefore physical and spiritual dichotomy ended and these became complimentary in Donne. Spiritual union is envisaged by physical union. In 'Good Morrow' the speaker describes love as a profound experience that's almost like a religious epiphany. Indeed, the poem claims that erotic love can produce the same effects that religion can. Through love, the speaker's soul awakens; because of love, the speaker abandons the outside world; in love, the speaker finds immortality. The physical love transcends into the spiritual love:

For love, all love
Let sea-discoverers to new
worlds have gone,

And now good-morrow to our waking souls,/Which watch not one another out of fear;
of other sights controls,/And makes one little room an everywhere.

What can be more courtly and romantic love than Donne's treatment of love in 'Anniversary'. Donne says, in Anniversary, addressing his beloved: 'Everything from kings to the sun in the sky is now one year older than when you and I first clapped eyes on each other. Everything else, however, is in decline, moving towards its own death, whereas our love is different from them because it knows no decay. Our love has no tomorrow, and no yesterday, because it's timeless; our love runs and runs, but never runs away from us; but instead, it remains as strong as the day we first met. When bodies are buried in the grave, the souls rise up from the bodies – because our souls will rise from our corpses to find each other again. When our souls are united even in death, we will be thoroughly blessed.

The continuum of earthly and heavenly love, the merging of profane and divine love, and spiritualisation of physical love at the mature of poems, Donne elevates his beloved from earthly to heavenly stature. The poet thinks encounter with women's love leads him to merge with the God. In this experience the marriage bed becomes temple and Love becomes religion of priest (lover)'Flea'. Poet justifies the holiness of his affair with women with the hope that his saintly relationship will become a model for others to follow. (Canonisation). Love of emerges as a religious epiphany Donne agrees with Plato that true love is spiritual. It is a union of the souls. But unlike Plato, Donne doesn't ignore the claims of the body. It is the body that brings the lovers together. Love begins in sensuous apprehension, and spiritual love follows the sensuous. So the claim of the body must not be ignored. Union of bodies is essential to make possible the union of souls. This poem brings together (or juxtaposes) opposites; the poet has also reconciled such opposites as the medieval and the modern the spiritual and physical, the scientific or secular and the religious, the abstract and the concrete. Sat we two, one another's best.

Our hands were firmly cemented/With a fast balm, which thence did spring;

Our eye-beams twisted, and did thread/ Our eyes upon one double string;

So to intergraft our hands, as yet/Was all the means to make us one,

And pictures in our eyes to get/ Was all our propagation Our souls (which
to advance their state Were gone out)/ hung 'twixt her and me.

And whilst our souls negotiate there,/We like sepulchral statues lay;

This variety of emotions across Donne's poetry represents push and pull male and female interactions – from the struggle a man has with the power of woman's "gnawing kisses", to the joy of finding a woman with a soul with whom he is "mix'd equally". It shows the unpredictability of love and for this reason, Donne's lover, especially in his Elegies, rejects a constant sort of fairy tale idea of love in which the woman is beautiful and perfect and the man simply loves her. This type of flattery, according to Donne is "poorly enrich'd with great men's words or looks" with nothing to substantial to go along with it. It mocks "notions of constancy and faithfulness" almost in such a way that Donne's lover seems to pity the type of lovers that are caught up in an obsession with a woman who they do not really know and therefore cannot truly love. To wrap up Donne has treated woman as object of his subject. He has exploited the theme for his form. He celebrated his encounter with women with full passion and exploited conjugal love to substantiate his poetry. Lastly this theme faithfully helped the priest to complete his religion. Physical intercourse helped to attain spiritual unity in heaven. *Donne's Verse Letters shows that Gender dynamics' were central to Donne from the beginning. "These early poems show Donne building the foundation of his 'house of language' with, precisely, the feminine as building material" (Meakin 25) and latter poems gave philosophy of essence of physical interaction for spiritual union in heaven.*

References:

Campton Rickets ; A History of English Literature.

T. S. Eliot, 1950. Metaphysical Poets.

Grierson, Herbert J. C. 1962 "Donne's Love Poetry".

Anthony Low, "The Reinvention of Love".

www.poetryfoundation.com.