

Metaphysical Poetry and John Donne

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ABSTRACT

Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy dealing with the relationship between mind and matter or between the physical world and human consciousness. 'Metaphysics' means after physics or beyond physics. Metaphysical deals with the ideas/objects that are beyond the existence of the physical world. Metaphysical poets are interested in the interplay between the world of the mind or the spirit or soul and the physical world. They often give concrete form to abstract ideas through their unusual images and comparisons. Metaphysical poetry was at its peak in the beginning of the seventeenth century in England. During this period, poets relaxed their previously strict use of meter and explored new ideas. Dryden was the first to use the term "metaphysical" in connection with Donne and Dr. Johnson later described Donne and his followers as the metaphysical poets. T. S. Eliot is one of the many twentieth-century literary critics who helped to establish the well-deserved reputation that these poets now hold. John Donne was the best known metaphysical poet. He was the pioneer of this kind of poetry. The other notable metaphysical poets were Abraham Cowley, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw and Henry Vaughan. The metaphysical poetry is characterized by intellectual tone, philosophical or reflective elements, new and original conceits, wit, fusion of intellect and emotion, i.e. unified sensibility, scholarly allusions, dramatic tone, colloquial speech, paradox, relaxed use of meter etc. In this paper, important aspects or characteristics of metaphysical poetry have been discussed and analyzed with reference to the poetry of John Donne.

KEYWORDS:- metaphysics, wit, conceit, colloquialism, paradox, unified, sensibility

I. INTRODUCTION :-

John Donne was born in 1572. He studied both law and religion. Donne was catholic by birth, but in 1597, he embraced the Church of England and became Anglican. His belief in the old faith struggled against the impact of the established church. His intellectual spirit detached itself from Catholicism. His conversion to Anglicanism was due to intellectual pervasion. Donne sought poetry and divinity. He was promoted to the post of Dean of St. Paul's in 1621. He died in 1631. Donne gave a sincere and passionate quality to the Elizabethan lyric. He was the pioneer and founder of metaphysical poetry.

The term 'metaphysical' means beyond (meta) physical nature (physical). John Dryden was the first to use this term in connection with the poetry of John Donne by saying that he "affects the metaphysics". Later, Dr. Johnson described Donne and his followers as metaphysical poets. About metaphysical poetry R.S. Hillyer writes: "Literally it has to do with the conception of existence, with the living universe and man's place therein. Loosely, it has taken such meanings as these- difficult, philosophical, obscure, ethereal, involved, supercilious, ingenious, fantastic and incongruous." John Donne, Abraham Cowley, George Herbert, Thomas Carew, John Suckling, Richard Lovelace and Andrew Marvell were the notable metaphysical poets. According to Grierson, Donne's poetry is metaphysical not only in the sense of being erudite and witty, but in the proper sense of reflective and philosophical. Dr. Johnson in his "Life of Cowley" states about metaphysical poetry: "About the beginning of the seventeenth century appeared a race of writers that may be termed the metaphysical poets. The metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavour. If the father of criticism (ie Aristotle) has rightly denominated poetry an imitative art, these writers will, without great wrong, lose their right to the name of poets, for they cannot be said to have imitated anything, they neither copied nature nor life, neither painted the forms of matter, nor represented the operations of intellect. Their thoughts are often new but seldom natural. The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together. Nature and art are ransacked for illustration, comparisons and allusions, their learning instructs and their subtlety surprises, but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought and though he sometimes admires is seldom pleased. Their courtship was void of fondness and their lamentation of sorrow. Their wish was only to say what they hoped had been never said before. Their attempts were analytic, they broke every image into fragments and could no more represent, by their slender conceits and labored particulars the prospects of nature or the scenes of life, than he who dissects a sunbeam with a prism can exhibit the wide effulgence of a summer noon." Although Dr. Johnson attacked the metaphysical poets and used the term in derogatory sense for Donne, the

qualities which he enumerated about Donne's, poetry are valid. Metaphysical poetry had two broad divisions : (i) love poetry and (ii) religious poetry. Donne wrote both amorous and religious verses with the same passions. Later, in the middle of the seventeenth century. Metaphysical poetry split up into two groups – one group writing secular or love poetry the other group writing religious poetry. The cavalier poets- like Thomas Carew, Suckling and Lovelace wrote only amorous verses while George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Henry Vaughan wrote devotional lyrics who got their inspiration from the religious hymns and sermons of Donne.

Characteristics of metaphysical poetry with reference to the poetry of John Donne :-

Grierson observes that the metaphysical exhibited deductive reasoning carried to a high pitch. Often Donne states at the beginning of a poem a hopelessly insupportable proposition which he defends later. According to Johnson, the metaphysical poets were men of learning and they desired to say what they hoped had been never said before. They endeavoured to be singular in their thought and were careless of their diction.”

LEARNING :-

Dr. Johnson noted that metaphysical poets sometimes drew their conceits from recesses of learning not very much frequented by common readers of poetry. Metaphysical poetry is laden with the scholarship of its authors.

A whole book of knowledge might be compiled from the scholarly allusions in Donne and Cowley alone. Such learning is an enrichment of the poet's mind, and part of the equipment for his high vocation.

UNIFIED SENSIBILITY :-

T.S. Eliot popularized the phrase ‘unified sensibility’. According to him, after the seventeenth century, there has been either poetry of thought or poetry of feeling. Such a separation of thought from feeling is called dissociation of sensibility. But in the early part of the seventeenth century feeling and thought were combined, they were one operation of the mind. This is called ‘unified sensibility’ or ‘unification of sensibility’. John Donne and other metaphysical poets had a unified sensibility. Their poetry expresses through thinking and feeling. For example in the poem ‘ The Canonization’ , the lovers will be regarded as saints of love and worshiped accordingly. Donne blends thought and feeling in his conceits to achieve this unification of sensibility. The situation remains emotional while its treatment and description is intellectual.

CONCEITS :-

Conceits are unusual and fantastic similes. They are farfetched images. Metaphysical poets indulge in discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently dislike. Through conceits most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together. Donne's conceits are metaphysical because they are taken from the extended world of knowledge from science, astrology, astronomy, scholastic philosophy, fine art etc. In the poem ‘the Flea’ the comparison of the flea to a bridal bed or a marriage temple is an example of an elaborate conceit.

“This flea is you and I this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is”

(The flea, lines 12-13)

Another example of conceit is from the poem ‘The Sun Rising’ where the beloved's bed is the universe and walls are the sphere.

“This bed thy centre is, these wall thy sphere”

(The Sun Rising, line 30)

COLLOQUIALISM:-

The use of colloquial speech is an important feature of metaphysical poetry, as far as Donne is concerned. This is especially apparent in the abrupt, conversational opening of many of his poems, following are some instances :-

“For God's sake, hold thy tongue, and let me love”

(The Canonization)

“Busy old fool, unruly sun”

(The sun Rising)

“Go and catch a falling star, Get with child a mandrake root”

(Go and catch a falling star)

“Batter my heart, three- personed God,”

(Batter My Heart)

HYPERBOLISM AND EXAGGERATION:-

Most of Donne's poems abound in hyperbolism and exaggeration. ``The Sun Rising', 'Go and Catch a falling Star ', 'Death Be Not Proud' and many other poems have an abundance of hyperbolism and exaggeration. Hyperbole is a figure of speech in which statements are exaggerated or extravagant. Some examples are as follows :-

'From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow.'

(Death be not proud)

"She is all states and all princes I Nothing else is "

(The Sun Rising)

"Ride ten thousand days and nights
Till age snow white hairs on thee"

(Go and Catch a Falling Star)

PARADOX :-

A paradox is a self- contradictory situation or statement. It is contradictory or unbelievable or absurd that may be true in fact. Donnes' many poems abound in paradoxes. Dr. Johnson compares Donne's paradoxes to remarks made by epicurean deities on the actions of men, devoid of interest or emotion.

Some example of paradoxes used by Donne are as follows :-

"And death shall be no more, Death thou shalt die."

(Death Be Not Proud)

"Take me to you, imprison me, for I
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free."

(Batter My Heart)

WIT :-

Wit is the ability to use words in an amusing way. Wit is the keen perception and cleverly apt expression of those connections between ideas that awaken amusement and pleasure. Wit is synonymous with understanding, intelligence, wisdom, cleverness, sanity and insight. John Donne has been called 'the Monarch of wit. Pope said," Donne had no imagination, but as much wit, I think, as any writer can possibly have. " Donne's wit is deliberate and peculiar. It impresses us with the intellectual vigour and force and does not merely lie in the dexterous or ingenious use of words; it comes naturally from his expansive knowledge and deep scholarship. Donne's wit lies in the discovery of conceits, in the assembly and synthesis of ideas which appear dissimilar or incongruous. It also lies in the use of paradox pun, oxymoron and word- play.

II. CONCLUSION :-

John Donne's poetry is metaphysical because it is reflective, philosophical and deals with the subjects of religion, God, Death and platonic love and it employs conceits and wit and is characterized by the display of learning, hyperbolism and exaggeration, colloquial speech, argumentation and paradox. Though metaphysical poetry was criticized by Dr. Johnson who considered this type of poetry to be full of heterogeneous ideas or elements yoked by violence together, it has been highly appreciated by T.S, Eliot who finds Donne's wit in the fusion of thought and feeling which he calls 'unified sensibility' or "sensuous apprehensions of thought." He commended Donne's images, conceits, abruptness, juxtaposition, his unique wit and loved his literary craftsmanship. Donne's poetry influenced not only T.S, Eliot, but W.B. Yeats, Rupert Brooke and W.H. Auden. Donne's mind was full of curiosity and the Renaissance spirit of adventure and exploration. This modern spirit is seen in his skepticism, self- analysis, introspection and self- consciousness. There is a close similarity between the age of Donne and the modern age. Both the ages were periods of transition, when the old values were challenged. Both ages were disturbed by political conflict, violence and insecurity. Donne's metaphysical poetry appeals to the modern reader who gives importance to learning, intellectuality, argumentation and scientific thinking. Due to the presence of these elements in the metaphysical poetry, modern readers take interest in it and this accounts for its revival in the modern age.

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