

A Study of Patriarchy, Misogyny and Sexual Politics in the poetry of John DonneDr. Abhisarika Prajapati^{1*}, Anwesh Banerjee², Shanzah Ahmad²¹Asst. Professor (English), School of Arts & Humanities, REVA University, Rukmini Knowledge Park, Kattigenahalli, Yelahanka, Near Border Security Bustop, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India²M.A. Student, School of Arts & Humanities, REVA University, Rukmini Knowledge Park, Kattigenahalli, Yelahanka, Near Border Security Bustop, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India***Corresponding author**

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Abstract: The 17th century saw the rise of John Donne, the most celebrated metaphysical poets of his age, who broke away from the conventional Petrarchan style of poetry and introduced the concept of 'metaphysical conceits' in his poetry. While the poet is highly eulogised for his erotic poems, what readers often fail to realize is that his poems reek of patriarchy and is replete with the recurrent images of commodification of women. His fetishism with the female body is often overlooked and his poems are misinterpreted as lending the female gender a fair chance of being vocal about their sexual urges. However, where is the female voice? This paper seeks to examine John Donne's poems through a feminist perspective and thus, provide a new insight into some of his carefully curated poems.

Keywords: objectification, patriarchy, feminism, voiceless, misogyny, Donne.

INTRODUCTION

"Women in her greatest perfection was made to serve and obey man" [1].

As stated by John Knox, the Scottish Protestant leader forms the crux of the Elizabethan society in the 17th century. The moth-eaten fabric of the Elizabethan society is perfectly described by the above-mentioned quote. Despite having a woman as the supreme ruling figure, the patriarchal society moulded women to fit into the roles of obedient, docile daughters and mothers.

The law of primogeniture prevailed and all titles passed on from the father to the first-born son, the only exception being the monarch herself. To secure her throne and the power that was associated with it, Elizabeth proclaimed her marriage to England, which gave her the identity of the Virgin Queen. A conventional marriage would mean submission to a man and a transfer of power. The fact that a woman, in order to retain her power, had to sacrifice the pleasures of life raises a finger on the oppressive society.

Both the upper and lower-class Elizabethan women were caught up in the patriarchal flux, the only difference being in the education the former received which the latter did not. While the upper-class women had tutors teaching them the Greek and French languages besides the various forms of fine arts, the lower class women had to master the skills of managing a household. The single women were doubly marginalized and were the first ones to be questioned about their character and chastity.

The thought processes prevailing in the society had a huge influence on the literary output of the age. Eminent writers like William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson,

Andrew Marvell and John Donne have constantly given shape to the concept of a chaste and fair woman being pursued by a man. Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" talks about how "worms shall try/Those long preserved virginity" [2].

Adding to the legacy was John Donne, a famous 17th century poet, who portrayed women as mere shadows of men, thus, denying them an identity of their own. Objectification is the act of reducing a person to a mere object. It also involves rendering a person voiceless and either speaking on their behalf or not shedding light on their perspective at all. When analysed through the lenses of feminism, John Donne's objectification of women becomes evident. The woman in his poems is a visually appealing object, far removed from the centre. She is discriminated on the basis of her sex and thus, becomes a victim of the male dominated patriarchal regime.

"Hope not for mind in women; at their best Sweetness and wit they' are but mummy, possess 'd." [3]

John Donne, for whom women but nothing but vessels which could be possessed for the gratification of

sexual needs, was celebrated as one of the greatest love poets during the 17th century. Born in 1572, John Donne in an attempt to break away from the conventionality of Petrarchan sonnets gave impetus to metaphysical conceits to bring out the themes of love, sex and spirituality in his poems.

John T. Shawcross in “Some Rereading of John Donne’s Poems” argues that we should not reduce Donne’s achievement as a poet “by limiting our reading to only one way of reading—whether as biography, or as limited to a male coterie, or as directed to a specific person only.” [4] Suggests, in particular, that one way to arrive at a fuller meaning in Donne’s poems is not only “to see the woman in the poem” [4].

But also “the woman reader outside the poem,” [4] (who may or may not read the poem differently from a man. Maintains, however, that “the female reader in the poem should not blank out the female and male reader outside the poem” [4].

Points out that although recognizing the “biographical underpinnings” [4] of some of Donne’s poems may lead to rereading of certain poems, “we should not become extreme” [4], demanding that others have similar underpinnings.

Shawcross’ argument about maintaining a gender neutral perspective cannot be applied while analysing John Donne’s poems because the issues of commodification of women and silencing of the female voice are too serious to be overlooked.

In the poem “Elegy: To His Mistress Going to Bed”, John Donne appears to believe in the act of intercourse as the be all and end all of the essence of spiritual love. The poet persona is seen exercising absolute power over the body of his mistress thus revealing his despotic nature. The speaker in the poem assumes a dominant position while his mistress settles for the subservient role. He commands her to shed her inhibitions which can be inferred from the following lines-

*“Unlace yourself, for that harmonious chime,
Tells me from you, that now it is bed time.” [5]*

The poem is heavily infused with sensual and erotic imagery which is instrumental in reasserting the manhood of the speaker. The poem brings about the idea of validating the female body with the seal of a man’s touch-

“Then where my hand is set, my seal shall be” [6].

A poem so replete with erotic images has been defended on grounds of Neo-Platonism, the justification being that as the soul must remove itself from the body, the body must remove itself from the clothes.

“As souls unbodied, bodies uncloth’d must be,” [6]

If John Donne believes that sex is an act of attaining spirituality, then why does he deny the mistress of her voice or opinion in the process of spiritual awakening? There is a clear-cut marginalization of the mistress in the poem where she is robbed not only of her identity but also of her decisive power. A speculation also arises regarding the age of the mistress. Since the speaker instructs the mistress for a simple act of undressing herself, the following questions can be raised- Was she a minor? Was the act of lovemaking mutual or was it forced? Clearly, there is a magnification of the male desire and treatment of the woman as a child-like being who will be taught by the male.

“To teach thee, I am naked first;” [6]

On the surface, the poem has conventionally come to stand for the unification of lovemaking and spirituality. When probed deeper, it could also mean rape or child molestation. John Donne has truly embarked upon a conquest of sexual imperialism.

In “Woman’s Constancy”, as the title suggests, the poet has questioned the stability of a woman’s nature. The poet persona is sceptical about his partner’s fidelity and her willingness to abide by the commitment that she has made to him. Shedding light on the future and its uncertainties, the speaker is certain of the forthcoming excuses that his lover would make. This is a clear projection of his imminent fears and paranoia.

Firstly, “Woman’s Constancy” is constant in terms of denying the woman a voice of her own. All the decisions and assumptions are made by the speaker where he indirectly accuses his lover of having a fickle mind. Secondly, the speaker’s thoughts, shrouded with pessimism, make him believe that his relationship will have a futile end. The lover, by placing his foreboding at the centre, pushes the woman and her perspectives to the periphery, thus establishing a markedly visible dichotomy.

“Go and catch a falling star”, one of the songs composed by John Donne, is an assertion of his belief that fair and faithful women do not exist. The poet persona is seen addressing a youth and assuring him that finding a ‘virtuous’ woman is similar to catching a falling star. The misogynistic tone of the poem establishes Donne’s belief that coming across a woman who is morally upright is a myth.

*“All strange wonders that befell thee,
And swear,
No where
Lives a woman true, and fair” [7].*

Even if one does hear about such a woman, John Donne is certain that by the time the speaker meets her in person, she would have already lost her chastity which is evident in the following lines-

*“And last, till you write your letter,
Yet she
Will be
False, ere I come, to two, or three.”* [7]

John Donne does not fail to calumniate the woman's character even in this poem. He establishes his image as a misogynist who believes that women are inherently unfaithful and fickle minded. The speaker in the poem is seen to be indulging in the propagation of patriarchy as he conditions the mind of another individual. Unlike John Donne's other poems, "Go and catch a falling star" does not have the physical presence of a mistress. Instead, he assassinates the character of women all over the world by passing an unwarranted judgement. Donne's insularity is highlighted when he talks about a woman being "true and fair"- Do chastity and beauty deem a woman true and fair?

Transcending the satiation of carnal desires to the realm of spirituality is the theme of "The Flea" written by John Donne. In the poem, the speaker coaxes the mistress to engage in sexual intercourse because she is unwilling to "yield'st" to the speaker. The flea becomes a symbol of the unification of the microcosm with the macrocosm. The Flea is also an extended metaphor for the nuptial bed.

On analysing deeper, we realize that "The Flea" is a silent commodification of a woman's body under the garb of spirituality. An alternative reading of the poem could also suggest a possible case of pregnancy which is evident in the following lines-

*“And in this flea our two bloods mingled be; /
And pampered swells with one blood made of two”* [8],

The woman's willingness to kill the flea can be interpreted as her wish to abort the unborn foetus. However, she has been robbed of her reproductive rights as the speaker constantly persists her to not kill the flea. She has been deprived of her sense of ownership over her body. Thus, "The Flea" composed in the 17th century is relevant even in the 21st century as women are still fighting for the right to abort.

Inhabiting the ocean of love, are men as the fish and the woman as the bait – this was the underlying idea of "The Bait" composed by John Donne. With the use of metaphysical conceit and vivid imagery, the poet throws a word of caution to all the men stating that –

*“That fish that is not catch'd thereby,
Alas, is wiser far than I”* [9].

As is evident throughout the poem, John Donne is seen highlighting the alluring nature of a woman stating how she uses her charm as a bait to trap men-

“For thou thyself art thine own bait” [9].

Already bewitched by the woman, he invites her to live with him or probably marry him so that they can together "pleasures prove."- hinting at his willingness to have sex with her. Rereading of the poem reveals the sorcerous powers of the woman and her art of seduction that Donne has tried to elucidate. The poet persona's love for the woman is hypocritical. Though he claims that the woman's presence in his life is so illuminating that he does not require the light of the celestial bodies,

*“By sun or moon, thou dark'nest both,
And if myself have leave to see,
I need not their light having thee”* [9].

Yet he asserts that the men who have not fallen prey to her enchantments are wise unlike him. Similar to Geoffrey Chaucer's portrayal of the Wife of Bath in "The Canterbury Tales" as a seductress, the woman in "The Bait" has also been labelled as the same.

John Bunyan referred to women as "that simple and weak sex" [10]. He disapproved of separate women's meetings, which did nothing but encourage 'unruliness.' According to Bunyan, in any public gathering, "her part is to hold her tongue, to learn in silence" [10].

Contributing to John Bunyan's belief of the weaker sex as passive and dim-witted, John Donne's poems have completely deprived the women of her voice. In all of his poems mentioned in this paper, a woman's character and her reputation have been dissected and demeaned by viewing her through the lens of patriarchy.

During the 17th century, Aphra Behn served as a voice for the marginalized women and wrote narratives of resistance to counter the narratives of oppression. In her poem, "The Disappointment", she talks about love, sex and power. The poem serves as a ray of modern hope of equality for women. As women were conventionally expected to be modest and pious, Behn brought in the perspective that women too were capable of intelligence and greatness. The idea of possession of a woman which is glorified in the poems of John Donne like "The Flea" and "Lovers Infiniteness" has also been mentioned in "The Disappointment".

*“And now, without Respect or Fear,
He seeks the Objects of his Vows;
His Love no Modesty allows”* [11].

As Lisander wants to possess Cloris because he is attracted to her. Unlike Donne, Behn brings in the woman's perspective showing that Cloris was hesitant initially and was eventually forced by Lisander.

Although critics view Donne as a poet who constructed the bridge between love and spirituality but his markedly visible distortion of the woman's body and soul cannot be overlooked. This paper aims at giving a voice to the voiceless and passively existing woman or mistress in the poems of John Donne.

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