

LOVE POEMS OF JOHN DONNE : ICONS OF DIFFERENCES AND DIVERSITIES

Nishat Sultana *

Abstract

When the stilted and worn-out trend of Petrarch and Ronsard has cheapened the English love lyric, John Donne has appeared with a new approach--- completely of his own—realistic, platonic, metaphysical and so on--- showing the many facets of the theme of love. This paper aims to illustrate John Donne as a great love poet projecting the varied diversified nature of his treatment of love that has added an extra colour to his poetry.

Key-words: Love, metaphysics, conceit, psycho-analysis.

Human life without emotion and love becomes colour-less and robotic. Love kindles hope and positivity to life and drives it in a flying colour. Born at a time, when the writing of love poems was both a fashionable and a literary exercise after the repeated cliché set-themes of his predecessors, the poems of Donne have sparked with many strings---dazzling and pleasing simultaneously. Indeed, Donne's poetic self is best illustrated in his love poems in an unconventional way with his use of scholastic conceits, his intellectual analysis of situation, his emphasis on 'psycho and its emotional intensity' than mere 'physio'; his lyrical presentation with logical dexterity; above all, his conversational dramatic style—all these really made him unique and distinguished in this field—far ahead of his time.

Donne adopts a very independent, straightforward, modern approach in his love poetry. Donne's famous compilation of love poems *Songs and Sonnets* (1635) portrays his poetic travel through a wide variety of moods and sentiments—from the trivial to the sublime, from the most cynical to the most idealistic, from the despair to the ecstasy, from the zest to the earnest—that leads to an unconventional philosophy of love which is very novel and modern in the then love poetry. Donne's love poetry delineates the emotional attitudes of the lover in such a way that apparently might

* Assistant Professor of English in Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), Dhaka, Bangladesh.

seem that it is, as if, Donne himself is trying to share his experience of love in different occasions.

In fact, Donne creates an epoch-making example bringing change in the existing typical set themes of the Petrarch tradition. The earlier trend was to present the immutable cruelty of the unbearably beautiful mistress and the silent, sighing, weeping, yearning and pining agony of a humble and obsequious lover for his beloved in most love poems. But in Donne, the lover's passive inclination to an unresponsive beloved—is decried in "The Blossome". Thus, the theme of courtship gets a new dimension in Donne's hand. Interestingly, courtship is there in Donne's poetry but that is, unlike a lover languishing for the beloved's rejection but is very bold and aggressive—compelling and violent. Say for example—the expression, the emotion that is expressed in "The Apparition" is not a sentimental dejection due to rejection but a vigorous sense of bitterness, hatred and revenge which seems quite natural and authentic in Donne:

When by thy scorne, O murtheress, I am dead',

...

'Then shall my ghost come to thy bed.

Moreover, Donne deviates deliberately from the Petrarchan tradition as he does not believe in one sided love. The poem "Loves Deitie" gives expression of this outlook:

I cannot thinke that hee, who then lov'd most,

Sunke so low, as to love one which did scorne,

... It cannot bee

Love, till I love her, that loves mee.

Most of the love poets of earlier period have raised their beloveds to the height of a goddess or a supreme being and praised them with utmost hymns and exaggerated adjectives. Thus, Petrarch and Laura have their counterparts in Spencer and Rosalind, in Sidney and Stella or even in Shakespeare and 'dark lady' (quoted in H. Masroor, 1996). But, it is Donne who for the first time has broken this lofty cult of woman—the goddess-and-the-devotee thesis used by the past sonneteers by bringing down both the parties in love to the level of human beings. In 'The Dreame', 'Aire and Angels' and 'To His Mistris Going to Bed', Donne's lady is depicted with a concrete figure, though imbued with an angelic grandeur just to enhance her uncommon appearance and action—but not to

treat and worship her as an unnatural being like ‘the sun’ or ‘the evening star’ to which she is compared.

Indeed, the liberal approach to woman is the most striking quality in Donne. Usually, woman’s modesty and coyness may make one feel that she plays the second fiddle in the orchestra of love-making, but it is quite the opposite in Donne. For, his lady is so much of a flesh-and-blood presence that she can be invited to playequally an active role like a male partner to “act the rest”.

Therefore thou waked’st me wisely;

.....

Enter these arms, for since thou

thought’st it best,

Not to dream all my dream, let’s

act the rest.

[The Dreame]

Thus, this portrayal of woman is quite unconventional as well as original in Donne.

Again, it is seen that Donne at times goes to the extreme line and turns totally negative against the female. As if, being betrayed, he becomes hostile to the ‘fair sex’ and shows cynical contempt for them in mocking tone. As a sheer realist, Donne debunks the idea of female as a personification of virtue and chastity and generalizes woman ever inconsistent in their love, especially in the “Song: Goe and Catche a Falling Starre” where he boldly asserts the harsh reality of not finding a virtuous faithful woman:

Nor can you more judge womans thought by teares,

Than by her shadow, her what she weares.

O perverse sexe, (where none is true but shee).

And again,

No where

Lives a woman true, and faire

—which gives a reverberation of Shakespearean *Hamlet*: “Frailty! Thy Name is woman!” In fact, probably Donne is the first poet who presents woman just as an ordinary human being, capable of love and desire, and therefore, downright able to deceive and be inconstant (Hossain, Masroor).

Actually, Donne analyses the term 'love' blending a number of strains and moods. One of these strains is Platonic one which is found in 'The Blossoms', 'The Primroses', 'Twickenham Garden', 'The Funeral', 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning', etc. where Donne exalts love of the spirit in high Platonic vein with a reflective mood:

Different of sex no more we know
Than our Guardian Angels doe.

Again, Donne uses a series of metaphors to express his mystical experience of love in 'The Canonization':

We are tapers too, and at our own cost die
And we in us find the eagle and the dove.

Also, in 'The Extasie', Donne describes love as a sublime union of two souls.

But, for a love poet like Donne who celebrates the joy of sensuousness, mere spiritual love cannot be that effective without being connected with physical passion to comprehend love in its totality:

Love's mysteries in soules doe grow,
But yet the body is his booke.
-The Extasie

Being influenced both by the medieval and the Renaissance worlds, Donne thus makes a synthesis between the spiritual and physical love, which ties in with the contemporary theory of the 'chain of being'. (Tillyard, E. M. W.)

Moreover, the joys and satiety of the complete consummated love is highlighted in "The Sunne Rising":

She's all States, and all Princes, I,
Nothing else is.

In addition, 'The Anniversarie' reveals the triumph of the mutual—'the wedded love' and its serenity:

Only our love hath no decay;
This, no tomorrow hath, nor yesterday.

However, Donne goes through the whole gamut of passions from its lowest to the highest form which is intensely evident in his "To His Mistris Going to Bed":

Full nakedness: all joys are due to thee,
As souls unbodied, bodies uncloth'd must be
To taste whole joys.

Again, there is a very clear-cut, bold and open sensual appeal:

License my roving hands, and let them go
Before, behind, between, above, below.

---This swinging from the mere romantic to the utmost sensual in English love-lyric is brilliantly unique in Donne.

Actually, Donne wants to embrace the totality of experience, not a slice of life. Hence, this very metaphysics of love—the interconnection of body and soul—leads Donne to another daring revolutionary approach of love that physical union, even though without marriage can be accepted if spiritual love and physical delight is reciprocal. This very bold liberal individualistic attitude is undoubtedly ultra modern in Donne though orthodox persons or moralists may sneer at it.

Surprisingly, Donne remains totally abstained from describing female's charming physique following the usual trend of a poet of love. He is not at all concerned with the feminine beauty but with its effects on the lover and delineates rather the lover's emotion very articulately, analyzing the total situation bit by bit where the lovers are involved in. This psycho-treatment, obviously, is superb and very modern in Donne.

Besides, Donne brings innovation creating his poetry mixing with logical dexterity. Being dramatic in nature, each of his poems deals with a love situation which he analyzed very intellectually with a lawyer-like skill. "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" is throughout a good example of close and continuous arguments within a logical structure. According to Grierson:

His genius temperament and learning gave a certain qualities to his love poems.....which arrest our attention immediately. His love poems, for instance, do have a power which is at once realistic and distracting. [<http://www.css forum.com.pk/2017>].

In fact, as an intellectual poet, Donne has knitted his poetry with the touch of intellect and intelligence. He makes it brilliantly floral and attractive with the help of different figurative languages like images, similes, metaphors, conceits, hyperbole etc. deriving allusions from

different fields of Theology, Religion, Scholastic Philosophy, Astronomy, Science, Mathematics, Medicine and where not! These vast extensive poetic uses conspicuously help enhance the intensity of his poems. Say for instance, the image and diction used in 'The Extasie' and 'To His Mistris Going to Bed' uphold love and sex as a religious experience which is absolutely a new improvisation made by him for the sake of his poetic intensity. Similarly, the ideas and notions expressed in 'The Extasie' are firmly rooted in the scientific theories of his time.[[http:// www.literature-study-online.com/essays/donne.html](http://www.literature-study-online.com/essays/donne.html)].

The scientific framework of Donne's view of love is seen in the stanza below:

But as all severall soules containe
Mixture of things, they know not what,
Love, these mixt soules, doth mixe againe,
And makes both one, each this and that.

---The two souls mix to form a new unity just like the four elements—earth, air, fire and water combine to form new substances. The strength and durability of this new unit is dependent upon how well the elements of the two souls are balanced, as we see in 'The Good- Morrow':

What ever dyes, was not mixt equally;
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
Love so alike, that none doe slacken, none can die.

Indeed, there is a touch of erudition and scholarship everywhere in Donne's love poetry. Donne fascinates his readers brilliantly with the help of fabulous metaphysical conceits and hyperboles which are, unlike Shakespeare and Sidney, part and parcel in his poems— everywhere--inseparable and admirably intellectual and eventually help enrich the depth and ranges of feelings of his wonderful love poems. Inseparable is the conceit of compass in "A Valediction"—how factual and convincing is the depiction of love that must return to its base—its home, after completing a full circle! So, Coleridge rightly says regarding this: "Nothing was ever more admirably made than the figure of the compass" (Hasan, Masroor). This functional use of conceits, not for decoration, but for intensifying the quintessence of the poem makes Donne's poems unforgettable.

Another arena in which Donne excels is his poetic style--- his language and diction. Unlike the elaborate music and soft tones of the

Elizabethans, Donne introduces natural speech rhythms—realistic, conversational, sometimes dramatic, sometime colloquial into lyrical verses:

I wonder by my troth, what thou and I
Did, till we lov'd?

(Good Morrow)

Again, many a poem opens with a very passionate dramatic note:

For God's sake hold your tongue and let me love

(The Canonization)

--This prosaic, rugged, conversational and 'non-poetic' words directly stimulate the feelings of the readers, and lend to his poems an extra interest. So, Grierson writes rightly: "Donne's poetry is a very complex phenomenon, but the two dominant strains in it are just these: the strains of dialectic, subtle play of argument and wit and fantastic; and the strain of vivid realism and a record of passion" (<https://neoenglish.wordpress.com/>).

Donne's poems really display the supremacy of love:

Love, all like, no season knows nor clime,
Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time,

George Saintsbury writes, "To some natures, love comes as above all things, a force quickening the mind, intensifying its purely intellectual energy. Opening new vistas of thought—abstract and subtle, making the soul intensely wondrously alive of such was John Donne". (Chaudhury, Karishma, 2016).

Indeed, it is the drama, the extravagance, the vivid realism, profundity of thought, a spirit of scientific curiosity and interrogation, the subtle analogies, and syllogistic arguments, coupled with a certain roughness of form mark the love poems of Donne, beaconing the spirit of the Restoration and the Romantics. Therefore, Grierson rightly declares that "With Donne, begins a new era in the history of English love-lyric". It is the 'new' that we easily locate in his poems. For, Donne's poetry marks the escapade from the sweetness of Elizabethan verse and artificiality of its style. And Donne, as a rebel breaks the convention not only with a hammer of destruction but also with a hammer of creation. According to T.S. Eliot, "Passionate thinking" and combination of "Thought and feeling" have been the hallmark of Donne's poetry (Chaudhury,

Karishma).Indeed, the poetry of lust has never been written with more minute truth, nor the poetry of love has more transcended sex. The endless variety of tone and temperament makes Donne's love poems singularly original, unconventional, unique and novel both in form and content; and henceforth attracts the readers even of the modern age with the same appeal and intensity of his time.

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