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AMALGAMATION OF LOVE AND RELIGION IN JOHN DONNE'S POETRY

DEEPALI CHOPRA

deepali.chopra.fdk@gmail.com



ABSTRACT

This paper describes the poetry of a well-known poet John Donne, in respect to his combination of love and religious poetry in the context of his metaphysical poems. The main themes of his poetry always aroused from the thought of ecstasy. In his poetry we can find a definite link between human love and divine love. He truly describes how the two souls in love depart from their bodies during their physical union and spiritually join together before returning to their actual bodies. This union purifies them and grants them spiritual satisfaction and fulfillment. Love is dependent on both soul and body. An effort to oppose physical love with the holiness of religion with the help of a series of occult similitude makes his poetry noticeably different and divergent from the stereotypical love poetry that governed the Elizabethan age. There swept a wave of romance in all creative writers with the love poetry of Donne. The spirit of adventure through metaphysical writings, created new literary forms and metres. Donne's independent spirit helped him to produce a poetry which was fresh as well as original and touched the hearts of his readers. He expressed his versatile personal moods and idiosyncrasies. He selected colloquial diction which has power, youthfulness and originality. A discussion of various perspectives of John Donne with the theme of amalgamation of love and religion followed by a brief examination of his especially two most popular works: "The Relic" and "The Canonization".

Keywords: Love, religion, metaphysical, conceit, juxtaposition, spirituality etc.

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John Donne is appraised as the most renowned poet of the metaphysical school of poetry that had prospered in England during the first half of the seventeenth century. But he is never recognized as a major voice of English poetry by the contemporary poets and readers until Doctor Johnson exhibited enthusiasm in his poetry writing in the eighteenth century and its modern restoration in the twentieth century through the essays of T.S Eliot and Herbert Grierson on Metaphysical poets. But today he is remembered as the leading supporter of a new style of verse known as "metaphysical poetry," which thrived in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The term metaphysical had been derived from two different words, where Meta means beyond and the word Physical means the physical surroundings. The term was first used by Dryden in

connection to Donne as he says that he “affects the metaphysical”. Other great metaphysical poets include Andrew Marvell, Robert Herrick, and George Herbert. The main characteristics of the metaphysical poetry were its complexity, intellectual tone, profusion of canny wit, combination of emotions and intellect, argumentative and dramatic tone, use of conceits, allusions, use of philosophical or reflective elements etc. The verse form in the poem are usually simple, but they always suitably justify the sense of the poem. The use of conceits in the metaphysical poetry is another major characteristic. A conceit is an unusual and fantastic simile used in the poem, to emphasize the degree of heterogeneity—the forceful element of variety and violence used to yoke together two dissimilar objects. It was described by Doctor Johnson, in a popular passage in “Life of Cowley”, as a wit which is:

“....,a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things ...most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together.”

Donne’s conceits are metaphysical as they are completely derived from out of the world of knowledge, science, astrology, fine arts, philosophy etc. His use of conceit in his poetry is intellectual and much too far-fetched and obscure. The well-known conceit used by Donne in one of his poems is of the two lovers which have been compared to a pair of compasses, where one of the leg remains fixed at the centre and the other leg is allowed to rotate around, it is the most elaborate and extended conceit. Another elaborate example of a conceit in Donne’s poetry can be seen in the famous poem “The Flea”, where a flea is compared to a bridal bed or a marriage temple.

Donne was born and educated during the high Catholicism when it was proscribed, experiencing a confidential love marriage without proper agreement, after that he turned towards Anglican priesthood and ultimately became the Dean of St. Paul Cathedral Church of England. All of Donne’s first-hand experiences with love and conflicts of religious faith are all modified and used in his poetry in a highly poetic manner. Thus love and religion have some autobiographical references in Donne’s poetry. But, as a true metaphysical poet, Donne treats love and religion in a very strange, unusual and different method from how it was previously represented in Elizabethan poetry. The dominant Petrarchan sonnet used during the Elizabethan age was completely discarded, instead a new approach of poetry known as metaphysical poetry was brought up which was a blend of perception and intellect, between ideology and reason that appears eminently divergent. John Donne uses a technique of pairing sexual language with spiritual subject matter as paradoxical, a paradoxical relationship between love and religion represented in the fundamental issues of Donne’s poems like “The Canonization”, “The Relic”.

All the Songs and Sonnets written by John Donne do not just describe any one view of love, but they express a variety of emotions and feelings. Donne through his defined his experience of love. We can find basically three strands in his love poems. First strand is the cynical which is against woman and aggressive to the fair sex. The main idea is the weakness of man—a matter of advantage for lovers who liked casual and extra-marital relations with ladies. Secondly, there is the strand of happy married life and joy in love. These poems are devoted to the peace and satisfaction to be practiced in a happy marriage. Thirdly, there is the Platonic strand, as in The Canonization, where love is regarded as a holy instinct just as a devotee worships God. He described love as an experience of the body, the soul, or both; it can be either a religious experience, or merely a sensual one. Donne’s poetry gives us an insight into the complicated scope of encounters that can all be truly labeled under ‘Love’. The images used by Donne in his poems like sex, physical attachments and material wealth, and one reading his poems alone would think that he is only interested in women for the satisfaction of his sexual pleasure. But he described sex in terms of a religious experience; a woman as an ‘Angel’ who provides ‘A heaven like Mahomet’s Paradise’ and a bed is ‘loves hallow’d temple’. Although sexual, but he nowhere he says that he loves the woman, or that sex is part of a deeper relationship.

Donne treats physical love just as divine love. In one of his poems, “The Canonization”, he describes love in different moods and different visions. The title of the poem is itself evident of the theme carried out in the poem. In this poem, he has taken up a completely positive and serious view of love. It is a selfish and saintly love justified of respect and worship. In the poem, we can see his great attachment and dedication

towards his beloved-Ann Moore, though being in love with her brought up disrespect and a bad reputation for him. In the very first lines of the poem, the speaker is addressing another person who is practically present and may be does not approve of his love affair with his beloved he says: "For God's sake, hold your tongue and let me love". The poem is a kind of passionate dramatic monologue through which the speaker is defending his act of love. The speaker asks him to keep mum and warns him not to interfere in the matter of his love. But the poem from its very beginning becomes very aggressive as the words suggest "For God's sake", where it refers to an acerbic suggestion of the speaker to defend his love. The main idea that is carried in the poem throughout is that his love does not interfere with the lives of the other people.

"Alas, alas, who's injur'd by my love?
 What merchant ships have my sighs drown'd?
 Who saies my teares have overflow'd his ground?
 When did my colds a forward spring remove?
 When did the heats which my veines fill
 Adde one man to the plaguie Bill?"

Donne's passion towards love is physical and other lovers also believe in sexual satisfaction. The bodies in physical love become one and so do their souls, as it is said, it happens in a religious mystery. Donne regards physical love as a spiritual combination. He says that the saints are canonized for leaving the world and the comforts associated with it. In the exact similar way, the lovers have also rejected the material world. He conveys the idea that his love for his beloved does not concern anyone in the world as the formal duties of the people are going on as per schedule, but he has gained more in the company of the love for his beloved. He calls himself and other lovers as saints who have left behind the world and whose blessings others lovers will supplicate. Other lovers will pray to God to grant them with the same true love which was enjoyed by the poet and his beloved. As lovers they are devoted to one another in the same way as a saint is devoted towards his God. It can be regarded as a paradox of Christian Canonization but the poem is well said, serious in tone and convincing at the same time. Physical love of the lovers is promoted to the plane of spiritual love in the poem,

"We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms;
 As well a well-wrought urn becomes
 The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs,
 And by these hymns, all shall approve
 Us canonized for Love."

"The Relic" is Donne's another poem with the combination of two main ideas of love and religion. The poem is addressed to one of the poet's friend named Mrs. Herbert. The poet's addressing and worshipping the lady from a distance and obtaining a sort of merciless satisfaction from holy love is one of the petrarchan ways of courtship. The poem is the reflection of poet's platonic love for the lady. The title of the poem "relic" signifies a part or memento of some holy person or holy souvenir worshipped after the death of a person, which is supposed to have miraculous powers. The poem begins with a shocking situation, where some people are digging the poet's grave and they will find 'a bracelet of bright hair about the bone. So the grave digger will think that it is the grave of a loving couple and the bracelet of hair around the bone is a device that makes the two souls meet on the judgment day and allow them to stay together. The poet further feels that the relic found by the digger will be brought up to a king or the Bishop to be blessed and recognized as a relic, the hair will be regarded as a relic of Mary Magdalena and that the bone of the poet to be regarded as that of Christ or other great saint. Such relics found shall further be worshipped by the lovers for its miraculous powers. Later the lovers will think that their love will be rewarded with success if they will worship the relic.

"First, we lov'd well and faithfully,
 Yet knew not what we lov'd, nor why;
 Difference of sex no more we knew
 Than our guardian angels do;"

The poet describes that his love with his beloved was a true love as they loved "well and faithfully". The love of the two lovers was not dependent upon any sexual relationship, just as the love of the guardian angels is not a physical one but a spiritual one, similarly their love was also based upon a close sympathy and connection between the two souls. The lovers must have exchanged formal courtesies of kissing at times of meeting or separation but there was nothing more than that, as his love was bound by the restrictions of the society as his lover had been married. In such case his love can only be platonic, a love that is sexless and pure love and the beloved described as a miracle of beauty and an object of holy devotion. The poem deals with the love, death, faith and religion. Pure love described in the poem defies death, and such a love lives through the memento "the bracelet of bright hair". The idea of death is found under the grave and the Day of Judgment. Religious thought in the poem is brought up through the Bishop, "the last busy day", Mary Magdalena and guardian angel. The great tribute given to their holy love shall be through the worship of the poet and his beloved as saints of love after their death and in such a manner their love shall become as sacred as religion.

"Then he, that digs us up, will bring
Us to the bishop, and the king,
To make us relics; then
Thou shalt be a Mary Magdalen, and I
A something else thereby;"

With the help of two poems stated above, we can consider Donne's poetry as an expression of real love with the touch of religious thoughts by using his wit and innovation to create clever poems. Johnson said of the Metaphysical poets: 'Their courtship was void of fondness and their lamentation of sorrow.' Donne's poems are quite proficient of stretching the emotions, and no matter how skillfully he writes his conceits, or revolutionary his thought is, his poems would always have a seed of genuine feeling at their centre. Donne, who came a generation after Shakespeare, took privilege of a different nature and became the prominent metaphysical poet of the seventeenth century.

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