

KAMALA DAS AND JOHN DONNE AS MATAPHYSICAL POETS A COMPARISON

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Abstract:

The term Metaphysics gained currency with the 17th century English poets that include John Donne, Andrew Marvell and Crashaw. The term was first used by John Dryden while commenting on John Donne's works. He observed "Donne in his poetry 'affects metaphysics'. The term was used to mean that Donne lavished into his poetry, the terminology and abstruse arguments of the scholastic philosophers so much so that perplexed the minds of the fair sex when he should have endeavored to conquer their hearts with the softness of love. Late in the 20th century in the Indian subcontinent poets like Kamala Das wrote poetry with metaphysical dimension infused in their poetry. This paper is an attempt to compare the poetry of Kamala Das and John Donne.

Key words: *Metaphysics, metaphysical poetry, wit.*

It was Dryden who first used the term when he said, "Donne affects Metaphysics". Dr. Johnson perpetuated this derogatory appellation by sticking it to a school of poets ranging from Donne and school that did not correspond with Aristotle's definition of poetry as an imitative art. Thanks to Dr. Johnson, Metaphysical poets have come to be applied to a group of diverse poets whose poems, whether secular or religious have but certain similarities. The poetry has its origins in the early 17th century England. The poets who contributed this school of poetry include John Donne, Andrew Marvell, George Crashaw, Vaughan and others. The characteristics of metaphysical poetry include Ratiocination, Thought and feeling, Conceits, Use of wit, Paradox, Abrupt opening and Humor.

It was Donne's poetry that reflected the shifting sensibility of his age. There are two distinct hemispheres in Donne's life and these are reflected in the poetry that he wrote: one is love poetry and the other the religious poetry. The earlier one dealt with love and the later one was directed and pointed at god. Donne spoke to readers and writers from diverse stances as love poet, dandy, rebel, satirist, melancholic, and priest. His feelings and thoughts were felt. What he feels and makes his readers feel is the peculiar excitement and pleasure of mental activity itself. It smells roses. It's being aware of and delighting in the electrical and chemical impulses that connect and reconnect the neurons in our brains.

The pleasure through his metaphysics offers our bodies the pleasure of extreme activity of the brain. He is characteristically concerned with the schemas we have constructed to map our mental activities geometry, complex grammatical constructions, physiology, definitions. He is thinking about thinking. Donne might have lived for three hundred years ago. He seems contemporary for he explores issues that absorb us, for his subjects include love, sex, the problem of intimacy, spiritual longing, the challenges of faith and the prospect of death and what if anything, comes after. He speaks truth, while questioning authority refusing to take things even God on trust. Donne's metaphysics, if centralized, may seem to be more relevant and if one historicize Donne, one may find in his metaphysical writing, opening a window into the part revealing the complex inter-relations among religion, politics, love and gender that existed in early modern England.

Donne's metaphysics included glorification of love, surrender, death, purity and all those that go

with the characteristics of metaphysical poetry. It is true that Donne affects the metaphysics not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses where native only should reign. He perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of Philosophy when he should engage their hearts. Donne has been very exciting in his metaphysics. Donne is the most intellectual poet in English, and his intellectualism had, even, sometimes a tendency to the abstract. But to be in intellectual poet does not mean that one writes about intellectual things. The pageant of the outer world of matter and the mid region world of the passions, came to Donne through the brain. The whole composition of the man was made up of brain, soul and heart in a different proportion from the ordinary prescription. This does not mean that he felt less keenly than others, but when passion shook him and his being ached for utterance, to relieve the stress, expression came through the intellect.

Although to Donne, thought was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, and fragmentary. The latter falls in love or needs Spinoza and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes. Based on this, Leavis, observed that the poetry of Donne or the 17th century poetry must be the yardstick for judging any piece of literature and poetry in particular.

Donne's poetry is too simple to simplify. Its complexity is all on the surface an intellectual and fully conscious complexity that we soon came to the end. Beneath this we find nothing but a limited series of passions; explicitly mutually exclusive passions which can be instantly and adequately labelled as such. Things which can be readily talked about and indeed must be talked about because in silence, they began to loose their hard outline and overlap to betray themselves as partly fictitious. That is why Donne always arguing. There are puzzles that we can solve. Donne's metaphysics is rooted in everyday life for there is presence of solid objects; they are bedroom, parlour, horse bank, bank of violets window panes, fleas, maps, candles and so on of the 17th century. They introduce one to the fever pitch of love, the welter of confused emotions which are recognizable in one's own most intense relationships.

Donne's metaphysics sees man as primarily an emotional rather than a rational being and for those who have experienced or who at least understand the ups and downs, the ins and - outs of human temperament, the alterations not merely of passion and satiety but of passion and laughter, of passion and melancholy reflection, of passion earthly enough and spiritual captive almost heavenly. There is no poet and hardly any like Donne. This is to say that Donne's metaphysics is universal. Metaphysical poetry is 'a kind of poetry created in England during the first two thirds of the seventeenth century, distinguished by a radical use of conceited imagery, rational or argumentative structure, a specifically intellectual emphasis manifesting itself usually in a non-sensuous texture, a language sometimes colloquial, sometimes learned from which all traces of special poetic diction have been purged, a markedly dramatic tone, and a preoccupation, in both amorous and devotional poetry, with themes of transcendence and aspiration. "Donne was... by far the most modern and contemporaneous of the writers of his time." And with hardly an exception, this stream of contemporaneity is urban, almost exclusively of London. As Mr. Leishman has pointed out so comprehensively:

Donne does not idealize his experiences or transform them by association into splendid visions; he grapples with them, carefully analyzes them, and often tries to interpret them by means of intellectual conceptions. But though a philosophic or metaphysical poet, he is still a poet, because he always tries to communicate the concrete experience itself, and not merely the results of his reflection upon it."

The mind of Donne is the mind of his time, but with a difference. That idealism, so lofty in its aspiration, so exacting in its demands upon self and society, which is one of the most dramatic features of the seventeenth-century mind, is his. Donne with his omniscient self-awareness knew too, at least once

when in his illness he penned,

And I have sinned before thy face, in my hypocrisies in Prayer, in my ostentation, and the mingling a respect of myself in preaching thy Word.

Donne's conception of God on the whole, is an austere one. That deep sense of the 'otherness' of God that runs through the Protestant Reformation fills Donne's heart with awe. The Creator and the Governor of the Universe, God is for Donne, as for most men of his time, defined in terms of power and will. He is the Judge who fills the sinner's heart with terror when he asks himself, "What if this present were the world's last night?" The wrath of God is for the sinner John Donne an ever-present terror, not to be forgotten in the many beautiful things he has said and sung of the mercy and the love of God.

Especially is the wrath of God important for an appreciation of the full measure of the wonder of the Incarnation and the Redemption. Here is a theme of which Donne never wearied, for here faith ministered to his deepest need. But though enthusiastic, his treatment of the Redemption is highly selective. For instance, he has very little to say of the human life and the human personality of Christ.

Donne's thought and feeling launched forth into the realm of the mystics in a beautiful invocation:

Eternall God, (for whom who ever dare
Seek new expressions, doe the Circle square,
And thrust into strait corners of poore wit
Thee, who art cornerlesse and infinite)
I would but blesse thy Name, not name thee now.

In India, the literary creations in English language dates back to the closing quarter of the 18th century. When several Britons came to India and put their experience of India in black and white, enthralled by the Indian culture, they produced a literature imbued with motifs emblematic of Indian ethos. The new poetry or the post-independence poetry shows strong evolutionary changes in terms of defiance of conventions and in extensive experimentations. And this divergence has been recognized in critical jargon as Modernism.

Modern poetry laid the emphasis on the concrete experience which may be intellectual or emotional or historical tragically logical pastoral conceit, free from propaganda, but realistic and in a vital language. The present is spectacle of the predicament of man in the modern world; their works are marked by an inner conflict, a sense of alienation and aversion to milieu and defiance of tradition. The Indian women are preoccupied with;

- i. Love and man-woman relationship.
- ii. Family the intricacies of different relations in family
- iii. Milieu Urban living, sense of alienation and aversion to east-west encounters.
- iv. Native imagery and symbolism
- v. Metaphysical and philosophical issues human existence, time, suffering, God, mysticism, spirituality and polarities of life and death.

The modern Indian women poets reveal the complexion of feminine psyche and mirror the changing position of women with the modernization in the Indian society after independence. In their quest for identity they show inclination towards self-discovery, self-expression and self-assertion. They show compulsive concern for emancipation from the bonds of patriarchy.

Kamala Das emerges as a staunch rebel against the conventional patriarchal structure in the Indian society. Her love is distinctly feminist and full of dissent. Her poetry, for the most part is autographical and confessional in nature. Her dissatisfaction and frustration in love and marriage form the leitmotif of her verses. As she herself reveals,

'I was disappointed in love. Wanted nothing but death, I made up my mind to liberate myself from an old hand.' The modern poets are quite candid in articulating their sensual cravings and sexual

experience. Kamala Das' poetic output covers the themes of personal experience which appears with more realized settings, deeper feeling, insecurity of conveys her description about the poor driftwood body which will be anyway taken to the shore. She indirectly compares her mortal life with body emotion, and complexity of life. Her offensive individualism appears as a shock after the soft and soothing strains of women poets like Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu before her. Das' quest for identity and her feminine sensibility construct her poems as the product of uncontrollable emotions. Despair kindles her into declamations against the male world in search of restructured perfection through death.

“All things are not equal, men and women are different.... Not better or worse different.” (A. Barbara)

In women's poetry, the relationship between man and woman is not so strongly holy-oriented and devoid of emotion. In Kamala Das' poetry one finds an explicit concern with the corporeal. Her poem *The Working Class* presents the fond details of the male holy thus:

Notice the perfection
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
The shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor
Dropping towels and the jerky way he
Urinate, see the fond details that make
Him male.

.....
He talks, turning a sun-stamped
Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark
Cavern, where stalactites of
Uneven teeth glean, his object
Hand in my knee

Like other modern Indian woman poets, Das reveals the complexities of the feminine psyche and mirrors the changing position of women with the modernization on the Indian society after independence. With the slight dissent against the male-governed world in their poems, of the women poets show an ambivalent attitude towards man-woman relationship which is a suffering, hope and despondence. Kamala Das who is too corporeal and uninhibited in her treatment of sexual relationships, regrets the lack of emotion in sexual union and it lands her in great despair and leads her to cynicism. For instance in her poem *The Stone Age* attests her disappointment.

Ask me, everybody, ask me
What he sees in me, ask why he is called a lion
A libertine, ask me the flavor of his
Mouth, ask me why his hand sways like a hooded snake
Before it clasps my pubis, Ask me why like
A great tree, felled, he slumps against my breasts
And sleeps. Ask me why life is short and love
Shorter still, ask me what bliss is and what its price.....

Kamala Das in her poems binds voicing her feminine discontent expresses her nostalgia for the locale, house and familial associations she had in her early days and was concerned about the present.

As a believer, she accepted life as it came to her. Her poetry is a recordation of her own experiences and observations, her own unfulfilled love and her own sexual exploration, frustration and disillusionment she suffered in silence in a male dominated society. She is very much a poet of the body. Her metaphysics lies, in short, in her confessions that are tall, far-reaching and meaningful. Though her poetry centered

round the self, shades of metaphysics could be seen in all her poems. When Donne was apolitical, amoral, Das' metaphysics included only the description of the self' and the related feelings, for she believed that a poet's raw material is not stone or clay, it is her personality. The frequent erotic themes in her poetry are probably a form of psychological compensation for the lack of affection in her childhood. Her intimacy with Indian landscape provides a synthesis of the changing reality of love and the unchanging contours of that landscape.

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