

The Metaphysical Poetry

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ABSTRACT

When the songs and the sonnets of the Elizabethan Age began to lose their charm, a different kind of poetry emerged. A group of poets began to write poems which were not as beautiful as the conventional poetry of the Elizabethan age was. It was not as musical as the poetry of Spenser was. But there were some characteristic features in it which invited criticism and controversy. These poets tried to say something that wasn't told before. They had their own thoughts. Their themes were far away from the themes of conventional poetry. They explored all fields of knowledge for comparison whether its science or nature. The stress was laid on intellectual, wit, conceits, obscure and philosophical allusions which made their poetry difficult to understand for ordinary reader. And this group of poets later came to be known as Metaphysical poets. A movement which has been harshly criticised at first and after more than a century critics find merits in it. These Poets were not formally affiliated but they caught lime light in 20th century and established their importance. Due to lack of coherence as a movement, and diversity of style between the poets, it was suggested that call them Baroque poets. The purpose of my paper is to discuss the various aspects related to the Metaphysical Poetry, chiefly dealing with its criticism and appreciation.

KEYWORDS: Criticism, Intellectual, Wit, Conceit, Philosophical allusions, Metaphysical poets, Controversial, Movement, Appreciation.

INTRODUCTION

The term metaphysics is found in Aristotle's philosophy when he talks about things which are beyond physical. The label is misleading because none of these metaphysical poet is seriously interested in metaphysics. It was Dr. Samuel Johnson, who wrote a work, comprising of short biographies and critical appraisals of 52 poets, *Lives Of the Most Eminent English Poets, 1779-81*, which focused on the poets who lived during the eighteenth century. He used the term metaphysical, while discussing the life of Abraham Cowley. Dr. Johnson says:

"About the beginning of the Seventeenth century appeared a race of the writers that may be termed the metaphysical poets; of whom, in a criticism on the works of Cowley, it is not improper to give some account".

But here one thing we have to keep in mind, as stated above, the term metaphysical he used, has nothing to do with the term metaphysics used by Aristotle. That means he didn't mean to describe something spiritual but he was referring towards the witticism of John Dryden. John Dryden, who is also regarded as The Father of English criticism, said about John Donne :

“He affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign; and perplexes the mind of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts, and entertain them with the softness of love. In this Mr. Cowley has copied him to a fault.”

Before Dryden, there was a Scottish poet, William Drummond, who in an undated letter from the 1630s accused that:

“Some men Of late, transformers of everything, consulted upon her reformation, and endeavoured to abstract her to metaphysical ideas and quiddities, denuding her of her own habits, and those ornaments with which she had amused the world some thousand years”.

We have to notice that none of the critic is in praise of the metaphysical poets. The term metaphysical is not used to honour these poets, instead they are being accused for this new kind of poetry, for expressing their high learning only, using far-fetched comparisons and lack feeling. Moreover, the term metaphysical poets came into being long after the poets to whom we apply it, were dead.

Dr Johnson believes that almost all the metaphysical poets were men of learning and their major function was to make the manifestation of their learning through their poetry. But it was unfortunate on their part that they tried to express it through their poetry which, sometimes, merely remained verse and very often they stood as an exercise for the fingers and there is no delight for the ears. Johnson becomes more rigorous when he claims that these metaphysical poets should not be considered as Poets. For Dr. Johnson, as per Plato, poetry is imitative art but the poetry of Donne and his school isn't imitation of anything. Although their thoughts are new but are not natural. In his own words;

*They broke every image into
 fragments : and could no more
 represent, by their slender
 conceits and laboured
 particularities, the prospects
 of nature, or the scene of
 life, than he who dissects
 a sun-beam with prism,
 can exhibit the wide
 effulgence of a summer noon .*

To Donne and his school we mean John Donne, the founder, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Henry Vaughan, Andrew Marvell and Thomas Traherne. All of these are considered to be a part of the school of Metaphysical poetry. This group is a loose group, the members we are placing, hardly met each other in their life time. But there are few common characteristic features of their poetry which make them related to the same group as well to each other.

One of the most important features of metaphysical poetry is ample use of conceits. As mentioned in Oxford dictionary of Literary terms, a Conceit is an unusually far fetched or elaborate metaphor or simile presenting a surprisingly apt parallel between two dissimilar things or feelings. The metaphysical conceit is contrasted with Petrarchan conceit, which was typical feature of Elizabethan lyrical poetry. The Petrarchan conceit is a type of metaphor used in love poems written by 14th century Italian poet Petrarch. The Petrarchan conceit was widely

used by his Elizabethan followers. In the Metaphysical poetry, conceits are distinct. In Dr. Johnson's words it's a combination of dissimilar images or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. He further says, the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions. To understand this concept we have to go through few examples. Edmund Spenser in Epithalamion, characterises beloved's eyes as being "like sapphires shining bright", with her cheeks "like apples which the sun hath rudded" and her lips "like cherries charming men to bite". These instances are of Petrarchan conceits, simple and delightful.

To describe metaphysical conceit let's take example of John Donne's poem, *The Flea*, in which a flea that bites both the speaker and his lover has no reason to deny him sexually although they are not married:

Oh stay! three lives in one flea spare

Where we almost, yea more than married are.

This flea is you and I, and this

Our marriage-bed and marriage-temple is

On comparison of two type conceits the difference is apparent. The metaphysical conceits is more intricate and intellectual device.

Another important trait of such kind of poetry is, its theme. The themes vary from erotic poetry to spiritual, philosophical and then love poems. Donne's poetry is lyrical, religious and full of erotic expression or of romance. His diction is full of unexpected turns of language and figures of speech. Moreover he is the chief exponent of the movement called metaphysical poetry. His poems like *The Flea* is a love poem and is full of metaphysical conceit and philosophy, *Death be not proud*, is an example of spiritual poem. George Herbert's poems titled *The Temple* are honest, intimate, sincere and modest. Richard Crashaw's collection of religious poems are a blend of Italian and Spanish mysticism. Talking about Abraham Cowley, he was more like Elizabethans and the characteristics that make him metaphysical poet are not upto mark, but his poem *To His Coy Mistress* reveals his metaphysical blend of passion and conceit.

GLORIFICATION OF METAPHYSICAL POETRY IN 20TH CENTURY

As it is stated earlier The Metaphysical Poetry hasn't enjoyed that reputation that it deserved during its contemporary time. John Donne's poetry published after his death and the manual script were circulated in few literary circle during his lifetime. Even the works of other metaphysical poets didn't gain much popularity during the 17th century, instead it has been criticised by various critics for being too much of intellectuality, far fetched imagery, lack of melody and its unconventional themes. But during the 20th century critics like T.S. Eliot glorified the metaphysical poetry and it served as a major factor behind the impact of metaphysical poetry on modern poetry. T.S. Eliot in his essay "The Metaphysical Poets", *Selected Essays*, 1921, gave a detailed account of metaphysical poets and the importance of their poetry. He praised the metaphysical poetry by adding that thinking and feeling or philosophizing and reflecting are not distinct modes. In this Poetry there is no conflict between emotions and thoughts. He says thought to Donne was an experience, it

modified his sensibility. Eliot feels that Metaphysical Poets “Possessed a mechanism of sensibility Which could devour any kind of experience”

For T.S. Eliot John Donne’s Poetry is intellectual as well as emotional at the same time. He writes “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 reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of poet these experiences are always forming new wholes”

T.S. Eliot also charged Poets like Dryden and Milton in his theory of Dissociation of Sensibility, he says:

In the later poetry there is feeling and thinking and experience but there is no union of these things. They think and feel but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of rose. In 17th century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered, and this dissociation as is natural, was aggravated by the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden.

Eliot advocates the encouragement of metaphysical poetry in the modern times. According to Eliot, “Our civilization today comprehends great variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results, the poet must become more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate, if necessary, language into his meaning.....”

Hence we get something which looks very much similar like the conceit—we get, in fact, a method curiously similar to that of the metaphysical poets’, similar also in its use of obscure words and simple phrasing....

Hence T.S. Eliot is encouraging modern poets to write metaphysical poetry and considers Metaphysical poets be the role models.

IMPACTS ON MODERN POETRY

The impact of metaphysical poetry in the modern times is clearly due to the efforts of T.S. Eliot’s essay ‘The Metaphysical Poetry’, written in 1921. The 20th century poetry seems to be influenced by metaphysical poetry due to its intellectual complexity, far fetched analogies similar to that of metaphysical conceit and startling imagery. The influence of metaphysical poetry is also visible in Indian English poetry. A poem, by A.K. Ramanujan, A Small Scale Reflection On A Great House, is a clear example of Metaphysical poetry. One of the important figure of modern poetry, W.B. Yeats and his poetry is also seems to be inspired by metaphysical poetry.

CONCLUSION

Considering John Donne as the main crusader of the movement, Metaphysical poetry, amalgamates quite abstract philosophical questions. We can’t say that poems are not that beautiful if we see the poems of John Donne and his company. Use of rich symbolism and imagery, makes metaphysical poems so exquisite. The Flea, is a poem which is a perfect example of metaphysical conceits as a trademark feature of metaphysical poetry, and we can’t

deny that poem beautiful. The thematic concern of this kind of poetry is the something that makes it different from other genres of the English poetry. The subjects like cause and effect, the purpose of existence, searching for truth, matter and time and the exploration of spirituality are really remarkable. And the metaphysical poets have done an excellent job to make these subjects interesting and loveable. John Donne used philosophical concepts to turn an argument. The poems are from the activities of every sphere of life such as science, alchemy, philosophy, history, mythology, law, religion and different beliefs. To get this kind of poetry one has to get the knowledge to get actual meaning. The impact of the school of metaphysical poetry is still visible in modern society and it has an important place in the history of English literature.

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