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John Donne: A Feminist Perspective (of power and cultural hegemony)

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Abstract:

As cultural studies explores the fact that the culture has been shaped by power, capital and popular culture. In Donne's poems, we find that the male dominant society had shaped the culture in the Elizabethan age too. We also see how Queen Elizabeth had been criticized for being female ruler of seventeenth century England. The culture at that time was being dominated by male members; Donne was not unaffected, he too was the member of the cultural hierarchy and that sense has been reflected through his poems. Many papers have been presented on an anti-feminist approach of Donne's selected poems. Donne has been criticized for defaming women by considering them as his property through the poems.

The present paper aims to explore the influence of power and cultural hegemony in John Donne's 'anti-feminist' poems. It would adhere on how cultural hegemony and power plays the main role in shaping the minds of the poets to write derogatory things about women. Through this paper I want to explore that it was not natural but cultural; how the poets of Elizabethan age were having patriarchal mind set; and how they're affected by gender discriminatory culture of that time. This paper would also explore how Donne was not intended to defame women but it was the culture and power which unknowingly affected him and thus, it becomes the part of cultural studies.

Keywords: *power and hegemony, anti-feminism, cultural hegemony, patriarchal mind set, etc.*

Introduction:

Elizabethan age was the age of Renaissance and new awakening in England. New discoveries and inventions took place in this age. The ruler was Queen Elizabeth; she was a wise ruler with all the good qualities. When Queen Elizabeth ascended the throne of England, the Ministers and courtiers were not happy with her as she was female. They did not want to be dominated by female ruler. The people of this age believed in cultural hierarchy of patriarchal society.

Besides, this age was the age of rebirth of learning but the women could not see and enjoy such awakening because of power and cultural hegemony of male dominant society. This was the

time when the whole society believed that male members are superior to female. Women were not allowed to go anywhere, to move freely, to enjoy their lives and to get education. It was not only few poets like John Donne, Spenser and Shakespeare were misogynist but they were the victims of male dominant society.

The culture of that time had shaped the minds of the people in such a way that they would not know that they speak ill about women, abuse or belittle them. It was a sort of usual for the male to negate female. The culture had been dominant on them. "The phenomenon of a female monarch simply requires male authority to take up the topic of female authority" (Katheirne Eggert 3). Popular culture made the queen think that she is weaker than men. "I have the body of a weak and feeble woman" Queen Elizabeth is famously reported to have said to her troops at Tilbury as they prepared for the anticipated invasion in Spain's Armada" (Katheirne Eggert 4).

In *Othello*, we find that Desdemona faces consequences as she is female. The play is anti-black and anti-feminist. "We end up almost inevitably, with a moral that is anti-black, anti-feminist even anti-sex." (Daileader, 16)

In Elizabethan age, it was the culture that women were not given equal value in the society. The capability and work of women were not recognized. The male always wanted female to be in their custody with having no freedom of expression, education and movement.

Women found themselves excluded from most areas of government and administration but they contributed to their communities and gained esteem in other ways. Studies of childbirth and household relations, of gossip and women's work have identified areas of female autonomy where women exercised authority over men or other women (Women Waging Law in Elizabethan England' by Tim Stretton 2).

Culture and authority have been linked in every age. The authority and power shape the culture of the time. The law of any era transforms according to the convenience of the culture and power. The legal system of the age was also unfavorable to women, though it seemed perfect for women according to men. Not only the society was gender discriminatory but the law was also gender discriminatory.

It is clear that legal institutions played a significant part in limiting women's freedom of opportunity, and researchers investigating disparities within the law between the rights of women and the corresponding rights of men have assembled a catalogue of the legal disabilities women endured in sixteenth and seventeenth century England. The law prevented women from becoming judges from serving on juries, from standing for parliament or voting in elections. In inheritance, the doctrine of primogeniture privileged sons over daughters and directed real property away from standing for parliament or voting in elections. (Tim Stretton 22)

Women did not have respect in their families too. Male child were being given more preference than female child. Girl child could not claim her right over the property of her father. “A married woman could not independently inherit legacies, nor could she accept gifts, even from her husband. She could not make a will without her husband’s agreement, and any existing will or testament became invalid on the day she married”. (Tim Stretton 23)

The women of the age had to live under the terror and fear of their husbands. They were not allowed to claim their equality before the male members. “Bias against women in English law can be found at every turn. In Elizabethan England a man who killed his wife was guilty of murder, but a woman who killed her husband was guilty of pretty treason and could be burned at the stake”. (Tim Stretton 23)

The absence of woman on the literary and cultural landscape has been seen in this age. There were no political rights given to women nor were they permitted to live independently. Marriages were mandatory for women, they had to follow male members irrespective of their cast. Any disobedience to male was punishable. Women were being accused of being witches. Education for women meant preparing for gender roles. There were three roles for women –chastity, silence and obedience. (Did women Have a Renaissance? By Joan Kelly- Gadol). During the reign of Queen Elizabeth, this kind of cultural hierarchy was prevalent in England. Men would write literature for women, women were not allowed to write her own. There had been Instruction manual for the women of that time; On the Education of the young woman as a child, which writers to be read and which not to be read? How she will behave in public.etc.

Some papers which have been presented on Donne’s anti-feminist attitude; show that it was his misogynistic attitude, he hated women, that’s why he objectified and negated women in his few poems. He loved Anne More and had written poems for her. The fact of his objectifying women and presenting female body in his poems indicate that it was the cultural influence on him to belittle women. There is no female appearance or female voice which can be seen in his poems. Donne has presented female body as an object and defamed women in his few poems.

As far as the attitude of male towards female is concerned, Donne’s contemporary poets also did the same as Donne. It was their patriarchal mind set and this cultural hegemony had shaped their minds in an anti-feminist way. They unknowingly did cultural hegemony on women and regarded it as the part of their day to day life. They were hardly moved by this power and hegemony. Women were meant only to give birth to children and nourish them. “The mother who survived often to face the death of the baby they had borne as such risk” (Women of the Renaissance by Margaret L. King 6).

Women were being executed for disobedience, approximately 30,000 women were executed in the age of renaissance (Did women have a Renaissance).Women had no space of their own “*The*

Taming of the Shrew” by William Shakespeare, clearly indicates that women in those times were to be tamed by men. In Shakespearian plays, women were not allowed to play role on the stage. The role of women was being played by men instead. Men would dress up as women on the stage.

As women were not allowed to write, there were few female writers who managed to write and had to face consequences later on; they were Mary Sidney, Anne Askew, Isabel Whitney, and Margaret Tyler etc. They faced a lot of difficulties, Anne Askew was even executed. “It was thought that women were affected by their emotions and passions so they ought to have been housekeepers and dutiful whereas men had a rational way of thinking, which gives them the right of ruling a country” (Women used as stereotypes of gender 2)

Spenser wrote '*Fairy Queen*' to show significant virtues and vices by benefiting from these literary stereotypes, women were supposed to be either virgin mothers. Spenser centered upon two specific stereotypes which were virgin in the face of Una and whore in the face of Duessa so as to represent the actual figures of Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots. “so pure and innocent, as that same lambe,/she was in life and virtuous lore (In Women used as stereotypes of gender 3 from Fairy Queen Book1, Canto1, Stanza 5, Lines 1 & 2)

The paper attempts to apply two theories - Feminism and Male Gaze theory. Mary Wollstonecraft, talks in her theory of feminism that Women should be treated equally as men. They should be recognized on the basis of virtue, character, reason and rationality rather than their beauty and elegance. The term, “Male Gaze” on the poems has been coined by modern film critic Laura Mulvey in her essay, “*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*”. Male Gaze defines how women are looked at and displayed as erotic objects both for the character within the story and for the spectator who identifies with the male protagonist and derives a sense of pleasure and omnipotence from it.

From the above discussion we found that; it was not only John Donne who was effected by male power and cultural hegemony; the whole generation was effected by such hegemony. This cultural hegemony has been dominant since the very beginning and the Donne's anti-feminist attitude is the result of Cultural hegemony which is reflected in his poems like “To His Mistress Going to Bed” , “Go and Catch a Falling Star” , Sun Rising” , “Flea” , “Loves Progress” “The Dream”, “Love's Alchemy”, “For Whom the Bell Tolls” “Good Morrow”etc. Depending on which poem one chooses to interpret it would be possible to see him as a misogynist or as a lover of women (John Donne from a Feminist Perspective)

John Donne was raised a Catholic in Protestant England. He studied from both oxford and Cambridge but could not graduate himself. He was imprisoned for eight years for marrying to count's Mrs.; he began a financially unstable career at count. His friends started supporting him but they also started dying one by one. It is around this time that he began writing, his religious uncertainty, notorious promiscuity, and clandestine marriage inspiring some of the most evocative

poetry in Western literature in defiance of contemporary taboos. He loved Anne More but was not in good terms with her, that's why he said, 'John Donne-Anne Donne –Undone'. He is widely known for his metaphysical conceits and farfetched imageries which he used in his poetry.

There is an anxiety about women authority in some of his elegies. Another view is seen in Donne's work which is that of his feelings for his wife Anne More Donne. She is the only woman he loved. Donne's love poetry shows an attachment to her and this is contradictory to his previous poems. Misogyny is seen in some of his poems. The notion of feminism is clear in his lesser known prose and poetry views on the female subject."The women in his poems are 'shadowy figures', 'object or reflection of male desire', and 'a metaphor for the poet's aspirations' because he does not talk about their physical appearances. (In John Donne from a feminist perspective, from Bell 201)

When John Donne's above mentioned poems are perceived through the prism of 'Feminist Criticism we find that he has said against women. In "Go and Catch a Falling Star" the poet, narrator constructs a gender stereotype related to women and states that if a person travels through the whole world, he can make any impossible things possible but cannot find women true and fair.

If thou be'st born to strange sights,
 Things invisible to see
 Ride ten thousand days and nights,
 Till age snow white hairs on thee,
 Thou, when thou return'st, wilt tell me,
 All strange wonders that befell thee,
 And swear,
 No where
 Lives a woman true, and fair. (Go and catch a falling star)

In the poem "To his Mistress Going to Bed" the poet describes his mistress as an angel who comes to him in white robes and the narrator finds pleasure in her presence. He finds her as his as an object and claims himself as an authority who can do whatever he wants. He wants her to follow her commands, no matter what commands they are. Stereotyping her as an angel and exalting her to a higher station but not perceiving her as a woman with an identity or with any kind of individuality.

Licence my roving hands, and let them go,
 Before, behind, between, above, below.
 O my America! my new-found-land,
 My kingdom, safeliest when with one man mann'd : (To His mistress going to Bed)

Femininity is a cultural construct: one isn't born a woman, one becomes. In "The Sunne

Rising” the lover blatantly objectifies the beloved when he talks about the beauty of her eyes that is expected to have blinded the sun and not of any other quality of the beloved other than her looks. He states:

She's all states, and all princes, I,
 Nothing else is.
 Princes do but play us; compared to this,
 All honor's mimic, all wealth alchemy.
 Thou, sun, art half as happy as we,
 In that the world's contracted thus.
 Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties be
 To warm the world, that's done in warming us. (“The Sunne Rising”)

In the above mentioned lines, the poet narrator or lover dehumanizes his beloved and reduces her to the status of a commodity and asserts that he is in possession of that commodity. In this case, the beloved symbolizes all the kingdoms or states whereas the lover symbolizes all the princes who own those states. Thus, the beloved who is a woman is shown to be passive and in the possession of the lover who is a man with agency as he owns the beloved.

In “The Flea”, the poet urges the beloved for a sexual union thereby establishing the beloved’s body as primarily an object of sexual desire. He also states that she will not lose her honour if she yields to him just as she hardly lost any blood when the flea had bitten her. “And pampered swells with one blood made of two, and this, alas, is more than we would do”(“The Flea”) thereby presenting the beloved as an object of sexual gratification.

“Donne is often seen as mocking and ridiculing women, playing with their emotions, using them for humour, sometimes playful and sometimes serious and behaves like a chasing man who courts a woman he come across but will never have for his own. The woman is perceived as “Femme Fatale” sometimes as vampires, enchantress, whore etc. The Curse by Donne deals with Femme Fatale.”(Sarangi)

Donne’s poem reflects his obsession with women as represented in his poems and his detailed description on their body parts reflects the time when the poetry was written where men and women were not considered to be equals. (Sarangi)

The above poems reflect Donne’s anti-feminist attitude and the theories of male gaze and anti-feminist are applicable in these poems. By above discussion we have come to know that there is no doubt that Donne’s some selected poems have objectified women. Nevertheless, we have come to the conclusion that it was the culture of Elizabethan age that male would look down upon female and it was cultural influence on Donne that he unknowingly wrote such poems and some level of objectification of women is found in his poems. At that time these poems may not be considered as

anti-feminist poems but now these poems are unacceptable where women are objectified and where they are used only for the sake of poetry without their appearance and their voice. Though we can say John Donne did this for the sake of poetry, to make poetry amusing and interested by presenting far-fetched imageries but we cannot deny the fact that he did not present any female voice in his poems. The cultural hegemony of the time is apparent in his above mentioned poems.

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