

DISCUSS JOHN DONNE AS A RELIGIOUS POET.

(B.A.English Hons.Part-1.Paper-2).

Donne has won world-wide acclamation and become one of the most renowned and distinguished religious poets that England has ever produced. Without any hesitation and fear of contradiction, we can say that he is the innovator of a religious poetry that is unique and matchless. He is the first metaphysical poet as well as the first religious poet of the 17th century England. He started to write religious poetry at the end of his career. It was a time when there was nothing except gloom, despair and frustration which were ultimately the result of his wife's death, poverty and ill-health. In all the poems, he addresses to God, to death, to the angels or to Christ and a point that is worth mentioning is that the main idea of all these poems is the essence of guilt and sins, repentance, forgiveness and the request to God for His mercy.

John Donne's religious poetry is a fair demonstration of his inner conflict and the intensity of his feelings towards the supernatural being. Donne was a Catholic by birth; however, he became inclined to Anglicanism and consequently converted to this faith. Most of his religious poetry is influenced by Anglicanism faith and his conversion to it.

Apart from the metaphysical element in his poetry, the religious element is also quite visible and it lays bare the inner feeling of the poet for the creator, the God. Donne's religious poetry depicts his struggle of converting to a different faith. The religious poems show that Donne is conscious of his sins and is turning to God in genuine repentance.

His experience of the death of his close relations including the death of his beloved wife instilled the fear of death within his heart. Everyone is afraid of death, but the way Donne describes his fear of Death in his verses is quite piercing. When Donne experiences his close relation in their deathbed and watches them suffering gravely, he turns towards God for his mercy. His religious poetry not only shows his fear of death and consequent turning towards God but also displays his awareness of his past follies and sins and his honest regret.

His holy sonnets are often regarded by many critics as poems of repentance and supplication for divine mercy and grace. The awareness of the temporariness of the world is also a theme in his religious poetry. He knows that this physical world is temporary and life here is nothing but fleeting moments of happiness and sorrow. The human souls are captivated inside human bodies and constantly craving to soar towards their Creator. The world or human body is like a prisoner for the souls, which restricts them from their divine alleviation and indulges them in the deceiving glitters of life. Donne turns towards Christ the Savior and the God so that he could undo his

wrongdoings, which he did in this world. He loath the vanities of this world, however, he does not completely detach himself from, but his religious poetry shows his constant supplication for God's deliverance.

The religious poetry of Donne is not didactic and he certainly does not wish to give moral teaching to his reader through it. His poetry is simply the reflection of his religious feelings and the unrest within his soul caused by his sins. Donne is the most sincere introspective religious poet of the 17th century.

Now let's discuss main qualities of Donne as a religious poet one by one.

First major quality of Donne as a religious poet is his "Religious Themes" in all his poems. In all the poems, he does not disturb the pure lyrics of his poetry with any other idea except religion. That's why, the readers enjoy fully the religious serenity which he creates through his verses. "The frailty and decay of this world", is the major theme of his poems. "All other things, to their destruction draw."

Another major theme of Donne's religious poems is "Insignificance of the Man" in this world. He always discusses man's temporary sojourn in this world, the transitoriness of all the earthly joys and the pangs that a soul relishes in the imprisoning body. All these poems express his sense of guilt and fear from the temptation and pursuit of devil.

"But our subtle foe so tempteth me

That not one hour myself I can sustain.”

Similarly, next major theme of Donne’s religious poems is “Fear of Death.” All these poems are replete with his regret for the sins he committed and fear of God’s punishment. He is sure that as soon as he is buried in the grave, the sins of his body will also be buried under the grave. After his burial, his soul will be free of all the attachments of his flesh. How beautifully he writes!

“Then as my soule, to heaven her first seate, takes flight
And earth-born body, in the earth shall dwell,
So, fall my sinnes, that all may have their right,
To where they bred.”

Another major theme of Donne’s religious poetry is his firm belief in “The Life after Death.” All his poems clearly display his belief that life in this world is the beginning of another life. Everyone after dying will taste this life. The life after death is free of death.

“One short sleepe past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt
die.”

Donne’s belief in the life after death inculcates in him “The Belief of Accountability.” He believes that no one can avoid this accountability for his doings. Everyone will have to be answerable to God for his good or bad deeds.

“They Grace may wing me to prevent his art,

And thou like Adamant draw mine iron heart.”

Second major quality of Donne as a love poet is that like his love poetry, his religious poetry has also the touches of his personality. The important element of it is that it is not written in a conventional didactic style. It is highly individualistic and personal. It is also an expression of his complex personality. It is the expression of his speculation, skepticism and melancholy. Actually, he was a Catholic by birth. For most of the people, religion is a matter of accident or for granted but according to Donne, religion should be a man's deliberate choice. It should be taken after careful study and minute observation. As a result of his approach, he got ready to embrace the Church of England. His conversation with Anglicism also influenced his poetry. Even after this change, he was not satisfied and could not find adequate or perfect answers to the questions arising in mind. Between this conflict, between the old and the new, he utters:

“Show me, dear Christ,

Thy spouse so bright and clear.”

Here by spouse, he means true religion.

We fully agree with the remarks of a critic who has observed: “Donne's best religious poetry is intensely personal; not an exposition of Christian doctrine, but passionate and dramatic prayer to be delivered from temptations and

distractions, to be made single-hearted, to find in God's will his peace."

Donne's third quality as a religious poet is his 'use of metaphysical elements' in his poetry. As a metaphysical poet, he always tries to have a sensuous interpretation of the soul. That's why, when he speaks of death, penitence, resurrection, punishments and rewards, he uses the imagery drawn from the physical sciences. For example, he uses the imagery of metallurgy in the sonnet. "Batter my Heart, Three Person'd God." Similarly, he uses conceits as the instrument of argument and persuasion. Each of his poems makes a vivid image of some experience or of a situation which gives rise to the argument. Almost every poem argues a case for mercy and salvation. Each poem has an abrupt personal opening, addressed to God, Christ or death. Each presents the image of a scene or situation. The arguments are illustrated and strengthened with the use of conceits. In "Batter my Heart", he compares himself to a usurped town.

"I, like an usurpt towne, to another due,

Labour to admit you, but Oh, to no end."

Fourth major quality of Donne as a religious poet is his 'use of sex imagery.' In holy situations, the use of sex imagery is surprising and startles a reader. In "Batter my Heart", he uses the imagery of adultery.

"Why doth the devil then usurp in me?

Why doth he steal, nay ravish that's thy
right?"

All the other religious poems also contain images which he borrows from sensual love. He does all this to illustrate his personal religious experiences. His personal experiences take him far away from mysticism which is totally absent from his poetry. That's why, we see that he does not forget his self as the mystics do. He is always aware of his environment, in which he is living, of his passionate friendships and of his self. In this connection Helen White says: "Donne was not the man to lose himself."

Another quality of Donne as a religious poet is his use of language with special features including combination of simple words and use of odd phrases. Similarly, sometimes Donne appears before us as a juggler in using a language. He tries to play upon with the words and repeats them to lay stress on his ideas.

Another quality of Donne as a religious poet is that there is found a great similarity of thought and treatment between love poems and holy sonnets. Though the themes of love and holy poems are totally different, the spirit with which they have been written is quite same. Here we come across the same experience that analyses the inner experience i.e. the experiences of love. In his treatment of divine poems, use of sexual imagery is quite clear.

"Betray kind husband thy spouse to our sighs

When she's embraced and open to most men."

The last and major characteristic of Donne as divine poet is that Donne's aim in writing divine poetry is not didactic or moral rather he wishes to give vent to his own moods, his aspirations, his sins and his humiliation in the quest of God. He is the most sincere, devoted and introspective Anglican poet of the seventeenth century. Truly, he had experienced the intensification of religious feelings mentioned in the holy sonnets. W.B. Yeats remarks: "His pedantries and his obscenities, the rock and loam of his Eden, but make us the more certain that one who is but a man like us all has seen God."

To sum up, we can say that Donne's main theme is his own self rather than love or religion. He has interest in taking down and recording his own experiences. In love poetry, he narrates to us his reactions to woman and sex and in religious poetry, we find a record of his inner conflicts, his doubts, his yearnings and the questions regarding religion arising in his mind. Whatever the subject be, Donne's craftsmanship is admirable. What we admire more than anything else is the projection of his personality and his mastery over diction, imagery and versification.

➤ **Points To Remember :**

- Donne is the first religious poet of the 17th century.
- As a religious poet, Donne's religious poems have these qualities.
- Religious themes
 - The frailty and decay of this world
 - Insignificance of Man
 - Fear of death
 - The life after death
 - The Belief of Accountability
- Personal touches
- Use of Metaphysical elements
- Use of sex imagery
- Use of language with special features including combination of simple words and use of odd phrases
- Similarity of thought and treatment between love poems and holy sonnets
- Donne's aim is not didactic or moral.
- Donne's main theme is his own self rather than love or religion.

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