



OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN AND LOVE IN JOHN DONNE

GOVIND PRASAD GOYAL¹, Dr. VIJETA GAUTAM²

¹Research Scholar (English), CCS University, Meerut

²Assistant Professor, KMGGPG College, Badalpur



Article Received: 20/03/2022

Article Accepted: 16/04/2022

Published online:19/04/2022

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.10.2.21](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.10.2.21)

Abstract

Through this paper, the authors make an earnest endeavour to dig deep and analyse the objectification of women in the literary works from the fourteenth century in general to seventeenth century poems of John Donne in particular. It selects the few of the literary works of Chaucer and William Shakespeare. Subsequently moves towards the select poems of John Donne (22 January 1572 – 31 March 1631). It tries to dig out the depictions of dual patriarchal system deeply embedded into the heart and minds of the literary minds who objectify women sexually in their literary expressions. On close examination of John Donne who is an axial centre of the study under hand. It has been found out in the select poems of Donne, women were deemed as objectified and dehumanized items. The feministic framework chosen for the study sparks the light on the dark forces of the time. The patriarchal thinking of the poet not only sexually objectifies his mistress but also reduces her womanhood to be a mere body for gratifying the sexual urge. This study, therefore, relies on intensive and extensive literature review related to the area of study also to find out the Ovidian and Petrarchan love. However, this study sets certain limits to analyse only the select metaphysical poems of John Donne to name a few "Love's Alchemy", "Woman Constancy", "Elegy XX", "To His Mistress Going to Bed", "Love's Progress", "Go and Catch a Falling star", "Fever" etc.

Keywords: Objectification, Feministic Approach, Metaphysical poetry, Sexual Urge

Introduction

This gender-oriented research examines the nature of both gender relations and power dynamics in which it has the longest established operations and their experiences in their stereotypical female-roles in the literary expressions in the British Literature. Since times in memorial, women have been observed nothing more than sexual objects. Presently too, this practice is prevalent. Women are characterized as an object to

some degree or other. The literature often echoes the viewpoints of a cultural imperialism, therefore, the sexual objectification of womenfolk quite often appears in literary works. Whether they have minor or major roles in a poetic plan, woman-characters are shown sexually subservient in some way and depicted as submissive to men. However, the sexual objectification of women is not only evident and present in literature of the past, but also of today. Both traditional and modern literature besides

music present sufficient evidences that the sexual objectification of women was prevalent in the past and still perpetuates today. There are many of the instances which reflect the exploitation of women. Both literary and music-video composers compose a world of women as sexual objects where words, sounds and meanings arbitrarily project them as a toy or a play-thing beyond any subjective autonomy. The notion of Objectification as a feministic perspective is antithesis to the personification, a figure of speech. To elucidate it further, John Gardner's Grendel is an appropriate example of the woman who experiences such insidious practice which may be likened to the treatment of woman for sexual objectification as described by Szymanski. Both the fungibility of Wealhtheow as an object and violability of hers exemplify the sexual objectification of women that was in existence in the past and persists today as well.

The story goes like that Hrothgar, an old emperor of a gigantic kingdom, is advanced by a young king. The young king bargains for peace through offering various items. Hrothgar declines the offer. On such negative reactions, the young king offers, "I will show you a treasure that will change your mind, great Hrothgar... I offer you, my sister. Let her name from now on be Wealhtheow, or holy servant of common good" (Gardner 99-100). When young king's sister Wealhtheow appears, entire coterie of courtiers gets mesmerized at her awe-inspiring beauty. But her beautiful appearance is the reason she is commodified like a mere plaything to be exploited for sex.

Although she is portrayed as succumbing to the sexual advancement of the old king with the dignity of a sacrificial virgin. After the first encounter of Wealhtheow, she starts having sensation of hopelessness. Grendel, spots the worsening condition of Wealhtheow and comments on her sexual mistreatment, "She's young, could have served a more vigorous man. And beautiful: need not have withered her nights and wasted her body on a boney, shivering wretch. She knows all this, which increases Hrothgar's pain and guilt" (Gardner 122). In exchange of Wealhtheow as a gift-item and

her consequential sadness typify the sexual objectification of women.

Right from the 14th century till date in most of the English Literature, woman has been projected as a toy to play with, a territory to be conquered and ruled over. She is considered nothing more than a thing or trash to be used and thrown away. In Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, the role of women is objectified by male characters, whether it be for fulfilling the lustful desire, embracing the infatuation, or to satisfy a male's ego by being a trophy or prize to win. In an online essay on *Misogynistic Role of Women in Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales*, the author writes, "Throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, women are largely treated as nothing more than objects, existing to serve a purpose for a male" (Cram.com). In the tales, when a few of male-speakers consider a female character as sexually desirable or lustfully needed for gratification of basic instincts, they decide to deem them as if they were a book placed on a shelf. The women in these tales are not measured, weighed upon or sought after for their cognitive contributions, insightful intelligence, panoramic personalities or for astute abilities. The scaling levels of treatment towards them is more oriented on their looks than on any other attributes and qualities of theirs. Other factors are highly ignored and weighed down. At times when the male characters face repudiation, it often triggers misogynistic misconduct, and there are multiple instances in the tales which reflect the low level of entitlement endowed upon the women. The men have degrading outlook towards women in the medieval times. "...medieval society is hostile to women's power. Women are continuously contained and constrained by the patriarchal norms of medieval Europe to strengthen the heroic ideals of masculinity, while maintaining the ideals of the domestic private sphere" (Shams 2005).

The fifteen century was a barren and unproductive period hardly having any piece of literary creation worth reading. The sixteen-century witnessed other stereotypes, stemming from the courtly culture of love. The idealized ladies of most the poems does not carry any realistic depiction. With the resurgence of dramatic enactment on the

stage, the late sixteenth century culture allowed for the performance of female roles on stage by the females, and this portrayal touched the climax in terms of the women portrayed by Shakespeare and other contemporary play wrights. Earlier the role of women was enacted by young male performers, which meant there were rarer parts assigned for them and women often had less to express themselves. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo speaks much more than Juliet. There is also an unusually high proportion of male performance than that was written for females. However, Shakespeare's later female characters have plenty to voice for themselves. Interestingly, they are articulate and outspoken only when disguised as men, e.g., Rosalind (*As You Like It*), Viola (*Twelfth Night*) and Portia (*The Merchant of Venice*). Webster's heroines such as the Duchess of Malfi and Vittoria Corombona, are depicted as overtly sexual, and assertive rather than just the sexual items for fulfilling another's desire.

Since times in memorial, societies across the nations have considered a woman – a human with only physical existence. Men in the society view women as prizes or trophies to win. The belief that women are playthings still permeates through the culture still prevailing in our society, whether it's in the media or everyday conversation. Since the early days of the society, women have been taught that an entire gender exists purely to satisfy other's needs. It's very likely that there are many people-MEN, who don't realize that they are perpetuating a culture that dehumanizes and objectifies women (Robin 2016).

Fathoming deep into the objectification, Martha Craven Nussbaum, American Philosopher expounds the involvement of the seven features which reflect how women were ill-treated not as a human being. They have been deprived of their personhood as an object. The very first one is treating a woman as an *instrument* for serving the purpose of the subject. They are construed to be a tool. The second feature is the *denial of autonomy* which gives the reflection as how women are deprived of the independence and autonomy; they are made to believe that they don't possess any strengths, abilities and capabilities. The third feature

which Nussbaum postulates is *inertness* which signifies that women lack in agency for executing anything on their own. They cannot initiate anything by themselves. The fourth one is *fungibility* which is the treatment of a woman as an exchangeable stuff with other objects like bartering system. The fifth feature is *violability* that is a demeaning treatment of women presuming that they don't have any integrity or chastity. Their virginity is meant to be violated. The sixth is *ownership*; women are considered to be chattels which may be easily sold and purchased eventually owned by other. Finally the seventh feature is *denial of subjectivity* which stands for the treatment of a person as someone whose experiences and feelings are useless and worthless to be discarded away like trash or any insignificant thing.

Adding to the list of Martha Nussbaum, Rae Helen Langton, (born 1961), Australian and British Professor of Philosophy includes three more features which may be enumerated as eighth that is *reduction to body*. It is a kind of the treatment of a person who is reduced to be mere anatomical structure with their body, or body parts. The ninth is *reduction to appearance*. According to which women are measured and weighed upon their looks and appearance and finally *silencing* that is the treatment of a person as if they are mute, speechless; a silent dumb- driven creature incapacitated to voice their own concerns. Most of the philosophers and thinkers observing the treatment meted out to the women on the parameter of objectification have considered it be emanating and emerging from the patriarchal structure deeply entrenched into the deep strata of the society's outlook which over the years have become more pervasive and prevalent. They deem it be morally problematic phenomenon.

Objectification basically means to present as an object, especially of sight or other physical sense. But if we just ponder on combining the word Women with Objectification we are just left with lustful mindset, few of us thinking what rubbish talk and the rest feeling pity about such scenario still persisting in the society.

We are living in 21st century the modern era. Hard to say but still with such narrow mindsets. Men like to subjugate women. It's not something which has recently come up in the society but something which has got its pre-existence from ancient times. From those early days of society till today we see women are treated as well as termed as consumable items and objects. Those objects which are always used by others to suffice their personal needs. The titles for women still roaming in and around society are all consumable items such as 'Honey', 'Cutie', 'Cupcake', 'Sweetie', 'Sugar Plum', 'Pie' and so on....

Well, one could easily trace the very presence of sexual objectification of women in select famous metaphysical poet of 17th century-John Donne, however the author could not venture into the discovery of the objectification of women in George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Henry Vaughan, Andrew Marvell, Robert Herrick and on...

There is a vivid and vivacious reflection of the warmth and infinite intensity of love in the best-known and most celebrated poems of John Donne. It has different dimensions stretching from a physical low, corporeal experience to a spiritual high. Donne's lyrics are essentially seductive which centre on the physical love in which the speakers argue aggressively for sexual intercourse or physical union whereas in Donne's *The Good-Morrow* is celebrated the feeling of newness which love can produce to the extent of ecstasy emerging out of spiritual union. The true meaning and sense of life begins when one meets the person one loves. The very opening lines of the poem address this plainly, "I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I / Did, till we loved?" (lines 1-2).

In *The Canonization*, the most famous poem of Donne, there is a fusion of sexual or romantic love with religious motifs and imagery.

Apart from multifarious reflections of love, the ten features of objectification can be traced in the treatment of women in the poetry of Metaphysical poet -John Donne (c. 1572-1631). Dryden writes, "Donne perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy when he should engage

their hearts, and entertain them with softnesses of love" (Mueller 142).

John Donne is celebrated as the father of metaphysical poetry. Majority of his poems comprised of male speaker and the audience predominantly male. He wrote in an era where a female was deemed lesser than a male and solely followed the conventions used by other coterie poets by composing misogynistic writings about women from a hyper-masculine point of view. A selection of lines from Donne's poetry will help us better understand about the kind of objectification in his poetry. "Hope not for mind in women; at their best, / Sweetness and wit they are, but mummy, possess'd" (*Loves Alchemy* lines). Here the poet says that finding intelligence in women is next to impossible. The best you can hope for is "Sweetness and Wit" but once you've 'had them' they are merely dead shells. These lines reflect that people of those days thought women were kind of a trashy substance..., " Now thou hast loved me one whole day,/ To-morrow when thou leavest, what wilt thou say?" (*Woman's Constancy*). The implication here is that woman can't be faithful and loyal to man for more than a day:

"Like pictures, or like book's gay coverings made

For laymen, are all women thus array'd.

Whom their imputed grace will dignify-

Must see reveal'd. (*Elegy XX. To His Mistress Going To Bed*)

Here, he compares women to book covers! How sexiest! He is also suggesting that 'We' need to see them naked. Now, the question arises that does the poet don't realise that there's more to a woman than naked flesh? In the 13th line of the Elegy "your gown, going off, such beauties state reveals...", it clearly indicates the romantic feelings taking rounds in the psyche of the poet. Further, he poetically undressed his mistress, "Unlace yourself, for that harmonious chime,/Tells me from you that now it is bed time".

The poet is more towards the sexual objectification rather than going on to the mind and soul the inner beauty which constitutes a person:

“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,
 Nowhere
 Lives a woman true and fair .
 If thou find’st one, let me know,
 Such a pilgrimage were sweet;
 Yet do not, I would not go,
 Though at next door we might meet,
 Though she were true, when u met her,
 And last, till you write your letter,
 Yet she
 Will be
 False; ere I come, to two, or three.
 From: Song, Go and Catch A Falling Star

These lines suggest that there is no such thing as an attractive faithful woman. He also implies that faithful women are only faithful if they are ugly because then men won’t want them. The poet then changes it a bit and says that even if you could find an attractive faithful woman, by the time you have told someone, she will have been unfaithful with two or three.

Coming to his famous *The Flea* he has used an usual metaphor, such as a flea biting two lovers being compared to sex (1633). An importunate lover points at a flea that sucked his blood after sucking his lady and he tries to prevent his mistress from killing it.

This flee is you and I, and this,
 Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;
 Though parents’ grudge, and you, we are met,
 And cloistered in these living walls of jet.

In this erotic metaphysical poem, Donne uses the conceit of a flea, the lover tries to convince his lady to sleep with him in their “marriage bed”. His argument hinges on the belief that since the blood of both is mixed in the flea it is as good as solemnisation of marriage. Donne is able to hint at

the erotic without explicitly referring to sex such as: “And pampered, swells with one blood made of two, /And this, alas, is more than we would do...” (Line-8). This expression clearly evokes the idea of an erection. Further, in these lines:

“Though use make you opt to kill me,
 Let not to that self-murder added be,
 And sacrilege, three sins in killing three”.

He argues that by killing the “flea” she would be killing herself, himself and the flea itself. The lady kills the flea, presumably rejecting the lover’s advances. His interest basically appears to be more in physical union with his lady than anything else.

Carey made an accusation on John Donne that in his poetry women are degraded, disparaged and denuded of their modesty on the grounds of all pervasive familiar Renaissance mentality (137). They held the women as an object like a ‘weaker vessel,’ not only biologically imbecile, but possessing relatively less mental ability and reasoning faculty than that being possessed by man. They are of the opinion that women are such vessels which could be filled with anything. This malleable capacity makes women more appealing as well as such incredibly made agents who could be carrier of any force-good or bad. “Feudal models of relationship and of personal identity, revived in the interest of legitimizing the Tudor regime and the new aristocracy and still present in the court patronage system, give place to other models, in which, for example, the lover may be conceived as subject and the mistress as object...” (Low 465) Further Anthony Low observes that in Donne’s poems, “Women have small place in the world of this first satire, except as degraded and degrading impediments. “Cheape whore[s]” (1. 53) recurrently trouble the speaker’s thoughts. True, he mentions the so-called “Infant[a] of London,” a rich heiress, but he need not belabor the point that she is a commodity, not a person to love, and that she is impossibly beyond his reach.

Thus the analysis of Donne’s select poems gives the strong reflections of his varied moods – one of them is the objectification of woman and love

in which women are portrayed as a mere object to satisfy the sexual urge of lover. She is, relatively, depicted in a degraded light in most of his poems. The speaker in Donne's poem addresses his beloved; he describes the beauty of his beloved that he always looks for it. In lines (11-14), he gives a beautiful metaphorical image for his mistress; he portrays her beauty as an angel:

And therefore what thou wert, and who,
I bid Love ask, and now
That it assumes thy body, I allow,
And fix itself in thy lip, eye, and brow.
From: Air and Angels

Works Cited

Online text copyright © 2003, Ian Lancashire for the Department of English, University of Toronto. Published by the Web Development Group, Information Technology Services, and University of Toronto Libraries.

Original text: John Donne, Poems, by J. D. With elegies on the authors death (M. F. for J. Marriot, 1633). MICF no. 556 ROBA. Facs. edn. Menston: Scolar Press, 1969. PR 2245 A2 1633A. STC 7045. First publication date: 1633 RPO poem editor: N. J. Endicott RP edition: 3RP 1.178. Recent editing: 2:2002/3/27

The Broadview Anthology of British Literature, Volume 2. ISBN 978-1-55111-610-5.

Jump up^ Abrams, M.H., ed. (1993). *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (6th ed.). W.W. Norton. p. 1081.

Jump up^ Hunt, Clay (1954). *Donne's Poetry: Essays in Literary Analysis*. Yale University Press.

The Objectification of Women in the Poems of John Donne. <https://www.researchgate.net/> Accessed Nov 20 2019.

Carey, John. "John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art". London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1990, pp. 82, 265.

Hadfield, Andrew. "Literary Contexts Predecessors and Contemporaries" *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, ed. Achsah Guibbory (New York: Cambridge UP, 2006) 56.

Low, Anthony. "Donne and the Reinvention of Love." *English Literary Renaissance*, vol.

20, no. 3, 1990, pp. 465-486. JSTOR, www.jstor.org. Accessed 10 Dec.2019.

Janel Mueller. "Women among the Metaphysicals: A Case, Mostly, of Being Donne For." *Modern Philology*, vol. 87, no. 2, University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp.142-58, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/438482>.

Ross, David. John Donne. Britain Express. January 03, 2013.

(www.britainexpress.com/history/bio/donne/htm)

Mulvey, Laura "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema". *Feminism: an anthology of literary theory and Criticism*. ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diana Price Herndl. New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1991, 432-442.

Sabine Strebel. John Donne's Metaphysical Love Poetry". Munich: GRIN Verlag, <https://www.grin.com/document/459310>

"The Love in John Donne Poems English Literature Essay." UKEssays.com.