

TEN FEATURES OF OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN IN 12 SELECTED POEMS OF JOHN DONNE

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ABSTRACT

This paper makes an attempt to pierce through the wrappings of the 12 select poetic works of John Donne on the analytical framework of 10 features which are involved in sexual objectification of women. They are: instrumentality, denial of subjectivity, denial of autonomy, fungibility, violability, inertia and ownership - as were given by Martha Nussbaum, American Philosopher and the other three were postulated by Rae Langton, Australian Philosopher which are: reducing a woman to a body, reducing a woman to appearance and the last is silencing. In the selected poems, on close content analysis, we may find the evidences of objectification of women. The selected 12 poems are: *Communitie*, *Love's Confined*, *Love's Usutry*, *Love's Progress*, *Flea*, *Twickenam Garden*, *Woman's Constancy*, *The Blossome*, *Love's Alchemy*, *The Bait*, *The Dreame*, and *the Dampe*.

Keywords: Objectification, Women, Love-verses, John Donne, ten features

Celebrated as a great love poet in English language, John Donne (1572–1631) has made a distinguished place for his original love poetry. His poetry has revived the interest over the centuries. Why does his amorous poetic composition entice and hook upon the lovers of literature? Over the centuries, many different answers have been given by various thinkers. Most of them give credit to the naturalism and colloquialism of his language; the brilliance of his metaphysical conceits; and the mutuality of the love that he celebrates. In her mid-twentieth century edition of these poems, Helen Gardner identified Donne's "bliss of union in love" (qtd in Targoff 49) as one of his preeminent accomplishments: on this subject, she affirms elsewhere, "he has no predecessors . . . and virtually no successors of any stature" (qtd. in Targoff 49). Donne's poetry is obsessed with women. Moreover, the woman-characters are sandwiched between institutional and interpersonal patriarchy. The institutional patriarchy such as societal-normative structure expects women to be virgin however the inter-personal patriarchy practiced by young-lovers demands that the girls with whom they are in love must make the most of the given moments of sexual indulgence. Donne's poetry echoes the objectifying outlook and male-gaze and challenges the gender-equality. Some of the poems ridicule, mock or dishonor women as crafty, deceitful, inconstant, and lacking in mental ability.

Some writers leave behind them their outlook entwined inseparably with what they have written. John Donne was one such. The young Donne, a great visitor of ladies, circulated witty mockeries in verse, recommending promiscuity, like the *Communitie* which present,

But they are ours as fruits are ours ;
He that but tastes, he that devours,
And he that leaves all, doth as well ;
Changed loves are but changed sorts of meat ;
And when he hath the kernel eat,
Who doth not fling away the shell?

The women have been projected to be consumable items like lollipop, plumcake, cutie-pie or sweetie-pie. And in the *Confined Love* has “Good is not good, unlesse/A thousand it possesse... .” The poem gives the reflections of objectification where “ownership” is one of the features of sexual objectification of women. In the poem cited above, women are considered to be property owned or possessed by male-supremacy. Other selected poems are also examples of the sexual objectification of women. *Love's Usury* is one such example wherein initially lover pleads to the beloved to allow him to love her at any price or any high rate of interest like a “Usurious God of Love”. But on close constancy of the flow of thought, his persistent persuasion tends towards immasculation of her. Virginity or Purity of Character makes the women Goddess-like or make her an angel but the moment, she comes in physical contact with a male outside the nuptial ties, she is called a slut or whore. The patriarchal notion governs the ways and acts of women. At first she is placed on the highest pedestal to be likened to Goddess of love to shower her Grace on the pleader who in the poem is the lover but in the pleadings is also underlying objective to have domination over the woman prayed for satisfying the sexual hunger of male-speaker. There is a reflection of ownership,

“Till then, Love, let my body reign, and let
Me travel, sojourn, snatch, plot, have, forget
Resume my last year's relic: think that yet
We had never met. (*John Donne: Love's Usury* lines 5-8)

The lover persuades for the ownership over his beloved. Moreover, he does not want her to be having any control on him in any way whatsoever. He does not care for any shame or pain in exchange of love to her. Moreover, he does not care for losing his prime period of life for keeping the fire of love animated, inflamed and dominion intact as his love is born out of his fullest passion.

Further, in the *Elegy XVIII: Love's Progress*, the lover fragments the woman into parts. Reducing a woman as means to the end to derive sexual pleasure. The woman who is addressed has been reduced to parts like breasts, lip, cheek etc... Besides, a woman has been compared to a metal i.e. Gold,

...prefer
One woman first, and then one thing in her.
I, when I value gold, may think upon,
The ductileness, the application,

The wholesomeness, the ingenuity,
From rust, from soil, from fire ever free,
But if I love it, 'tis because 'tis made
By our new nature, use, the soul of trade.

(Elegy XVIII: Love's Progress - Poem by John Donne, Lines 9-17)

The lover expresses that he does not love a woman for her mind and heart how so superior they may be but he loves them for their “centric part” i.e. private organ (Elegy XVIII line 36). He wants to travel “straight Hellespont between/ Sestos and Abydos of her breasts, / (Not of two lovers, but two loves the nests)” (Elegy XVIII lines 60-62). In Donne's mind a woman is an object or a body either absolutely or in parts. In the poem, there is reflected the objectifying features such as ownership, instrumentality, silencing, reducing her to a body or appearance besides denial of subjectivity and autonomy.

Moving further, *In The Flea*, the speaker tries to persuade a woman to have sex or bodily relation with him. The woman depicted in the poem is probably a virgin. The speaker makes a fervent plea to seduce his mistress with a crude metaphor: he and she were bitten by the same flea, which means their separate blood is now mixed inside the body of the Flea. The lover-speaker argues that indulging in sex makes no difference, and nothing dishonors her, brings her bad name, therefore she must yield to him and satisfy his carnal desire, “Mark but this flea, and mark in this, / How little that which thou deniest me is...” (*The Flea* lines 1-2).

In another poem, *Twickenham Garden* by [John Donne](#), the [speaker](#) expresses his anguish after being deceived by a lady in love wherein he is “Blasted with sighs, and surrounded with tears,/Hither I come to seek the spring (Lines 1-2) but in the end he call her as a “ O perverse sex, where none is true” (Line 26). The mistress is made a violable and fungible object that is one of the features of objectification.

While in the poem *Woman's Constancy*, Donne calls his mistress as “lunatic” a mad woman who is not trustworthy as she keeps on changing the bed-partners. Such treatment of woman reflects the patriarchal mindset of Donne. The poem proves to be a hyper-masculine voice making a mockery of a woman. Let's quote a few lines to prove,

Now thou hath loved me one whole day,
Tomorrow when you leav'st, what wilt thou say?
Wilt thou then antedate some new-made vow?
Or say that now
We are not just those persons which we were?
Or, that oaths made in reverential fear
Of Love, and his wrath, any may forswear?

(*Woman's Constancy* by John Donne | *Poetry Foundation* lines 1-7)

Woman for Donne is not an idol to be worshipped or her beauty to be placed on the highest pedestal like an ideal lover. In The Blossome, although Donne is frankly Petrarchan, but does not sigh Petrarchan woes, rather he treats Petrarchan convention of love ironically and exposes its hollowness. The poet's [sarcastic](#) and ridiculous treatment of woman reaches a [climax](#) when he says that for a woman's heart is just like that of evil spirit. Let's quote Donne, "A naked thinking heart, that makes no show,/ Is to a woman but a kind of ghost./How shall she know my heart ; or having none,..!" (Kumar, *The Blossome* Lines 27-29).

What is notable that in *Love's Alchemy*, the lover believes that an angelic woman is impossible. At their best, women have sweetness and verbal cleverness or wit. But when once they have been enjoyed they are found to be mere dead flesh without mind or soul. In the words of the poet, "Hope not for mind in women; at their best/ Sweetness and [wit](#), they're but mummy, possess'd" (*Love's Alchemy* by John Donne | Poetry Foundation" Lines 27-28). Considering women having no agency of their own is also a one of the features of objectification of women which is called inertia which is also visibly evident in the poem.

In *The Bait*, the speaker asks his affectionate object to live with him-perhaps to marry him and become his wife. Phallocentrism, which is evident in the select poem shows that how it transforms to oppression. Marriage is an institution established by patriarchy to sustain and thrive. He advises his beloved "need'st no such deceit" (line 25). This is because of the natural goodness that inherently draws men: "thou thyself art thine own bait" (line 26). Indeed, the poet has already been caught, comparing himself to one of the fish: "That fish, that is not catch'd thereby, /Alas! is wiser far than I" (lines 27-28). He is so enamored of her that he cannot imagine anyone who can escape her charms but is made silenced to convey anything of her own.

The Dreame which is considered as one of the best love poems of John Donne also suffers from the infirmities of sexual objectification of woman. The lover was dreaming a dream but his dream was interrupted by the arrival of his beloved. Her arrival in his bedroom was intended to arouse his passions-to light the torch of his desires-and to satisfy herself that he was fully capable of satisfying her sexual desires. Such sexually-laced description projects the objectifying outlook of Donne who considers women to be just body meant for sexual gratification.

The last poem *The Dampe* is a morbid description of autopsy of the poet. Herein Donne seduces a married woman. The final seduction is then introduced as an elegant compliment stemming from the notions of women being inferior to men. "Naked you have odds enough of any man". When a woman is naked, she is lovely enough to defeat any man. Again in the poem, the voyeuristic outlook projects the male-gaze attitude of the lover where in there is an involvement of objectification of women.

Thus, John Donne who is among the most striking poets of the metaphysical school of poetry so fertile in imagination and brilliance of thoughts, but objectifies woman-characters in all the twelve selected poems absolutely or in fragments. If in the *Communities*, women are projected to be fruits to consume the kernel and throw them as waste, in the *Love's Alchemy*, they have been depicted as lacking in mental and cognitive ability. While in the poem *Love's Usury*, if there is a reflection of ownership on woman by the lover, in *Love's Progress*, woman has been objectified as

“centrique part” and “breasts”. In the *Dreame*, the very arrival of the mistress interrupts the dream of lover and arouse him sexually whereas in the *Dampe*, the naked woman can arouse anyone sexually. *The Blossome* depicts that women don't have heart so they don't understand the heartfelt emotions, they are reduced to be body for bodily pleasure while as a bait is eaten by fish and get entrapped so is the lover seduced by a woman in the poem *Bait*. In other poems like *The Flea*, the poet longs for bodily union while in the *Twickenam Garden*, women are called as perverse sex similar projection is in the *Woman's Constancy*. Donne is a lover, arbiter elegantiae, poet, innovator, and player of words and free and overflowing force of variety of moods. Moreover, Donne is appreciated as a man who is full of fresh and illuminating thoughts who empties himself, and his love, of concern with self and love but “Physical bodies are at the core of Donne's most striking poetic moments” (Greteman, 27). He is known for unusual metaphors, farfetched conceits, fertility of imagination, intellectual prowess, originality but his outlook towards women is of one of the pro-objectifiers, ridiculers and mockers of women. The employment of monologic style by Donne also renders woman as a silent and passive object devoid of personhood or womanhood which consists of mind, body and soul. To defend him, it may be said that Donne was writing his poems for male-coterie so could have expressed such objectifying thoughts and feelings in his poems for his male-friends. It is also written about him that he didn't intend to publish his such poems in which is a reflection of objectification of women but it is unjustifiable to prove that his mind was not morally corrupt to reduce a woman as an object in his poem since poetic outpourings are believed to be the outpouring of the self.

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