

## John Donne's Attitude towards Women, Deconstructing the Taboo; A Study of Select Poems of John Donne

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**Article History:** Received: 11 January 2021; Revised: 12 February 2021; Accepted: 27 March 2021; Published online: 4 June 2021

**Abstract :** John Donne is persistently writing about women and gender portrayal, both unambiguously and indirectly through analogy and metaphor. He can be seen seldom praising women in his poetry and sometimes could be perceived as sarcastic and scorning them. He recurrently practices women as a body for the subject of his poetry. John Donne appears to be infatuated in women whose desire for them is purely for the theme of his poetry. He incredulously trusts that womenfolk are neither divine being nor totally truthful; they are born with all the moral and human imperfections. Therefore, Donne's approach towards women folk is infrequently misogynistic and distrustful. Donne ironically arguments, that, it is utterly difficult to discover a persistent and an honest lady anywhere in this entire world. This paper explores, how John Donne portrays women in his poet

**Key Words:** attitude, misogynistic, infatuated, distrustful, women.

John Donne's poetic work comprises of such a varied diversity of perspectives, and identities, and his language is, therefore, difficult to understand, allegorical and figurative. Donne's stances towards womenfolk swing so fleetingly, seldom, in a particular poem or time, that, it is challenging to say precisely what Donne actually himself believed, and his poetic language is entirely difficult to identify an enduring or logical view about womenfolk. Donne's Verse Letters indicates that 'gender dynamics' were dominant to Donne from the very beginning. "These early poems show Donne building the foundation of his 'house of language' with, exactly, the feminine as building material". Male-dominant attitude of John Donne can be seen in his poetry. Donne presented women as a theme of his poetry as seen from the masculine perception. The Petrarchan poets continually exhibited the optimistic face of women and treated them to be deities whereas Donne is an exception. Donne typically depicted the deleterious face of women, replicates misogynous attitude in his poetry and pronounces an odd relationship between him and his lady. The beloved is unapproachable to him and his entertainment of love scarcely has any culmination.

In Elegy-III "Change", John Donne's comparison of women to crafty "foxes" and licentious "goats" advances the realistic belief which perceives man as a beast, free from society's ethical chains and administered exclusively by desire. Women are also "clogges," or burdens, emotionally involved to man, to harm his autonomy. Then, in an image drawn from hawking-suitors as fowlers, woman as the bird- the speaker presents the idea that the bird is accessible to any man with the ability to hook it. In another metaphor, woman is like "plough-land" from which the owner imagines a greater produce and woman is also compared to the sea that receives all rivers, the speaker defends sexual liberty in women:

*"Women are like the Arts, forced unto none,  
Open to all searchers, unprized if unknown.  
If I have caught a bird, and let him fly,  
Another fowler using these means, as I  
May catch the same bird; and as these things be,  
Woman are made for men, not him, nor me.  
Foxes and goats, all beasts' change, when they please,  
Shall women, more hot, wily, wild than these.  
Though Danuby into the sea must flow,  
The sea receives the Rhine, Volga, and Po".*

John Donne is not often pessimistic towards womenfolk, for the reason that whenever, Donne discovers a woman really trustful as well as honest. He extremely respects such qualities of her. For illustration, in the famous poem "Twickenam Garden", he disparagingly pronounces that the womenfolk are dishonest; they can't remain constantly

faithful to a particularly lover. But he portrays a gleam of positivity when he states that only his beloved is true and honest, ever since she is truthful and faithful to a particularly lover. Donne seriously appreciates her for this specific quality, as it is certainly an erratic quality in womenfolk.

Donne practices his humor to quash the alarming female identity and to comfort his own nerves. "The most important thing about renaissance misogyny is its religious character". Donne not merely in his "Songs and Sonnets" but also in his "Divine Poems" employs religious principles and theology to undermine woman identity. Sugg says, "Although Genesis doesn't announce that Eve was not inspired by a soul, it never mentions explicitly that God breathes his spirit into her as He does into Adam" [58]

*"Man to God's image, Eve, to man's was made,  
Nor find we that God breathed a soul in her"*

Donne expresses his prejudice against women or girls in most of his poems; his exhibition of fury towards his spouse or lover. Women Constancy, Donne attempts to get out of the relationship and favor not to contest with his beloved for the absence of constancy. Good Morrow defines his earlier love as flimsy. Woman's trustworthiness to man is questioned and Donne gives the impression to be materialistic about womankind for he considers the activities of women are hypocritical and motivated by self-interest. "Donne attained a compatible art and sensibilities, which he advanced to employ in profligate style on "wine, women and songs". In Go and Catch the Falling Star women is measured to be disloyal and not constant. On the other hand, to express the delight of love making without anyone's intervention, he even considers women to be counterfeit and deceitful. The womenfolk addressed in his poetry are not often permitted to express for themselves.

The impact of Donne on the literature of England was surprisingly extensive and deep. His inventiveness and the strength of his ingenious desire made him popular and extremely attractive to the younger generation of poets; they held him as their torch bearer when it came to breaking the path from the old tradition and were ready to follow him implicitly into the new fields. Donne was a specialist who used with ease daring phrases that have a rare fragrance of poetry in them. Donne's prior poetry was remarkable for his eroticism particularly "Elegies" in which he employed rare images. For instance in his poem "The Flea", stinging of a 'flea' of two lovers being compared to sex."

It won't be out of place to mention here that, when it comes to John Donne there is hardly anyone who has not read his famous poem "The Flea". Over the years, it has become a sort of house hold name for the followers of English Literature yet not lost its lustre. Since the flea has become eternal in the world of unconventional metaphors, any discussion on Donne would be in complete and making no reference about the flea would tantamount to injustice to his creativity. In "The Flea" an importunate lover points at a flea that sucked his blood after sucking his lady. He tries to prevent his mistress from killing it.

*This flea 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.*

It is the finest sensual metaphysical poem. In this poem, John Donne employs the metaphysical conceit of a "Flea", and the speaker entices his beloved into sexual activity with him in their "marriage bed". His argumentation hooks on the belief that meanwhile the blood of both is mingled in the 'Flea', and it is as worthy as 'glorification 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 contends that by killing "The Flea" would be killing of three lives: herself, himself and 'The Flea' itself. The lady kills the flea, presumably rejecting the lover's advances. His interest mainly looks to be in sensual union with his beloved, not in anything else. In the 13th line of Elegy XIX "To His Mistress Going to Bed", he say: "your gown, going off, such beauties state reveals...", 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".

There is always continuous flow of amorous feelings for his lady. In the last Para, he has becomes impatient and very emphatic in his attitude: "Full nakedness! All joys are due to thee,/As souls embodied, bodies unclothed must be/To taste whole joys ..." Words like "your gown, going down", "unlace yourself", "Full nakedness" clearly imply the

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rhythm of his thoughts which are hovering over the flesh and blood of his lady preoccupied with the intentions for physical indulgence.

In the poem "*Go and Catch a Falling Star*" John Donne willingly encounters readers of his poems. He microscopically comprehended the world however leaves its analysis on readers of his poems and probes them to go anywhere in this world to find a loyal and trustful women and challenges that, it is equally impossible to find such a woman in this world as to 'Catch a Falling Star'. Donne's outlook towards womenfolk is not consequently respectable. He considers that good-looking women are ethically corrupt. Some people are capable and powerful to attain any incredible marks. Donne openly challenges them and he believes that, even those people can't search a trustworthy women anywhere in this world. "*Falling Star*" represents for a loyal and unerring woman. As one can't 'Go and Catch a Falling Star'; consequently, he also can't discover a trusty woman in the whole world. For Donne, it is the utmost challenging assignment. The poet challenges, "if a person has phenomenal and super human qualities, he can see nature; also he can see the whole world till his hair turns white, even which, a person can't search a truthful and honest woman. He is against presence of faithfulness and constancy in good-looking women. Donne is speaking about two things: "true and faire", that means, the women who is good-looking and trusty, and one can see truthfulness even in an ugly woman, but not in a beautiful woman".

*"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 Faire".*

### Conclusion

Sometimes, John Donne can be seen praising women in his poetry and sometimes could be perceived as sarcastic and scorning them. He persistently practices women as a body for the subject of his poetry. John Donne appears to be infatuated in women whose desire for them is purely for the theme of his poetry. He ironically comments, that, it is entirely difficult to discover a persistent and faithful woman anywhere in this word. This paper explores how John Donne portrays women in his poetry. He incredulously trusts that womenfolk are neither divine being nor totally truthful; they are born with all the moral and human imperfections. Therefore, Donne's approach towards women folk is infrequently misogynistic and distrustful.

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