

# Re-Reading John Donne: A Postcolonial Perspective

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**Abstract:** *The socio-political and cultural changes in the Elizabethan period and the subsequent emergence of colonial enterprises have been reflected in many of the literary and cultural productions of the period. This study is an attempt to reread the early works in 17<sup>th</sup> century to its colonial context with special focus on John Donne, the pioneering literary figure in the Metaphysical School of poetry. The study takes up many of his works and analyzes how imperialist agenda is working through it.*

**Key Words:** *post-colonialism, metaphysical school, orientalism, imperialism.*

## 1. Introduction:

Re-reading the 'canons' of literary/cultural texts in its historical, social, political and cultural contexts provokes new insights and is very significant in the realm of postcoloniality. Colonialist discourses were deliberately created and manipulated in favour of the imperialist project and were crucial in the process of domination over the colonized - socially, politically, and culturally. The control over the narratives was a weapon at the hands of colonizers to subjugate the colonial subjects. Edward Said, in his *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), writes: "The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them" (XIII). (1)

So when we read the past Western literary works in the postcolonial theoretical context we are exposed to the conceptualization of the process of 'othering' in these Western discourses.

## 2. CONTEXTUAL REVIEW:

Queen Elizabeth, daughter of Henry VIII and Ann Boleyn came into power in England and her actions led the Puritans fleeing England, settling down in the newly discovered America and establishing a colony there called "New England". It was the beginning of a specific phase of colonization, which in later years, was a major factor in the sociopolitical, economic and cultural life of England.

The greatest change in Elizabethan England was the emergence and expansion of overseas enterprises. With accurate planning and effective leadership they could outwit Spain and Portugal in the process of colonialist expansion. England could establish colonies in different parts of the world and the merchant class was able to find out safe markets for their capital in these newly found lands. The mastery over navigational skills and their experiences in different tactics and craftsmanship helped England to advance in imperialist expansions. Another influential factor in the expansion of imperialism was the rise of overseas trading companies and the subsequent emergence of merchant capitalism. G.M. Trevelyan writes:

By the end of the Elizabeth's reign not only was English commerce and finance thus reviving and expanding on a modern bases, but her ancient rivals were in rapid decline [...] The expansions of overseas enterprise was closely connected with the growth of the merchant capitalism [...] (2)

This context - the discovery of new lands, the expansion of imperialist interest, the accumulation of wealth and its consequential growth has contributed much to the cultural life of England. Many of the writers of this period have been influenced by the scintillating glory of the time and the spirit is reflected in their writings. But sufficient attention has not been paid in exposing the colonial dimensions involved in the writings of late 16th and early 17<sup>th</sup> century writers.

## 3. ANALYSIS:

John Donne (1572-1631) is the most prominent figure of Metaphysical school of poetry and his poems are generally read and praised in relation to the metaphysical characteristics involved in it. This essay attempts to read Donne's poetry in relation to the colonial ambience which covertly surrounds his poetry. His poetry has been instrumental in carrying the aura of colonialism. The ideas of colonial aspirations are strong and pervasive in his poems and we can see an abundance of colonial images in them. Donne uses these images to talk about love, sex and desire

and are very much connected with imperialist advancements. The new way of thinking about distant lands is reflected in his poems.

Let us take some of his poems and analyze how the imperialist agenda is working through it. See how he uses the idea of colonialism to talk about the physical consummation of love in his "To His Mistress Going to Bed".

License my roving hands, and let them go

Before, behind between, above, below (25-26) (3)

These lines are explicitly related to the emergence of the new capitalistic and monopolistic trading companies, which were licensed by the King or Queen of the time. In Elizabethan England many trading companies were set up for colonial missions. They were supported by the monarchy and the Royal Navy was assigned protection tasks for these companies in distant continents. Exploiting mindset of the capitalist class of the time is visible through these lines. They need permission from Queen to "go before, behind, between, above, below" of the world. They want to find out new worlds and establish colonies there. Other lines of the poem also indicate the same thing.

O, My America, my new found land,

My Kingdom, safest when with one man manned

My mine of precious stones, my empery (27-29)

Here Donne thinks of the discovery of America. The land was first occupied by the Puritans and later it was colonized by the imperialist regime. These lines are significant with regard to the debates on the phrase 'postcolonial countries' - whether countries like America could be categorized as postcolonial though they are the worst embodiment of imperialism in the post modern world.

Colonial images spill over in "Canonization" and see the way Donne speaks about the exquisite and divine love between the lovers.

Alas, alas, who's injured by my love

What merchant's ships have my sighs drowned? [...]

Soldiers find wars, and lawyers find out still

Litigious men, which quarrels move

Though she and I do love (10-17)

Threats to the colonial trade are presented in a Westerner's point of view. Natural forces like tempests or floods could cause considerable damages to ships and boats. But these vessels carried the wealth of the colonized nations and the saving of excess capital gave way to the monopolistic class investing more in distant lands. These forces used the political power to find outlets in the foreign markets. Once these external markets are found either protected or restricted, the necessity for acquiring colonies and other such areas of imperial expansion get immediately translated in to national policy.

Donne speaks about soldiers and lawyers who were inseparable in the process of overseas imperial expansions. Trading companies made use of them in order to keep their interests. Royal Navy's service in foreign lands helped them a lot to maintain the profitable character. Besides it, state obliged them in the form of tariffs, embargoes, and subsidies. The imperialist state, by acquiring or retaining colonies and by imposing trade and monetary regulations advantageous to the home capitalist, provides the latter with the opportunity to reap the fruits of imperial control over the colonies.

Monetary images, which are the results of an imperialist economy and its pervasion in the British society, play a significant<sup>1</sup> role in Donne's poetry. In "Canonization" Donne talks about the "stamped face" of the king.

Observe his honor or his grace

Or the King's real, on his stamped face (6-7)

Another poem "Image of Her Whom I love" also contains the same image.

Makes me her Medal, and makes her love me,

As kings do coyness to which their stamps impart. (8-9)

Underlying these lines is clearly the feudal doctrine that money belonged to the King because the coin bore his image. The coin extends King's or Queen's body and authority to where he/she cannot travel. Disseminating his/her image beyond seas, colonialism exercises authority on his behalf. These coins or images bring king or queen face with their colonial subjects.

The money or coin which bore the image of King or Queen was made out of gold or silver and we can see Donne using the image of gold or money in many of his poems. In "Loves Progress" the theme of love or sex is defined in relation to the commercial premises and his comparison of female to gold is quite significant.

I, when I value gold, may think upon

The ductleness, the application,

The wholesomeness, the ingenuity

From rust, from soil, from fire ever free

But I love it, tis because tis made

By our new nature (use) the soul of trade (14-19)

The value of gold: resides in such properties as 'ductleness', application 'wholesomeness', and so forth; Love also should possess such qualities and what is evident here is the commoditization or commercialization of love in the context of colonial advancements and its reverberations. The cause of the sudden influx of gold and other precious metals into Europe was the result of Iberian colonial expansion. Many European countries engaged in the exploitation of the natural riches of the colonized lands. In "The Sun-Rising"; Donne speaks of "India's of spice and mine" and what he is alluding to is the East Indies which is full of spices and West Indies which are treasures of gold. East is known for the West in the name of natural riches which they exploited and the knowledge has helped European writers to let loose their imagination. Edward Said in his *Orientalism* writes:

The European imagination was nourished extensively from this repertoire, between the Middle ages and the eighteenth century such major authors as Ariosto, Milton, Marlowe, Tasso, Shakespeare, Cervantes and the authors of the Chanson de Roland and Poems del Cid drew on the Orient's riches for their productions in ways that sharpened the outlines of imagery, ideas and figures populating it. (63) (4)

Colonial voyages gave energy to the versification of the period and in the poem "The Good Morrow" Donne draws the picture of sea discoverers who set out to find new worlds or colonies.

Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have sown

Let maps to others, worlds on worlds have shown

Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one. (12-14)

Donne contrasts the ever-expanding world of imperialism with this little room. Donne draws our attention upon the practical navigational methods and equipments available in late medieval Europe, particularly on the spatial practice of the charts or maps. They were essentially plots of routes drawn by sailors in order to find out correct place or destination. In "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," Donne uses the image of compass - a navigational instrument - to describe the inseparable love. Another poem, "A Valediction: Of Weeping" draws the image of a map or a globe.

On a round ball

A workman that hath copies by can lay

An Europe, Africa, and an Asia (10-12)

#### 4. CONCLUSION:

Donne is connecting all the continents - Europe, Africa and Asia - to a single thread of colonialism. Its expansion and settlement in all the continents are conveyed through these lines. Thus through the image of the globe, it is possible to see the colonial thrust behind it. A good number of other poems, like "Bracelet", "Loves Growth", too carry the colonial spirit with them.

Indeed, Donne's contact with Essex and his participation in the expeditions to Cadiz (1596) and Azores (1597) support the fact that Donne's politics was always in favor of the spirit of the time i.e. the imperialist project of the period. Donne himself had investment projects involving colonialist ambitions with Virginia Company-a company engaged in colonial trade and expansion. In his 1622 sermon to Virginia Company, Donne warns the would-be-adventurers not to expect a speedy return on their investments, despite God's promise that kingdom beyond the seas will be theirs.

This also supports the fact that Donne's writings try to keep the interests of the imperialist regime. He was not different from the mainstream which saw a bright future in colonial advancements and this perspective is reflected in his writings.

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