

Exegesis of Metaphysical Poetry

(William Shakespeare and John Donne)

Dr Manjula Batra

**Associate Professor and Head Department of English
GGSDS College, Palwal**

Abstract:

Literally, 'meta' means 'beyond' -- so, the literal translation of 'metaphysical' is 'beyond the physical'. Metaphysics questions the nature of reality in a philosophical way. Does God exist? Is there a difference between appearance (perception) and reality? Is everything that happens pre-determined? If so, then is free choice non-existent? What is consciousness? These and many more such mystic questions are explored in metaphysical literature; it questions the unquestionable, so to speak. The 'metaphysical' strain is characterised by complexity as against simplicity, wit or the ability to relate disparate things.

The term 'metaphysical poets' was coined by the critic Samuel Johnson, an eighteenth-century English essayist (1179-1781), a poet and philosopher, in his book to describe a loose group of 17th century English poets (that included John Donne, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Andrew Marvell and Henry Vaughan) since their work was characterised by the inventive use of witty conceits, and by a greater emphasis on the spoken than lyrical quality of their verse. When he wrote in his *Life of Cowley* that 'about the beginning of the seventeenth century appeared a race of writers that may be termed the metaphysical poets'; his 'may be termed' indicates something that is reminiscent of the witty sally from Dryden who, in writing in 1963, said of Donne: "He affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign..."¹ Pope is also reported to have remarked that 'Cowley, as well as Davenant, borrowed his metaphysical style from Donne',²; before Dryden the only writer who spoke as if there were a 'metaphysical school' is Drummond of Hawthorden (1585-1649) who speaks of poets who made use of 'metaphysical ideas and Scholastical Quiddities'.³ The highly intellectual poetry of 'Metaphysical poets' is marked by bold and ingenious conceits, complexity and subtlety of thought, frequent use of paradox and pun, and often by deliberate harshness and rigidity of expression. Frequently employing unexpected similes and metaphors through displays of wit, Men of letters in metaphysical poetry have always sought God in Man and Man in God through subjects like love, religion, and morality. William Shakespeare and John Donne have often used metaphysical poetry as a vehicle to create a realm beyond the organic existence and physical laws.

Key Words:

Metaphysical, Conceit, Wit, Economy, Concentration, Self-exploration, Incongruity, Heterogeneity

The manner of metaphysical poetry originates in developments in prose and verse in 1590s. The greatest glory of that decade is that it saw the flowering of drama. "Metaphysical poetry is the poetry of the great age of our drama." Says Gardner. Shakespeare drew on the language of metaphysics, and its canonical problems, to test the relationship between poetic and philosophical thinking. John Donne was, the master of metaphysical poetry, was 'a great frequenter of play' in his youth. The appellation, 'Metaphysical poet' has stuck to Donne (1572-1631) since Dryden, more so since Dr. Johnson. Donne used his poetry as a tool for theological self-expression and exploration, writing extensively on his questions about God.

His strong dramatic imagination of particular situations transforms the lyric and makes a metaphysical poem more than an epigram expanded by conceits. Shakespeare also drew on the language of metaphysics, and its canonical problems, to test the relationship between poetic and philosophical thinking. Helen Gardner's *Metaphysical Poets* (1957) included 'proto-metaphysical' writers such as William Shakespeare. What we call metaphysical poetry was referred to by contemporaries as 'strong lined', some form of poetry characterised by concentration. The reader is held to an idea or a line of argument, demanding that we pay attention and read on and make it out—something 'beyond the reach of vulgar wits'—not to be read by all and sundry.⁴

The most striking feature of metaphysical poetry is its fondness for conceits. A conceit is a comparison whose ingenuity is more striking than its justness, or at least, is more immediately striking. All comparisons discover likeness in things unlike a comparison becomes a conceit when we are made to concede likeness while being strongly conscious of unlikeness. A brief comparison can be a conceit if two things patently unlike, or which we should never think of together, are shown to be alike in a single point in such a way, or in such a context, that we feel their incongruity. Here a conceit is like a spark made by striking two stones together. After the flash the stones are just two stones. Gardner emphasises Shakespeare's conceits:

"...the conceit is a kind of 'hammering out' by which a difficult join is made."⁵

She borrows, admitted by her, the phrase from Shakespeare's poet-king Richard 11, who occupies himself in prison composing a conceited poem:

*I have been studying how I may compare.
This prison where I live unto the world:
And for the world is populous,
And here is not a creature but myself,
And I cannot do it; yet I'll hammer it out.
My brain I'll prove the female to my soul...*

Longer conceits set themselves to 'prove' likeness. They may, as here, start from a comparison which the speaker own is far from obvious and then proceeds to establish. Or they may start from one that is immediately acceptable generally and then make us accept further resemblances in detail after detail. Thus, nobody would think Lady Macbeth is being particularly ingenious when she compares the troubled face of her husband to a book in which men may 'read strange mattes'. She leaves to our imaginations to give further content to this comparison of finding meaning in a book and meaning in a face and to the deliberately imprecise words 'strange matters'.

The brilliant abrupt, personal openings-- in which a man speaks to his mistress, or addresses his God, or sets a scene, or calls us to mark this or that-- for which metaphysical poetry is famous, are like the lump of gold flung down on the table to be worked; the conceits are part of the beating out-- 'hammering out' --by which the metal is shaped to receive its final stamp, which is the point towards which the whole has moved. Argument and persuasion, and the use of the conceit as their instrument, are the elements or body of a metaphysical poem. Its quintessence or soul is the vivid imagining of a moment of experience or of a situation out of which the need to argue, or persuade, or define arises.

The strong sense of actual and often very ordinary situations which the metaphysical poets convey justifies Grierson who thinks that words such as 'conceited' or 'fantastic' do not sum up their quality at all. A reader may at times exclaim 'who would ever think such a thought in such a situation? Shakespeare is a master artist when it comes to brilliantly engaging thoughts

in ordinary situations. Dryden praised Donne for expressing deep thoughts in common language. He is equally remarkable for having extraordinary for having extraordinary thoughts in ordinary situations.

A metaphysical poem tends to be brief and is always closely woven. Marvell, under the metaphor of a garland, characterises his own art finely in 'The Coronet' when he speaks of a 'curious frame' in which the flowers are 'set with Skill and chosen out with Care'. And Donne in a sermon, speaking of the Psalms as especially dear to him in that they were poems, stresses the same elements of deliberate art (curiosity), and economy of language when he defines psalms as

Such a form as is both curious, and requires diligence in the making, and when it is made, can have nothing, no syllable taken from it nor added to it.⁶

"Concentration and a sinewy strength of style is the mark of Ben Johnson as well as of Donne, such adjectives as 'strenuous' and 'masculine' applied to him by his admirers point to a sense in which he too was in some degree a 'strong lined' man and explain why so many younger writers were able to regard both him and Donne as equally their masters", observes Gardner.⁷

Metaphysical Poetry of Shakespeare:

One tends to wonder: Shakespeare and a Metaphysical poet! Some critics term him as a mystic also. How? Although Shakespeare wrote his sonnets before Donne's metaphysical poetry was published, there are metaphysical images and conceits within Shakespeare's whole oeuvre. Wilson Knight, in his influential work *Wheel of Fire*, interprets Shakespeare's somber tragedies in terms of *Shakespearean Metaphysic*. He tries to identify the metaphysic or mystic in two group of plays: the plays of hate theme which include *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *King Lear*, *Othello* and *Timon of Athens* and the plays of evil in human mind which includes *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*. However, one needs to comprehend the metaphysics of the poet, the greatest poet ever, that Shakespeare was. It goes without saying that Shakespeare emerges as a poet even in his plays; his poetic temperament is what makes him a mystic and metaphysical writer.

Long treated as a poetic curio or a biographical riddle, Shakespeare's poetic contribution to the 1601 *Loves Martyr* —usually known as 'The Phoenix and Turtle' ---has recently been reclaimed as an experiment in metaphysical poetry. The various metaphysical traditions express a single idea: that of the soul's union with the divine through self-extinction and surrender of ego, which is very much the theme of the immolated Phoenix and Turtledove in his mystical rhyme—"The Phoenix and the Turtle".⁸

The opening stanza places us in Arabia—already an Eastward shift of scene. The "sole Arabian tree" links up with the "Lote Tree of the Utmost Limit", that marks the boundary of the seventh heaven:

*Let the bird of loudest lay
On the sole Arabian tree
Herald sad and trumpet be,
To whose sound chaste wings obey.*

The poet warns off undesirable birds in stanza 2 and 3, a familiar site in superstition and occultism. One must actively exclude evil or malignant spirits from a sacred site or ceremony.
*But, thou, shrieking harbinger
Foul precurrer of the Fiend,
Augur of the fever's end,
To this troop come thou not near.*

A key for what comes next is '*precurrer*', chosen instead of *precursor* because it contains the word 'recur'. The word refers both to the Phoenix's periodic return to its immolation-grounds and to its rebirth. The concept of rebirth is found not in Christianity, but only in Hinduism and Buddhism. So, the poem draws us even further east. This shift is again suggested in the birds welcomed to the funeral. First, the eagle--- either Lord Vishnu's mount, Garuda, or the eagle that Dante sees in *Paradiso*. The former seems more likely, considering how in the very next stanza, the swan is characterised as 'a priest in surplice white', that is, as a *shwetambara* ("white clad") priest of Hindu or Jain religion. The crow is described as engendering its young with its breath, a fine 'Elizabethan' image of an 'inspired' poet breathing forth his poem. The "crow" is a yoga pose, the *kak asana* or *kaki mudra*. Breath control, or *Pranayama*, is a discipline described in the Upanishads and the *Bhagavad Gita*. The yogic practice of *prana* and *apana*, inhalation and exhalation (breathing in, breathing out) connects with the phrase "breath thou giv'st and tak'st."

It's noteworthy that the self-immolated Phoenix, in the poem, is a female. The Hindu myth of Shiva and Sati speaks of Goddess Sati's self-immolation. The myth prompted, in some parts of India, the practice of *Sati Pratha*, a kindred image of a couple's joint immolation. Indeed, much of the poem's mystical resonance comes from the play on the numbers *two* and *one*.
*So, they lov'd, as love in twain
Had the essence but in one;
Two distincts, division none:
Number there in love was slain.*

In the next lines "Self was not the same", self is the soul (soul is called 'atman' in Sanskrit). The new joint being *Neither two nor one was called*, they are zero. The Hindu invention Zero or *Shunya* was taken up by the Buddha to describe the state of the Supreme Enlightenment. In the Eastern mystical traditions, these highest states are described as bliss, or else transcending bliss itself. Shakespeare ends his rhyme on the transcendental ideal of truth and beauty:
*Truth may seem, but cannot be;
Beauty brag, but 'tis not she:
Truth and beauty buried be.*

While composing it, the 'inspired' poet Shakespeare seems to have attained the transcendental state of universal Self, exhibited in the wisdom thereof. Such echoes are common in his plays as well.

Shakespeare's plays, argues Martin Lings in *Shakespeare's Window into the Soul*, are concerned with mystical realities far more than the workings of human psyche: "they are sacred, visionary works that, through the use of esoteric symbol and form, mirror the inner drama of the journey of the soul". Lings, while analysing the mystical, spiritual and profound visionary wisdom contained in the dramatic artistry of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *The Tempest*, leaves readers with a deep understanding of the playwright himself and of the passage the soul must make to reach its final sacred union with the Divine.

"The problem of tragedy has always been the problem of evil in the world. The presentation of the evil that befalls men is but one of the concerns of tragedy; the other and the more important is the

explanation of the why of the evil so presented. Thus, it is that tragedy and philosophy, tragedy and religion, must always have much in common.” Lily Campbell begins chapter 1 by this observation in *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes*.⁹ In 1597, she goes on to say, there was published *The Theatre of God's Judgements, translated out of French, and Augmented by more than three hundred Examples*, by Th. Beard. The work has become famous as containing the case of “Marlin”, the atheist playwright, and his appropriate death by his own hand which had sinned in writing blasphemies. In the same chapter, Beard goes on to clarify :”that men are too prone to think of the mercy of God and to dismiss from their thoughts the justice of God; and that is the cause why more perish by presumption than despair: for this cause it seemed to me most necessary to call into men’s memories the wonderful judgements of God and to set before their eyes a view of his justice manifested in the world upon sinners and reprobates, to the end that the drowsy conscience of God’s children might be awakened, and the desperate hearts of wicked confounded, when they shall see how vengeance pursue malefactours to their shame and confusion in this life, and to their destruction in the world to come.”Punishment follows sin as a shadow doth the body” he concludes denying the element of chance in events, insisting all is of God. Lord Krishna says to Arjuna in the *Gita* that when evil (Adharma or unrighteousness) is rising, the Lord Himself will come and restore the balance. Shakespeare echoes this philosophy when Hamlet says that he is a part of God’s plan: “Not a whit, we defy augury. There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow.”(Act 5, Scene2, 217-224) Or when Gloucester speaks in *King Lear*: “ As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods; /they kill us for their sport. So distribution should undo excess.” (Act 4, Scene 1, 37-38)

Shakespeare mentions his “muse” many a times, mostly in his sonnets but a few times in his plays too. Historically and mythologically, the “muse” refers to one of the nine Greek goddesses, said to personify the arts (literary, visual, musical and dramatic) and sciences. In a wonderful way, they anthropomorphise ‘Inspiration’. Shakespeare, a poet at heart, famously calls upon the muse in the opening line of *Henry v*: “*O, for a muse of fire that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention*” --- a classical invocation drawn from Homer and Virgil that could easily be something Shakespeare muttered to himself while trying to create his third five-act play in twelve months with a deadline looming. And in *Othello*, when the villainous Iago complains of his own lack of “invention”, he says, “My muse labours, and thus she is delivered.”Here Shakespeare draws a nice parallel between literary creation and childbirth.

But an artist’s muse could also be a living person, and Shakespeare appears to be directing his sonnets to multiple figures. There is the so-called “Dark Lady” sonnet sequence and the “Fair Youth” sonnet sequence: both identities remain unknown. There is also the mysterious “Mr W H”, who appears in dedication to the first published edition and is described as “the onlie begetter of these sonnets.” The key to what Shakespeare felt for his “Muse”, moving steadily toward his mystical flights of fancy, is found in sonnet 10:

*But that thou none lov'st is most evident:
For thou art so possest with mirderous hate,
That gainst thy selfe thou stickst not to conspire, ...*

The impression conveyed, and it is particularly explicit in 6 , is that the Friend is so far consumed in self-love as to be too jealous to produce “copies” of himself. He is exhorted to give—to love; if he does not, then the world of death and time will deal with him, for he deserves no more:

*No love towards others in that bosome sits
That on himselfe such murderous shames commits. (9)*

Martin Seymour Smith throws light on the mystic use of language: “Marriage and procreation are the metaphors for the ‘use’ which a possessor of beauty must make of it if he is not to destroy it.”¹⁰

In the final sonnet of this series(17), Shakespeare warns the Friend that if he does not procreate his kind (and this is the only way of exhorting him to love, to give himself away) then his beauty, as celebrated in Shakespeare's poems, will be 'scorn'd':

And your true rights be termed a Poets rage.

And he ends:

*But were some childe of yours alive that time,
You should live wise in it, and in my rime.*

If the Friend does not free himself from the meshes of his self-love, then his beauty will be destroyed: it will not be worthy of perpetuation in poetry, because poetry is concerned above all with love, which is the prey of Time and Death. Martin Seymour-Smith observes about his sonnets significantly:

"They provide a clear record of how Shakespeare began to write sonnets, urging a boy to marry... and how he then became interested enough in his subject to reproach him for his self-love and how he finally fell in love with him...Shakespeare finally makes his appeal: 'for love of me'...The person with whom he is in love is, so to speak, 'made in his own image': thus there is inevitably an element of self-love and of sexual vanity in his attitude."¹¹

The narcissistic element of 'self-love' tends to spring from and translate into **mysticism**. The anglican theologian, clergyman, and mystical poet of the 17th century, Thomas Traherne, unfolds this wisdom:

Had we not loved ourselves at all, we could never have been obliged to love anything. So that self-love is the basis of all love.¹²

If our highest calling is to serve God, and if the highest form of service is love, as Jesus and Lord Krishna teach us, then Traherne's comment begs us to remember that the place most immediately present and constantly available for such service is within oneself. One is reminded of the famous myth from Plato's *Symposium* : People were hermaphrodites until God split them in two, and now all the halves wander the world over seeking one another. "How we love others is affected by how we love ourselves, and for the first time in a long time, I was whole." Comments Richelle Mead, the American writer.¹³

Furthermore, if we also believe the scriptures and many mystics claiming that God is love (manifested in Krishna's flute and *Raas leela*) and that to love is to know God, then loving oneself is to love and unite with God. "Love thy neighbours as thyself" we are reminded of Jesus' second commandment. The Biblical line reveals that self-love is not only recommended, but is also understood by the Lord, as explained by Traherne, to be central to our ability to love others.

When Shakespeare is not praising the beauty of the Fair Youth or expressing his ardent passion for the Dark Lady, Shakespeare personifies his own internal creative spirit as a muse. Venting his creative frustration, Shakespeare complains that his muse is inarticulate, insufficiently inspiring, and has even outright abandoned him. But in sonnet 38, he explores the tension between this internal muse and his external living one:

*How can my muse want subject to invent
While thou dost breathe...*

He begins, before suggesting that his human muse must be added to the pantheon of divine ones:

*Be thou the tenth muse
Ten times more in worth
Than those old nine which rhymers invoke*

Shakespeare is expressing the desire that his mortal muse become immortal, if not as a goddess, then within the lines of his poems. **Mysticism** involves a transformation at the level of existential feeling. Shakespeare ultimately gets to the transcendental state of selfless love. Martin Seymour-Smith concludes:

No one, I think, would deny that the sonnets as a whole convey an overwhelming atmosphere of having been written by a man who desperately wanted to exist well: to learn how to live and love truly...Shakespeare obstinately goes on loving the Friend...Shakespeare reached a state of mind in which he desired his welfare without expecting to get anything in return.¹⁴

In sonnet 116, Shakespeare is describing the ideal of purely spiritual love, which is not bounded by death, decay, and destruction caused by the relentless march of “Time’s winged chariot”. He begins with “Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments” and ends with “Lover alters not ...to the edge of doom.” In Christian belief, God will determine the fates of men on the day of the Last judgement. So strongly declaring the steadfast nature of true love, the poet affirms that it will remain constant even to the dreadful day of Judgement. The poet’s overwhelming concern with the passage of time, and the allied theme of death and mutability is obvious all through his poetry and plays. Death is a metaphysical subject, found in John Donne’s *Holy Sonnets* too, where he says: “One short sleep past, we wake eternally, / And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.” The idea of death as an enemy to be destroyed comes from the Bible wherein it is stated that ‘Christ must rule until God defeats all enemies and puts them under his feet. The last enemy to be defeated will be death’(Corinthians 15:26, 54-5).

Metaphysical Poetry of John Donne:

John Donne was the first poet in English literature who thought in verse, not simply felt; or rather thought and felt simultaneously. “It was William Drummond of Hawthornden (1585-1649) who first used the critical term “metaphysical” for poets, who as he said, used “metaphysical Ideas and Scholastic Quiddities.”¹⁵ Observes Reena Ramdev. Since Dryden nuanced this criticism by using the word ‘Metaphysical’ in connection with Donne’s poetry (“*He affects the metaphysics...*”). From this comes Samuel Johnson’s use of this term as Dr Johnson confirmed the judgement of Dryden, applying it to the writing of a group of poets a group of poets writing at the beginning of 17th century “recommended by the manner of Donne.”¹⁶ Since then the epithet ‘metaphysical’ has somehow stuck with Donne.

Donne’s poems express a strong, independent spirit as they rework received literary traditions and conventions. Thomas Carew in “An Elegy Upon the Death of the Deane of Pauls, Dr John Donne” (1st printed 1633) praises Donne as the monarch of wit who “purged the Muses Garden” throwing away “the lazy seeds/ of servile imitation ...And fresh invention planted”.¹⁷ The crowning glory appraisal of Donne’s metaphysical art has been offered by Helen Gardner in her *The Metaphysical Poets*:

I have begun this volume a little before Donne with poems which in some way anticipate the metaphysical manner: Raleigh’s fine passionate conceit of a pilgrimage, written when he was under sentence of death. . . Southwell’s meditations, Shakespeare’s strange celebration of married chastity in the most ‘strong-lined of all poems, if ‘strong lines are riddles...But the minute the reader reaches Donne, he will have the same sense of having arrived as when, in a collection of pre-Shakespearean plays, we hear the voice of Marlowe”.¹⁸

Understandably, it is not so much the substance, the material, of Donne's poetry that has earned him the title of 'metaphysical poet' as the manner, the method, of blending the opposites, often warring elements of the material. As Sir Grierson says:

'Donne, moreover, is metaphysical not only in virtue of his scholasticism, but by his deep reflective interest in the experiences of which his poetry is the expression, the new psychological curiosity with he writes of love and religion.'¹⁹ A conceit of Donne is his instrument of argument and persuasion. We may not accept that Donne's 'Good Friday' was actually 'made as I was riding westward that day', as a heading in some manuscripts tells us, but we must accept as we read the poem that he is riding westward and thinking as he rides. The most serious and impassioned love poetry of the century argues, or assumes as a base for argument, that love is a relation between two persons loving---'It cannot *be* love till I love her that loves me'. The poems which Donne wrote on the experience of loving where love is returned, poems in which 'Thou' and 'I' are merged into 'We', are his most original and profound contributions to the poetry of human love. It is not possible to find models for such poems as 'The Good-Morrow', 'The Anniversarie', 'The Canonization', and the most amazing creation of Donne 'The Extasie'. These poems have the right to the title metaphysical in its true sense, since they raise, even when they do not explicitly discuss, the great metaphysical question of the relation of the spirit and senses. They raise it not as an abstract problem, but in the effort to make the experience of the union of human powers in love, and the union of two human beings in love, apprehensible. We never lose our sense of a 'little roome' which love has made 'an everywhere'. Donne uses words which call the mind into play, rather than those which speak to the senses or "evoke an emotional response through memory". In his conceits, he constantly brings together the abstract and the concrete, the remote and the near, the spiritual and the material, the finite and the infinite, the sublime and the commonplace. Widely divergent elements are, "yoked by violence together", (**Johnson**) and the effect, as Grierson and Joan Bannett have recognised, is often fantastic.

The fantastic nature of 'metaphysical conceits' bears witness to the extreme condensation and density of Donne's poetry. In "Valediction: Forbidding Mourning", true lovers, now parted, are likened to the legs of a compass The image is elaborated at length:

*If they be two, they are two so
As stiffe twin compasses are two,
Thy soule the fixt foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the' other doe.*

The lovers are still spiritually one, just as the head of the compass is one even when the legs are apart. One leg remains fixed and the other moves round it. The lover cannot forget the beloved even when separated from her. The two lovers meet together in the end, just as the two legs of the compass are together again, as soon as the circle has been drawn.

*Such wilt thou be to mee, who must
Like th' other foot, obliquely runne;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end, where I begunne.*

The compass becomes a perfect image to suggest inseparable union of two souls even though bodies may seem to go apart.

Similarly, in "The Flea", Donne deduces every kind of consequence from the fact that a flea hops from biting him to suck his mistress's blood.

*Mee it suck'd first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea, our two bloods mingled be;*

He will not let her kill the creature in which their blood has mingled. The insignificant object, insect, itself becomes their bridal bed, the temple of marriage:

*This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;*

Apart from the poem, the comparison would look absurd, but in the poem the very absurdity becomes a proof of the poet's fidelity to his passionate experience. The originality of the comparison is as striking as its elaboration and extension convincing. By the force of passion and surprising animation of intellect, the flea itself is transformed into a sublime object. It is because that sublimity of a 'flea' that the lovers' bed becomes the earth—microcosm and their room the sphere—the macrocosm.

"The Extasie" is central to Donne's metaphysical philosophy. Here he is grappling with basic contradictions, contradictions between body and soul and, again, soul and souls, indicating the inherent tension. The contraries, even though, each retaining its individual identity arrive at a perfect fusion. While considering the image-making power of Donne, it is pertinent to remember the words of Aristotle:

'...the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars.²⁰

If coining of good metaphors is a sign of poetic genius, Donne most certainly was one, and it is this aspect of his genius that makes his poetry metaphysical. In "The Extasie" most scholastic ideas of Donne got fused with his passion of love—a consummate passion which involves body and soul. The word 'Ecstasy', in modern times, has come to signify 'ecstatic joy', 'ecstatic passion', 'ecstatic frenzy'. But in Elizabethan times, it was supposed to be that mystical state in which soul, while the body is quiescent and seemingly inert in deep contemplation, is liberated from the body and communicates with the divine power. Like a typical metaphysical poem, it begins abruptly:

*Where like a pillow on a bed,
A Pregnant banke swel'd up, to rest
The violets reclining head,
Sat we two, one anothers best.*

A natural setting had no meaning for Donne unless it contained a reference to the human world. Therefore, though it is an open-air setting, yet 'a pillow on a bed...' brings in the suggestion of a room, and the lovers lying in embrace. This human frame, the human passion, is always kept to the fore, and all other allusions serve to intensify it. The next two stanzas describe the complete union of the lovers' bodies into one, as it were, though such words as 'cemented', 'fast balm', 'eye-beams', 'intergraft' and 'propagation' are vibrant with meanings from architecture, horticulture, the then prevailing theory of sight, etc. Donne uses every fragment of his knowledge to suggest the completeness of the physical union. 'Intergraft' — the horticultural image—alone is capable of communicating what the poet wants to convey: the hands so firmly fixed in each other that they become inseparable in a vital union in which

they derive life from each other. The last two lines of the third stanza are suggest greater vitality:

*And pictures on our eyes to get
Was all our propagation*

“They were ‘looking babies’, that is, seeing the image of each reflected in the eyes of the other”, comments Gardner.²¹ They will be readily observed as being similar to the line in “The Good Morrow”:

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears

With the next stanza, Donne enters the realm of metaphysical abstraction, but keeps to, as he always does, the vividly physical plane in his description:

*As, twixt two equall Armies, Fate
Suspend uncertain victorie,
Our soules, which to advance their state
Were gone out hung ‘twixt her, and mee.*

By implication, while the lovers’ bodies entered into a vital physical union, their souls left their bodies and hung above them. In the next stanza, the souls suspended in air above the two still and motionless bodies, begin parleying within the hearing of the hypothetical character:

*And whil’st our soules negotiate there
Wee like sepulchrall statues lay;
All day, the same our postures were,
And wee said nothing, all the day.*

The lovers now stand in the full glow of love’s illumination, and they realise the nature of their experience. It is revealed to them that it is not sexual urge that has brought them together or united them. It is a moving power. In the subsequent four stanzas Donne describes this primary power, the soul, and its composition and relation to love. Although soul, as such, was regarded as most pure, Donne twists the idea and makes a distinction between souls unaffected by love and souls transmuted by love. The souls composed of natural elements are not yet fully aware of themselves, are not even pure: this is brought about by love, a super-power, which mixes two souls in love and makes them one, even though they simultaneously keep their individual identities. The phrase ‘each this and that’ in line 36, as Redpath has pointed out, suggests ‘that there is no distinction of this and that’ between the two souls once love has united them, or that each can equally well be called ‘this’ or ‘that’: alternatively the meaning may be that by the working of love the two souls become qualitatively indistinguishable, both now consisting of precisely the same mixture of elements.²² This new soul made out of the fusion of two souls and simultaneously refining each of them is compared to violet transplanted:

*A Single violet transplant
The strength, the colour, and the size,
(All which before was poore, and scant,)
Redoubles still and multiplies.*

The third soul concocted by love’s alchemy becomes vital, reproductive, fruitful, capable of multiplying itself like a transplanted violet plant. This soul, born out of the inter-animation of two human souls, conjoins the latter, which remains otherwise separate, into a meaningful, vital, companionship.

So, Donne is a poet primarily who wrote poetry from his unified sensibility, and such poetry always tends to be metaphysical, like the poetry of T. S. Eliot who finds evening “like a patient etherised upon a table” in his *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. Intellect and emotion

are in perfect poise in Donne as one finds in Eliot. That's why Eliot has celebrated the inventiveness of Donne.²³

'The Sun Rising', 'Holy Sonnets: 'Death, be not Proud', 'Go and Catch a Falling Star', 'To His Mistress Going to Bed' are outstanding examples of Donne's metaphysical poetry. Dr Oliver Tearle (Loughborough University) observes: "John Donne's poetry is a curious mix of contradictions. At once spiritual and metaphysical, it is also deeply embedded in the physicality of bodies: love as a physical, corporeal experience as well as a spiritual high. His style can often be startlingly plain ('For God's sake hold your tongue', one of the poems on this list begins), yet his imagery is frequently complex, his use of extended metaphors requiring some careful unpacking."

Conclusion:

Shakespeare and Donne, as mentioned above, use conceits, elaborate, sustained metaphors, in abundance and they do so with telling effect. Both, in their conceits, make ample use of their learning too. Both make use of sonnet form: Quatrains and couplet in 14 lines of Shakespearean sonnet; an octave and a sestet in the Italian or Petrarchan form of Donne's sonnet. Critics have often remarked that a comparative analysis of Shakespeare's sonnet 18 and Donne's Holy Sonnet 10 yields amazing similarities in terms of metaphysical style, technique and content, which is applicable to the entire oeuvre of the great literary masters. Shakespeare begins with a rhetorical question: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" The metaphor Shakespeare invokes in line one, to compare the youth and beauty of the young man to a summer's day, is elaborated and sustained throughout. One finds this hyperbole echoing in Donne's opening lines too: "Death, be not proud, though some have called thee/ Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;/ For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow/ Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me." Both poems approach a philosophical and metaphysical subject like death with reason and end in paradox. In sonnet 116, "Let me not to the marriage of true minds", Shakespeare explores love's true nature that echoes in Donne's "The Extasie". Shakespeare and Donne display their own ingenuity as they express a deep vision of the world and the strands of analogy that seem to hold it together. It is the second section of Shakespearean sonnets, that which concerns the nature of youth and beauty and the inevitable effects of time, which most clearly anticipates the later Metaphysical poetry of Donne and his followers. In fact, what Shakespeare did to dramatic poetry, Donne did to lyrical poetry. Like the great Elizabethan dramatist, Donne translated the form of verse he chose to work in from its feminine softness into masculine sturdiness capable of digesting diverse and desperate elements. Shakespeare's sonnets are expressions of the private zone where the writer let the reader know his personal feelings and emotions. Donne's poems are not exactly personal or private statements. However, it is pertinent to note that Shakespeare and Donne use metaphysical poetry to create a realm beyond the organic existence and physical laws.

Notes and References

1. Dryden, John, *A Discourse Concerning the Origin and Progress of Satire* in A. J. Smith, ed., *John Donne: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p.151.

2. Gardner, Helen, Introduced and edited., *The Metaphysical Poets; Revised Edition, The Penguin Poets*, penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, 1957, 1966, p.15.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.P.17.
5. Ibid., p.20.
6. Ibid., p.18.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., P. 41.
Note-- In the myth the Phoenix, a bird of dazzling beauty and sole of its kind, dwells on a lofty tree in an Eastern Paradise. Every thousand years, it flies to a palm-tree in Arabia and there builds itself a nest of spices. Here it is consumed by its own fires and reborn. When full-grown it flies with its own ashes to lay them on the altar of the Temple of the Sun at Heliopolis. Men rejoice at the return of the marvellous bird and other birds assemble. In chorus they accompany the singing Phoenix as it soars to heaven, before flying back alone to its Paradise. Unlike his fellow poets who celebrated the Phoenix (Beauty) and the Turtle Dove (Constancy), Shakespeare, omitting the central element of the bird's death and resurrection, has created out of the myth of its own.
9. Campbell B. Lily *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: SLAVES OF PASSION*; Cambridge Univ. Press, 1961; University Paperbacks, Methuen: London, Pp. 1-2.
10. Seymour-Smith Martin *SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS*, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, London, Pp.33
11. Ibid., pp 33-34.
12. Dobell Bertram, Ed., *Centuries of Meditations* by Thomas Traherne (1636-1674) Cosimo Classics, 1908, 2007, sect.55.
13. Mead Richelle *Succubus Revealed*, Kensington Publishing Corporation,2012.
14. Seymour-Smith Martin *SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS*, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, London, P.36.
15. Ramdev Reena, ed., *SIDNEY, SPENSER AND DONNE: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION*, Worldview: An Imprint of Book Land Publishing Co., Delhi, 2011, p.190.
16. Johnson Samuel, *Lives of the Poets in A.J.Smith, ed., John Donne: The Critical Heritage* (London: Rutledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p.218.
17. Ramdev Reena, ed., *SIDNEY, SPENSER AND DONNE: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION*, Worldview: An Imprint of Book Land Publishing Co., Delhi, 2011, p.191.
18. Gardner, Helen, Introduced and edited., *The Metaphysical Poets; Revised Edition, The Penguin Poets*, penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, 1957, 1966, p.23.
19. "Introduction" to *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems*, Oxford, 1921. P. XIV.
20. Aristotle, *On the Art of Poetry*, trans. By Ingram Bywater Oxford, p.78.
21. Gardner, Helen, Introduced and edited., *The Metaphysical Poets; Revised Edition, The Penguin Poets*, penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, 1957, 1966, p.75.
22. Redpath Theodore, *op.cit.*, pp. 89-91.
23. T. S. Eliot, review of *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to Butler*. Selected and edited, with an Essay, by Herbert J.C. Grierson (Oxford, Clande

JOURNAL OF CRITICAL REVIEWS

ISSN- 2394-5125 VOL 07, ISSUE 12, 2020