16TH CENTURY ENGLISH POETRY: CRITICAL EVALUATION

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ABSTRACT

It was the renaissance in the sixteenth century which gave birth to a variety of style and encouraged experimentation in English literature. For the first time the poets experimented with Italian style and created sonnets. The term modern was never used before, however with the change in the structure and form, the term "Modern English Poetry" was used to identify these newly developed poems. Courtly poets Wyatt and Surrey introduced new style, rhythm and form in English poetry which was identified as the modern English poetry since they were the first reformers in English metre and style and changed the traditional style. The essay here will study about the birth of modern English poetry and how it evolved during the age in the expert hands of Wyatt, Surrey, Spenser, Shakespeare, Sidney etc. It will further highlight the characteristic of the modern poetry of the period and highlight the fact that for the first time the greatest playwright Shakespeare wrote sonnets under the influence of Italian literature and others paved way for the heroic and epic poetry for the poets of the subsequent age. While lyrical style was predominant, but not the only form of the era, the poets experimented with early blank verse and also introduced the epic form and the dramatic or conversational poetry by William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, John Donne and Phillip Sydney which were highly appreciated and read even today.

Key words: Sixteen century poets, Renaissance- English poetry- Courtly poets- lyrical style-Shakespeare- Donne Spencer

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Wyatt (1503- 1542), the modern English poetry begins in the sixteenth century. Wyatt along with the 'courtly makers' who followed him soon exercised their talent in language by translating the works from foreign models as well as experimented with a variety of lyric measures, that helped in restoring English metrics, the combination of flexibility as well as regularity which was lost after the age of Chaucer. In the hands of Wyatt English poetry experienced rapid shift from the stage of language also known as Middle English to the stage known as Modern English where these poets specially Wyatt and Surrey, essential craftsmen who treated the conventional subject matter in a unique manner which is

disciplined yet flexible poetic style. They borrowed, translated as well as imitated from Italian as well as French poets .

Thus it can be said after studying from the great works of literature that Wyatt wrote lyrics but Surrey tried his hands with blank verse. While Wyatt picked the Italian style and wrote sonnets, Surrey developed unrhymed pentameters (or black verse) later perfected by Dryden and Milton. Thus the poetry of England during the Renaissance developed .

Under the influence of Chaucer, folk songs and Italian form. Poets experimented with simple themes like life of ordinary men and women, relationship between sexes the treachery and hypocrisy of courtly life . The poetry no longer remained limited within the genteel society or was written with a purpose of educating gentlemen. Instead the new forms developed, sonnets and lyrics appeared and collection of poems was published in "Tottel's Miscellany" to help common men read the finest lyrics of the time. The book contained about 40 poems by Surrey and 96 poems by Wyatt. According to (Daiches, 2004), Wyatt is studied only for the freshness and pathbreaking style he brought with him from Italy and not for his poetic genius. His poetry was ordinary in approach and content. However, the English poets picked his style of fourteen lines and continued writing. Thus the finest sonnets by other poets such s Shakespeare and Sidney were penned in the same era.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EARLY POETRY

Renaissance in the sixteenth century connotes to the idea of achieving liberation from the authority of Church. According to the French historian Michelet, renaissance the discovery of the world and the discovery of man, by man, or Revival of Learning, re-awakening was due to the study of the ancient classics such as Greece and Rome. Earlier the books and manuscripts were sealed for common men. Before the renaissance the books were for gentleman, monks, court and Church . This movement helped in familiarising common people with the classical art and culture. Italy was the first home for Renaissance which helped in inculcating humanistic spirit. Spencer laid the foundation of new poetry with his invention of fresh vocabulary, new stanzaic forms as well as humanistic theme and sensuous imagery. Soon Bacon adapted the syntax which was predominant in Latin poetry. Bacon used the Latin syntax to produce clear, self-conscious as well as precise prose style. New forms developed and thus gave birth to unique craftsmanship that enriched the English poetry with new forms such as sonnets, elegy, and pastorals enriched poetry .Thus English poetry experienced renewal through 'Humanism'in poetry after a prolonged period of sterility.

Courtly Poets Sir Thomas Wyatt and Earl of Surrey took the responsibility of reviving poetry by embracing the model and stimulus from Italy . Under the influence of fourteenthcentury Italian poet, Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch) the father of sonnet, who used the form to idealise love. Thus after studying Italian literature extensively, Wyatt was the first poet to introduce the particular form in English. Soon sonnet matured in the hands of other poets and evolved as one of the most popular verse forms of the Elizabethan period. The 14 line poetry, sonnet was first developed in Italy in the twelfth century and then transferred to French and later in English poetry .

16TH CENTURY POETRY

16th century poetry mainly focussed on sonnets and experimentation with other metre forms in English. Sonnet is a subjective poem, a type of lyrical poem which was written to express the personal feelings and emotions of the poet . Subjective poetry underwent decline in the medieval period. In the sixteenth century it regained importance due to the Renaissance (the human feelings, emotions and art forms were given importance). In the middle age the main emphasis was on the religion and morality, but with Renaissance came the change .

Sonnet form of poetry was made popular by Italian poet Petrarch. The word came from the Italian word 'sonneta' meaning a little sound. Petrarch derived the sonnet form mainly from two sources, the middle aged spiritual poetry and Troubadour poetry that celebrates physical love. Features of Petrarchan sonnet were, firstly, the poet idealised his mistress. She is worshipped as an epitome of beauty. The beauty of the lady is mesmerising and is often compared to the Classical Goddesses. She is virtuous and time and gain referred to as Aphrodite or Venus. Secondly, the dominating these of the poetry were, the lover would constantly woo his lady however she rarely responds or reacts to his call.

Wyatt, the first English sonneteer followed the Petrarchan form however brought in changes in the English setting and incorporated greater liveliness and occasional humour which was not present in the Italian sonnets. With Spenser in Amoretti the style matured and in the hands of Sir Philip Sidney a note of psychological complexity first came in poetry. However, the conflict in the mind of Astrophel was later perfected by Shakespeare . Sydney's conflict between ideal public role and yearning for lady love became one of the mostly used themes is the sonnets of the later time. Shakespeare however, deviated from in style from his predecessors, dedicated about 126 sonnets to the fair youth where the identity was ambiguous. He was a sensible writer and not a sensible writer. While the classical poets wrote poetry as a mean for immortalisation, Shakespeare immortalises the youth and beauty of his friends through the sonnets.

Shakespearean sonnets refer to a distinct kind of lyric which means spontaneous overflow of powerful expression. Strong personal feeling or emotion expressed in a musical language. Most sonnets of Shakespeare are personal and express strong emotion. Some of sonnets are steeped with dramatic quality. Just like drama these poems expresses conflict and tension. Just like drama which has action, the sonnets often have sequence. The conflict in the mind of the writer could be noticed in the poetry . His love, admiration and emotions for his friend and the grievances towards the friend could be traced back. His conflict between passions for the lark lady is also studied. Some his sonnets are written in a conversational tone, such as "How careful was I when I took my way, or Shall I compare thee to a summer's day". Often critics identify the mingling of lyrical and dramatic style in the sonnet and refer his creation as dramatic lyric. It is his uniqueness in style and narration which helped Shakespeare emerges as a unique sonneteer.

All Elizabethan sonneteers have expressed different stages of love and courtship. Following the Petrarchan pattern they have further shown how the poet would often suffer from

frustration and despair due to non-reciprocation of their love by the mistress. Shakespeare too has referred to the similar mood of melancholy and despair which was depicted dramatically. For example, Sonnet 116 is one of the most elevated definitions of love found in English poetry (Waller, 2006). The sonnet bears the evidence to the profound contemplation of the poet regarding love. His use of syntax and repetition also made the sonnets unique and different from the contemporary literary works. Other poets of the time followed the structural division of the sonnet used by Petrarch, the octave and sestate, a few like Wyatt and Spenser experimented with three quatrains and a couplet. However, it was Shakespeare who studied various styles and popularised the form of fourteen lines with a new rhyme scheme that other Elizabethan sonneteers never used .

CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE 16TH CENTURY ENGLISH POETRY

Wyatt, Surrey, Milton, Shakespeare, Spenser and Sydney dominated the era with magnificent lyric, innovative forms and common themes. To begin with, the modern lyrical style was first introduced by Wyatt after he studied Italian sonnets. He introduced new forms which was unknown to the traditional English writers, and used three measures to poetry terza rima, ottava rima and sonnet. His lyrics were magnificent in expressing courtly sentiments in melodious strain, however sonnets failed to impress but are admired for the verse form and Wyatt's great contribution in the English poetry . One of the 'courtly makers', Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, was equally sensitive to the literary fashions that influenced Europe from Italy and like Wyatt, he too engaged himself in translating work to enrich English poetry with French and Italian masterpieces in the simple language. His tone was elegiac and love for nature was genuine which he mingled in love yielding sonnets. His sonnets introduced a fresh model were an arrangement of three quatrains ending in rhymed couples could be noticed. It is this technique which was later .

perfected by the greatest dramatist of all time, William Shakespeare while writing the magnificent bouquet of 154 sonnets. Surrey's contribution in English poetry was uncompromising with his translation of Virgil's Aeneid he gifted the world literature the rarest verse form, 'blank verse' that helped in matching with the spirit of renaissance. A rough and rigid technique style expressing fondness to the last line while maintaining dignity and strength. Surrey is thus identified as the first precursor of verse form which was later used by Milton and Shakespeare in greatest poems and drama .

Works of other poets in the age included the excellence of Thomas Sackville who wrote for a short while, however is remembered for first classical tragedy "Gorbuduc". His poems were humanistic and often lyrical in style and narration. His use of rhyme royal stanza, melancholy and elegiac spirit coupled with archaic language inspired Spenser, the poet of "Faire Queen". Edmund Spenser, the New Poet of the era, culminated the variety of forms and constantly developing thoughts to pave way for the new beginning . According to David Daiches, Spenser was the great synthesizer for whom the English nondramatic poetry was waiting. With the finest work "The Shepheard's Calendar" in 1579, Spenser came to be known as the New Poet. Inspired by Virgil and Theocritus, as the name suggests, the poetry was true to the

spirit of renaissance. It is a series of twelve eclogues, a pastoral, a poetic style, and one for each month. The predominant theme was unrequited love .

Metaphysical poetry of the era was a different strain which was beyond physical or dealt with the spiritual. In metaphysical poetry Donne and his followers introduced the argumentative form expressed in a philosophical manner . Features of metaphysical poetry includes a rare combination of the opposites, argumentative style, a dramatic opening to arrest the reader, use of simile and deals with the philosophy that life is full of contradiction. Though Donne began writing towards the end of Elizabethan age, however the predominant style of the metaphysical poetry came during the seventeenth century or during the Age of Milton as chronicled by the History of English Literature .

FAMOUS POETS OF THE AGE

Edmund Spenser (1552- 99), gifted English poetry some of the finest masterpieces such as "Shepheard's Calendar", "Faerie Queen", "Amoretti", "Four Hymns" and ''The Prothalamion". The Shepheard's Calendar (1579) modelled on artificial pastoral poetry developed under the influence of Virgil and Theocritus, became popular during the renaissance. The pastoral poetic genre soon evolved as the true renaissance spirit. The combination of lines and rhymes was rich, the warm pictorial beauty, richness, fresh use of meters and his dominant theme of unrequited love exercised a great influence on the literature. Faerie Queen was the masterpiece. It was story of twelve knights of Elizabeth who took different enterprises in her honour. He declared "to fashion a gentleman in virtuous and gentle discipline". His poem fuses the spirit of renaissance. The Faerie Queen is an allegory which is often termed as a picture gallery. The love poems or sonnets Amoretti were his rarest creation in which he expressed his feelings without using allegory. Thus evolved Spenserian sonnets specially valued for purity. Amoretti have a charm of harmony and pure environment .

The great sonneteers of the period, Sidney, Spenser and Shakespeare were the authors of legendary works like, Astrophel and Stella, Sonnets and Amoretti. The themes are inspired by humanism of renaissance and Sidney is known as the greatest sonneteer of the age after Shakespeare.

Sir Philip Sidney (1554- 86), experienced a brief life about thirty two years in which he penned some of the greatest works of the time. A scholar, critic, poet and courtier Sidney's work the sonnetsequence "Astrophel and Stella was published after his life time. "Astrophel" and Stella chronicle his hopeless love for Stella. Arcadia was written to amuse his sister, the Countess of Pembroke. It is a prose romance . Sidney's most important work is "Defence of Poesie" penned in early 1580s was also studied and appreciated later.

CONCLUSION

Literary works of sixteenth century were not only significant but also unique. The Renaissance inspired the writers and new forms of expression came into use. Poetry was a dominant form of expression and under Henry VIII it reached new heights. Courtiers Wyatt

and Surrey first experimented with new forms of meter and rhythm in English after studying Italian poetry of love, passion and emotion. Steeped in Italian fervour, thus Wyatt, the first modern English poet introduced sonnet form in vernacular and made it popular among the writer. While humanism and return to rustics were the predominant theme of Renaissance, Surry introduced black verse to express the spirit of the re-birth phase in true form. Though, Wyatt and Surrey experimented with modern style in lyrics, it was under the great poets like Spenser, Sidney and Shakespeare, the forms, rhythm and style perfected and contributed to the literary excellence of the time. Other styles also developed during the later part of sixteenth century and gave birth to the metaphysical poetry by John Donne, Vaughn and Crabbe. Nonetheless, soon followed the greatest works of all time by John Milton with his "Paradise Lost", that articulated the conflict between God, man and nature in true spirits of the modern sentiments.

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