

A Study of Donne's Poetry in Postcolonial Feminist Perspective: To His Mistress Going to Bed

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Abstract. *To His Mistress Going to Bed* is a love poem by John Donne, a British metaphysical poet. The poem describes the process in which the male protagonist seduces the female protagonist. Most critics focus on the mystical metaphor of Donne as a poet, but lack attention to the underlying significance of this poem. This article analyzes the female subject in poetry based on the theory of postcolonial feminism, revealing that the female subject in the poem is in a state of being banned by mainstream Western society, suppressed by patriarchal society, and colonized. It studies the issue of identity loss and identity construction of female subjects; This article also explores the social background and cultural colonization of the Elizabethan and James I eras in which the poet lived, and the subtle influence of colonial consciousness on the poet and his poetry. Ultimately, it is concluded that John Donne constructed a textual world of "others" through the poetic text in the process of creating this poem. This paper provides a new perspective for the study of postcolonial feminism and helps to drive people to engage in new reflections.

Keywords: Post-colonialism, feminism, John Donne.

1. Introduction

Postcolonial feminist criticism is a theoretical framework that emerged at the end of the 20th century, integrating postcolonial theory and feminist perspectives. It attempts to analyze the intersection of gender, race, class, and colonialism in literature and society. This approach challenges mainstream narrative and power structures, highlighting the experiences and voices of marginalized women in the postcolonial era. It comprehensively considers feminist ideology and criticism of the colonial system, rejecting patriarchy as the sole factor oppressing women. Instead, it explores gender issues by linking them with various factors such as country, race, geographical boundaries, imperialism, capitalist multinational corporations, colonization, and being colonized. This method criticizes the "hegemony" of Western/white/middle-class feminism, opposes considering identity and homogenization only from individual issues, demands fully reflecting all women in oppressed situations, and emphasizes the diversity and multi-level nature of feminist criticism discourse, focusing on cross-cultural gender differences [1].

John Donne was a famous metaphysical English poet in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Donne is known for his metaphysical style, exploring themes of love, spirit, and interpersonal relationships in his poetry. His works often depict complex metaphors, wisdom, and the fusion of religious and emotional imagery. *To His Mistress Going To Bed* is one of Donne's most famous poems, which imitates the temptation of men to women. Due to the influence of the poet's historical background, there have been analyses of John Donne's poetry from a postcolonial perspective. This article will select the poem *To His Mistress Going To Bed* and analyze it using postcolonial feminist theory.

This article will analyze John Donne's poetry from the perspective of postcolonial feminist criticism, providing a new perspective for his poetry creation. It enables readers to explore how gender, power dynamics, and colonial influences shape his portrayal of women. By examining the social and historical background of Donne's writing, readers can reveal hidden meanings and challenge traditional explanations. This method is important because it promotes a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of literature, highlighting the voices of marginalized women in history.

This paper will unpack the gender dynamics of the poem through postcolonial feminist criticism applied to the poem. The male gaze, the inherent power imbalance, and the objectification of women in the figure of Donne's mistress are very much up for discussion. In addition, the impact of patriarchal norms and societal expectations on female subjectivity, and the potential for resistance or subversion in the poems, have also been the focus of research. This analysis will reveal the deeper meaning of this poem and challenge traditional reading methods.

This paper will analyze John Donne's 'To the Mistress Who Went to Bed' by applying postcolonial feminist criticism to reveal the power dynamics, gender roles and social influences latent in this poem. This approach can help to explore the complex relationship between love, desire and female agency in Donne's work. By considering historical contexts and critical perspectives, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the poem and contribute to wider literary and gender studies.

2. Analysis of Poetry from the Perspective of Postcolonial Feminism

This poem is a pornographic poem with a strong seductive connotation, mainly describing the process of a man enticing a Miss to have sexual intercourse. From a postcolonial feminist perspective and looking at image construction and characterization in the poems, some of the underlying contradictions between gender and power can be identified.

2.1. Imagery Construction in Poetry

At the beginning of the poem, the male protagonist warmly invites the female protagonist and uses labor to describe the state of waiting.

The word to be analyzed here is labor. The alliteration here is very interesting. In the Phoenician and Hebrew alphabet cultures, L is a symbolic symbol for the action of whipping, pulling, beating, or swinging a whip or rope. In this poem, even if the man "I" is giving orders, the poet will still use action verbs, such as "labor" and "in labor", which should belong to women. The original meanings of these two words are "farming" and "eagerly anticipating", with sexual implications. The poet compares women to land, while the male protagonist is hinted at as the person who cultivates the land. The use of labor here not only implies sexual intercourse but also the objectification of the female subject by men. The purpose of the poet's use of puns is to replace the act of conquering women with land reclamation at the discourse level, laying the foundation for colonial discourse in the following text.

Then, after tempting the female protagonist to take off his clothes one by one, the male protagonist exclaimed, "O my America!" Here, the author compares women to the Americas and the New World. It is believed that this reflects the idea of "Orientalism". According to Said's Orientalism, the East, as the geographical East of Europe, has always represented "romance, exotic charm, beautiful scenery, unforgettable memories, and extraordinary experiences in the minds of Westerners" since ancient times [2]. Postcolonial theorist Edward Said proposed the view of "Orientalism" from the perspective of cultural power, pointing out that "Orientalism" constructs a colonial discourse system based on a binary opposition framework by emphasizing the spatial and geographical differences between the East and the West, historical development processes, and civilization derived systems. Through the above system, Western countries have achieved the shaping of their own cultural influence, establishing a hierarchical structure of West-East, Self-Other, and Civilization-Faint, thereby strengthening their hegemonic rule and colonial oppression over the East [3]. In this poem, the woman in bed is replaced by a newly discovered land, and the satisfaction of her discovery and possession is replaced by the conquest of the newly discovered land and the Americas. This is in line with the pun "labor" that combines sexual behavior with farming in the previous text, reflecting the male protagonist's view of sexual behavior as a predatory conquest activity, and the male protagonist becomes "Western" or "self", And the female protagonist becomes "Eastern" or "Other".

Furthermore, the male protagonist compares the female protagonist to "my gem mine" and "my empire", and expresses his desire to use his hands to cover the female protagonist's body with a seal.

The seal is a cultural representation, a symbol of possession, a confirmation of ownership originating from the will to power [4]. The desire of the male protagonist in the poem actually reflects a color of power in gender discourse. The seal here is to confirm identity relationships and exclude the possibility of other colonizers interfering with their own land. The saying "being with someone is the safest" goes without saying. Therefore, this is a declaration of superiority towards the conquered (female/colonizer), declaring that the conquered, i.e. the female protagonist, has lost control over her body. The male protagonist views the female protagonist as a "gem mine" and an "empire", while portraying himself as someone who possesses both. This not only objectifies women but also elevates their male rights, status, and identity.

2.2. Deficiency of Female Roles

Many of Donne's other pieces feature distorted female imagery and male chauvinism [5]. In this poem, the absence of female characters is clearly shown. The poem depicts the process of seducing the character's behavior. However, during this process of temptation, readers can only see the action language of male characters, while female characters are in a neglected position and in a muted state. This poem is entirely described from a male perspective, detailing the male protagonist's enthusiastic praise, invitation, and seduction towards the female protagonist. However, the heroine of the poem does not give any response: there is no way of knowing whether her emotions, desires, and demands in this matter are completely submissive to the hero's set of demands or whether she expresses a refusal or some degree of defiance. Since the woman is attached to a man, she can be naturally wanted and devastated, which is expressed in *To His Mistress Going to Bed*. The poem depicts the unheard voice of the female, who occupies a subordinate position and can only respond to the will of the man, thereby becoming the "other" of man and the object of man's power [6].

In this sexual relationship, only the male protagonist shows his eagerness and longing, while the female protagonist is completely marginalized. In this love poem full of the male gaze, women are merely projected as male desires, becoming an "other" in sexual relationships, an object used to prove male power, losing control over their own bodies and the power to express their bodily sensations. The absence of such female characters leads to poetry not reflecting the wishes of women themselves, which may pose a risk of moral condemnation for women. The social identity of the heroine can be derived from the title of the poem: a married woman. This is likely to indicate that the sexual behavior described in the poem is immoral. The absence of female characters keeps the female protagonist in a passive state, and in a state where she is unable to express her attitude and reaction, she is placed on the high ground of moral condemnation. Throughout the poem, the woman is left "roaming" by a man, resulting in readers not knowing her thoughts, her consciousness as well as whether she is reluctant or willing to be with him [6]. As Millett illustrates in her *Sexual Politics*, "Aggression intelligence force and efficacy in the male; passivity, ignorance, docility "virtue" and ineffectuality in the female" [7].

From the post-colonialism perspective, this poem presents a combination of gender discourse and political discourse. When gender and political discourse are intertwined, the relationship between men and women is further solidified, forming opposing poles, whether in the West or the Third World. In this opposition, the Third World loses its subjectivity under the cultural hegemony of the West, while women lose themselves under the control of male power discourse and exist as appendages. This is undoubtedly a continuation of the construction of Eastern feminization and Western masculinization, as well as a continuation of the disregard for women. In such discourse construction, women once again become others, marginalized, and the measure of women is no longer women themselves but men. When post-colonialism views third-world men as the "other" in the eyes of the West, third-world women also become the "other" in the eyes of the "other". However, "others" cannot defend their own image: they are defined by other groups with discourse power, although this definition is far from their own situation.

From the perspective of postcolonial feminism, the image of the hero can be interpreted as a complex expression under the influence of Western culture. Reading the poem from the perspective

of feminist criticism, it is very obvious that the poem is entirely a text centered on a patriarchal discourse, embodying a naked sense of male power. The title of the poem itself contains a crude desire for conquest and a tendency to violence, and the narrative process of the poem itself can be regarded as a complete process of sexual violence in which a man conquers a woman. The poem contains a number of commands issued by the hero to the woman, whom he directs to undress step by step while expressing his admiration for the flesh. This is a condescending gesture, using the tone of a ruler to get obedience and thus the pleasure of domination and subjugation.

The title of this poem is full of a sense of conquest and violence [8]. Throughout the poem, he uses his eyes, hands and words to exert violence and control over the women. Firstly, the description of the removed clothes is used to covertly show the sensitive parts of the heroine's step-by-step nakedness, and she is like an ornamental object with no autonomy to be judged by the hero's playful eyes. Not only that, but a series of orientation words also make the poem's perspective change from front, back, up, down and in the middle with the sliding of the hand. This is not only the hero's conquest and smug caress of the female body but also guides the reader in his judgment of the female body. He enjoys the joy of successful conquest like caressing a trophy, "then where my hand is set, my seal shall be". When that male in the poem touches his exploratory hand to the ketone body of the woman, he has the savage desire from the male primate to conquer his own kind, also the satisfaction, pride and pleasure from the conquest of the land, and moreover the rational impulse to legitimate his conquests and put a seal on them. This primitive urge to make a mark to prove affiliation shows the arrogance and ambition of the characters. The hero shows his admiration and desire for his lover's flesh, which reflects the male-cent redness of Western culture. The characterization of the male protagonist presents a traditional male egoistic and conquering image from a postcolonial feminist perspective.

The author also uses the relative relationship between the two main characters to reflect the dominance of the male character. The whole poem follows the hero's senses in action, describing the step-by-step aggression and conquest of the woman. The hero's conquering mindset can also be clearly seen in the metaphors and symbols used throughout the poem. Comparing the female ketone body to a kingdom and a newly discovered continent, "O my America! my new-found-land, My kingdom", is a way of fulfilling the male mind's desire for conquest and a praise of the protagonist's male ego. Women, like the kingdom, are to be fought over and materialized. Satisfied with his taming, the hero compares women to a kingdom, thus implicitly praising his dominance and absolute power. This is the consolidation of the male's own self-esteem and self-importance, which keeps the masculinist mindset growing. Moreover, both the comparison of the female ketone body to a kingdom here and the comparison of the lover to a goddess in the second half of the poem are side-stepping the elevation of the male ego's status. Men absolutely dominated women's bodies. Although women are favored by men, their low social status is also evident. The "one man" in the poem emphasizes the desire for exclusivity. When a woman is found by only one man, she has to be confined to his power [9]. According to Alec Boehmer in his book "Colonial and Postcolonial Literature," "Control over a territory or country is not only a matter of exercising political or economic power; it is also a matter of mastering imagined leadership" [10]. When he describes his control and frivolous enjoyment of his mistress, he presents himself in a condescending light as he praises his 'pet'. The praise that arises from this unequal relationship between the sexes, then, can be understood as a manipulation of personal possessions. Such praise is merely a manifestation of one's own supremacy and absolute domination over the "goddess".

3. The Social Background and Culture Reflected in Poetry

The Elizabethan and James I eras of England, in which the poet lived, coincided with the English Renaissance and a time of political, economic, cultural and religious change. During this period, England's colonial tendency gradually emerged. After the opening of the New Voyages, Britain began to carry out overseas exploration and colonial expansion. In the early 16th century, the British

established the first permanent colony in North America, and thereafter, British colonial activities continued to expand, covering North America, the Caribbean and India. The main objectives of British colonial activities during this period were to find new resources and markets, to expand the national sphere of influence, to spread the Christian faith, and to establish an orderly society. Dunn's works did not directly deal with colonial tendencies, but his poetry was influenced by the social background and cultural atmosphere of the time. His interest in the themes of adventure and conquest, as well as the exploration of the mysterious and the unknown, can be seen in this poetry. The comparison of the woman's body to an uncultivated country and the poem's emphasis on subordination show the colonial power's desire for land that has not been divided and enjoyed. These themes fit in with the spirit of British colonial expansion at the time.

4. Conclusion

This article draws on the theoretical framework of postcolonial feminism and analyzes the female subjects in *To His Mistress Going To Bed* who are silenced by mainstream Western society, suppressed by a patriarchal society, controlled by Western knowledge systems in terms of identity and characteristics, and "colonized" from the perspective of the text. John Donne, in the process of writing this rich literary work about colonialism, intentionally or unintentionally participated in the process of colonialism, constructing the textual world of the "other" through his poetic texts.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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