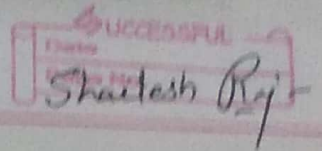


B.A (English-Hons)

Part - I

Paper - I



Metaphysical Poetry

Metaphysical poetry began early in the Jacobean Age, i.e. in the last stage of the Age of Shakespeare. John Donne was the leader and founder of the metaphysical school of poetry. He led the new way of writing poetry as reaction against the conventional poetry of the Spenserians. It was Dr. Johnson who christened Donne and his followers "the metaphysical poets". This title was borrowed by Dr. Johnson from Dryden's famous phrase "Donne affects the metaphysicals, not only in his satires but in his amorous verses." This term 'metaphysical poets' is applied to some seventeenth century poets who reacted against the 'deliberately smooth and sweet tones of much sixteenth century verse. Under this label are gathered John Donne, George Herbert, Vaughan, Traherne, Andrew Marvell and sometimes Abraham Cowley. These poets developed a vigorous, rational, uneven and energetic style and used a language marked by wit. Metaphysical poets tried to prove the world not through mysticism or intuition, but in rational argumentative style.

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* Characteristics of the metaphysical School

1. Delight in novel thought and expression :-

Metaphysical poets did not feel obliged to follow the trodden path. They had their own thoughts and they worked out their own manner of expressing them. In the words of Walter Scott - "metaphysical poets played with thoughts as the Elizabethans had played with words."

The witty expression and novel ideas are fundamental to poetic purpose. The metaphysical poet seeks to work out a logical connection between the abstract and concrete, the remote and the near in rendering his experience of emotional reality. For example Donne in "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" compares the "twin souls" of the lovers to "stiff twin compasses" or speaks of his mistress's tears as coins or maps, he identifies an intellectual

(ii) Far-fetched Images :-

Metaphysical poets saw acute resemblances in things apparently unlike. They introduced far-fetched images which could not be easily understood by the reader. Their constant aim was to produce stories and for this purpose they introduced images of an extraordinary character which could not be understood easily.

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(iii)

Intellectual poetry:- Metaphysical poetry was purely intellectual and made an appeal to the intellectuals. The thoughts of the metaphysical poets were often new, but seldom new. They saw beneath the surface of life, and illuminated the deeper places with revealing flashes, and, devoting their intellect and imagination to reflection upon God and their relation to Him, they produced what is by no means common in our literature, great religious poetry.

(iv)

Affectation and Hyperbole:-

Metaphysical poets always used hyperbole in their poetry. It is one of the favourite technique of metaphysical poets. For example, the series of hyperboles in praise of the lady, with which Andrew Marvell opens his poem "To his Coy Mistress" is a witty elaboration of the supposition "Had we but world enough and time." Hyperbole has always been a favourite device of poets.

(v)

Mystical and religious note:-

Most of the metaphysicals are often called mystical poets. In the poetry of Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, Vaughan and Traherne, there is an expression of a communion with God. These mystic poets have sense of unity of all life. They believed that the spiritual is alone the real

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world and that the things of this world are mere shadows. Their mystic vision pierces through the shadows of the world and interprets them as symbols.

(vi) Poetic style - The Elizabethan style of poetry was clear. It was marked by a note of rich melody and beauty. The metaphysical poets threw poetic style to the winds and made the style unduly rugged, coarse and hard. For diffuseness they substituted comparison, the straight forward imagery and similes out of which the Elizabethan had wrought beauty, the metaphysicals replaced by subtle and unexpected comparison; from description they turned to analysis; from a healthy acceptance of the world to a somewhat morbid brooding on religion and a probing of their souls. Further, for smoothness Donne substituted roughness of metre, and instead of idealistic but often conventional love poems he wrote realistic and cynical ones. And as a result of this revolt the metaphysicals developed more individual styles. It is easy to distinguish the poetry of Donne from that of Herbert, and Herbert from Crashaw's and so on.

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Major poets of metaphysical poetry

- (i) John Donne (1572-1631)
- (ii) George Herbert (1593-1633)
- (iii) Richard Crashaw (1613-1649)
- (iv) Henry Vaughan (1623-1695)
- (v) Thomas Traherne (1634-1704)
- (vi) Francis Quarles (1592-1644)
- (vii) Abraham Cowley (1618-1667)
- (viii) Andrew Marvell (1621-1678)