Arguments and Counterarguments for and against Coffee in 17th-Century English Literature

Ashfaque Ahmad Shovon
Leading University, Sylhet, Bangladesh

Coffee was a foreign product in Britain, only introduced during the Post-Medieval period. The introduction was not smooth as it was viewed as a drink from the Moors or the Turks. Two groups emerged – one favouring coffee and one deriding it – and the conflicts were depicted in books, pamphlets, and leaflets of that era. Coffee faced opposition from other beverage sellers as it became a threat to their existing businesses. During its initial days, there was even a call for a baptism of the drink to wash out its "Satanic influence". Coffee, seen as a medicine in its earlier days in Britain, became an essential part of everyday life in the late 17th century. Coffee houses became a place for public gatherings where social, political, and business discussions took place. This paper will explore the discussions and debates revolving around coffee in 17th-Century English Literature.

Introduction

Coffee, as a beverage, was introduced to Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Regarding the introduction of coffee into Europe, Ellis wrote, "the practice of drinking coffee is of comparatively recent origin: It goes back only 350 years in Northern Europe, and only another century or so in Ottoman Istanbul" (156). Ukers commented that scholars collected enough evidence to establish that coffee has been known in Ethiopia "from time mimmemorial" (11). Abu al-Tayyib-al-Ghazzl wrote about a myth that Solomon was the first to use coffee, and he cured some ailing people by roasting coffee beans through the instructions of Gabriel (Hattox 12–13). There is a story popular in Islamic

tradition that Sheikh Omar accidentally discovered coffee at Ousab in Arabia while he was in exile (Ukers 11). Another legend is that coffee was accidentally discovered by a herdsman in "Upper Egypt or Abyssinia" when he realised that his goats became more energetic after eating a particular berry (14). French scholar Carlos Claudius and German physician Leonhard Rauwolf were pioneers among the Europeans providing notable textual references about coffee in the late sixteenth century (Cowan 16, Ukers 25). Coffee was first mentioned in the English language by a Dutchman, Paludanus, in 1598, but the drink was referred to as *Chaoua* (Ukers 35). Sir Anthony Sherley was the first British person to mention coffee in 1599, though clergyman William Biddulph's work published in 1609 contained the first detailed description of coffee in English (35-36). Since then, there were several mentions of coffee in 17th-century British texts, both positive and negative.

The first coffee house in England was established in Oxford in 1652 (Cowan 90, Ukers 41). In the same year, Pasqua Rosee established the first coffee house in London (Cowan 94, Ellis, An Introduction 157). The popularity of coffee houses proliferated, as Leslie Stephen commented about the existence of 3,000 coffee houses in 1708 (37). The popularity of coffee grew so quickly that some people got suspicious and condemned this foreign product, and some wrote negatively about this drink for various other economic, religious, social, or political reasons. At the same time, another group provided counterarguments on the same points. This paper is an attempt to discuss the arguments and the counterarguments for and against coffee in 17th-century English Literature, the causes behind these arguments, and the reasons for the sudden popularity of coffee in 17th-century England.

Coffee and its Impact on Men's Virility

Coffee is severely criticised in "The women's petition against coffee representing to publick consideration the grand inconveniencies accruing to their sex from the excessive use of that drying, enfeebling liquor: presented to the right honorable the keepers of the liberty of Venus / by a well-willer" published in 1674 for the "Decay of that true Old English Vigour" among the men who were "the *Ablest Performers* in Christendom" in earlier ages (1). As a comparison with previous times, the piece provides an allusion to a Spanish Prince who had to make a law forbidding men to "Repeat the Grand Kindness to their wives above NINE times in a night..." (2). Sadly, the pamphlet implies that

the vigour of man has changed with the introduction of coffee – the drink that these women have accused of making their husbands impotent. It suggests that men are not "capable of performing those Devoirs which their *Duty* and our *Expectation*s Exact" and blames coffee for this catastrophe (2).

> The Occasion of which Insufferable *Disaster*, after a serious Enquiry, and Discussion of the Point by the Learned of the *Faculty*, we can attribute to nothing more than the Excessive use of that Newfangled, Abominable, Heathenish Liquor called COFFEE, which Riffling Nature of her *Choicest Treasures*, and *Drying* up the *Radical Moisture*, has so *Eunuch* [....] our Husbands, and *Crippled* our more kind *Gallants*, that they are become as *Impotent*, as Age, and as unfruitful as those *Desarts* whence that unhappy Berry is said to be brought. (2)

This pamphlet suggests that though it is claimed coffee helps to keep people awake, in reality, it does the opposite. It makes men so sleepy that "A betrothed Queen might trust herself in a bed with one of them, without the nice caution of a *Sword* between them..." (3). The petition puts forward women's sexual frustration repeatedly, accusing tobacco and coffee of turning men into a lesser species in terms of sexual prowess.

> ... For can any Women of *Sensce* or *Spirit* endure with patience, that when priviledge'd by Legal Ceremonies, she approaches the Nuptial Bed, expecting a Man with *Springhtly* Embraces, should Answer the Vigour of her Flames, she on the contrary should only meet *A Bedful of Bones*, and hug a meagre useless Corpse rendered as *sapless* as a *Kixe*, and *dryer* than a *Pumice-Stone*, by the perpetual Fumes of *Tobacco*, and bewitching effects of this most pernitious *COFFEE*, whereby Nature is *Enfeebled*, and the Offspring of our Mighty Ancestors *Dwindled* into Succession of *Apes* and *Pignies...* (3)

A reply to this argument is found in a pamphlet called "The Mens Answer to the Womens Petition Against Coffee: Vindicating Their Own Performances, and the Vertues of that Liquor, from the Undeserved Aspersions lately Cast Upon Them by Their Scandalous Pamphlet" where "the men" accuse these women of being ungrateful and bringing their private lives into public domain – "Could it be Imagined, that ungrateful Women, after so much labourious Drudgery, both by Day And Night, and the best of our Blood

and Spirits Spent in your service, you should thus publickly Complain?" (1). They don't understand "… why must innocent COFFEE be the object of your Spleen?" as according to them "…Tis not this incomparable settle Brain that shortens Natures Standard, or makes us less Active in the Sports of *Venus*" (2-3). They claim that coffee helps them in their sexual activity by focusing their concentration and making them more virile.

> …whereas Coffee Collects and settles the Spirits, makes the erection more Vigorous, the Ejaculation more full, adds a spiritualescency to the Sperme, and renders it more firm and suitable to the Gusto of the womb, and proportionate to the ardours and expectation too, of the female Paramour. (4)

Restoration satires often had a few quips or even lengthy discussions on people's love-making activities. Since the introduction and popularisation of coffee happened in this era, the earlier pamphlets or advertisements both for and against coffee put good emphasis on this subject.

Negligence of Household Duties

Coffee is labelled as "a little *base, black, thick, nasty, bitter, stinking, nauseous* Puddle-water" which has made men negligent of their duties to the family (The women's petition 4). This drink is termed as an "ugly *Turkish* Enchantress" that makes people so addicted "that those that have scarce two pence to buy their Children Bread, must spend a penny each evening in this *Insipid* Stuff" (4). Women complain that they cannot send their husbands for household necessities like to "*Call a Midwife*, or borrow a Glister-*pipe*" but the husbands always spare time for their coffee and smoking (4). "A Character of Coffee and Coffee Houses" by M.P. is blunter in criticising these people, and states that coffee has become so crucial for them that calling a midwife for a pregnant wife or saving the life of a friend who is dying is less important for them than indulging in their coffee or tobacco habits. It has become more crucial than their work and other sources of earning money: "for many men neglect their Calling and Vocation, to tattle away their time over two or three dishes of Coffee" (M.P. 5). The writer claims "This ill-tasted Liquor (by what charms I know not) makes Men to neglect and forsake themselves…" (5). "The women's Petition" recommends that severe penalties should be administered to coffee drinkers who are "under the Age of *Threescore*" (sixty), and suggests that beer,

ale, and chocolate, etc., should be recommended instead of coffee (6). This piece gives an impression of being written or sponsored by competitors who sell other beverages than coffee.

Coffee Drinking as a Waste of Time

A strong argument against the coffee houses is "At this place a man is cheated of what is, by far more valuable than Mony, that is, Time" (M.P. 5). Gathering in coffee houses, according to the "The women's petition", has made the men excel in loquaciousness which they say is "a Quality wherein our Sex have ever Claimed preheminence" (4). The men in the coffee houses are compared to "Frogs in a puddle" or "Frogs confusedly murmur insignificant Notes", and drink "muddy water" aka coffee (The women's petition 4; M.P. 5). "The women" think men indulge in insignificant chatter in the coffee houses "till half a dozen of them out-babble an equal number of us in Gossiping…" (The women's Petition 4). M.P. also propagates similar thought – "The Company here have out-talk'd an equal number of gossiping Women and make a greater noise than a Bake House" (4). People in coffee houses cannot remain fixed on any specific subject or point and change topic "as insensibly and as swifty, as *Polewheel* runs division on the Base Viol", which diminishes the gravity of their arguments and logic (The women's petition 4). The place is even compared with a "School, filled with Children, everyone conning his lesson aloud" (M.P. 5). The attendees of coffee houses are also criticised for being much too keen to find fault in others and for throwing dirt at others though the exposed weaknesses are not always valid:

> Very critical and very discerning is the Assembly here. The Company within a very short while will look thorow and thorow the Prudentest and most cryed-up Person. A Weak part will quickly be found in him, and not only Real but Imaginary Faults will be laid to his charge… (6)

The patrons of coffee houses are heavily criticised for talking about big issues while being incapable of doing anything. Though there are arguments that gatherings in coffee houses led to the birth of opinions, some of which might be against the government and could spark a rebellion, "The Women's Petition" sarcastically comments that coffee house regulars are too tame to attempt such endeavours:

> At these houses (as at the Springs in *Afric)* meet all sorts of Animals, whence follows the production of a thousand Monster Opinions and Absurdities, yet for being dangerous to Government, we dare be their compurgators, as well as knowing them to be too tame and too talkative to make any desperate Politicians. (4–5)

Although people talk about big issues concerning politics, warfare or international relations, the writer doubts if they are even "fit to be the Life-guard to a Cherry-tree" (5). Though coffee houses are places where conflict of opinions or severe arguments arise, the writer of this piece is not worried about the patrons of coffee houses at all as they are not capable of fighting "with any other save our Weapon, the Tongue" (5). People become more interested in trivial things and jokes rather than subjects of great value in a coffee-drinking group. Those who can use the weapon of flattery are rated higher than those who offer good advice (M.P 6).

However, "the men" do not agree that coffee makes them less "manly". Since virility was a gravely important issue in the parodic writings of that period, they were not ready to lose the battle so easily. They claim that their strength and vigour remain unaffected after drinking coffee, and they are fit to show their bravery whenever duty calls. To support their argument, they give the example of the Turkish soldiers who are regular coffee drinkers, and whose strength and courage are unquestionable: "and yet no part of the world can/boast more able or eager performers, than those/ Circumcised Gentlemen…" (The Men's Answer 3).

During the early days of coffee, a competition erupted over the common marketplace of beverages. Coffee as a newcomer, threatened to topple the established order. Several writings emerged, mostly in the form of humour and satire, both for and against coffee as a consequence of the conflict.

Racism and Class Issues

The equal treatment of customers in coffee houses was uncustomary in 17th-century England, where social hierarchy was a major issue. It was therefore deemed disrespectful and peculiar, and was even mocked – "Here is no respect of persons. Boldly therefore let any person, who comes to drink Coffee down in the very *Chair*, for here a Seat is to be given to no man. The great privilege of equality is only peculiar to the Golden Age, and to a Coffee-house"

(M.P. 5–6). Since the habit of coffee drinking was rooted in the Orient, the introduction of this practice in Britain was damaging to the self-perceived racial supremacy of a group of people. The writer lashes out in frustration about the introduction of Coffee and the enthusiasm regarding the drink in England comparing the English people with "Apes" who "Imitate" others and are ready to "submit" like "Slaves" to the cultures "even of Turkey and India" (1). "A Cup of Coffee" draws a connection between this drink and the devil to scare off devout Christians:

> For Men and Christians to turn Turks and think
> T'excuse the Crime because 'tis in their drink,
> Is more than Magick, and does plainly tell
> Coffee's extraction has its heats from Hell. (A Cup of Coffee, Lines 1–4)

Satire regarding coffee was not only confined to poems and prose, but was also portrayed on stage. In the play "The Tryall of the Coffee-Man", one coffee-vendor was tried in a court, consisting of other food and beverage merchants, for selling coffee in the business spaces of others and allegedly contributing to making the townsfolk impotent. With the help of the witness statements of two women, he was found guilty. The punishment of the coffee-vendor was excessively harsh:

> You are to be carried back to the Stoke-hole, from where you come, and from thence to be carried to the next Brewers Copper, being fill'd with thy own Liquor, to stand there up to Thy Neck, till thy skin be as black as thy Coffee, then to have thy principal Members cut off, afterwards to go stark naked through the City, and be beaten by the Maids of *London* with Bulls Engines, till thou comest to *Billingsgate,* where the Fish-Wives, Oyster-Lasses, and Orange-Girls, shall pelt thee with Ram-stones, till thou art Dead, Head, Dead. (Ellis, *Eighteenth-Century Coffee-House* 74)

This play, in a satirical manner, also shows the attitude of other traders towards coffee sellers, who took the bulk share of the beverage market very quickly. It helps to explain the reason for so many negative writings about coffee in its early days in England. Many of these pieces were propaganda spread by other businesspeople competing for the same market alongside a few people who were genuinely sceptical about the sudden popularity of a relatively new product.

The poem named "A Broad-side against COFFEE; or the Marriage of the Turk" is full of racial analogy. Coffee is considered as "Turkish Renegade", or Turkish betrayer, which came to pollute "Christian Water" (Lines 1–2). Coffee is considered "too swarthy for a Nymph so fair" as this "black" coffee is so unsuitable for the English environment that they will soon file for divorce (L.10–12). The poem asserts "*No faith is to be kept with Infidels*", and this "Slave coffee" must be beaten because it is going to corrupt English religion and culture (L. 20–24). Coffee is compared with that "Venetian Moor", Othello; which is going to treat British water as a "whore" and is ultimately going to "kill" it, as Othello killed Desdemona (L. 25–26). The introduction of this "Asian brat" will bring demise, and doom is inevitable as "The groom is heavy, cause the bride is light" (L. 27–32). There is the accusation that "This canting Coffee", or this dirty coffee, is responsible for bewitching both men and water (L. 33). The writer is astonished and does not understand how this foreign product, which is inferior to British ones, could reach such a height of popularity: "That such a *Dwarf* should rise to such a *stature*!" (L. 57).

The poem named "A Cup of Coffee: OR, Coffee in its Colours" consists of severe racist attacks towards coffee. Coffee is hated because it is from the Turks and, the writer claims coffee is related to black magic. They are referred to as "Turdy Turks", and coffee is compared to the biblical serpent which brings downfall (L. 55). Coffee was also held responsible for destroying the British wine market. Coffee is black and its flavour is compared to the smell of old shoes – "A loathsome Potion, not yet understood/ Syrrop of Soot, or Essence of old Shooes" (L. 52–53).

Coffee is called "A meer Decoction of the Devils", and Europeans are suffering as a result of its introduction (L. 56). It is claimed that no medicine beats coffee for its bad taste – "No Draught so loathsome as foul coffee is" (L. 70). Coffee makes people subdued and takes away their sleep: "Coffee does dull and yawning sleep expel", and people fall as prey to a black magic spell, induced by this Turkish drink (76). This piece accuses that this drink goes against Christianity and has a connection with apparent faithlessness. Coffee's origin was scathingly attacked in a few writings published in the 17th century where writers tried to demonise coffee as a drink to keep its popularity and circulation suppressed.

Debates on Coffee Houses

Coffee houses provided an almost classless environment which was not common in the highly stratified and socially-divided English society of the 17th century. The seating arrangement of coffee houses did not favour the maintenance of a class identity as people were always coming and going. While entering into coffee houses, customers primarily focused on grabbing the most convenient seats. A poem titled "The Rules and Orders of the Coffee-House" (1674) elaborates:

> Enter Sirs freely, But first if you please,
> Peruse these civil orders, which are these.
> First Gentry, tradesmen, all are welcome hither,
> And may without Affront sit down together:
> Pre-eminence of place, none here should mind,
> But take the next fit seat that he can find: (L.1–6)

This classlessness was not always looked upon favourably in 17th-century literature. Since the mingling of people from all classes, with disregard for their rank, was not very common in previous centuries, coffee houses were scorned for providing this mix. For example, a pamphlet named "The Character of a coffee house, With the Symptoms of a Town-Wit" quoted:

> As you have a *hodge-podge* of drinks, such too is your company, for each man seems a Leveler, and ranks and files himself as he lists, without regard to degrees or order; so that oft you may see a silly *Fop*, and a worshipful *Justice*, a griping *Rook*, and a grave *Citizen*, a worthy *Lawyer*, and an errant *Pickpocket*, a reverend *Nonconformist*, and a canting *Mountebank*, all blended together, to compose an *Oglio* of Impertinence. (3)

The introduction of coffee houses coincided with the restoration of the monarchy in England. During the second incarnation of the monarchy, people tended to have more freedom, leading to more intellectual and cultural sharing, for which coffee houses became the venues. Coffee provided Englishmen an opportunity to have a drink in a public setting without the fear of intoxication. It was a norm then in England for business transactions to take place in public, and coffee houses soon became the favourite place for such activities, as people could remain sober while discussing business and signing deals.

The public gatherings and discussions in the coffee houses caught the attention of Charles II, who grew concerned about plots against the throne. So, he declared a proclamation, named "By the King: A Proclamation for the Suppression of Coffee Houses", which stated:

> …His Majesty hath thought fit and necessary, that the said Coffee Houses be (for the future) Put down, and suppressed, and doth … strictly charge and command all manner of persons, That they or any of them do not presume from and after the Tenth Day of January next ensuing, to keep any Public Coffee House or to Vtter or sell by retail, in his, her or their house or houses (to be spent or consumed within the same) any Coffee, Chocolet, Sherbett or Tea, as they will answer the contrary at their utmost perils… (all licenses to be revoked) (1)

However, this proclamation proved ineffective and coffee shops in England continued to increase in number during the late 17th century. Thus, public demand overruled a proclamation from the Sovereign.

Reasons for the Success

While discussing the success of coffee, Cowan put forward "four general lines of argument: the profit-maximising motive of neoclassical economics; social emulation theories; functionalist explanation; or suggestive motivation from ideological or cultural impulses" (7). The first bulk arrival of coffee on the European mainland took place in Venice, and arguably the first coffee house in Italy was opened in 1645 (Ukers 25–27). Though Coffee arrived in the Port of Marseilles in 1644, it was introduced to the French court by Suleyman Aga, the ambassador sent by the Ottoman king, Mehmet IV, to the Court of Louis VI in 1669, and the first coffee house established in Paris was in 1671 (31–33). Coffee was introduced in Germany around the 1670s; and in Vienna, it was spread after the Battle of Vienna in 1683, and the first coffee house was established there in the same year (Ukers 45–50, History of Viennese Coffee House Culture). The decline of import prices and the increase in real wages in the latter part of the 17th century in Western Europe created a favourable environment for the expansion of the coffee market.

Coffee was first given prominence in English literature by the "virtuosi writers", who were from aristocratic backgrounds and had an interest in art and

culture, along with a wide range of travelling experience. People followed the trend of using coffee, which was primarily introduced by these knowledgeable gentlemen. If medical quacks were the only people who advertised coffee, it might not have gained so much popularity in such a short space of time, rather it might have been restricted merely to medicinal use. Both the ideas of suggestive motivation and social emulation theory worked in this sphere as, historically, people have tended to follow the habits and recommendations of the upper classes.

The published works regarding coffee in 17th-century England were mostly Restoration satires. There were pamphlets, broadsides, characters, short poems and advertisements regarding coffee. References to coffee-drinking culture and coffee houses are found in travel documents, personal diaries, official documents, and proclamations. But the presence of coffee was not in abundance in general in the literature of the 17th century, as that period was still the early stages of coffee in England.

Coffee houses greatly impacted trade and commerce due to connectivity. Businessmen used these shops as temporary workplaces which provided them with good opportunities for networking. The origin of the London Stock Exchange can be traced to Jonathan's Coffee House where John Castaing started issuing a list of currency, stock and commodity prices in 1698 (Our History: London Stock Exchange). Authors and politicians also had their favourite coffee shops and gathering places. Coffee shops were also used as places for delivering mail before the introduction of a fully organised mail delivery system (Suter 108). Coffee house culture was also instrumental in the flourishing of newspaper culture in the UK. For example, Addison and Steele's famous periodical *The Spectator* was indebted to coffee houses for its sources of information, and was also circulated widely in them (Bramah 48). Coffee houses were called Penny Universities as they were the places where, after paying only one penny, people could enter and take advantage of the opportunity to gain knowledge from well-educated patrons, as well as listen to or participate in both intellectual discussions and gossip. The spread of knowledge and information provided impetus to the Industrial Revolution in England in the second half of the 18th century, which ultimately have changed human civilisation.

Conclusion

Coffee fitted in well with the demands of the time. It was a social drink, without the risk of drunkenness, which made it appealing to many in 17th-century England. Since it came from a distant land, it seemed exotic to some. Coffee was also cheap and the debate around it ensured its publicity. England was going through changes in the political sphere, and coffee houses gave people an excellent opportunity to sit together to discuss and share ideas. 17th-century English people began to enjoy more opportunity and liberty in economic, political, and intellectual spheres than in earlier centuries, and coffee houses provided opportunities and environments for sharing opinions and enjoying this new-found liberty. Since coffee houses were places where many people gathered, they also began to serve as venues where news and ideas kept floating. 17th-century coffee culture provided invaluable contributions to various fields including art, culture, literature, science, innovation, commerce, and politics.

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ASHFAQUE AHMAD SHOVON is a Lecturer at the Department of English, Leading University, Sylhet, Bangladesh. He completed his B.A and M.A in English at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Bangladesh, and later achieved his second Master's in English and American Studies from Otto-Friedrich-Universität Bamberg, Germany. His research interests are Contemporary Literature, Food and Literature, Border and Migration Studies, Post-Colonial Studies, Human Rights, and Peace, Conflict and International Relations.
ashfaque_shovon@hotmail.com