

The Poetry of the Sultan-al-Arifin (RA) Circle

Of the Persian Literature produced during the reign of Jalal-al-Din Muhammad Akbar a major chunk consists of the poetry written by the luminaries who constitute the circle of Hazrat Sultan-al-Arifin, one of the greatest ever sons of Kashmir. The main subject of this poetry is religion, particularly Sufism, and religious personages. Such, for instance, is the poetry of Hazrat Baba Daud Khaki, Khawja Hasan Qari, Khawja Ishaq Qari, Baba Haider Telamuli and Khawaja Miram Bazaz. In this humble presentation I have tried to tackle the question of the literary value of this poetry. In view of the delicacy of the subject such an evaluation has to be preceded by a necessary explanation. To say that someone is not a great poet does, by no stretch of imagination, amount to saying that he is not a great man. The greatest of men, men who have significantly determined the course of history, have generally not been poets, not to speak of being great poets. If, therefore, the poets under consideration here do not turn out, on critical examination, to be genuine poets, it does not in any way diminish their stature. Indeed a large portion of the so-called religious poetry is neither genuine nor great although all great poetry is unconsciously religious, as it springs from the womb of a consciousness which is essentially religious – a consciousness which is so integrally related to the unconscious as to become indistinguishable from it. Such poetry is religious without appearing to be so or being called by that name.

Poetry that is known to be religious can broadly be divided into two categories. The first category consists of poems which present religious dogmas and matters relating to any branch of religion such as *fiqh* or the accounts of the lives of religious personalities in a versified form in order to make them memorable and impart a sweetness of sorts to a material which is otherwise frigid and uninteresting. Such

mechanical devices have always been used in pedagogy to help memorise mathematical formulas and grammatical items. We all have benefited from multiplication tables with their lilt and cadence and such versified formulas as,

Thirty days hath September,
April, June and November.....

The knottiest problems of Arabic grammar were made easy by grammarians by being reduced to verse formulas. Look at the following three verses about *huroof-al-jer*, *huroof al Jawazim al-mudare* and *zawaidat*.

باووتاو كاف ولام وواو منذر مذ خلا
رب حاشامن عدا في من على حتى الى

ان ولم لقا ولام امر ولاء نهى نيز
بج حرف جازم فعل اندوهر يك بے دغا

سالت حروف الزوائد عن اسمها
فقلت ولم يبخل امان وتسهيل

There are many instances in which this device of versification has been adopted to expound intricate problems of fiqh and fundamental religious truths. This poetry is limited by the aim that it sets for itself and no intelligent and perceptive student of literature approaches it with expectations of aesthetic gratification. As can easily be seen, conscious craftsmanship plays a greater role in the production of this type of poetry than feeling, emotion and subconscious impulses.

The second category of religious poetry is not meant to catechize and preach religions but takes its origin from a profound religion which is "felt in the blood and felt along the heart" and which, in consequence, gives rise to authentic poetry. The difficulty with such deeply felt religious and mystical experience is that because of being essentially arational it is, in general, incommunicable. The most important feature that the poetical and the mystical experiences share in common is that both have strong alogical elements but with significant differences of both kind and degree. The mystical experience transcends reason almost in its totality and therefore defies communication. In the poetical experience, on the other hand, the rational and the arational, the conscious and the unconscious elements are organically mingled together which renders the task of communication relatively less difficult. A person who combines in himself the vision of a mystic and the creative talent of a poet has full realization of the overwhelming difficulties of communicating himself to others. He finds that language fails him and that words refuse to obey as they tend to break under the burden. As Eliot eloquently put it in *Burnt Norton*:

...words strain

Crack and sometimes break under the burden,
under the tension, Slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imperfection.

It is to come to terms with a dilemma like this that Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi prays,

اے خدا نماے جاں را آں مقام
کاندراں بے حرف می روید کلام

Lord, let my soul rise to the status
Where communication grows without depending
On letter and word.

All human language is essentially meant to communicate such experiences as originate from man's contact with sensible reality, with phenomena. As far as those experiences are concerned which relate to the metaphysical and suprasensible reality, with noumena, with states of the soul which is a part of the unseen, human language fails to embody and communicate them in their totality although on rare occasions it may vaguely adumbrate them. Mystical visionaries gifted with genuine creative talent try to break and remake language in order to enable it to bear the burden of their extraordinary experience: Specimens of this kind of authentic religious poetry can be seen in the works of Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi, Hakim Abu Said Abu al-Khair, Donne (of the holy sonnets), George Herbert, Emily Dickinson, Christina Rosseti, T.S. Eliot (of the *Four Quartets*) and, nearer home, Lalla Arifa. The parameters of this brief paper do not permit copious illustration from such poetry but a few quotations are necessary to establish the point of the paper.

من بے خود تو بے خود مارا کہ بردخانہ
 من چند ترا کتتم، کم خورد و سپیانہ
 اے لولی بر بطزن تو مست تری یا من
 اے پیش تو چوں مستے افسون من افسانہ (روئی)

I am drunk as well as you; now who shall carry us home?
 How many a time I admonished you to drink less by a cup
 or two !
 My dulcimer-playing gypsy-love who is more lost – me or
 you ?
 Before a one so rapt as you, my magic crumbles like a
 myth.

چو قلام آفتابم ہم از آفتاب گویم
نہ شہم نہ شب پرستم کہ حدیث خواب گویم (رومی)

As I am the Sun's slave, I sing of the Sun alone:
I am neither night nor night-worshipper to sing of sleep and
dreams.

بیزیرکنگرہ کبریاش مردانہ
فرشہ صید و پیغمبر شکار و یزداں گیر (رومی)

In the shade of the pinnacle of his glory are men,
who hunt angels, prey on prophets and ensnare God
Himself.

The birthday of my life
Is come, my love is come to me.
(Christina Rossetti)

آمہ پنے سو دریں ناوہ چھس لمان
کتہ بوزہ دے میون مہیتہ دیہ تار (لال عارف)

With a raw thread, I tow my boat in the Ocean:
Would that my God rows me across!

This, to be sure, was not the kind of poetry that was written by the poets associated with Hazrat Sultan ul-Arifin, Gods mercy be on all of them. They wrote what I have termed above the first kind of religious poetry – poetry which could have been written as well in prose. About this illustrious and highly venerated circle of devotees I feel tempted to recall what I wrote a few years back in my foreword to Professor Sidiq Niazmand's valuable book, *Hafiz Ganji Sultani* – I said that in their wholehearted devotion to their spiritual guide we are reminded of the disciples of Jesus Christ (the *hawariun*) and the holy companions of our beloved Prophet (sal Allahu alihi wasallam). And I added :

اس سلسلے کی اصولی بات یہ ہے کہ ادب اور فن ان نفوس
 قدسیہ کا مقصود اصلی نہیں تھا مقصود اصلی تبلیغ و ارشاد کا فریضہ
 انجام دینا اور قارئین تک پیغام ہدایت پہنچانا تھا۔ اسی حسی
 ہدف نے ان کا اسلوب نگارش متعین کیا ہے۔۔۔۔۔۔
 ان کی تصنیفات کا ادبی مقام و مرتبہ متعین کرتے وقت اس
 اصولی بات کا ذہن نشین رہنا بے حد ضروری ہے۔ یہ بے لوث
 اولیاء اللہ مروجہ معنوں میں اپنے آپ کو ادیب اور شاعر کہلوانا
 شاید پسند بھی نہ کرتے۔

The fundamental fact to be borne in mind in this connection is that art and literature was not the basic aim of these noble souls; their basic aim was to preach and sermonize and to provide moral and spiritual guidance. This aim has determined their style of writing and as we undertake a literary evaluation of their work, this all-

important fact should not be overlooked. These selfless and and saintly men would not have perhaps liked to be christened as poets and literatteurs.

Wird-ul-Muridin, for example, is a sincere expression of the warm and profound devotion of a learned and dedicated disciple towards his spiritual guide. It is a surmeh for the eye of our vision and a source of Divine grace to its reciters but whether or not it is poetry, is a different question. Consider the following verses:

شکر اللہ حال من ہر لحظہ نیکو تر شد است
شیخ شیخان شیخ حمزہ نامراں ہر شد است
چوں رسول اللہ گفتا ہر تقی آل من است
شکر از باغ نبی پیدا کیے گو ہر شد است

Thank Allah that my state has improved from moment to moment
Since the day the Sheikh of Shaikhs, Shaikh Hamzah undertook to guide me,
The Prophet of Allah declared all pious men as his progeny:
Thanks that a pearl has emerged from the Phophet's flower-garden.

Consider in particular the combination of **bhag** (garden) and **gowher**(Pearls). Now read a few verses of another devotee about his spiritual guide. The devotee is Mawlana Rumi and the murshid, Shams al-Din Tabrizi:

باز آمدن مہے کہندیش فلک بخواب
 آورد آتشی کہ نمیرد بہ ہیچ آب
 بگر بخانہ تن و بگر بجان من
 از جام عشق او شدہ این مست و آن خراب
 خورشید روئے شتر تبریز شمس دیں
 اندر پیش رواں شدہ دلہائے چوں سحاب

The moon of which the heavens have not dreamt of has
 returned
 And brought with him a fire which no water can
 extinguish.
 Look at the fabric of the body and look within the soul—
 Love's cup has inebriated the one and devastated the other.
 The sun-faced pride of Tabriz, Shams al-Din
 Hearts follow him like to the sailing clouds.

Khawja Ishaq Qari has composed a long poem about Nimaz
 which opens with the following two verses:

نماز خلق تسبیح و سجود است
 نماز عاشقان ترک وجود است
 نماز عارفان اندر نہان است
 بوصول لامکاں در عین جانست

The namaz of people is recitation and prostration
 While that of the lovers it is self-surrender.
 The namaz of the Gnostics is an inward thing –
 A union with the Abodeless in the depths of the soul.

Noble mysticism, indeed. But see how such perceptions are rendered into poetry in a single verse of Rumi:

بند خیرندارم چون نماز و اگذارم
که تمام شد رکوعی که امام شد قلائے

By God, as I perform the namaz, I know not
When and how the prostration ends and who it is who leads
the prayer.

Khawaja Miram Bazaz is a better poet in the goup under discussion here but when we compare some of his better verses like;

بهار و باغ و شب وصل خوش بو صاتی
بیار بادہ گلرنگ خوشگوار امشب



رنگ گل رعناست لیکن نیست ہر رنگ رخس
سر و موزون است اما نیست چون بالا سے پیار

How lovely is the spring, the flower-garden and the night
of union

Serve then, tonight the pleasing rose-coloured liquor.
The rose's colour is charming but not like her cheeks;
The cypress is elegant but nowhere near her stature.

With the Mawlana's famous verses;

عماے رخ کہ باغ و گلستانم آرزوست
بکشاے لب کہ قدر او انم آرزوست
یک دست جام باد و یک دست زلف سیار
رقصے چنین میانہ میدانم آرزوست

Unveil thy face as I crave for gardens and flowers,
Open thy lips as I thirst for candies in boundless measure.
The cup of liquor in one hand and the beloved's tresses in
the other.

And in this state an ecstatic dance in the open.

We at once notice the difference.
Much of the poetry of Miram Bazaz recalls Hafiz but with
what difference can be gauged from the following two verses,
one each by Bazaz and Hafiz:

مرغ جان من نهد تنها اسیر دام تو
شد دل خلقے ز بہر دانہ حالت بدام
(بزاز)

It is not my soul's bird alone that fell to your mesh:
Many are the people whose hearts fell to the mole of your
cheek.

گمان مبر کہ بدورتو عاشقان مست اند

(حافظ)

خبرنداری ز احوال زاهدان خراب

Think not you have inebriated lovers alone:
It is only that you know not the plight of the hermits.