

LOCAL VOICES, GLOBAL ECHOES

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Abstract

This paper attempts to highlight the humanistic elements contained in poetry (both religious and secular) with a spiritual bent. The researcher wishes to establish a link between the voices emanating from her own culture and tradition and the voices in English literature that echo the same elements, cutting across the dimensions of time, space, language and cultural conditioning to bring out the universals in human nature and faith. The paper will consist of selected texts from Bhakti and other Indian poetry in regional languages, as well as texts from English and American poetry. The main effort is to show how the non-conformist voices in literature that frequently challenged the established order paved the way for individual emancipation and provided hope to humanity by emphasizing the human values that form the core of all religions.

Key Words: Human values, Non-conformism, Faith, Self-surrender, Cosmic Brotherhood

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In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

(John 1:1 84)

I do not wish to go into the theological implications of this statement from the Bible as I am not really qualified to talk about it. But for me, it is a supreme statement about the power of the Word, the power of language and literature to convey the meaning of life and of the Universe to us. One can connect it to the day of the Genesis when God said 'Let there be light and there was Light'. There is a similar Hindu belief that the whole process of Creation was set in motion with the resonance of the sound 'Om'. The Sanskrit word, 'Akshara', which means Letter or Alphabet also means 'Immutable' or 'Imperishable'. This again speaks volumes for the power of the Word.

The word, 'Quran', I gather literally means 'recitation' or 'the act of reciting'. The scriptures of most institutionalized religions have come down to us in the form of poetry, and frequently employ the story form or the form of the parable to provide us with lessons on life. They constitute the earliest literature in most languages. We know that Classical Western drama too had its origin in religious festivals in Greece. As Philip Sidney puts it in his "An Apology for Poetry", poets offer 'food for the tenderest stomachs' (Enright and de Chickera 16) as common people are able to understand these complex messages when they come down to us through stories/songs/plays. Literature, whether religious or secular, is strongly rooted in human life and human psychology. The Mahabharata claims in the *AdiParva* (The Book of the Beginning) that 'What is here is elsewhere, what is not here, is nowhere'.¹ The tale of the Fall or the Battle of Kurukshetra have often been read as allegories for good and evil, for the conflicting forces within the human psyche- God and Satan are both contained within us. It is we who make the choices to channelize our

energies either in a positive direction or a negative one. Having traced out briefly the connection between religion and literature, I would like to go on to talk in more detail about the nonconformist voices with regard to religion that find expression in literature, particularly through poetry.

Though the divine experience in its highest form can never be captured completely in words, the ecstasy very often finds expression through words and specially, poetry. As Bahinabai Chaudhari puts it through one of her poems:

माझीमायसरसोती
मालेशिकवतेबोली
लेकवहिनाच्यामनी
कितिगुपीतंपेरली! (113)

Bahinabai is talking of how her mother, the Goddess of Knowledge, Saraswati gives her the power of articulation by sowing (and revealing) all the secrets of the universe in her heart. It is almost as though when devotion and ecstasy come together, it spontaneously overflows in the form of poetry as the devotee strives to communicate his/her feelings for the Creator and the magnificent creation through words. Guru Nanak Dev describes himself as a bard, out of work, whom the Lord has employed in his service to sing his praises day and night. This simple faith or Bhakti coming straight from the heart finds expression in words, but it does not require any learning- in fact, many of our saints were not even literate, but handed down their wisdom through a rich oral tradition. As Sant Kabirdas puts it:

पोथी पढी पढी जग मुआ, पंडित भया न कोय,
ढाई आखर प्रेम का, पढे सो पंडित होयाⁱⁱ

No one can become wise merely by reading the scriptures, but even a few moments of oneness with the Supreme are enough to give us all the wisdom in the world.

The American poet Emily Dickinson captures the same essence through her lines:

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church.
I keep it staying at home,
With a bobolink for a chorister
And an orchard for a dome.

Some keep the Sabbath in surplice.
I simply wear my wings.
And instead of tolling the bell,
Our little sexton sings.

God preaches- a noted clergyman
And the sermon is never long
So instead of getting to Heaven at last-
I'm going all along! (Johnson 153-54)

One finds echoes of the same in Bahinabai Chaudhari's next words from the poem that I quoted earlier:

माझ्यासाठीपांडुरंगा
तुझेगीता-भागवत
पावसातसमावतं
माटीमधीउगवतं!
अरेदेवाचदर्शन
झालंझालंआपसुक
हिरिदातसूर्यबापा
दायेअरूपाचंरूप!
तुझ्यापायाचीचाहूल
लागेपानापानांमधी

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देवातुङ्गयेनंजानं

वारासांगेकानामध्री(113)

And the poem continues in the same vein as she continues to celebrate the trance-like state to which she is transported by virtue of her divine communion, as she can sense God's presence in every breath, every leaf and every movement of the Universe!!! Neither Dickinson, nor Bahinabai were women steeped in the scriptures, nor even known widely for their religious poetry. They have spoken on a variety of subjects under the Sun- Dickinson was educated and belonged to nineteenth century New England. Bahinabai was illiterate and belonged to twentieth century Maharashtra. Yet both are speaking the same kind of language- the language of the heart and of simple faith that transcends all orthodox institutions. And it is the same language that flows through the voices of the saints belonging to the Bhakti and Sufi traditions. As A.K. Ramanujan observes in his essay, "Talking to God in the Mother Tongue": 'Now the moment God begins to be addressed in the mother tongue, all sorts of human emotional experiences become relevant to religion'. (Ramanujan, 10). Irrespective of language, caste, creed, nationality or time, all of them reiterate the same ideas- praise of the Creator and his Creation- and a rare intimacy with the Lord that allows them to question Him, challenge Him, and yet never abandon their faith. The idea of god appears in different garbs- as a friend, lover, philosopher and guide, apart from representing the Supreme Being, capable of any and every miracle- yet never far away from us as He too wishes to serve those who serve him and more importantly, those who serve their fellow-beings, as this Abhang from Tukaram indicates:

जेकारंजलेगांजले

त्यासीम्हणेजोआपुले

तोचिसाधुओळखावा

देवतेथें चिजाणावा (Chitre 347)

Rabindranath Tagore communicates the same message through Song 23 of the *Gitanjali*, "Leave this Chanting and Singing and Telling of Beads":

Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!
He is where the tiller is tilling the hard ground
And where the path-maker is breaking stones...
Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down
On the dusty soil!(Tagore 11)

All these non-conformist voices invariably foster human values, the need for empathy with the whole Universe and total self-surrender in the quest for the divine. A supreme assertion of this can be found in this couplet by Amir Khusro, a poet from the Sufi tradition:

खुसरोदरियाप्रेमका, जोउल्टीवाकीधार,
जोउबरासोडूबगया, जोडूबासोपाराⁱⁱⁱ

What Khusro is talking about is the need to flow with the tide, against it, submerge in it, and even drown in it to reach the Absolute. Or very simply put, we have to lose ourselves to find our True Selves.

This iconoclasm and self-surrender go hand in hand in the work of the Indian saint poets. Many of the male Bhakti poets shed their gender identities in their quest for the divine, sometimes taking on the role of the mother, at other points, the beloved of the Lord, often dissolving the dichotomy between the body and the soul. And the women Bhakti saint-poets were equally unabashed in offering themselves body and soul to the object of their worship. This is also their way of exhibiting their defiance for the norms laid down by society and overcoming the limitations placed on them by their gender. Whether it is Andal who openly expressed her erotic love for the Lord, Mirabai who overstepped the boundaries of marriage, Akka Mahadevi and Lalla Ded who actually shed their clothes to show their contempt for social norms, or Janabai who proclaims that she has cast off all shame and become a 'slut' to reach God's home (Tharu 83) -all laid out a mode of individual emancipation through a candid expression of their intimacy with the Lord. The significance of their contribution comes out through this statement by Madhu Kishwar in her Introduction to the Tenth Anniversary Issue of her journal, *Manushi*, which was dedicated

to Women Bhakta Poets that 'the work of many of these women has survived in the popular culture not as a subterranean tradition but as a major contribution to the mainstream.'(Kishwar 5) What better expression of the dissolution of this dichotomy can we have than through these lines from Soyarabai, where she redefines the whole concept of the 'pure' and 'impure'?!

You say some bodies are untouchable.
Tell me what you say of the soul.
You say defilement is born in the body.
If menstrual blood makes me impure,
Tell me who was not born of that blood.
This blood of mine fertilises the world.
Tell me who has not sprung from this source.
... That's why I praise only Pandurang,
Who lives in every body, pure, impure. (Trans. Jerry Pinto and Neela Bhagwat)
(Subramaniam 49)

Echoes of the same note of intimacy and subversion appear in the poetry written by seventeenth Century English poets such as John Donne, George Herbert and John Milton. In one of his Holy sonnets that begins with the line, 'Batter my heart, three-personed God" Donne ends the poem with the words, that "...I,/Except you' enthrall me, never shall be free/ Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee." (Gardner 86). The use of a violent sexual image to talk about chastity may shock many. But what he is praying for is to be grabbed by force to attain salvation as he is unable to control his darker impulses. George Herbert who was a very devout priest would sometimes go off into a state of despair because of his poor health. In one of his well-known poems called "The Collar", even as he is raving and ranting against God, he instantly responds to the call 'Child' with a spontaneous, 'My Lord', all his frustration and anger draining off in the face of God's love (Gardner 135). John Milton goes off into a similar state of anger and depression in his poem, "On His Blindness" when he starts losing his eyesight and is completely shaken by God's injustice. But he ends by

reiterating his faith through the statement: "They also serve who only stand and wait." (*Auroral Musings* 49) He is convinced that God needs no special gestures or demonstrations of our devotion – simple unconditional faith is enough to win his love and compassion.

But the mystical note and joyousness at beholding God's creation finds its best expression in English literature through the poets of the Romantic Revival- William Blake, William Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley, none of whom can be strictly classified as religious poets. Blake's ecstasy on beholding the macrocosm within the microcosm is superbly captured through these words from his "Auguries of Innocence":

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour

And the failure to perceive this for him is equal to damnation as callousness towards any part of creation is bound to invite Heaven's wrath- 'Puts all Heaven in a rage.'^{iv}Wordsworth, the High Priest of Nature, talks of feeling a 'Presence' that disturbs him 'with the joy/ of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused/ Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns/ And the round ocean and the living air/ And the blue sky and in the mind of man...'. (Hutchinson 164)

However, from the middle of the nineteenth century, one begins to find a greater sense of despair creeping in. As Matthew Arnold puts it in his poem, "Dover Beach", 'the sea of faith' that 'was once at the full', had begun to recede and he could now hear only its 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar' (*Victorian Poetry* 128) Tennyson through his poem, "In Memoriam" goes through a phase of doubt and despair as he confides, "There is more faith in honest doubt, believe me than in half the creeds." (*Victorian Poetry* 40) But, he is still able to end on the note that he hears at times a "sentinel / Who moves about from place to place, And whispers to the worlds of space/ In the deep night, that all is well..." (*VP* 46) But, as Science and rationality started exerting a greater sway and religion started losing its hold, loss of faith becomes the major theme through late nineteenth century and a

major chunk of twentieth century literature. Although writers like Arnold, I. A. Richards and T.S. Eliot felt that literature therefore ought to now completely take over the role played by religion in order to foster human values and rescue mankind from doom and destruction, the problem that surfaces through most literature is that man has not just lost faith in God, but in himself and his fellow-beings. Ironically, we also find a greater obsession with religion and the need to believe and it is this conflict that produces the anxiety and restlessness we come across frequently in twentieth century literature. But, even today, we realize that works that give us satisfaction are works that exhibit a positive attitude towards life. Paulo Coelho, one of the more popular authors in recent times frequently brings in mystical and spiritual elements into his works. He emphasizes the positive elements contained even in negative experiences when he states that 'Disappointment, defeat and despair are the tools God uses to show the way.' (Coelho 17)

Even non-believers can take a cue from the lines written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his "Rime of the Ancient Mariner":

He prayeth best, who loveth best

All things, both great and small (Coleridge 209)

This probably is the vision likely to appeal to the rational, angst-ridden mind of today, smitten as it is with problems such as climate-change, different brands of sectarianism and terrorism. The statement not only emphasizes the need for a loving and compassionate attitude towards the whole of Creation, but also the interdependent nature of everything in the Universe. These egalitarian values are captured beautifully by Sant Bahenabai as she redefines the concept of a 'Brahmin' by destroying all hierarchies by proclaiming the same divine essence within all beings:

सर्वाढायी जीव सारिखाची ँक।

पशु पक्षी देख चांडाळाही ।

बहेणि म्हणे जीव प्राणिमात्राक ।

ब्राह्मणत्व देख म्हणो नये ॥ (124)

The symbolism contained in the mighty Elephant God seated on a puny mouse is a wonderful example of this interdependence. Far from being ridiculous, it illustrates the completeness and power contained within every being for the smooth and harmonious functioning of the universe. Both may have their limitations, but also have their unique qualities. If indeed we are able to accept and respect one another's differences in the same way, the world would definitely be a better place to live in.

I would like to end the paper on this positive note by highlighting the qualities of sensitization and Cosmic brotherhood that all these poets and saints tried to promote in different epochs and in different parts of the world. While Walt Whitman proclaims this egalitarianism and brotherhood with his characteristic brash but euphoric arrogance, "Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am/ touch'd from" (Fisher 324), Sant Dnyaneshwar captures the sublimity of the concept through his "Pasaayadaan". A fitting finale to the paper therefore would be provided by these lines from the "Pasaayadaan" where he invokes the Cosmic Consciousness to bring peace, harmony and joy to all the inhabitants of the Universe by emanating the Divine radiance and warmth all around to purge the Evil within:

जेखळांचीव्यंकटीसांडो।तयासत्कर्मरितीवाढो।
भुतापरस्परेंपडो।मैत्रजीवाचे।।
दुरिताचेंतिमिरजावो।विश्वस्वधर्मसूर्येपाहो।
जोजेवांझीलतोतेलाहो।प्राणिजात।। (479)

ⁱQuotes from Mahabharata. Trans. J. A. B. van Buitenen <<http://mahabharata-resources.org/quotes.html>>

ⁱⁱ Kabir ke dohe, 9 March 2017. <<http://smileworld.in/pothi-padh-padh-jag-mua-doha/>>

ⁱⁱⁱखुसरोकेदुर्लभदोहे, 10 September 2017. <<http://hindi.webdunia.com/romance-love-song>>

^{iv}Blake, William. "Auguries of Innocence" <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43650/auguries-of-innocence>>

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