

Analyzing Sheikh ul Alam's Poetry in the Cultural Milieu

Sumaya Firdous¹, Mansha Ashraf²

¹Ph.D. Scholar Department of English,

B.P.S Mahila Vishwavidhyalaya, Khanpur Kalan Sonipat Haryana (India)

²Ph.D. Scholar Department of English, SRM University Sonipat (India)

ABSTRACT

Kashmir has been an abode of different races, communities and religions. Many interesting customs and traditions prevail in the valley. Kashmiri culture is composed with elements of Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist traditions. It is quite evident that multicultural and composite society is formed with a long historical process of immigration. Sheikh ul Alam, in his poetry, has made an effort to depict the cultural values in the valley. Almost no philosophic poet of his stature has born in the entire cultural history of Kashmir who could break the precincts of time and space. Sheikh ul Alam, by virtue of his vast and illuminating thoughts would give guidance to Muslims as well as the entire civilized country-men (irrespective of cast, religion, creed, and color). He has significantly stepped out of the age-old limits and confinements. He has addressed his message not only to the people of Kashmir, but to the entire human race. There have been only a few in human histories that could alter the course of their respective cultures, Sheikh ul Alam, undoubtedly is one among them. The present paper attempts to study his selected poetry that portrays his cultural instinct.

Keywords: Culture, Diverse, Kashmir, Poetry, Truth

Kashmir is an amalgamation of different cultures as it happened because of immigration of a number of diverse and varied people with diverse and dissimilar cultural inheritance and social heritage. The Gnostic and intuitional observations of this greatest saint of Kashmir are culturally more important than literally or religious-wise. Sheikh ul Alam prefers an itinerary of active and dynamic life, and censures any escape from life of action. This is exactly what an ever-changing cultural set-up should be formed of. His portions of poetry signify the cultural muse of Kashmir. It is a sound warning, a resonance of caution and is draped in ultimate love and longing for his culture and people. He calls up for a continuous reshape and redesigning for the glory of Truth and cultural wellbeing. His deep and profound issues relating to Kashmir culture are not only an expression of approval and day-to-day endorsement, but are a common spiritual and Gnostic heritage among communities. Subsequently, after sharing and assimilation of diverse heritages, certain cultural values and traditions came into existence. Since ancient time, it is an assimilating capacity of Kashmiri culture that different religious attitudes have merged in such a way as to form a composite culture. Historically, Kashmir valley remained under different rulers from the beginning like Westerners, Dogras, Mughals, Hindus and others, but the culture of

Kashmir accommodated itself under the changes from time to time. Consequently, a few cultures of Hindus were adopted by the majority population i.e. Muslims, as Lawrence points out in his book *Valley of Kashmir*:

In heart of hearts Kashmiris adopted some cultures of Hindus they turn from the mean priest and the mean mosque to the pretty shrines of carved wood and roof bright with the iris flowers where the saints of past time lie buried. They like to gaze on the saint's old clothes and turban, and to examine the cave in which he spent his ascetic life. Every Kashmiri believes that 'the saints will aid if men will call' and they think that a dead saint is more efficacious than a living priest. The Kashmiris are called by foreigners *Pir Parast*, that is saint worshippers, and the epithet is well deserved (Lawrence, 286).

The variation in Kashmiri culture was noticed when Sufis set their foot in the valley. This brought forth a rich inheritance of humanism and universal brotherhood. The influence of Sufis was felt in all ways including culture of both communities (Muslims and non-Muslims). The influence of Hindu in the court diminished and eventually began to decline. Similarly Sanskrit was replaced by Persian which once had received royal position. "The Baihaq Saiyids, who wielded great influence in the court, in the words of Shrivara, neglected men learned in the vernacular and in Sanskrita. However, Sanskrit continued to be the literary language of the Hindu elite, but was nevertheless affected by an influx of many Arabic and Persian words." (Rafiqi, 285) During Sikander's rule, under the guidance of Mir Muhammad Hamadani, the whole culture of Kashmir started to change in different ways like of dresses, diet or other means. A new sub-culture turned up with the arrival of Sufi immigrants. Lamenting over these changes Jonaraja remarks, "As the wind destroys the trees, the locusts and the *shali* crop so did the Yavanas destroy the usages of Kashmir. Similarly, Shrivara ascribes the misfortunes of the people of Kashmir to their acceptance of changes in their way of life. But these protests were in vain; the influence of Persian culture went on increasing day by day." (Rafiqi, 287) In the field of literature, Lal Ded, Sheikh ul Alam and other great poets were mostly influenced by Sufism which glorified insight of people and eventually Kashmiri culture. Thomas Moore, an Irish poet, and Firdausi, the noted Persian poet has sung of the heavenly charm of Kashmir, the Land of sages and seers, the *Sharda Peetha* of the days of yore, the land of Lalla Ded and Nund Reshi (Sheikh ul Alam).

Sheikh ul Alam, being a saint aimed at propagating his message of simplicity and harmony with nature. His full, thick and love-torn messages in his Shruks will never lose its power and authority to move and thrill. Hence will continue to bring in the hearts of those who still inhale the divinely air of Kashmir's cultural mystic muse. The souvenirs of unstinted love and sincerity of thought warms the hearts of the old and young, male and female of all walks of cultural generations. It will never be lost in the guidance and the spiritual leadership of Sheikh ul Alam. He has properly comprehended the truth of Islamic and Sufi cultural teachings. Afterwards he combined the thought and philosophy of universal and cultural brotherhood of Kashmir. He has given guidance not only to one community, but the entire cultural fabric of Kashmir. It is always desirable and sought-after to make a thorough and deep study of his illuminating ideas and principles. His enlightening ideas had brought into existence a great cultural heritage of Kashmir society many centuries ago. The nomenclature and the genesis of those principles and ideas are still fresh and spanking new in the cultural corridors of Kashmiri society. In the midst of the spiritual bankruptcy, sectarian conflicts, cultural aggression and confusion, the enthralling and gripping Shruks of Sheikh ul Alam bring the comfort and solace to distracted and troubled souls. People

acquainted with the cultural history of Kashmir are well aware of the fact that there exists a very thin and delicate (but complete in its manifestations) spiritual unity and oneness of soul between different communities of Kashmir, especially Muslims and Pandits. That is the reason in the toughest times of turmoil, people of Kashmir has been successful in preserving the cultural heritage and Kashmiriyat almost to its fullest. As a consequence it has been the teachings of that great man which have bind and fastened the relations between these communities.

One can hardly site an example in the cultural history of literature and thought comparable to the revolution that took place in the soul of Sheikh ul Alam. Sheikh ul Alam is perhaps the only one who has strongly criticized the idle clergy (Mullah) and his dangerous potentialities working within the culture. He was rigid against Mullahs' pointless disputations and controversies over the petty issues of the communities without any positive and constructive contribution. He found it an urgent need of time to repair the rifts so artificially and crookedly fabricated by the professional clergy. The so called Mullah, however, freely but unsuccessfully indulged in allegations and condemnations of Sheikh ul Alam. But the power of his poetry is so strong that even today the Mullah finds it difficult for himself to betray the ordinary and faithful people. His poetry, as a strong instrument of expression helps to maintain a constant appeal. He criticizes mere ritualism, customary religious procedures, and traditional Mullah-made day-to-day routines. He surely serves the Torch-bearer of Kashmir ethos and culture. He is the Torch-bearer of Kashmir; the "Cultured and Debonair Saint" of Heaven on Earth.

Through Sheikh ul Alam's poetry, it is apparent that the influence of Buddhism, Sufism and Hinduism on the Kashmiri culture was immense. Meanwhile, Sheikh ul Alam gave new impetus to the Kashmiri culture by abolishing evils and tribulations that lead to the destruction of society like communal disharmony. The culture of seventeenth century manifests itself through his poetry. He has mentioned names of vegetables, dress and other eatables of his time which are still being used, such as *haakh* and *handh* (green leafy vegetable), *baakir* (a kind of chapatti which is prepared on ghee), *feran* (a long woolen garment used in winters), *kaangri* (fire pot used in winters) etc. "In 1919 George Abraham Grierson wrote that Kashmiri is the only one of the Dardic languages that has a literature. Kashmir is proud to have a fairly old literature which is now over seven hundred fifty years old. This is more or less the age of many a modern literature including English." (Malik, 50).

In one of his Shruks he mentions humility and simplicity of his living and he directly instructs that one should give up extravagance, materialism, greediness, acquisitiveness. Sheikh ul Alam was committed to simple things and habits through which he reached to the eternity and contentment. He wished societies to adhere to that concept of contentment and gratification. Ignoring the delicious food, Sheikh ul Alam like all other saints and Prophets, preferred to eat tasteless food that he found tastier. Saints hardly take care of such things which could fulfill their appetite rather they remain in search of that food which could satisfy their soul.

Committed I am to my firepot and rag,

Which have defended me against the severe cold?

I have treated more delicious than all dishes,

The refused boiled rice provided artificially heated by steam (Gowhar, 235)

Sheikh ul Alam displays a reasonably good knowledge of cropping season and detailed account of the life of peasants. His Shruks show his deep understanding of various crop cycles and world of agriculture. The famous poem '*Gongal Nama*' presents the clash of interests between farmers and land lords and resultant tyrannical practices. "Sheikh's final sarcastic diatribe on the farmer himself makes the poem peculiarly modern. The farmer spends his labor and life in ploughing sands. The poem has the flavor and urgency of socialistic demagoguery and the spirit is satirically Byronic. There is poignant sarcasm in the burden of the poem; "*Yusuy Kari Gongal suy kari krav.*" The metaphor of cultivation of land has been very aptly used for the cultivation of the religious spirit, the different stages of work being correlated to different stages of enlightenment.

Realize it in the beginning that first of life is spring;

Do thou draw thyself up, at the very outset?

Let thou shouldst fall behind, for spring is tricky;

One, who celebrates the *Gongal*, will surely celebrate the *Krav*. (Parimoo, 189)

In the following Shruk Sheikh ul Alam shows how tyrannical were the landlords of that time. It is the fear of land lord which forced farmers to work in the fields untiringly. It was his precious thoughts and teachings that paved the way for the upliftment and the betterment of small cultivators and peasants.

In fear of the state watcher is moment;

Who comes to check thy work daily?

And in greater fear of the landlord be,

One, who celebrates the *Gongal*, will surely celebrate the *Krav*.

Some of his Shruks highlight the warm hospitality for which Kashmir has had a good reputation. It becomes more of a cultural practice in Sheikh's poetry because welcoming the guest and serving him with utmost dedication is something which Kashmiri culture has held dear throughout the centuries. Sheikh ul Alam perceives it to be an integral part of Kashmiri life and culture. The following Shruk refers to the contemporary hospitality practices indirectly though:

Thee warmly treated me as thy guest,

Gifted (on my departure) a cow and calf...

As guest I get warm treatment from you,

Alas! At last the soul be taken towards heavens,

And neither will you be my entertainer nor I your guest. (Gowhar, 237)

In more than one Shruks Sheikh ul Alam has shown the extravagance of people by their inclination towards competition. Modern culture has a trend in the vein of having collections of different dresses suited at different occasions. Similarly, constructing buildings and houses of modern day designs and architecture has also gained

a momentum of competition. On the contrary, Sheikh ul Alam propagated the lessons of self-restraint, simple life and discipline. Therefore, he shunned publicity, blandishment, riches, and public relations on the foundation of trends and fashion. He was a free and pure soul not enslaved by desires and market standards.

Thee hast wasted thy life in construction of houses,

In this soon decaying home,

To achieve these fast decaying ends,

Thou hast antagonized people,

Bees store honey recklessly,

Ultimately that is eaten by sparrows. (Gowhar, 239-240)

Sheikh ul Alam was popular of being conscious activist of religious harmony. In addition to his profound commitment for religious tolerance, he was intolerant about interpolation of customs and superstitions in religious practices and corrupting the social and cultural structure.

They who paint their houses with cow dung,

They who waste the delicious food items,

They all shall be presented with black faces,

On the day of resurrection before God. (Gowhar, 253)

Education is the base and liberating force for any cultural set-up. The communities within a culture are repository of knowledge therefore this knowledge should be used sensitively. Learning and teaching processes should be based on the grounds of honesty and sincerity. While reading following Shruks it is apparent that during Sheikh ul Alam's time undeserved and unmerited took an advantage while as deserving and intelligent were being crushed. Such status has not withered even today when the worthy are being pushed away. The setup of institutions and administration has become habitual of accumulating wealth through the means of bribe and corruption. Sheikh ul Alam gave the voice to those who suffer under such terrible circumstances:

Amidst the fast running rivulet, thou a sweet spring have lost entity,

Amidst scoundrels, thou a devoted seer have lost your identity,

Amidst the dullard, thou an intelligent teacher have lost thy wisdom,

Amidst the crows and eagles, thou the phoenix have lost thy grace.

The blind is carried in a decorated palanquin by stout and the able,

That blind is ignorant even of alphabet,

The intelligent is charged with the duty to dress him up,

It is how the wisdom is at disposal of the luck,

The status of the culture of any country flourishes by fulfilling all promises that are committed with it. The culture is instinctive in each society but at the same time its lively colour diminishes by broken promises. Sheikh ul Alam put forward the political and socio-cultural situation of Kashmir during his time. He clearly portrayed that how the voice of people was deprived under the coercion and subjugation of force. The below mentioned verses apparently reveal the struggling behavior of Kashmiri people while facing threats. During his time also, people were being dispossessed from their rights. He advocates and preaches freedom; the freedom of purity of thought, the freedom of soul in warmth of remembrance of God, and everyday living.

Demands were raised but denied,

The denied demands were imposed by force,

Some people had to die while agitating their demands,

Some people were deprived and they perished in deprivation.

The civilized society is not one which is developed under science and technology, but moral and ethical values of an individual matter the most. Each person is embedded with good traits as well as bad ones and Sheikh ul Alam tried his best to spring out the good traits in a person. Hence, such individual could serve the society at broader level. Thus, he says that a person should not backbite and let anyone down. It is just deterioration of one's status, faith and ultimately leads to provocation of God's wrath. This kind of degradation is going no good for them rather it will hinder their spiritual journey and progress.

You feel pleasure to embrace wives of others,

Such ideas and thinking both are embarrassing,

Dead impossible is to purchase even for any huge price,

Thy precious diamond, character. (Gowhar, 241)

Music, dance or any stage performances are prohibited in Islam and during Sikander's rule in Kashmir, wine, gambling, music were strictly prohibited. It was during Zain ul Abidin's reign when such prohibitions were uplifted. Sheikh ul Alam, a religious scholar, was against music and dance. In early period, Kashmiri culture beholds and breeds certain indigenous dramatists or performers (*Baand*) who perform acts which include dance, music (with the *surmai*), mimicry, clowning and dialogue. They used to roam from one place to another for performance and people admired it. At the end, final item of an act was a prayer "Just as a classical recital of Indian music always ends with the *Raag Bhairavi*." (Raina, 176) The program is called *baanda paathur* and (*paathur* means drama). People had a belief on them and considered their prayers valid and asked them to pray. On the contrary Sheikh ul Alam considered it a devilish act that takes a person away from God.

Let not fan the indecent disco dances.

Doing so the eunuch and rogues (*baands*) shalt snap thy wealth,

Tread not thou the blissful pathway with such amusements.

Thus detained wilt thou be along with thy household. (Adfar, 406 I)

It is a human's instinctive belief that drives people towards religion which then leads to ethical value of a particular religion and then culture. Orthodox or any other religious teachers drive people towards religion by the fear of hell and love for heaven. Instead of teaching them the divine Love, they infuse in them selfishness and fear. Eventually, the result of it is the deterioration of that particular religion and culture as well. Sheikh ul Alam rightfully make an aura of that Love under which there will be no space for doubt. The extent of Sheikh ul Alam's love towards God is too deep. His love for God is not because of having selfishness or fear of hell or love for paradise. He loves Him just for Him not for any desires. How beautiful and appealing will be the culture of people whose love is unselfish and pure even towards their God.

Who shalt invoke Thee with a selfless supplication?

Who would have a magnanimous faith?

It's either with the fear of hell or love of paradise.

That all worship Thee, for their own good My Lord. (Adfar, 289 I)

I.CONCLUSION

It was the wholesome description of Kashmiri composite culture during Sheikh ul Alam's time. It is all that will remain, certainly and eternally, the poetry that he creates, a record of society's rituals and mores and of that great man's effort to bring about the history of Kashmir to all. His effort is inspiring one in which there is an exploration of the nature and simplicity that comprises beauty of traditions. He plumbs deeply into the Kashmiri culture- its rituals, its morality and its vast cultural history. It is his uniqueness that he did not let his mystical thoughts overshadowed by cultural history. In every Shruk there is an unison of cultural and mystical significance. The status of Sheikh ul Alam is so great, unique and profound as whatever he has experienced, he valued it greatly. He lavished his proper care to religion, himself and people and bestows his teachings to all truly and absolutely, out of unconditional love. It is without expecting anything in return, a selfless love. The foundation of his teachings is love- love for God and for people irrespective of cast and creed. His world is so beautiful without any cultural abhorrence, inter-religious hatred, prejudice and chauvinism.

REFERENCES

- [1] Walter R Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir*. London: Oxford University.
- [2] Abdul Qayoom Rafiqui, *Sufism in Kashmir (Fourteenth to the Sixteenth century)*. Sydney: Australia Goodword Media.
- [3] G.R. Malik, *Kashmiri Culture and Literature*. Srinagar: jaykay Books.
- [4] G.N. Gowhar, *Kashmir Mystic Thought*. Srinagar: Gulshan Books.
- [5] B.N. Parimoo, *Unity in Diversity*. Srinagar: J&K Academy of Art Culture and Languages.
- [6] Trilokinath Raina, *A History of Kashmiri Literature*. Delhi: Vimal Offset, Panchsheel garden.
- [7] G.N. Adfar, *Alchemy of Light*. 2 vols. Srinagar: Quaf Printers.