

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SELECT ENGLISH MYSTIC POETRY
(WILLIAM BLAKE AND FRANCIS THOMPSON) AND KASHMIRI SUFI
POETRY (SHAMAS FAQIR AND WAHAB KHAR): A THEMATIC
APPROACH**

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Cite This Article: Dr. Saltanat Farooq, "A Comparative Study of Select English Mystic Poetry (William Blake and Francis Thompson) and Kashmiri Sufi Poetry (Shamas Faqir and Wahab Khar): A Thematic Approach", International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in Arts and Humanities, Volume 3, Conference World Special Issue 1, Page Number 212-216, 2018.

Abstract:

Comparative literature is an interdisciplinary field that deals with studying literature across national borders, time periods, languages, genres, and disciplines. Comparative literature is the study of the relationship between any two or more than two significant literary works or literatures. The very act of comparative analysis aims to evaluate different literatures for cross cultural understanding. The present study of "English Christian Mystic Poetry and Kashmiri Sufi Poetry" takes into consideration the importance of understanding the significance of comparative literature so that the mystic trends revolving around two different religions (Christianity and Islam) expressed in two different languages (English and Kashmiri) could be put in a perspective. The selection of the poets from East and West allows the researcher to compare different literary traditions. The present research paper is not only a comparative study of poets who come from diverse religious and literary backgrounds, but also those who indeed share deeply similar mystical insights. The study defines clearly the spiritual positions and views of the select English and Kashmiri poets, regardless of their differences in culture, language and background. Comparing the mystic doctrines of the above two religions and the poetry used for their expression opens before us the various converging elements that run across the mystic doctrines governed by these religions. Comparative literature searches for a universal relevance of the various literary documents and as such a thematic approach has been put to use while comparing the English mystic and Kashmiri Sufi poetry. This research paper brings before the audience the universal mystic temperament as seen in the poetic pieces of poets belonging to the religious-cultural diversities.

Key Words: Mysticism, God (Allah), Seeker, Beloved, Love & Grace

1. Introduction:

Comparative literature is an interdisciplinary field that deals with studying literature across national borders, time periods, languages, genres, and disciplines. The interdisciplinary nature of the field means that comparatists typically exhibit acquaintance with sociology, history, anthropology, translation studies, critical theory, cultural and religious studies.

In critical parlance, the term 'comparative literature' denotes any literary work or works compared with any other literary work or works. Hence, comparative literature is the study of the relationship between any two or more than two significant literary works or literatures. It is essential that while making a comparative study one should take the multiple sources into consideration. Broadly defined, comparative literature is the study of "literature without borders." Comparative literature is an approach through which we compare two or more than two literatures in such a way that their similarities and dissimilarities are brought out for interpretation. The very act of comparative analysis aims to evaluate different literatures for cross cultural understanding. The definition given by Bijay Kumar Dass is very simple and vivid:

The simple way to define comparative literature is to say that it is a comparison between the two literatures. Comparative literature analyzes the similarities and dissimilarities and parallels between two literatures. It further studies themes, modes, conventions and use of folk tales, myths in two different literatures or even more. (4)

About the historical development of comparative literature, R S Pathak says: Mathew Arnold made meaningful efforts in English world and emphasized strongly the significance of the comparative approach to literary works. He wrote in a letter in 1848, "Every critic should try and possess one great literature at least besides his own and more the unlike his own, the better. (Qtd. in Dhawan 22)

Alexander Veselovsky brought out a series of studies on the migration of themes from the West to the East and vice versa. Similarly, Richard Price, in his preface to the new edition of Warton's *History of English Poetry* (1824) regarded literature as a huge treasure house of themes which spread, multiply and migrate. French scholars also collected evidence about literary relations and migrations of themes and ideas all over the world. Renowned intellectuals who have understood and defined comparative literature in various ways can be divided in two groups; first, those intellectuals who hold a broader view. In this connection, Henry H.H Remak is taken as a representative of this group. He says: Comparative literature is "the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand, and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts. ... It is the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression". (qtd. in Cluver 1)

The second group has those intellectuals who hold a narrower view. *La Littérature Comparée* carries this narrower view of comparative literature as: Comparative Literature: Analytical Description, Methodical and Differential comparison, synthetic interpretation of inter-linguistic and intercultural literary phenomena, through History, Criticism and Philosophy in order to better understand Literature as a specific function of Human mind. (Pichois and Rousseau)

The present study of "English Christian Mystic Poetry and Kashmiri Sufi Poetry" takes into consideration the importance of understanding the significance of comparative literature so that the mystic trends revolving around two different religions expressed in two different languages could be put in a perspective. Comparing the mystic doctrines of the two religions (Christianity and Islam) and the poetry used for their expression opens before us the various converging elements that run across the mystic doctrines governed by these religions.

English Mystic Poetry and Kashmiri Sufi Poetry: Convergences

Both English Mysticism and Sufism are rooted in the mystical view of God and religion. This mystical view involves an inner journey of the soul to God. English mystics and Sufis have often expressed their unity with the divine through the medium of poetry by using a language loaded with mystical meanings. Both portray the concept of annihilation/ecstasy time and again and both refer to God as lover and beloved, often personalising him beyond all reason. Both have employed symbolism as a technique to provide a vivid image of God.

Within both the religious traditions of Christianity and Islam, there is an inner or esoteric dimension demonstrating a direct realization, or Gnosis of the ultimate nature of reality. Moreover, if we compare the testimonies of the mystical experiences had by the mystics belonging to either of the two religions, we find that, despite vast separations in time, place, language, and culture, they are strikingly similar—so much so that many scholars have come to view their teachings as constituting a single perennial philosophy which, like some irrepressible flower, keeps blooming again and again in the human psyche.

English mystics as well as Kashmiri Sufis feel that the concept of God or Allah respectively cannot be grasped by thought or expressed in words. Although mystics cannot define the ultimate reality in words, they still use language to point to that which is beyond it. All mystics agree that, while the ultimate reality constitutes the true nature of everything, in itself it is nothing. The concept of *Nothingness* related to the ultimate reality has been dealt with in English mystic as well as Kashmiri Sufi poetry. Although the ultimate reality is not a thing, they also agree that this nothingness is not vacuous. It is radiant with the light of the Pure Spirit, Primordial Awareness, or Consciousness itself.

There is no more an important and profound theme than God and his attributes in mystical poetry. As all mystical writings give pre-eminence to God, the focus is generally His immanence and transcendence. God is near yet far, incomprehensible yet approachable; greatly to be feared, yet easy to be loved. Scriptures speak of both aspects of God, sometimes emphasizing the one, sometimes the other. And often we find passages clearly indicating that God is both. In short, when it comes to divine immanence, Scriptures use metaphors of nearness, and speak about Him as bridegroom, father, shepherd, husband, lover, etc. When discussing God's transcendence, Scriptures use metaphors of distance, and speak about him as creator, king, judge, master, etc. Apart from these, a lot many other themes similar in attitude are found to be common in English Mystic and Kashmiri Sufi poetry, for example—Inherent divinity of man, The tale of Union of God and Man and the Instrument of Love.

2. Thematic Dissection of Mystic Poetry:

2.1 Man's Inherent Divinity: Mysticism, in English Christian and Kashmiri Sufi doctrines highlight man's innate divinity, the proof of which lies in the fact, that a seeker desires God, for he cannot desire what he has not seen. Both English mystics and Kashmiri Sufis have expressed their views on man having a divine spark. These mystics have shown that man is the most striking manifestation of God. William Blake says:

We live as One Man: for contracting our infinite senses
 We behold multitude: or expanding, we behold as one.
 As One Man all the Universal Family: and that One Man
 We call Jesus the Christ: and he in us, and we in him,
 Live in perfect harmony in Eden the land of life,
 Giving, receiving, and forgiving each other's trespasses.
 (Qtd. in Maclagan and Russell 38)

In these lines not only does Blake endow humans with the attributes of a higher self but he also transfers divinity to the human form itself. 'One Man' composed of many is a divine human, Jesus Christ, and the rest of the human family is identified with him. It is a multitude in one man, guaranteeing each other's existence and leading to simultaneous unity and diversity. Blake's *Divine Image* also substantiates this:

For Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love,
 Is God our father dear

 Where Mercy, Love and Pity dwell,
 There God is dwelling too (12-13).

Blake praises both God and man while asserting an identity between the two. The four virtues that Blake assigns alternately to man and God are the ones conventionally associated with Jesus. Christ was both God and man, hence the vehicle for Blake's mediation between the two. The concept of man's innate divinity is also exhibited in Kashmiri Sufi poetry. The following verses of Wahab Khar would suffice the claim when he says:

Amid the intern nothingness, he brought me to life
 He hid himself in human pelt
 Angels do know this secret well,
 Tell me my love, Oh beloved just say!
 (Self translated from Saqi 11)

In these verses, Wahab Khar says that God bought him to life from "nothingness." This nothingness is the source of all life. God too can only be comprehended in the realm of this nothingness. Hence the source of God and man is the same—Nothingness. As "God has hid himself in human pelt," the poet reflects upon the inherent divinity of man. Man's form and essence reflect God.

2.2 The Instrument of Love: Ibn al-'Arabi, the greatest Arab theosophist, declares that no religion is more sublime than the religion of love for God. Love is the essence of all creeds: true mysticism welcomes it whatever guise it may assume. He said, "My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks." In mystical poetry, love, symbolizes the emotional element in religion, the rapture of the seer, the courage of the martyr, the faith of the saint, the only basis of moral perfection and spiritual knowledge. Practically, it is self-renunciation and self-sacrifice, the giving up of all possessions—wealth, honour, will, life, desires, wants and whatever men value—for the beloved's sake without any thought of

reward. This self-sacrifice—giving up of all the worldly desires has time and again been touched and well documented in English mystical poetry. The following verses of Francis Thompson vindicate it amply:

Ah! Let the sweet birds of the Lord
With earth's water make accord;
Teach how the crucifix may be
Carven from the laurel-tree,
Fruit of the Hesperides
Burnish take on Eden-trees,
The muses' sacred grove be wet
With the red dew of Olivet,
And Sapho lay her burning brows
In white Cecilia's lap of snows!
(qtd. in Connolly 59)

In the above lines, crucifixion of the little self is looked upon by poet as the sole means to inward illumination; correspondingly the poet too, in his view, has to go through a painful, ascetic discipline before he attains the insights leading to his union with God. Similarly William Blake says:

Abstinence sows sand all over
The ruddy limbs & flaming hair,
But Desire Gratified
Plants fruits of life & beauty there.
(qtd. in Sampson 173)

Here the poet points to controlling material desires in order to attain spiritual bliss. When a seeker attains the power to control his selfish and mortal needs, he gets the desired results. He turns pure from inside and what matters to mystics is the purity of the soul. Once the seeker's desire is in the right direction, he achieves better goals. Self-renunciation for the purification of soul leads a seeker to distance his self from worldly love in order to acquire the pure love of God. This theme has been dealt with in Kashmiri Sufi poetry with great effort. For example Shams Faqir says:

Shams Faqir squealed the secret
None perceives the depth of infinity.
Divorce your human desires, eternity you can earn
Turned bemused, I was forlorn.
(Self translated from Aziz 246)

In these verses, Shamas Faqir reveals the secret of God's eternal existence. He says that none can perceive the vision of the absolute self of God until and unless a seeker gets rid of his materialistic self. This world is not to be taken as final and this realisation can enable a seeker to enter into the realm of God where pure and true love becomes the basis of his and his lord's relation. Shamas says:

I will reveal thou the secret, O Shamas!
Surrender your ego without a fail,
The doors will be open only for the blessed ones
That is what I call as manifestation of God.
(Self translated from Aziz 137)

A seeker has to cleanse his self, and for that matter one needs to shun his arrogance and only then can one be blessed. Such a man is ready to receive God's grace in the form of love. And the one whose bosom remains loaded with this love, his heart turns into a mirror reflecting God's essence. Between a seeker and God, mutual love acts in such a way that binds them together. "Love," says Jalaluddin Rumi, "is the remedy of our pride and self-conceits-- the physician of all our infirmities. Only he whose garment is rent by love becomes entirely unselfish." Man's love and yearning for God is a quality which manifests itself through the heart of the pious believer. In the Kashmiri Sufi poetry, when a Sufi realizes God, his love turns him into a restless being for God. For example, in the following verses Wahab Khar's yearning for God invites Him to provide an answer to his love queries:

Do come today, O sincere one
And sit in my kingdom of love.
Today decide my fate
To whom would say, I lovely lass?
(Self translated from Ramzan 85)

These verses of Wahab portray his figure as a petitioner asking for God's favour, a favour of providing him with His holy glimpse. He wants God to decide his fate. Wahab finds himself oscillating between two poles, one of an unfulfilled desire of a communion with God and the other the unbearable pain of his separation from Him. Apart from Wahab Khar, many more Sufi poets in Kashmir have presented God's image in majestic and colourful words. For example, Shamas Faqir says:

Thy glimpse would ease off my enduring pain
Craving is, my heart for the same,
My whole world may turn starry
Be my guest, for a moment O love!
(Self translated from Aziz 286)

The poet says that his heart craves for the vision of the Absolute Being of God and that if God turns out to be merciful enough in casting over him His glance; his entire world would be illuminated. Hence, he requests God to be his guest and bestow upon him His holy vision. This yearning for God has found its expression in English mystical poetry as well. For example, in

Francis Thompson's poetry there are instances that testify to his yearning for God at the moment when everything close to him loses significance. Even the innocence of children is lost because all he wants is his spiritual bliss. For a soul as sensitive as Thompson's, the suffering of children when "their angel plucked them from me by the hair" would necessarily be very painful. In his poems on Children we note this same sadness, both because he felt estranged from the simplicity of childhood at his age, and because even the purity of an unspoiled child's affection could not satisfy the yearnings of his heart. The *Hound of Heaven* would permit no creature to take God's place in the chosen poet's affections. Next it is nature that fails the fleeing soul of the poet. Perhaps here a refuge may be found when he says:

I triumphed and I saddened with all weather,
Heaven and I wept together,
And its sweet tears were salt with mortal mine;
Against the red throb of its sunset-heart
I laid my own to beat,
And share commingling heat;
But not by that, by that was eased my human smart.
In vain my tears were wet on Heaven's grey cheek.

.....
Nature, poor stepdame, cannot slake my drouth;
Let her, if she would owe me,
Drop yon blue bosom-veil of sky, and show me
The breasts o' her tenderness:
Never did milk of hers once bless
My thirsting mouth. (qtd. in Connolly 79)

The chase continues, Nature is too mortal, too changing, too unsympathetic, to draw the heart of Thompson. He says in an essay *Nature's Immortality*:

You speak, and you think she answers you. It is the echo of your own voice. You think you hear the throbbing of her heart, and it is the throbbing of your own. I do not believe that Nature has a heart; and I suspect that like many another beauty, she has been credited with a heart because of her face. You go to her, this great, beautiful, tranquil, self-satisfied Nature, and you look for - sympathy? Yes; the sympathy of a cat, sitting by the fire and blinking at you. What indeed does she want with a heart or a brain? She knows that she is beautiful, and she is placidly content with the knowledge; she was made to be gazed on, and she fulfils the end of her creation. (80)

A mystic's flight is senseless if God does not steer his flight in the right direction. God will have His way in the end. The poet stops, trembles, and awaits the approach of the God (Hound in the poem):

Naked I wait Thy love's uplifted stroke
My harness piece by piece Thou hast hewn from me,
And smitten me to my knee;
I am defenceless utterly. (qtd. in Connolly)

The cry is of a soul that has completely surrendered to God. It is the price of Thompson's share in Divine Love, as well as the price of his vocation as a poet. "... the gates of the beatific Love are guarded by the purgatorial Love" (Thompson 92). This yearning that results from the restlessness of a mystic to catch a single glimpse of his beloved soothes only through love. After all it paves the way for man to approach God and quench his thirst. In Kashmiri Sufi poetry, love preoccupies a central place. Kashmiri Sufi poets understand of love as a Divine gift and not anything that can be acquired. Those who love God are those whom God loves. For Sufis, love signifies the passing-away of the individual self; it is an uncontrollable rapture, a God-sent gift which must be sought by ardent prayer. Man's love of God and his continuous yearning for Him is a subject thoroughly dealt with in Kashmiri Sufi poetry. Shamas Faqir says:

Pay some attention to Shams Faqir, O beloved!
Provide him with a life as of Rum Rishi
The hot love embers of love set me ablaze,
O friend! Convey my concerns to him.
(Self translated from Aziz 192)

In these verses Shamas requests God to pay some attention to his lover beyond any comparisons. He refers to Rum Rishi, a prominent Rishi of Kashmir and asks God to bestow upon him a pious life of an ardent seeker like Rum Rishi. He says that his love for God has burnt his very existence and reduced him to ashes.

The mad Shams is a true lover of Absolute Truth
O Lord! Glorify thy name in the world.
The rustic approached the skies to relish the moon
Blurredness I wish disappears from his naïve eyes.
(Self translated from Aziz 185)

These lines reveal the poet's position as an unmatched lover of God who requests him to glorify his life here in this world and the hereafter. He further says, that those who cherish the worldly desires end up gaining nothing as they turn to go after glittering material devices and wishes for such men that their sight clears and they envision the persona of God as he does. In the English mystic poetry as well, the relation of love between a mystic and God is appropriately portrayed. Francis Thompson too has documented this emotion gushing out of both, the seeker's bosom and God's essence. For example while describing God's love for man; Francis Thompson says that it is only because of the unmatched love for man that God likes his soul. God too runs after man so that he can realise what it means to be in a relation based on true love. Francis says:

From those strong feet that followed, followed after
 But with unhurrying chase
 And unperturbed pace,
 Deliberate speed, majestic instancy
 They beat and a voice beat
 More instant than the feet. (O' conor---4)

Further, Francis Thompson describes the mutual love that exists between a mystic and his beloved in the following lines from *In Her Paths*:

Ah! Foolish pools and meads! You did not see
 Essence of old, essential pure as she,
 For this was even that Lady, and none other,
 The man in me calls 'Love', the child calls 'Mother' (qtd. in Connolly 74)

In these lines the poet sees the relation of a child and a mother as a prototype of his relation with the divine. In our human approach, the relation between the child and the mother is the most selfless relation based on love. Hence, Thomson has personified God's love and gave it the name of a mother.

3. Conclusion:

The present research paper brings to the fore some innate tendencies present in the mystics all around the world as seen and captured through the English and Kashmiri mystic verses. Mystics belonging to any of the religions through their inner illuminated eye of vision see and conceptualize God on a same paradigm. Apart from that, the present paper worked on the concept of 'love' and its position in the mystic relation of God and man. Love plays the central role in moulding a seeker's heart and receiving grace from God. The innate divinity of man and the forces governing the annihilation so that a seeker merges in the absolute reality have been positively chalked down as well.

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