

## **The Parallelism between the Poetry of Sultan Bahu and John Donne**

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### **Introduction**

Metaphysics remained a dominant feature of classical Punjabi and Metaphysical English poetry. Sultan Bahu and John Donne were creating religious and metaphysical verse in the seventeenth century in the Orient and Occident. John Donne, the first of the seventeenth century English Metaphysicals, attempted to grasp the enormity of the universe and the underlying realities of human existence. A bevy of poets was influenced by the Donnean tradition. The most interesting followers of John Donne were religious poets forming the Metaphysical school (Evans 48). These Metaphysicals were Christian mystics having some affinity with the saints of the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Critics have highlighted the characteristics of Metaphysical poetry comprehensively. Professor H J C Grierson briefly elaborates: "Metaphysical poetry in the full sense of the term is a poetry which, like that of the *Divina Comedia*, the *De Natura Rerum*, perhaps Goethe's *Faust*, has been inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and of the role assigned to human spirit in the great drama of existence" (115).

It was this subject, that the Metaphysical poets versified and remained occupied with. This definition, in particular, brings out that the fundamental concerns of classical Punjabi poetry were strongly metaphysical in nature. It further brings to light that Metaphysical poetry does not

remain an isolated phenomenon peculiar to the seventeenth century English literature, rather it seems to be the universal trait of poetic tradition in various civilizations. In Punjabi classical poetry, Sultan Bahu, though not labeled traditionally as metaphysical, also encompassed the phenomenon of existence. Bahu belonged to the philosophic school of the Sufis (Krishna 11). According to Schimmel, Sufism is the generally accepted term for Islamic mysticism. It is the love of the Absolute that enables the seeker to bear as well as enjoy all the pains and sufferings showered by God. Reality is the goal of the mystic that cannot be understood by usual perception. Neither philosophy nor reason can explain it. The mystic ultimately yearns for reunion with God (3-4). In fact Punjabi classical poetry is Sufi poetry. It is the manifestation of mysticism (Quddus 154).

These poets, metaphysical in essence, contributed splendid mystical poetry to literature. The verse of both Donne and Bahu is *je ne sais quoi* artistically. It is primarily an expression of their particular vision of life. Moreover the poetry of Donne and Bahu has vivid attributes including original images and conceits, colloquial speech as well as complex themes involving the trans-physical being.

## **Themes**

There is a broad spectrum of themes in the poetry of both Donne and Bahu. Metaphysicals, *au fond*, were saints. Their verse was an excursion in the spiritual world in theme and facade.

Like mystics of all ages, Donne upheld that the difficulty of the knowledge of God or ultimate reality couldn't be resolved through the precepts of reason, intellect, and philosophy. In the early years, Donne in a letter to the

Countesse of Bedford, traced the path to reach divinity  
(Grierson 1971: 167):

Reason is Soules left hand, faith her right,  
By these wee reach divinity, .....

Sultan Bahu treads a similar path in the pursuit of nirvana. He discards the notions based on traditional icons, rather he believes in complete submission to the Murshid; a spiritual guide and facilitator. Reason and knowledge cannot step beyond physical limitations.

The Lord on throne is never found, nor in the Ka'ba<sup>2</sup>  
And in the books is hardly found, nor in the mosque  
Bathing in Ganges<sup>3</sup> He is not found, I traveled a lot  
Since I entered Murshid's<sup>4</sup> fold, I have  
been rescued from around.

*(Abyat-e-Bahu)*

Bahu expressed passionate love for his Beloved. His sentiments were kneaded with philosophical vision. Although his philosophy was rooted in orthodoxy, he created a practical balance between the two worlds. Perhaps it also ensured his safety and peace (Krishna 11). His sainthood did not let him become a recluse nor indulge in worldly pleasures. Both John Donne and Sultan Bahu, in fact, established a mystical and philosophical tradition of poetry in the literature of their lands.

Donne's poetry was charged with the strength of his beliefs. He did not merely speculate about the nature of things. He rather firmly held the strings of new philosophy. "An Anatomie of the World" represented the theme 'the frailty and the decay of this whole world'.

And new Philosophy calls all in doubt,  
The Element of fire is quite put out;

The Sun is lost, and th'earth, and no mans wit  
Can well direct him where to look for it.

Bahu was a man of great learning. He received the best possible education of his times (Kalim 41). He was a scholar of Islam and had great perception of the philosophy of Islam. Bahu interpreted Islam through the canons of a mystic. Schimmel mentions that though the verses of Sultan Bahu, the first great Punjabi mystical poet, developed ideas known to earlier Sufis but it was his approach that spread the ideas of Sufism (385). His philosophy hinged on faith and truth.

Other profession for heart is not efficient, the Kalma<sup>5</sup>  
of heart is efficient  
The Kalma takes the rust away and the Kalma  
scrapes off the dirt  
The Kalma is diamond, ruby, and gems, the Kalma  
has extended its shop  
Bahu, here and there in both worlds, the Kalma is all  
the wealth.

(Abyat-e-Bahu)

Bahu was fully cognizant of the transient nature of this world. He believed that his real profession is the Kalma of love. He further maintained the supremacy of love as even devotion could not reach where love would carry in a short span of time (Narang 145). In fact Punjabi sufi poets including Sultan Bahu produced memorable mystic verse. It was an expression for 'the longings of the soul in its effort to transcend reality' (Maini 4-5).

The poetry of Bahu and Donne touched upon a variety of themes. But they remained more concerned with themes like the conception of love, religion, eternal bliss, and the littleness of man. Thematically, these poets in terms of time

discussed eternity and in terms of space examined the universe.

### **Diction**

The religious mystics and the mystic poets in their search for reality communicated the richness of their experience through artistic and highly imaginative language (Husain 26). T S Eliot in "Donne in Our Time" (16-17) mentioned that the sharpness and precision of the working of Donne's mind and imagination were reflected in the "felicity of his diction". Donne had mastery over a large vocabulary. It was enriched and wide enough to express the subtleties of his thought and philosophy. Also T S Eliot found that Donne followed the movement of conversation most of the time. He conversed with death in one of the most famous Holy Sonnet:

Death be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not soe,

Donne did not pronounce the victory of death rather he shattered the illusion of death's might. As Nutt says: "His method here, as elsewhere, is to establish an argument or conceit which challenges our thinking, and then explain and elucidate it. What Donne seeks to undermine in this opening is not, as we might initially think, that death is 'proud', but that he is 'Mighty and dreadful'" (161). He then concludes the sonnet with:

One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.  
(Holy Sonnet X)

Donne had an unshakable belief in God as the embodiment of mercy. For him Christ was a symbol of pardon and divine love. He expressed his conviction in simplified diction:

What if this present were the worlds last night?  
Marke in my heart, O Soule, where thou dost dwell,  
The picture of Christ crucified, and tell  
Whether that countenance can thee affright,  
Tears in his eyes quench the amasing light,  
(Holy Sonnet XIII)

Bahu's language was Punjabi as spoken in the Jhang district of central Punjab. It had sweetness and simplicity but was not rustic. (Krishna 12). Bahu opted for simple language to express his complex ideas for the sake of clarity. His message reached the majority of people. It was moving and persuasive. His poetry primarily was the expression of attaining the Divine grace. His knowledge got dissolved in his heart. The poetry of Bahu influenced a large number of people (Kalim 41). He depicted the state of those blessed with supreme love:

In whose veins if love has pierced, they wander  
silently in the world  
His every hair with thousand tongues, praises the  
beauty to whom he clings;  
With Greatest name perform ablution, and bathe too  
deep in unity-ocean,  
Bahu! acceptable is prayer, when Loved  
recognizes lover.

*(Abyat-e-Bahu)*

Bahu's verse remained without any artificiality. His diction, was usual, simple, and local. Another relevant attribute of his verse was the avoidance of alien expressions and display of verbosity. His poetry in all times remained successful to realize greater realities and complex thought while using commonplace expressions and symbols. Maini, highlighting the contribution of Sufis, mentions: "All these



poets used the Punjabi vernacular, and lifted it to new levels of expression and significance" (5). Bahu confined his experiences and learning in four to five line verse form (called "*Beit*" in Punjabi). In fact, Bahu was an introvert and had no linkage with extroversion. It was one of the reasons for employing this form. This becomes obvious while he portrays the vastness of the innerself:

Heart is deeper than the river and ocean, who  
can dare know heart's condition?  
The storms in it, the ships, the boats, and sailors  
with oars propel their boats,  
Fourteen Heavens<sup>6</sup> in it are found, while canopy-  
like, above and around,  
Whose is well aware of heart, Bahu! he knows  
the Heaven's chart.

(*Abyat-e-Bahu*)

The metaphysical poetry of Bahu and Donne was an interpretation of the cosmos. The elevated subjects, they addressed in their poetry, were transcribed in simple diction. Although in Donne's poetry critics have found an expression of scholarship, it essentially lacked obscurity and skepticism. As a matter of general evaluation, both poets succeeded in creating lasting impressions through a particular choice of diction.

### Imagery

The metaphysicals painted their verse with original images and conceits. Donne followed, rather established, this style. His poetry was marked with an extraordinary range of conflicting images and ideas.

He did not contend with the traditional variety of imagery rather "he sought out the strangest images" (Evans 47). He was skilful in this ingenuity and created greater meanings.

Goe, and catche a falling starre,  
Get with child a mandrake roote,  
Tell me, where all past years are,  
Or who cleft the Devils foot,  
Teach me to heare Mermaides singing,  
Or to keep off envies stinging,  
And finde  
What winde  
Serves to advance on honest minde.  
(Song)

It is a fact that Donne had a different conception of the function of imagery than other poets. His use of imagery revealed the parameters of his intellectual and superb mystic explorations. The primary purpose of imagery in Donne's poetry was to elaborate and sketch emotional experience with the help of an intellectual parallel.

When goodly, like a ship in her full trim,  
A swan, so white that you may unto him  
Compare al whitenesse but himselfe to none,  
Glided along, and as he glided watch'd,  
And with his arched necke this poor fish catch'd.  
(The Progresse of the Soule, XXIV)

The poetry of Bahu is marked with the symbolic description of spiritual experiences. The artistic use of images and symbols is to simplify and explicate



complexities of thought with its depth as well as enormity (Kalim 46). He revealed the image of life:

O Moon! spread out your light, stars speak of  
you  
Diamond sellers (fakirs) wander, helplessly in  
the streets  
O God! no traveler be troubled, they are so  
helpless  
Bahu! don't compel them to fly away, they are  
destined to leave.

(Abyat-e-Bahu)

Sultan Bahu brought out greater meanings from these customary images. Riches and misery are with reference to the shadow of Divine patronage. Bahu employed symbols to suggest the hidden reality (Narang 146). He took the readers from unreal to real and from transience to permanence. As Quddus brings out: "His use of metaphor is singularly inventive and a strong aesthetic sense serves as a cement of observation" (174). He attained nirvana and expressed it with the imagery that was comprehensible to people. In his first verse (dated 1691 AD), Bahu mentioned his experience:

My guide has planted the jasmine plant in  
my heart O God!  
Watered with 'No God except God' in every vein  
of mine O God!  
The plant has blossomed inside me, with  
fragrant flowers O God!  
May my perfect master live long who planted  
this in my heart O God!

(Abyat-e-Bahu)

This verse is a fine example of the kind of Punjabi imagery that is easily understandable to rural masses (Schimmel 386).

Grierson while comparing Donne with Browning declared that Donne's poetry did display usual images but quickened 'the intellect to intense and rapid trains of thought' (Hammond 26). He further asserted that Donne's imagery remained erudite and simple (Grierson Xliii). Donne was innovative to a great extent in all dimensions of his verse.

At the round earths imagin'd corners, blow  
Your trumpets, Angels, and arise, arise  
From death, your numberlesse infinities  
Of soules, .....

(Holy Sonnet VII)

Here by these images, Donne did not discuss whether the world was round or flat, rather he was projecting his sentiments. The themes of death, judgments, and eternity were treated in the sonnet. According to Joan Bennett, "Donne's technique was in many ways a new thing in English poetry and his most important innovations, although they found imitations among his immediate successors, afterwards remained in abeyance for two centuries" (30). Donne's innovative art, thus, had lasting influence on English verse.

Intricacies of spiritual experience are demanding for the poet to express in prose or verse. Such expression flows through images and symbols (Kalim 19). Kalim further reveals that the mystical experience is "not very

tangible and it requires a great mastery over the poetic medium to make it concrete" (24). Bahu's symbols are, to great extent, a deviation from the traditional or popular symbols in classical poetry. Although his images and symbols originate from the socio-cultural setting of the area. Black and white colour imagery in this 'beit' conveys the contrast between the illusion and reality.

Than a black heart a black face is better, each  
one is aware of that  
If face is black and heart is white, the beloved  
recognizes that  
Such heart should ever follow the beloved, might  
be that He recognizes him  
Bahu! hundred of scholars left the mosques running  
when their heart attained its mark  
(Abyat-e-Bahu)

Imagery in the poetry of Donne and Bahu portrays complex but profound subjects. Their art enabled readers to have considerable understanding of their vision. Their poetry had two distinguishable features: the intellectual richness (intellectualism) and compositeness of imagery. They have an unassailable place in classical poetry.

### Conclusion

Bahu and Donne lived in an age that witnessed developed civilizations both in India and Britain. Husain points out, "It is a significant fact in the history of mysticism, that great epochs of mystical activity have followed the great periods of artistic and

intellectual civilization" (20). John Donne experienced the ongoing Renaissance with its diverse manifestations. Sultan Bahu found socio-cultural development and economic prosperity during the great Mughal period. It was the time when art, literature, and philosophy burgeoned in India. Moreover both poets belonged to prosperous families but relinquished comforts in the pursuit of Divine love. Perhaps they were able to perceive the realities of spiritual world.

Metaphysical poetry is a universal tradition in the literature of past and present. Bahu and Donne were esteemed religious mystics. In Islam and Christianity the great poets had also been great mystics. Bahu and Donne were continuation of this tradition in the seventeenth century. Bahu was believed as a saint. Similarly Donne was a Catholic saint. The verse of Bahu and Donne treated universal subjects and it was an artistic overflow of their intoxication with Divine love. This transient and morbid, world was not of much concern to them. They languished for eternal reunion. That is why, they opted out of traditional themes in their verse. However they differed in the form. Bahu mostly employed the form of "*beif*" (quatrain) in his Punjabi poetry. Donne's poetical works include a variety of genres like songs, sonnets, epigrams, elegies, poems, epitaphs, and even marriage songs. He also wrote in prose. The use of imagery by Bahu and Donne had great similarity. Both employed visual and abstract imagery. Furthermore in his verse, Bahu presented the essence of his numerous experiences and diverse observations. He was not a poet of elaborate and minute details. Donne, on the contrary



adopted a different pattern of poetic expression. His poetry varied in form and style.

Bahu and Donne were metaphysical poets in essence although the term refers to Donne's school. Their art too had many common strings. It was innovative and unconventional. Perhaps it was befitting to their subject. Their message influenced a large number of people and their poetry is a valuable part of classical literature. Punjabi and English literature in the seventeenth century were geographically far apart. There was no interface of both poetic traditions. Nevertheless a juxtaposition will bring out commonalities of their art. It supports their vision and art. It provides evidence of the universality of Bahu and Donne's verse.

## Notes

English translations of Sultan Bahu's original Punjabi poetry, quoted in this paper, are by Prof Siddiq Kalim, Dr CL Narang, Dr Lajwanti Rama Krishna, and the writer.

(1) - Sultan Bahu (1629 – 1691 AD): A Sufi poet writing in Arabic, Persian, and Punjabi. His major work is in Punjabi and collection of his verse "*Abyat-e-Bahu*" first appeared in 1972. He wrote "*beit*" (quatrain).

- John Donne (1572 – 1631 AD): A Catholic mystic poet, born in London. He wrote in various genres of poetry in addition to prose. He was the progenitor of the Metaphysical school of poets in English literature.

(2) Ka'ba: For Muslims, Ka'ba is house of Allah in Makkah (Saudi Arabia).

(3) Bathing in Ganges: Ganges is holy river for Hindus. Bathing in Ganges is believed to wash away all sins.

(4) Murshid: A spiritual guide for devotees.

(5) Kalma: A statement fundamental to Islam, negating existence of any other God but Allah and belief in the prophethood of Muhammad (SAW).

(6) Fourteen Heavens: Muslims believe in seven earths and seven skies.



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