

Art, Love and Time: A Comparative Study of Hassan Kozagar and Ode on a Grecian Urn

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Abstract:

Noon Meem Rashid, a prominent Pakistani poet, is considered one of the front-runners of the Modernist movement in Urdu poetry. His Persianized diction, avant-garde sensibility and atypical themes make him stand out among his contemporaries. His poem 'Hassan Kozagar' is an apostrophe that attempts to traverse a trodden yet elusive domain - the relationship between love and art, between the artist and his creation. Hassan, the potter, dwells on the philosophy of love, time, art and self and his musings take us to his imaginative microcosm. This microcosm is created by a 'sad god' with the bricks and mortar of his imagination in which his enunciation itself becomes the act of creation. The speaker is Hassan, the potter, who lives in Baghdad, perhaps in the middle ages, and his addressee is Jahan Zad, his beloved, though he appears to construct his own 'self' through this invocation to an 'other'. The poem seems to have many parallels with Keats "Ode on a Grecian Urn" even though both exist in a separated space-time coordinates. In Keats' poem the addressee is the Urn, the object of art, while the speaker is the poet and strangely there is no reference to the personality of the artist while in case of Hassan Kozagar, it is the poet who seems to be out of the frame. Both works approach the questions of love, art and immortality from different perspectives and yet it would be interesting to draw a parallel between the two. The theoretical framework of the study is grounded in the aesthetic theories of Baumgarten and Kant, Lacanian psychoanalysis and Time theories of Henry Bergson.

Key Terms:

Love, Art, Time, Desire, Lacan, Psychoanalysis, Kant, Baumgarten, Bergson,

Introduction

The poetic milieu of Indian sub-continent has always been dominated by 'ghazalites' but we see an upsurge of 'nazm' writing in the years leading to the Partition. Whether it was the influence of European Modernism which had almost spent its force up till then or the yearning for an imposed order and coherence brought it about, is just a matter of conjecture. Faiz's revolutionary ardour, Meera Ji's privy sensibilities and MajeedAmjad's philosophical musings all found their expression in Nazm form. NoonMeem Rashid lived and wrote in the same age and though in his early years he did try his hand at the established tradition of 'ghazal', very soon he got disillusioned with the fetters and shackles imposed by its form and subject matter. 'Nazm' allowed him a freedom, not only of form but also of subject matter, and this resulted in a kind of experimentation hitherto unknown in Urdu poetry. As Rashid (n.d.)himself has put it; "For a Modernist poet not only there is no restriction on form but also he has limitless possibilities for the subject matter. In fact, the reason for the freedom of form is that it might not impede the development of ideas" (p.91).

On the other hand, Keats lived and wrote in a completely different spatio-temporal setting but it would be interesting to read his "Ode on a Grecian Urn" alongside Rashid's "Hassan Kozagar" as both poems have analogous conceptual base. Keats have compared and contrasted two worlds; one is of 'representation' and other of 'lived experience' and the poem draws its appeal from the tension between the two;

"Two distinct worlds, therefore, confront us and each other in the Ode on a Grecian urn. On the one hand the ancient Greek world imitated directly from nature and suggestive of harmony and happiness, and on the other the greatly differing world of the poet's own experience" (Godfrey, 1966, p. 49).

Human experience like that of love and its representation in art has a curious relationship with time and both these poems attempt to analyse the nature of this experience.

Art

What is the nature of the relationship between the 'self' and its 'creation'? Whether the artist acts just as a mediator between art and reality or art is an expression of his 'self' or 'consciousness'? How can a 'subjective' experience of the artist transcend the limits of space and time and attain an 'objective' status? Baumgarten attempts to answer this question by differentiating between a rational enquiry and an aesthetic judgment. For him a rational enquiry divides the world into a subject, who is doing the perceiving and object which is being perceived and this divide is responsible for the distinction between a 'subjective' experience and an 'objective' truth (Cazeaux, 2000, p. 3). But aesthetic experience does not divide the world into a subject and a predicate rather it 'unifies' them and the subjective and the objective merge into one whole. Kant takes this argument further by establishing the fact that the subject cannot know the world 'in itself' as experience is mediated through senses and consciousness. For Kant beauty does not lie in an object rather the subject's way of perception makes that thing beautiful.

To say, This flower is beautiful, is tantamount to a mere repetition of the flower's own claim to everyone's liking. The agreeableness of its smell, on the other hand, gives it no claim whatever: its smell delights [*ergötzen*] one person, it makes another dizzy. In view of this [difference], must we not suppose that beauty has to be considered a property of the flower itself, which does not adapt itself to differences in people's heads and all their senses, but to which they must adapt themselves if they wish to pass judgment on it? Yet beauty is not a property of the flower itself. For a judgment of taste consists precisely in this, that it calls a thing beautiful only by virtue of that characteristic in which it adapts itself to the way we apprehend it (p. 145).

This implies that aesthetic experience does not presume the distinction between the subject and the object but it is the blending of the two.

In Keats' 'Ode on Grecian Urn', the urn seems to be an object – a site, where the boundaries of the subjective and objective meet. The urn

unites them at a higher level and this unification gives birth to a new work of art i.e. a poem. We can say that the iconic final message of the urn; "Beauty is Truth; truth beauty that is all/ Ye know on earth and all ye need to know" (p. 282) takes this unification a bit further as it seems to imply that the realm of the aesthetic (subjective) and the realm of rational (objective) overlap and the distinction between the two, if any, is artificial. Consciousness is rooted in the world and it is consciousness that structures our epistemological categories and consequently the rational and the aesthetic are the same.

In Rashid's poem "Hassan Kozagar", we discern this relationship from a different focal point as Hassan mourns loss of connection between his subjective self and objects of his creation. The pang of separation has alienated him from his artistic creation as his pots though

Gilo rang o roghankimakhloq e bejan (Rashid, 1988, p. 254)

(the unanimated beings of clay and colour)

Voice their concern at the indifference of their creator in these words;

Wo Sargohshiyo men ye kehte

Hassan Kozagar ab kahanhy

Wo hum se khudapneamal se

khudawand bun krKhudayonkimanindhyroyegirdan.(Rashid, 1988, p. 254)

(They would whisper to themselves/ "Where is Hassan Kozagar/ How he has become oblivious of us- his own handiwork/ Like a god heedless of his creation").

On one level, Hassan – the pottor – has lost connection with his pots, his creation but at the same time his voice or his consciousness – brooding over this loss - is giving birth to another kind of art i.e. poetry. The divorce between his consciousness and his creation is superficial as its awareness has heightened his sensibilities which has resulted in poetic creativity. The subjective and objective are sublated at a higher level and again we discern a unification of the two in the poetic expression. If

Keats' poem effaces this distinction between the subjective and objective by generating a discourse on the nature of art, Hassan Kozagar does that by transforming the very discourse into an art form.

Love

In the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', Keats seems to eulogize the love represented on the urn and by comparing it to the ordinary love, deems it far above 'all human passions' (Keats, p. 282). "Moved to ecstasy and envy by the happiness emanating from the figures and their environment, he has gone on to contrast with it the sorrowful reality of the human condition, especially in the experience of love" (Godfrey, 1966, p. 45). For Keats, the represented love, though devoid of passion and consummation, is eternal;

More happy love! more happy, happy love!

For ever warm and still to be enjoy 'd,

For ever panting, and for ever young;

All breathing human passion far above, (Keats, 1982, p. 282)

Keats rejects ordinary human passion on the ground that it "leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd" (p.282) and "a burning forehead, and a parching tongue" (p. 282). Does it indicate that the fulfilment of desire leads to a kind of disillusionment and it is just the anticipation of the desired object that keeps the interest alive? In case of the lovers on the urn the answer would be 'yes'. Keats specifically mentions this fact that the represented love is better because it is unconsummated and he also invokes this association between Beauty and Love. Love is always with Beauty and as Beauty, in the real world, is short lived so inadvertently, Love, which is dependent upon it, is also transient. Keats injection here about the nature of desire is postmodernist as it brings to mind the Lacanian concept of desire.

Lacan is of the view that Desire is 'lack' and its true nature is always veiled. Desire exceeds need and it is a chain of signifiers without signifieds and it lies in the realm of fantasy and has nothing to do with

reality. Desire is a fantasy of fullness, a wholeness which is, in fact, a veil for the projection of our own narcissistic self. Desire is just an illusion of this fullness otherwise, as already mentioned, it is 'lack' and the veil is necessary for our desires to persist. If we come too close to our object of desire, and if the veil is lifted, we would meet our own narcissistic self. Thus desire is not about fulfilment, on the contrary, it depends upon keeping our distance (Lacan, 1999, p.637).

For Keats this anticipation, "forever warm and still to be enjoyed" (p.282) renders the represented desire its peculiar charm. Its fascination does not lie in its fulfilment but in a continual deferral of fulfilment. The bold lover cannot kiss "though winning near the goal" (Keats, 1982, p. 282) but he has this consolation that she cannot fade;

Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (Keats, 1982, p. 282)

It is on this ground, as already mentioned, Keats seems to be disillusioned with the nature of ordinary human passion. When the veil of desire is rendered we come across our own fantasy, our own narcissistic projection and this leaves the heart "sorrowful and cloy'd" (Keats, 1982, p. 282). The world depicted on the urn is not real, it is more than real because it is fantasy. Its unheard melodies are sweeter, leaves of its trees would never "bid the spring adieu" (Keats, 1982, p. 282), its unconsummated love would always be warm and its imaginary village is hyperreal. The world of the urn is a signifier without a signified that can be constructed and reconstructed ad infinitum in the realm of fantasy and this is the reason that despite being "unravished bride of quietness" (Keats, 1982, p. 282) and "foster-child of silence" (Keats, 1982, p. 282) the urn can express

A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme (Keats, 1982, p. 282)

On the other hand, Hassan Kozagar celebrates not the unconsummated passions of lovers, frozen in time and fixed in the memory of a work of art, but its repertoire deals with the feelings and emotions of Hassan – the artist himself. In Canto I of the poem, Hassan tells us that it has been nine years that he set eyes on Jehanzad for the first time and he has spent all these nine years in contemplation of the radiance of her eyes..

Everything that Hassan tells us about love in canto I of the poem constructs an idealized image of Jehanzad at the level of fantasy; the way he suffered the pangs of separation, how he got isolated from his art, family and even his own self. The light of her eyes illuminated his spirit and the same light not only can revive his deadened artistic sensibilities but also can resuscitate a new Hassan out of him. He became oblivious of everything and instead of moulding decanters and goblets of clay; he sculpted dreams with the stuff of his imagination. At this stage, Hassan's love is unconsummated like the 'bold lover' of Keats but there is hope for fulfilment and Canto II of the poem hints at this consummation;

Jehanzad

Nishatusshab e be rah raviki

Men kahantakbholon?

Zor e maitha, ke mere hath kilarzish thee

Keussraat koi jaamgira toot giya (Rashid, 1998, p.443)

(Jehanzad! How can I forget the joy of that ecstatic night, Was it the intoxication of wine or was it some inner shudder? That night a goblet dropped and broke)

On one hand, Hassan is talking about the ecstasy of consummation but in the very next line he tells us about the breaking of a decanter. Does this mean that ecstasy was followed by disillusionment – rending of the veil of desire? At metaphorical level it can be interpreted as the same sorrowfulness and cloyment that Keats has talked about and which is associated with ordinary human passion and which the lovers on the urn would not experience. The difference between the two poems is that Keats just stops there and does not delve into the nature and cause of this disillusionment while Hassan does explore it further when he equates love with narcissistic projection. As Lacan has said that love is caught up in our fantasies and thus it is not an 'other' that we love but an idealized image of that 'other' constructed through and in fantasy. "That's what love is. It's one's own ego that one loves in love, one's own ego made real on the imaginary level" (Lacan, 1999, p. 142). Hassan says;

Tu mere samneainarahi

Sar e bazaar, dareeche men, sar e bister e sanjabbhi

To mere samneainarahi

Jis men kuchbhinazraayanamuje

Apni hi sooratkesiwa (Rashid,1988, p.444)

(You were a mirror to me, in the bazaar, in the window, in my bed - and I saw nothing in that mirror but my own visage)

The play of desire is always enacted on the stage of fantasy and fantasy is the projection of our own ego and thus meeting with this 'other' is confronting our own 'ego. For Hassan, Jehanzad is a mirror in which he cannot see anything but his own reflection;

Iss men kuchbhinazraatanahen

Ab aik he sooratkesiwa(Rashid, 1988, p. 444)

(Now nothing else is visible in it except one visage)

At the moment of consummation, this reflection of the 'self' in the 'other', this rending of the veil of desire, leads to disillusionment as it dawns on the subject that his object of desire is a mirror in which he has projected his own self. Hassan muses that love is cyclic as it comes back to its point of origin;

Ishq se kis ne magrpayahykuchapnesiwa

Aye Jehanzad,

Hyharishqsawalaesakeaashiqkesiwa

Isskanahen koi jawab

Yahikafihy k baatinkisadagoonjuthe(Rashid, 1988, p.448)

(One only finds one's own 'self' in love, Jehanzad!, Every love is a question and the lover is its only answer – Its enough that one can hear the echo of one's own self)

So Canto I of the poem, just like represented love of the urn, constructs an idealized image of love and the object of love at the level of fantasy but in the next two Cantos Hassan comes to realize that this idealized image is the phantom of his own brain, a projection of his own ego. Therefore, we see that in Canto II and III, he does not contemplate the parts of his beloved rather his musings are of more philosophical nature as if he has experienced that sorrowfulness and cloyment that Keats has talked about. It is in Canto IV, after hundreds of years of his earthly existence, now that he is transformed into a disembodied voice, he again mentions the beauty of Jehanzad and how it inspired him to create imperishable objects of art. Desire is all about keeping our distant from the object of desire and without this distance desire cannot persist as coming too close to it would rend the veil.

Time

Few poets endeavoured to evaluate the working of their own consciousness during the creative process; Coleridge in 'Ode on Dejection' and Ted Hughes in 'Thought Fox' can be quoted as examples. But most of the notable poems that deal with artists or artistic creation are set in a distant past. Browning's "Andrea Del Sarti" and the two poems under discussion come to mind. Possibly, the distant setting allows the poets to analyze creative process in a state of neutrality but there is no denying the fact that there exists a close affinity between art and time. It is believed that art transcends time and space and its perpetuity in contrast to temporality of human existence has haunted poets and artists throughout history. The artist or the 'creative self' is temporal and consequently the interpreter must also read a work of art in a spatio-temporal setting. If a work of art is created in time and must be interpreted in time then its perpetuity, though paradoxically, becomes 'relative'.

Memory is experience accumulated in time and this in turn constructs the 'self'. 'Self' is a narrative, a history written for us and by us and through this we make our existence meaningful. Just like an artist who shapes and moulds new forms out of the same material, our identity is also

constructed in time out of the same lived experience and yet every 'self', like every work of art, is unique. Henri Bergson distinguishes between the time that exists independently and is understood in spatial terms which he calls mechanical time and 'Duree', the psychological or pure time perceived by the 'self' (Bergson, 2002, p.5). The psychological/mechanical time dichotomy of Bergson has been treated rather atypically in the poems as the artist and his art seem to transcend both. The object of art exists in linear time yet itinerates the past, the present and the future at the same time and thus defies the linearity of mechanical time. It seems to have its own consciousness and consequently its own Duree and thus it exist like a 'self' yet an 'other' for the artist. The object of art would always invoke and refer to the 'self' that created it yet it continues to exist long after the extinction of that 'self'. In a way, a work of art deconstructs the binary opposition of 'self' and 'other' as it exists on the margins of both.

The Grecian urn is the 'foster-child' (Keats, 1992, p.282) of silence and 'slow time' (Keats, 1992, p.282) , it 'teases us out of thought/ As doth eternity' (Keats, 1992, p.282) and it is also referred to as 'sylvan historian' (Keats, 1992, p.282) in the poem and these epithets draw attention to the fact that it exists diachronically but also it is something that is beyond time. It belongs to the past but it is still here in the present and it 'shalt remain in midst of other woe' (Keats, 1992, p.282) and thus the urn has this ambivalent relationship with time i.e. it is temporal and atemporal at the same time. Its beauty must be linked with the temporal perception and experience of the observer otherwise it would lack warmth and colour. Keats's poem is a reading, an interpretation but this reading is not objective in the strictest sense of the word as it is tainted by the subjective perceptions of the poet.

On the other hand, Rashid's poem is about the artist himself, the 'self' that creates and how the history of this 'self' is constructed in time. In the beginning of Canto I Hassan recapitulates how he suffered pangs of separation for nine years but these nine years, mechanical time that is, got frozen in his memory as he says;

Jahanzad no salka dour yunmujpeguzra

Kejeseekisishehr emadfoon par waqtgzre (Rashid, 1988, p.255)

(Jahanzad! This period of nine years passed as if time moves on a dead city)

The psychological time is frozen but the external time is not and later in the poem Hassan compares the movement of time with that of the potter's wheel. It is the circular motion of the wheel that shapes and moulds goblets and decanters for the potter and in the similar fashion, time creates and destroys the identities of human beings.

ZamanaJahanzadwochaakhyjispe

Surahi o meena o jam o subokimanind

Buntebigartehan insane

Men insan hon lekin

Ye no sal jog hum k qalib men gzre

Hassan Kozagar iktoda e khaakhy

Jis men numkaasrtaknaehy(Rashid, 1988, p.257)

(Jahanzad! Time is like a potter's wheel on which like goblets and decanters, men's self is created and destroyed. I am a man but the nine years that I suffered has turned this Kozagar into a piece of sod in which no moisture can be found)

Here the 'self' is equated with a work of art created on the 'wheel of time' and the boundary between the artist and his creation is blurred. Like clay, that needs moisture for its being moulded into an artistic object, the artist also needs this moisture or inspiration not only to create a work but also to shape his own 'self'. But these nine sufferable years have taken out of him the 'essence' or the 'moisture' that is essential for the creative process. The external time, chaak-the potter's wheel continued to move in these nine years but his psychological time got frozen, and he himself turned to sod and thus despite the circular motion

of the wheel, his 'self' remained fixed like a buried city. And this was the time when his creative abilities also took leave of him as he says;

Ye woh dour tha k jis men men ne

Kbiapneranjoorkozoonkijanib

Palatkrnadekha(Rashid, 1988, p.253)

(This was the time that I never paid attention to my sad pots)

The equation of the movement of the potter's wheel with that of time is interesting as it seems to negate the linearity of external time by deeming it circular and repetitious. This premise is ratified when in Canto II, Hassan describes time as a 'moth' that crawls on walls, mirrors, decanters, glasses, cups, goblets and potter's pit;

Waqtkia chez hytujantihy?

Waqtaikaesapatangahy

Jo dewaronpeaainyonpe

Paimanope, sheeshonpe

Mre jam o subu, mretagharonpe

Sadareengatahy(Rashid, 1988, p.445)

(You know what time is. Time is a moth that crawls forever on walls and mirrors, on decanters and glasses, on goblets and potter's pit)

The emphasis is on continuity of time but this continuity needs not be linear as the very next lines suggest;

Reengatewaqtkemanindkabi

Loat ke aye ga Hassan kozagarsokhatajan be shayd(Rashid, 1988, p.445)

(Perhaps one day, like crawling time, Hassan Kozagar would also return)

Why does Hassan say that he would return like this crawling time? Does it mean time repeats itself or moves in a circle? There is evidence in support of this argument when in Canto IV of the poem, the disembodied

voice of Hassan tells us that after thousands of years, in another city, another Hassan Kozagar is reliving the same experience;

Hassan naamkaikjawankoza gar – iknayeshehr men –

Apnekozaybunatahua, ishqkrtahua

Apnemaaziketaron men hum se proyagayahy (Rashid, 1988, p.542)

(Another younger Hassan Kozagar, in a new city, who is making pots and is in love is connected to us through the past)

The lines clearly suggest that even the mechanical or external time is not linear and the progression of history is an illusion. We live the experiences that have been lived before and Keats also reminds us of the same when he says that the urn “shalt remain, in midst of other woe than our” (Keats, 1982, p. 282).

If time is cyclic and if ‘self’ is constructed in time then it implies that the ‘self’ repeats itself and ‘becoming’ never realizes into ‘being’. The psychological time, or the history of the ‘self’ is just a reflection of the events represented in the mechanical time that too just repeats itself endlessly. There is this possibility that this dialectic of the ‘self’ and ‘time’ may sublimate into a higher unity of art and attain a kind of perpetuity. But this perpetuity can only have meaning if it is recognised and analysed in relation to contemporary experience and thus in a way it would be still dated. The figures on the Grecian urn gain significance and meaning only when the poet relates them to his own lived experience and the same is true of Hassan’s pots. Hassan mocks the archaeologists/interpreters who are trying to interpret his art because the archaeologists’ scientific study can never uncover the essential nature of the pots as they do not study them in relation to lived human experience. So art, though eternal in relation to mechanical time, remains to be interpreted by the ‘self’, the psychological/temporal being to give it a timeless meaning.

This cyclic conception of being and experience brings to mind the idea of ‘eternal recurrence’ as conceived by Nietzsche “that all things recur eternally and we ourselves along with them, and that we have already

been here times eternal and all things along with us” (p.178) and this seems to be a negation of the Hegelian dialectical progression. But here we can safely assume that art is such a medium that transcends this vicious cycle and provides the possibility of sublimation. Human experience and ideas may recur but art grasps this experience and makes it stand out. Both these poems seem to suggest that the timelessness of art is not just its perseverance against the ravages of mechanical time but its relationship with the lived human experience that recurs eternally.

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