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Mystical significance of images and symbols: A study of The Bijak of Kabir

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Abstract

All great poetry essentially is created never in so rustically and so plain manner that it should look a thing of common understanding or simply a matter of commonsense. Rather in looseness of poetic charisma and charm, there remains nothing but the substance of inane and trite existence of words which may be something, yet other than poetry. Imagery in poetry contains one of the features that bring forth symbolical strata and multifariousness to the semantic subject including multiplicity to the phenomenal beauty to a literary piece.

In this paper an endeavour shall be made to find out, if not all, yet some significant images and symbols and their mystical significance in the poetry collection The Bijak of Kabir translated version of Kabir's poetry by Linda Hess and Sukhdev Singh. Kabir Das is one of the ever greatest Bhaktis, poets, mystics and philosophers of India, born in 1398, as per some records and according to the rest in the year 1440, in Kashi village of Varanasi (Banaras) India.

The study shall be substantiating the symbolic aptness in relation to mystical notions of Kabir and bring out their significance in understanding of some basic Indian mystical thoughts and principles. An effort shall be made to know how Kabir through image and symbols symbolically expounds the essence of human existence and other related elements in relation to the religious tradition whatsoever. However, it is very pertinent to say that the motif behind the study literally shall be unearthed with the consultation of literary books, articles, research papers in addition to the main source. Moreover, in this respect the New Criticism shall be partially viewed according to which a poem or a work of art must be solemnly the centre for the critical approach to highlight and appreciate it, along with viewing the Russian Formalism which sets erect itself on the criterion of strangeness of a work of art.

Keywords: Swan, water, defamiliarisation, strangeness, Ganga, formlessness

Introduction

There is no abnegation of the belief found in literary ambits that poetry is not a matter of commonsense and something uncouth and unsophisticated aspect of literature, rather a serious and sublime expression of human sentimentality, philosophy and ideology in an urbane style, so suggestive and apt to let flow symbolically the semantic essence in multifarious ways for the accomplishment of which symbols and images share bonafide and honest-to-goodness significance in the way to give birth to the real Mc Coy of deep meaning or connotative essence. The symbols and images in Kabir's poetry are bedrocks for the expression of his ingenious expression of mystical or spiritual thoughts and sterling beliefs.

Kabir Das' The Bijak of Kabir is no doubt the poetry in sheer symbolism crafted and created a cognizant reader in it finds everything that futures as the symbolical expression of Hindu religion and mysticism and, as such construes them in light of Vedantic tradition and Bhagwat Gita in particular. As a fact it is, Kabir never had schooling, it hardly has impact on the expertise of his employing symbols and images. Kabir as a spiritual saint, on eternity accrues the subject under the norms of poetic technicality very well as exemplified in the following lines:

Saints, once you wake up, don't doze off.
Time can't eat you, eons can't swallow you,
age and decay can't waste you.
Turned-around Ganga dries up the ocean,
swallows the moon and sun. (Trans. By Hess and Singh 41)

In Bhagwat Gita, Time is all about manifestation of divinity as the omnipotent force of destruction which neither can be postponed nor hindered and thwarted in the apocalypse of the phenomenal things. This concept of time in metaphorical contrivance, Kabir highlights eternity as human soul when it has already got liberated or had Moksha and therefore remains unaffected and indestructible; the time which in meaning is similar to that of eon is just the spiritual abstraction.

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However, Kabir attributes in it the act and action of the living similar to that of consumers in the similar fashion age and decay also fit in the device of personification, besides the image of Ganga which the Hindus, since ancient times, adhere their omnism and sacrosanctity to. In addition to the evident layer of conceptual meaning, the symbols and images like Time symbolising divine destructive force, age and decay symbolising matterly transience, the Ganga as an illusion symbolising faith, sanity, chastity and more prominently the cultural tradition of Hindu Civilization, the moon symbolising the ephemeral beauty or maya, the ocean symbolising the creation of earth, formlessness and more predominantly the chaotic situation, and as such the sun contains, symbolically the sense of power and vigour. A careful analysis of this metaphorical corpus evicts otherness or pith behind the conceptual temporality as in the Language of Gesture R P Blackmur holds, "We use the language of gesture when the language of words fails, because the language of poetry is essentially the language of "symbolical action."" (Tilak 101)

The aptness of such images and symbols in Kabir's mystical theodicy marks out the total quintessence of devotion which, to him, is the way to the station of ethereal eternity or permanence of soul, unaffected, unshattered and all beyond the delusiveness of phenomenology of the world. There is such ascension of human soul wherein the elemental association of water, fire, earth and air fall apart the reality. This lesson of Kabir through the chain of symbols and images is the beyond time expresses what, "Gita declares that the supreme purpose of human faith is to know God and everything else is secondary because this provides salvation to that which means permanent bliss and immortality" (Varma 12).

Culturally, Ganga has great spiritual significance for Hindus; the people out of belief are used to immerse the ashes of the dead in its waters under the faith of having done so the souls are purified and consequently fret the shackles of Karma cycle. Nevertheless, to Kabir, in the verse has a different thing to construe of this visual image: This to him symbolises Brahman conscience, a kind of spiritual experience wherein human vision rises up to experience the unitive nature of all beings with Brahman and therefore, in fact in faith a state of consciousness as mentioned in Mundikha Upanishads as Turiya in which:

The consciousness is neither turned outward and inward; it is beyond both cognition and absence of cognition. This fourth state of Turiya cannot be experienced through the senses are known by comparison, deductive reasoning or inference; it is indescribable, incomprehensible, and unthinkable with the mind. (TK *et al.* 67)

The symbolical approach of understanding Kabir's poetry sprinkles out different varied cultural domains that determine meaning and its different shades in the weltered groves of signs, symbols, images and the related, and for that it can be well analysed on the principles of archetypal approach of criticism. Semiotic conscience can do a lot in acting as a wharf to explore the sum total since, "Semiotic theory takes structuralist approach to signs to understand the cultural codes and conventions they embody and therefore, a semiotics of reading is bound to be limited and conservative in outlook" (Das 120). The mystical thought of Kabir is welded with the semantic significance in the visual image of Swan or Hansa bearing not a whit of dissociation with the religious significance in Hinduism: the bird as a symbol is juxtaposed to a saintly person who in the material world

lives, however remains aloof in the sense of being emptied of the carnal desires and other voluptuous things in the similar manner as the Hansa's feathers remain dry even being in the water. For that reason this bird qualifies the connotations of divine nature, intellectual grace, elevated or pure self or simply the spiritual intellect. More importantly this Hansa is considered as the vehicle of Goddess Sarasvati—the spouse of Brahman. Principally, this bird has been used by Kabir suggestively to compare it with the Brahman conscious soul who always longs to take flight to the real essence leaving the curtains aside of the delusive gnome and as:

Hansa is the title carries different shades of meaning, it variously means truth, life-breath, and the two petalled ajna cakra (the swan or the third eye) located between the eyebrows. Hansa also implies one who can differentiate between truth and untruth like the mythical bird, which is believed to have the power to separate water from milk. (Rao 73)

Kabir addresses Swan using the technique of apostrophe that inwardly is the address to God conscious man to wield progressively to attain the devotional training to soar above the ephemeral and winnow the truth from untruth as is evident from the stanza below:

Hey swan, clear your mind
in the morning. They've set
so many snares, knit the net
of three qualities
and trapped the world. (Trans. By Hess and Singh 51-52)

With Upanishadic symbolism of the bird Kabir aggrandizes it according to his own spiritual insight and discretion in light of his devotional theodicy: through this image and symbol Kabir highlights the nature of true Bhakti, always active in liberating himself from all negativity to attain ontological freedom called Moksha subject to the, "Complete dedication and total surrender to One Absolute" (Prasoon 90). Since in literary world, "Scales, for example, symbolize justice; the orb and sceptre, monarchy and rule; a dove, peace; a goat, lust; the lion, strength and courage; the bulldog, tenacity; the rose, beauty; the lily, purity; the Stars and Stripes, America and its States" (Cuddon 699). There is no seizure to be allowed in understanding that symbols identify cultural and anthropological affairs of human life and as such this essence must not experience atrophy in the acknowledgement of religion as symbolical. The archetypal corpus and the notions of Defamiliarisation and Strangeness as the chief ingredients of literariness are abound in Kabir's legacy; nonetheless, it has religiously the spiritual colour. His image of water adding besides referential stuff conceives those constituents that, "determine the 'literariness' of a text" (Das 82). This is how it is clarified in Kabir's verse as:

A shadow burns on the water.
A man without feet runs everywhere,
without eyes see the world.
Turned-around rabbit swallows a lion. (Hess and Singh 41)

Here the image of water from Allen Tate's critical compass is the essential extension unfurling intention that on the scientific or phenomenological grounds seems a bizarre sort

pushing out all wonderfulness and logically unexpected substantiating thus the notion of Defamiliarisation since water acts as an agent of extinction, which nonetheless Kabir does not mean so. To Kabir water is the essence of things sharing the nurgunic concept of God. Burning of shadow, that too on water, has spiritual and philosophical historicity: it to Kabir is the duress of all existences; he connotes it to the philosophical fact that water is life agency and everything burns (dazzles or lives) owing to it and water as a reality blocks out what seems other than the real. In the Holy Quran God declares the essence of water as, “We made every living thing of water” (The Qur’an Pickthall 21:30). The image of water for that quintessence is mentioned in this Holy book fifty nine times. For its essence and role in human existence in esoteric dimension of Islam it is so magnificent and glorified which according to Ismail Zarghami and others that, “Supreme Being has placed its throne on water” (123). Equivocally, Kabir as virtuoso, takes water as aforementioned, the divine secret wherefrom the phenomenal world appears to exist; this thought of him is thus that water accounts for the noumenal reality of things or simply the core of existence. Mystically, in Islamic mysticism very particular to Ibn-i-Arabi’s philosophy of pantheism, “In Sufism, particularly in wahdat al-wujud school of Ibn ‘Arabi, water of oceans and seas is envisaged as representing Existence” (Radpour 7). In the similar manner Kabir uses water for similar reality in the following lines:

The world is overflowing
with that water.
The water where sound and sea
divide, where Vedas
and six rites are born,
where dwell
both god and soul,
that water holds earth,
sky and light. (Trans. By Hess and Singh 64-65)

A judicious scholarship in studying Kabir encounters with plethora of significance in symbolism engrained in the extensions so suitably knitted that the literary and thematic ambiguity do not allow any sort of clue of abracadabra nature: such is the suggestiveness and up-to the mark standard though one is reminded of Horace’s concept of *purpureus pannus* (Purple patch). Kabir, to bring his point home of the subject of eternity or immortality employs, as per the creative situation, congruous gustatory image as in the given verse:

Without a cup nectar is sipped,
streams swell with water.
Kabir says, he lives from age to age
who tastes the liquor of Ram. (Trans. By Hess and Singh 41)

The Hindi word for nectar is *amrit* which in Hinduism has a great mystical role: a watery substance that having drunk makes one immortal in Hindu mysticism. This image shares centrality in religious and spiritual domains mostly in Rigveda associated with Devas or other sorts of deities from Puranas, Kabir correlates this metaphorical image with divine consciousness or divine knowledge that satiates as a taste, the seeker of the supreme God till the attainment of unitive ontology. Through this, “The Gnostic superman

lives for God in himself, for God in the universe and for God beyond all.” (Umar 42)

Conclusion

From all sides what comes to fore is that Kabir’s poetry as one of the richest Bhakti legacies enriched with the layers of symbolism through which mystically the sublime experiences are voiced which, however, cannot adumbrate the pith and marrow at superficial level. A close study through the spectacle of new critical approach, of Kabir, the symbols and images do concord with the desirable thoughts meant to be expressed without the slightest tinge of expected ambivalence. Mostly the symbols and images as used by Kabir put forward his own esoteric output of the spiritual experience which, nevertheless, do not contravene with the traditional archetypes as found in the Hindu religious scriptures. As far as Kabir’s artistic excellence is concerned, the symbols and the images, at first instance bring forth uncertainty and chaos on the issue of congruence, yet a keen and in depth swotting justifies all emollience and aptness. Through symbols and images Kabir systemizes his Bhakti school according to which devotional progress is the only way to liberate and attain Moksha. Kabir Das as an Indian Bhakti saint manages to create the extensions from the cultural dimension of the land to bring round the desired and demystify the essence of God consciousness or Brahman consciousness. The corpus in the paper vindicates the fundamentals of Kabir’s mystical school which aim at human perfection, true knowledge and unitive essence of things or pantheistic view of God.

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