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An Aesthetics of Mystical Poetry: A Study of Bimla Raina's *The Silence Within*

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The paper seeks to examine the selected Kashmiri poems of Bimla Raina translated into English by Arvind Gigoo entitled *The Silence Within*, in the light of Kashmir's mystical tradition to which Bimla Raina consciously associates herself. It opens with a brief reference to the aesthetics of mysticism as reflected in the poetry of various poets like William Blake, T.S Eliot, W.B Yeats, William Wordsworth etc. All of them, in their own ways, have expressed the helplessness and difficulties that a mystic encounters while trying to articulate a genuine mystical experience. Their prime focus is on the inadequacy and inefficiency of language that proves to be a worn-out tool when required to come to terms with the mystical consciousness. However, a mystic gifted with the genius of creativity is, to a large extent, in a position to recast and redefine the function of language. He clothes a deep and profound experience with linguistic signs to which an ordinary and average human reader can relate. The paper further seeks to make a thorough analysis of the poetic form that fits the fleeting nature of a mystical experience. Since a mystical experience is short lived, it can be captured only in the form of short poems like *Vaakhs* and *Shrukhs*. It is in this particular respect that Bimla Raina associates herself, very closely, to the tradition of LalDed and RupaBhawani. However, it is observed that unlike LalDed, Bimla Raina is a conscious craftswoman for whom structure is subservient to texture. She has very meticulously selected words and carefully cast them into an arrangement most suited to her thought. The paper also talks about the problems of translation in general and concludes with a brief review of Bimla Raina's *The Silence Within*.

“There is true knowledge.

Learn thou it is this:

To see one changeless Life in all the Lives,

And in the Separate, One Inseparable”.

(*BhagavadGita*,18)

The Silence Within is the English rendering by Professor Arvind Gigoo of selected Kashmiri poems of Bimla Raina, a noteworthy original voice in modern Kashmiri poetry. Bimla Raina is avowedly a mystical poet in the tradition of LalDed and RupaBhawani. Her poetry immediately raises the question of the relationship of mysticism and poetry.

Mysticism is, in truth, a temper rather than a doctrine, an atmosphere rather than a system of philosophy. One could perhaps employ more or less the same terms to describe the nature of poetry but with important qualification to which a short definition of poetry by Abbe Bremond pointedly draws our attention. He defined poetry as “incomplete mystical experience.”¹ This definition points at once to the similarities and dissimilarities between mysticism and poetry.

A mystic is blessed with an awareness and consciousness that is beyond the usual human empirical mode of apprehension. Mystics find it impossible to describe the state of consciousness they attain in a genuine mystical experience through a mundane tool like language. Language, like all other human media is devised to comprehend and describe material and rationally comprehensible data of experience. Since mystical experience is arational, words turn into rebels, sentences break, coherence falls apart and meaning is overburdened with the intensity of the consciousness attained. Hence Eliot's complaint:

"... words strain
crack and sometimes break under the burden,
under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
decay with imperfection."²

To come to terms with the ideal, mystics gifted with creative talent break and remould language in order to partially meet demands of the deepest and highest levels of consciousness. The poet like the mystic is subject to certain "peak experiences" when "we are blessed by everything, Everything we look upon is blessed."³ Such experiences are reinterpreted into something relatable. Mystical poetry is meant to be read and interpreted at the level of metaphor and allegory and not fact. The mystic approaches reality directly, the poet obliquely. In the words of William Blake:

"if the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to a man as it is, Infinite"⁴

It cannot be gainsaid that the poetical experience and the mystical experience share certain similarities. For example, both are dominated by alogical and arational components with significant difference of degree and also, in some cases of kind as well. However, unlike a pure mystical experience, poetic mystical experience lends itself, with a relative ease, to the subjugation of linguistic signs. The creative genius in a mystical poet lies in the way he clothes a profound and intense mystical experience in a poetic form. In other words, he attempts at articulating the inarticulate which Eliot fittingly calls, "raid on the inarticulate".⁵

The mystical experience originates from the encounter between the finite which is man and the Infinite which is Ineffable and Undefinable. Such encounters are inevitably brief and momentary as the finite cannot bear more than a momentary exposure to the Infinite. T.S Eliot has rightly described such encounters as moments of intersection between time and timelessness. Such 'spots of time' as Wordsworth called them bring infinite enlightenment and gnosis with them:

"when we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things".⁶

To W.B Yeats such a blessed moment was the moment of moments. James Joyce, in his secular phraseology, called it an epiphany, when the reality of an object leaps out of the vestment of its appearance and becomes available to us. Dostoyevsky tells us that each one of his great novels was conceived in a moment like this. Since these encounters occur like flashes they can linguistically also be captured in poems which are like flashes such as the *Vaakh* and the *Shrukhs* which have necessarily got to be neat and concise. In trying to capture the mystical experience, the poet tries to seize fleeting gleams, short-lived epiphanies, which are the products of the momentary intersection of the Eternal and the ephemeral.

Kashmir's mystical poetic impulse finds expression in the form of *Vaakhs* and *Shrukhs*, verse-form characterized by brevity and concentration. *Vaakhs* and *Shrukhs* are essentially short poems originating from deep insight and poignant intensity. Bimla Raina has a natural mystical temperament with an impulse to give it poetic expression. Naturally her choice of a poetic form to articulate her mystical experience falls on *Vaakh*. By doing this, Bimla Raina, easily, places herself in the line of tradition of the practitioners of *Vaakh* that include LalDed and RupaBhavani. However, one has often the feeling that unlike in LalDed, craft takes precedence over spontaneity and suggestivity in Bimla Raina's poems. She consciously indulges in a verbal play to produce the desired effect. In the ultimate analysis, she emerges as a conscious craftswoman articulating pure and genuine mystical consciousness.

"I guarded the fragments

And

Lost the big.

I plugged the nostrils

And

ruptured the veins".

and

"Body and mind

are

a wheel.

The soul journeys.

Trap it

and

give it to Him.

Hate and worry

Will end

You will be All”.⁷

Having said this, it has to be remarked that this brief assessment of her poetry is based on the English translation of selections from her poetry and the problem with translation is that while translating the thought from one language into another, the essence is largely lost. Inevitability and irreplaceability are the two dominant keynotes of authentic poetry. It is arduous to capture and execute the same thought in a similar arrangement of words in a different language. In the words of Robert Frost, “poetry is what gets lost in translation”.⁸ For George Borrow “translation is at best an echo”. Moreover, in translating mystical poetry, the translator faces the problem of recreating in another language the half-actualized experience of the poet. Keeping these difficulties in mind, it is obvious that in translating Bimla Raina’s mystical songs, Arvind Gigoo has achieved a formidable feat. However, he has not restricted to the formal restraints adopted by the original poet. Gigoo confesses:

“Perforce I had to resort to subversion, abrogation and inventiveness. I ignored the rhythms and movement of the originals, interpreted and paraphrased their densities and complexities, and reconstructed their structural, syntactic and linguistic intricacies. I invented my own narrative frame and recasting device, and replicated mythological references. In the process, Bimla’s verses lost their punch”.⁹

Nevertheless, reading of *The Silence Within* turns out to be an ecstatic experience. For the non-Kashmiri reader it is a delicious feast and for the Kashmiri knowing reader it certainly augments the enjoyment and appreciation of the original.

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