

ISSN:0976-8165



# The Criterion

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

**VOL. 15 ISSUE-2 APRIL 2024**

**15 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS**

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ISSN 2278-9529

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**  
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## **The Rishi Poetics, Societal Refinement and Sheikh Nooruddin Wali**

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11103345>

**Article History:** Submitted-25/02/2024, Revised-09/04/2024, Accepted-16/04/2024, Published-30/04/2024.

### **Abstract:**

In the vast landscape of Indian literature, the Rishi Poetics stand as a beacon of enlightenment, blending profound philosophical insights with artistic expression. Rooted in ancient traditions of lasting relevance, the Rishi corpus serves not only as a source of aesthetic pleasure but also as a catalyst for social reformation. In the Kashmiri context, Rishis were a group of religious people living in Kashmir during the medieval era who led ascetic lives and subsisted on frugal sustenance. They devoted their lives towards the worship of their Lord and selfless service to humankind. The Rishi thought focussed on complete devotion to God, living an ascetic and solitary life remote from the common habitation, performing meditative practices based on self-mortification, service to mankind and to subdue all negative impulses like hatred, lust, jealousy, greed and so on. One of their main objectives was social transformation and societal refinement. As a representative Rishi poet of fourteenth century Kashmir, Sheikh Nooruddin emerged on the scenario and used his revolutionary poetic outpourings to bring about a positive change in the social set-up and popular ideology. In the present paper, an attempt has been made to throw light on the basic tenets of rishi poetics and how the rishi thought played its part in societal refinement in the valley. This paper explores the symbiotic relationship between Rishi Poetics and the drive for societal transformation, delving into their timeless relevance and enduring impact. The poetry of Sheikh Nooruddin Wali, the representative Reshi poet has been discussed so as to highlight his pivotal role in the social transformation of Kashmiri society during his times and positive impact of his teachings since then till the present period.

**Keywords:** poets, society, rishi, reformation, ascetics, Kashmir.

Poets have always played an important role in any society. They inspire the people, kindle their minds and make way for great changes in the world. P. B. Shelley, in his treatise *A Defence of Poetry* has mentioned that, “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” (90) Societies have witnessed moral degradation and ethical slump over the ages and how at every such juncture some great personalities took birth and worked for the upliftment of society. Among these reformists, there have been many poets who wrote against the prevalent evils and preached for social upliftment and moral rectification. Even some movements emerged in the past like the Bhakti Movement of India, which produced devotional luminaries like Guru Nanak, Kabir, Meera Bai, Baba Bulleh Shah, Namdev etc. whose aim was to ameliorate the spiritual illness of the people.

Rishi Poetics stands as a testimony to the enduring power of art to inspire, uplift, and transform. Through their sublime beauty and profound wisdom, the Rishi thought serves as beacons of light in times of darkness, guiding humanity towards a brighter future. In the tradition of Rishi Poetics, the poet assumes the role of a visionary, prophet, and moral guide. Through their verses, they not only reflect upon the current state of society but also envision a future imbued with righteousness and enlightenment. By weaving together the threads of myth, history, and personal insight, these poets inspire readers to transcend their limitations and embrace a higher purpose.

The valley of Kashmir offered its fertile soil for the Rishi Movement to flourish in the medieval era which focussed on the betterment of the individual and the society. Rishis were a group of mystics living in Kashmir during the medieval era who led ascetic lives and subsisted on frugal sustenance. They devoted their lives for the worship of their Lord and selfless service to humankind. The Rishi thought focussed on complete devotion to God, living an ascetic and solitary life remote from the common habitation, performing meditative practices based on self-mortification, service to mankind and subdue all the negative impulses like hatred, lust, jealousy, greed and so on. While Rishi Poetics may seem esoteric at first glance, they carry a potent message of social reformation. Embedded within their verses are subtle critiques of societal norms and injustices, urging readers to introspect and strive for a more harmonious world. Whether addressing issues of caste discrimination, gender inequality or environmental degradation, these poems serve as calls to action, challenging individuals to embody the virtues of compassion, justice, and empathy. At the heart of Rishi Poetics lies a deep reverence for nature, humanity, and the cosmic order. Drawing inspiration from the contemplative wisdom of the sages (Rishis), these poems

transcend the boundaries of time and space, offering profound reflections on the interconnectedness of all existence. Through intricate metaphors and allegories, Rishi Poetics unravel the mysteries of life, inviting readers to explore the depths of their own consciousness. The Rishis played an active part in social transformation and societal refinement of Kashmir. According to the famous historian, Abul Fazl:

The most respectable class in this country is that of the (Rishis) who, notwithstanding their need of freedom from the bonds of tradition and custom, are the true worshippers of God. They do not loose the tongue of calumny against those not of their faith, nor beg nor importune. They employ themselves in planting trees, and are generally a source of benefit to the people. (354)

Even among the non-Muslim scholars, Rishis were considered the religious personalities highly respected by the people. It was believed that they were divinely inspired ones and their words were taken as inviolable. “According to orthodox Hindu belief, the Rishis are inspired personages to whom these hymns were revealed, and such an expression as ‘the Rishi says’ is equivalent to ‘so it stands in the sacred text.’” (qtd. in Khan 36)

Sheikh Nooruddin also known as Sheikh ul Alam was the main proponent of Rishi tradition. He propagated his rishi thought through his poetic compositions popularly known as Shruks. His poetry has become part of standard Indian Literature and has penetrated into the popular collective psyche. People have memorized his verses as aphorisms and refer to them in their daily dealings. He began his spiritual journey by initially meditating in caves, remembering of Almighty God, offering prayers and doing ascetic practices. Subsequently he left the secluded life and embarked on an extensive tour of the valley of Kashmir along with some followers, living for long periods at different places and propagating his message of purity, piety, fear of Almighty Allah and love for humanity. Sheikh Nooruddin was a leading figure in spreading Islamic values in Kashmir that culminated in the process of Islamization of Kashmir in the truly religious sense.

Historians say that Islam came to Kashmir long before Sheikh Nooruddin started his missionary work, but it was essentially through his poetry, articulated in a local language, that a vibrant and creative interaction started between the great tradition of Islam, as represented by the Sufis and Ulama and the local peasantry. He undertook his Islamic missionary work on the principles of Qur’an and Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad. He tried

to establish an ideal Islamic culture based on love, honesty, tolerance, patience, brotherhood, moral and mutual social affairs.

Sheikh Nooruddin represented the rishi thought and used his poetry for the moral and ethical rectification of the society. This reformative movement focussed on piety, righteousness, and respect for all irrespective of caste, gender, religion and unity of all humanity. Apart from being a poet and Sufi, Sheikh Nooruddin was a prominent thinker and a reformer of high repute. His personal life enveloped in righteousness and rectitude was his main forte. He expounded the concept of social affairs and lashed at the evils present in his society. The exploitation and suffering of the weak at the hands of the rich and powerful pained him. The rich people indulged in worldly enjoyments and forgot their duties towards their society. He exposes this disparity in the following words:

One gets amused with musicians- melodious

Gleeful all in drowsiness too.

The other is struck violently with whips and batons.

Learn this self, is the discretion of Lord! (Alchemy 78)

He advises rich people to show generosity and give in alms to the poor for the sake of Almighty God. This will increase their wealth, foster an environment of peace and fraternity in this world and yield a big reward in the hereafter.

A grain single wilt thou sow to grow a set of tenfold produce.

Thus wealth and prosperity wilt not leave thee portal and portico.

Aye! Riches did thou attain – a blessing of God to be spent.

So do not delay doing good- an act haste not to go waste. (Alchemy-III 185)

He was greatly upset by the pathetic condition of the oppressed section of the society and wished that all lived in peace and tranquillity. He sketches the condition of his society in the following words:

Weighing gold and brass with some measure

When I saw I became totally shocked and dumb

When intelligent got crushed and fools enjoyed

I thought the best thing is to retreat to a forest (Afaqi 361)

The Sheikh sought to unite the Hindus and the Muslims under the banner of love and brotherhood, so that they live peacefully. As a believer of unity of humankind, he says:

Among the brothers of the same parents

Why did you create a barrier?

Muslims and Hindus are one

When will god be kind to his servants? (Gauhar 241)

He denounced all social evils and wanted to nip them in the bud. The Sheikh scorns at the Caste system and pinpoints that Adam and Eve are the originators of human race and therefore discriminating people on the basis of caste or religion is unfounded. He clearly mentions that anyone who believes in caste system is bereft of reasons and wisdom. He says:

Adam is the progenitor of the human race

From him came wife, our mother Eve

From where have the low castes descended?

How can a high born taunt the low born badly? (Afaqi 295)

One harps proudly upon one's caste,

Is bereft of reason and wisdom,

Here the good alone can claim noble descent,

In the hereafter, caste will be extinct. (Afaqi 86)

He did not spare fake Mullahs and gluttonous Brahmans who wear the mask of piety and deceive the people. He discloses their fraud and deceit in this way:

Mullahs have become merchants of mosques,

The Pandit steals the idols from the temple.

One among thousands of them may deserve salvation,

Others are all the disciples of Satan (Afaqi 321)

Speaking against immorality and debauchery, he lashes out at the perpetrators of lechery and promiscuity. In the following Shrukhs he exposes this immorality and warns against its consequences. He says:

You feel pleasure to embrace wives of others

Such ideas and thinking are embracing

It is impossible to purchase even for a huge price

Thy precious character diamond, character (Afaqi 377)

He was a champion of moral uprightness and integrity of character. His principal aim was to build a prosperous society free from all types of evils and mischief. He says:

Five are the affairs loathsome for a human heart

One if thou be in false notion of adultery

Second if thou develop fondness for liquor-the mother of evils

Third if thou rear the idea of a sin- the vice

Fourth if thou seek ill and untoward prayers for anybody

Fifth if thou nourish chimerical ways to be blissful. (Alchemy-III 347)

In the early part of his life Sheikh Nooruddin confined himself to forests and caves and believed that renunciation is the only way to reach God. At a later stage, he realised that social life and its responsibilities are equally important for a perfect human being. To strike a balance between ones social and religious duties is the key to a peaceful life. Consider the following verses:

Imperfection lead me to conifers O, Baba Nasar.

Conceiving that monastic life be the path to extol me.

See not thee a great infamy did it prove.

Uprightly, His track routes through human habitation. (Alchemy-I 327)

The Sheikh advocated for hard work and diligence. If one does not face all the trial and tribulations in life, one cannot taste the essence of life. A society can develop only when its members are hardworking and persistent in all situations.

Tie not if one his waist, shalt be with no work done.

Not in love one shalt be, if fragrant he is not.

Taste not if the bitter poison, truth can't be attained.

Goal shalt not be forward, if motto not desired, (Alchemy-I 216)

Sheikh Nooruddin, as true Rishi, encouraged goodness and condemned all types of evil. He urges all to uphold truth, keep control on baser instincts, discipline ones wishes, and desist from the unethical. In his words; this needs firm resolution but it will pay in the end:

Let not eat beyond thy appetite and expedience.

Over eating wilt disturb thy ingestion and digestion.

Carnality wilt make thee a quadruped wild.

Thus credibility of eminent beings wilt thou lose! (Alchemy-II 25)



Sheikh Nooruddin also spoke in favour of equal rights for women. He said that since women and men were created by the same God therefore, they deserved equal treatment. For the continuity of life on this planet, both sexes play their part:

Adam be the sole father of humanity as a whole.

Eve be the mother great an offshoot of Adam.

Thus differentiated art neither the gipsies nor the curriers

Thou cannot insult a picture of thy shape and existence. (Alchemy-II 346)

To sum up, it is crystal clear now that the Rishi thought advocated by Sheikh Nooruddin laid emphasis on societal refinement and individual rectitude. In an era marked by rapid technological advancement and social upheaval, the wisdom of Rishi Poetics shines ever brighter. As humanity grapples with pressing issues such as climate change, political unrest, and cultural fragmentation, these timeless poems offer solace, guidance, and hope. By reconnecting with the natural world and nurturing a sense of inner harmony, individuals can draw strength from the teachings of the Rishis and work towards a more just and sustainable society. Sheikh Nooruddin preached the message of philanthropy, non-violence, truth, self-sacrifice, virtue, self-purification, self-discipline, uprightness, hard work, unity, and a concern for the poor, the indigent and the women folk. Therefore, it is clear that the Rishi poetics manifested in the poetry of Sheikh Nooruddin Wali has greatly aided in the societal refinement of Kashmir over the ages.

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