



Ubiquity of Lyrical vein in the poetry of Habba Khatoon and Sarojini Naidu

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Abstract

This research aims to evaluate the presence of Lyrical vein in the poetry of Habba Khatoon and Sarojini Naidu. Habba Khatoon is the 16th century Kashmiri poet and Sarojini Naidu, the 20th century poet from Hyderabad, India. Khatoon is considered as the "Nightingale of Kashmir" and Sarojini Naidu is crowned with the sobriquet "Nightingale of India". The centre of attention in this research is the comparative study of their poetry and how both the poets, though belonging to different period of time, places, religion and milieus depicts the same conventions in terms of Lyricism. The elements studied in this stream are characters, situations, places, language, metaphors and similes in their poems. The researcher used the qualitative research and essentials of Orality and Lyricism to analyse the poems carefully. The poems are mostly folk songs and are sung even today and therefore has been additive since ages. The oral literature has been the main agent in the legacy of their songs. The songs carry the musical quality and have also been the focal point in this research. The conclusion of this research exhibits that the poetry of both poets is flooded with the elements of Lyricism. Both the poets are subjective in writing. They have used the situations, places and characters usually from the common life. The use of metaphors and similes by the poets witnesses the artistic taste of the Medieval and Modern poetry. The study exhibits the similarities witnessed through their evaluation.

Keywords

Imagery, lyricism, melody, orality, refrain.

Habba Khatoon, a 16th Century Kashmiri poet, known as the “*The Nightingale of Kashmir*” is considered as the most melodious and lyrical poet in Kashmiri literature. The profound grief that shocked her was the separation from beloved and the lyric she composed on that occasion shows further maturity and cataclysmic understanding of the ephemeral life. During the time of Habba Khatoon, poetry in Kashmiri and Persian was predominantly metaphysical and spiritual in nature that abhorred the materialistic world and dealt with the philosophical notions of existence after demise, life before birth, and the temperament of divinity; being of the living human being had no significance for them. Khatoon’s poetry is a visible departure from this well established trend and acknowledges feelings, sensations, colours, sounds, and sights. S.L. Sadhu wrote about this aspect of Habba Khatoon:

We are nevertheless impressed with her familiarity with wild nature: jasmine, basil, musk-rose, dandelion, menthe, cress, water-chestnut, almonds, pomegranates, mulberry, parrots, larks, bulbuls, freshet, stream, etc. Perhaps it is in harmony with feminine nature that she does not involve gigantic deodars, mighty lions, crafty owls or other gross or coarse objects in finding an utterance for her emotional reaction. When Shakantula departed from the hermitage of Kanva, she took leave of her companions which included her friends, fawns, parrots, and flowery shrubs. Habba Khatoon’s lyrics seem to convey a similar impression of all life being one, and man, plant, and animal being members of the same family. (49)

The poetry of Khatoon is full of images, similes and metaphors from the natural world. She has made ample use of flowers like jasmine, wild yellow rose, dandelion etc which shows the feminine nature. Flowers are usually beautiful and fragile and can be attributed to female folk. Khatoon has abstained to include other creatures from nature, which usually reflect the dominating and powerful nature, for instance, animals. Her verses reveal certain illustrations where she is treating everything an important part of life.

The corporeal world consisting of feeling and thinking of humans, surrounded by objects of natural world in their very physical form and having an integral connection with the human world is seen in its full form. She might use them as metaphors to present a spiritual state, but the things do not lose their significance. Her poetry draws upon variegated aspects of nature. Her life was full of extraordinary events and great misfortunes. She was an ordinary country damsel married in her early age to a cruel husband and then fate decided for her something else: to be a companion of the romantic king, Yousuf Chak. Her good fortune lasted only for some years, as Yousuf Chak was defeated in war, taken as prisoner and exiled to Bihar. She is lacerated by the sting of separation and has renounced the world, and wanders aimlessly in woods and dales. The persona of Khatoon’s poetry is a contrast to the surrounding environs that are full of spring vitality, freshness and new beginnings, the pleasure mongering lovers are in wild abandon; she alone on the contrary, is woebegone, decaying bit by bit, swinging and swaying in her feebleness and about to get finally annihilated.

Sarojini Naidu, a 20th century poet, known as “the Nightingale of India” is a well-read poet who consciously chose her artistic way and experimented with a clear notion

about the subject matter and modus operandi. But she too, like Khatoon, used a pastoral backdrop for all her poems. In classical and neo-classical poetry, Arcadian situations like mountains, valleys, pastures, streams, wild flowers, are dealt with and the organic relationship between humans and the nature were applied. Throughout her poems, one comes across yearning and dream, action and suffering, joy and song. Naidu's poetry echoes an exquisite melody and graceful sentiments. She chants about myths, celebrations and customs of India. She is chiefly 'a Singer of Songs' and 'a Song Bird', and Mahatma Gandhi called her 'Bharat Kokila'. Naravane is right, when he points out:

However, the strongest feature of Sarojini's poetry is her vivid imagery. Her most memorable lines are those in which she has presented beautiful and graphic pictures by fusing together several visual impressions. It should be stressed, once again, that these images can be appreciated only by those, who have retained their sensitivity to the subtle stimuli which come from the Indian environment... (139)

Naravane comments upon the characteristic aspect of Naidu's poetry, which is the flamboyant imagery. The poems of Naidu take one into the spheres of inner ecstasy and spiritual elation and many other quivers with the passion of love. The idea of nature, love, life and death project a universe of joy and hope. Kumari quotes Mr. Mathur, who says, Sarojini is a "Supreme singer of beautiful songs, songs bathed in melody and thought" (1). Sarojini has not only the melodious voice but the great ideas, blended in harmony, and attributing her with the most musical bird of India, called as Koel.

The word lyric is derived from the Greek word *lyricos*, which means singing to the lyre. This etymological root of the word in itself suggests that a lyric is essentially subservient to external music. It is therefore fundamentally a song which is meant to be sung orally in supplement of some music. Walter Ong (1988) has elucidated how Orality functions on the collective memory and assists to preserve the basis of a culture. He summarizes that it helps to add new expressions to the old piece of literature, devoid of any form and creates a structured one which could be easily retained. He talks about how Orality helps to evaluate the song in its totality and produces the same effect as intended by the poet. The ample use of words from the customs or rites and human life helps to connect more with the lyrics and people find it easy to remember. It further states that Orality is free from the severe boundaries of religion and traverses rules and regulations and Lyrical poetry should overpower this and touch all spheres of life. It emphasized that Orality provides an internal consistency to the poetry. The poems of Khatoon have been passed from 16th century to 21st century through oral medium and her verses exhibits all the qualities mentioned by the Ong. The poetry of Khatoon relates to the agrarian activities and since ages has been sung and memorized by old and young in the Kashmir. The form of her poetry hasn't been questioned and can be evaluated in a form of Lyric poetry. Though Naidu is the 20th century poet and her verses were aptly recorded as in the form she has written. But her lyrics carry all the characteristics defined by Ong. He states, to imagine Literature without Oral Literature is same as assuming automobiles without wheels.

Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1801) is the manifesto for Romanticism. The following passage from this epoch making essay sums up some of the

fundamentals of lyricism. Wordsworth writes, — “The principal object, then, proposed in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men” (7). Wordsworth’s famous critical notion that “poetry is —spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (46) is analysed thoroughly in the verses of Khatoon and Naidu.

Khatoon is a poet of lyrical sensibility. The harmony of expressions and thought augments the melody and lent charm and grace to her poems. Her poetry exhibits the ordinary folks engaged in their common life activities. The common people of rural areas are the real subjects of their poetry because they live in closer proximity with nature and are humble and simple. She communicated her thoughts in an appealing manner and acquired an exceptional and distinguishing style called as *Lol*, which is apparent to Lyrical Songs. In one of her poems, the display of pastoral verve is reflected thoroughly.

While sauntering in the garden I made nosegays of ivy,
I visited the market place after six months,
There I perchance met my dear father,

.....
My darling child, you better go in-laws home,
Your life you have to spend there,

Nothing you are to gain from your parent’s home. (BKP 45)

The poem paints the imagery of garden, market, parental and the in-laws home thoroughly and display the places, which are ordinary. She talks about flowers, her father and in-laws, and is an illustration that her poetry is flooded with the stock characters. The poem talks about the miseries of a daughter-in-law in her in-laws home and how due to the pressure of society, her father is unable to give her permission to stay with her. Her verses flaunt the tenderness of a common person, who becomes a victim to social situations.

Sarojini was popular in the English literary circle owing to her innate talent as a poet. She is in reality extremely gifted with the temperament and nature of an artist. Except for Keats there are very few poets who had such an overpowering passion for poetry as she. It is poetry that charged her every moment, to which she directed her best efforts in and which she burned. This keen poetic sensibility did not desert her even after joining politics. It reproduces itself through her conversations, letters and particularly speeches. She believed in "a poet's craving for beauty, the eternal beauty" (9), quotes Padmini Sengupta in *Sarojini Naidu: A Biography*. Edmund Gosse was the most powerful literary influence on Sarojini Naidu in England. He gave a direction to her poetic genius and helped her to emerge as a great Indian English poet. She discarded writing about "robins and skylarks" and began to write about Indian fruits, flowers, trees and birds. Her writings thereafter tended to be typically Indian in the choice of subject matter and sentiments. Her poem “In the Bazaars of Hyderabad” reflects the humdrum of city life in India:

What do you weigh, O ye vendors?
Saffron and lentil and rice.
What do you grind, O ye maidens?
Sandalwood, henna and spice. (TSF 106)

The poem talks about the marketplace or bazaars of Hyderabad, where she is experiencing the vendors, who are busy weighing the groceries. She is noticing the unmarried girls, who are on different shops, engaged in buying the decor items like henna and sandalwood and spices for cooking. In the market she hears the cries of pedlars, sellers or the common- folks who are involved in their daily activities. Naidu has aptly displayed the stock characters and stock situations as the matter of her rhythmical poetry.

The lyrical outpouring of Khatoon under the sway of phonic music of language and the established structures of Islamic mysticism is sorrow on the transience of life, and simultaneously celebration of freedom in the afterlife. The lingo of Khatoon is simple yet sweet. The songs are flooded in music and one could memorize them easily. She didn't hesitate while expressing her anguish of separation from the lover. She is a rebirth of Echo, a nymph of Greek legend who wasted away in her love for heedless Narcissus; only her voice had survived forever. This Echo like voice of Khatoon is heard in all her songs, and she has actually become an incarnation of Echo for Kashmiri speaking people; her melancholic and nostalgic calls are the most loved legacy for over the centuries. Khatoon, places her persona in a pantheistic sort of ambience, where forms and events in natural world evoke corresponding movements and music in the inner world of a wakeful soul. Since poet uses the language of the social reality, it is bound to create melancholy. In one of her poems, she says:

O my love of incomparable grace,
See, I've dyed my hands. Come and still
The craving of one dying for you,
For how can I pass these barren days
With you so far away? (Raina 47)

Khatoon exhibits the pangs of unrequited love, where she is beautifying herself and staining her hands with henna. She is waiting for the beloved who has gone away and both haven't met for a long time. The anguish inside her is taking her happiness away and she feels world around her bereft of any joy. She experiences everything unproductive in the absence of beloved.

"In Praise of Henna" recalls a typical Indian scene. Henna is a plant the powder of whose dried leaves made into a paste is applied by maidens and young women, particularly on auspicious occasions, to their palms and feet to colour them red. When the rains come, a call goes to the girls to come out and 'collect the leaves of henna, and sing song in its praise.

The tilka's red for the brow of a bride,
And betel- nut's red for lips that are sweet;
But, for lily- like fingers and feet,
The red, the red of henna-tree. (TSF 13)

The song displays how the brow of a bride shines with the stain of tilka and how her lips glow with the hue of a betel-nut. She displays the sweet combination of a newly wedded bride who is grooming herself to look beautiful. Her hands and feet are immersed in the paint of henna and exhibit a typical character and features of Indian society.

The songs of Naidu contain sweetness and spontaneity like some bird's song. Her songs possess the same naturalness, the same light-hearted case, and perhaps, the same

expanding movement as possessed by the melodies of bird's song. *The London Times* stated that Mr. Arthur Symons had made the acquaintance of this Hindu lady some years earlier, and quoted his introductory passages, commenting on her wisdom, passion and humour. He remarked on the release of *The Golden Threshold*: ". . . Her poetry seems to sing itself, as if her swift thoughts and strong emotions sprang into lyrics of themselves" (58), quotes Padmini Sengupta. Every phrase and word becomes a song in itself. It is this ease and naturalness that lends the real charm to her poetry. The fact that she does not write any blank verse in the manner of modern poets also suggests that her genius is essentially lyrical.

Naidu has composed a variety of stanza forms and metrical measures and successfully practised - iambic, trochaic, anapaestic, dactyl, or their permissible combinations. In "Cradle Song" Naidu uses iambic measure for melodious effect:

Sweet, shut your eyes,

The wild fire-flies
Dance through the fairy neem;
From the poppy-bole
For you i stole
A little lovely dream. (TSF 17)

The poem can be seen flooded in rhyme and produces a song like quality. The word, eyes rhyme with flies, neem rhymes with dream and bole with stole. Here, the mother in the poem builds up different images for her child in order to put him asleep. The words used and arranged are creating a lullaby effect, inducing a relieving effect on the psyche. The poetry of Naidu reveals the intensity of words, energetic emotions, sweet music, and colourful descriptions through which her listeners enjoys liveliness and strength.

"The Palanquin Bearers" with its romantic setting and imagery, successfully recreates the scene of careful and tender swaying and heaving of palanquin bearers as they carry a beautiful maiden sitting in their palanquin. The palanquin is veiled and its bearers sing songs in rhythmic harmony with their footsteps to assuage the tiredness of their burden. The love-laden heart of the lady sitting behind the veil finds true expression of its beats in the song and springy movement of the palanquin bearers. The melody of their song pervades the atmosphere. The poem is not recognized only for its meter and assonance but for the prominent comparisons too. The poet says:

She skims like a bird on the foam of a stream.
She floats like a laugh from the lips of a dream.
Gaily, O gaily we glide and we sing.
We bear her along like a pearl on a string. (TSF 3)

The poem is rich in kinaesthetic images expressed through words conveying 'felt motion' - "sway", "skim", "float", "glide", "hang", "spring", and "fall". The poem has a rhythm of comparative swift movement corresponding with the swaying movement of the palanquin. The augment and plunge of palanquin, expressed through the stressed and the unstressed sounds synchronizes with the rise and fall of the footsteps of the palki - bearers. There is a complete rapport between the tone of the palanquin bearer's song and the heart-beats of the lady inside. Commenting on the use of metrical rhythms in Naidu's verses for musical effects, Prof. Rameshwar Gupta aptly remarks:

It is enough to show that if Sarojini had genius, it was a genius for verbal rhythm. The very tissues, nerves and muscles of her body would sometimes go into motion to get the rhythm that rested in her being, and then it would manifest itself in some melodious articulation. English poets who show such variety of rhythmic patterns and tunes are not many. That is Sarojini's contribution to English poetry. (125)

Gupta talking about the brilliance and intellect of Naidu exhibits that the rhythm in her poetry seems natural and genuine. The music in her verses seems a harmonic combination of all the tunes in her mind, body and soul. He compares her with the best English poets who have excelled in the lyrical poetry and emphasizes that this endowment does not come to many.

All the emotions expressed spontaneously seem personal emotions of the poet, but most often it is the tradition of free use of musical language that determines the emotions. James and Das, exhibiting the significance of expression of human message in *Studies in Comparative Literature* writes: "A literary text speaks more or less directly of living reality. Its power is felt not because, it is in Hindi or French or English, its power lies in its encounter with life and in the dynamic vitality of words in which it is embedded" (50). It emphasizes that piece of work written in any language does not carry weight, but the choice of words from the daily life in it makes a difference.

As an eloquent speaker, she was dear to millions of her people who fondly called her their *Nightingale*. The magic and music of her words always thrilled them. Words danced out of her lips in perfect rhythm, and sentences after sentences she would pour out without pause or hesitation, investing the theme she would speak on with sanctity and nobility breathing intense patriotism. Naidu's poetic sensibility unveils profound passion for delight in beauty and came very close to Keats. She confessed to Edmund Gosse in a long letter written in 1896: "I do not dare to trust myself to thank you for what you said on Sunday. You cannot know what these words meant to me. . . . Poetry is the one thing I love so passionately, so intensely, so absolutely that it is my very life of life - and now you have told me that I am a poet - I am a poet. I keep repeating it to myself to try to realise it" (27), quoted by A. N. Dwivedi.

Naidu's decision to publish her poetry was entirely depend on Edmund Gosse who influenced her thoroughly. She could not believe that her talent of writing has been appreciated by him. She used to send her poems to him for his approval. This letter is a mark of elation that from Gosse, she received the positive remarks.

Arthur Symons was the second important literary figure who influenced her. In his Preface to the first collection of Naidu, *The Golden Threshold*, he remarks:

In the East, maturity comes early; and the child had already lived through all a woman's life. But there was something hardly personal, something which belonged to a consciousness older than the Christian, which I realized, wondered at, and admired, in her passionate tranquillity of mind, before which everything mean and trivial and temporary caught fire and burnt away in smoke. (16)

After Gosse, it is analysed that Symons had influenced her. Symons was enthralled by her beauty, her innate talent of talking in a low voice like some sweet music. He was amazed

about her talent of writing in verses with technicality. He was carried away with her charisma of being a wise old lady by solving the troubles of others. He felt that she carry the genes of ancestors who have been scholars and practised yoga.

Lyrical imagination sets the references to objects free to play without subservience to any accepted logic. Kant in *Critique of Judgment* calls this type of play, “a free, harmonious play of our cognitive powers of imagination and understanding” (62). Khatoon, belonging to a remote and impenetrable past, is a representative of her time and the drama enfolded in her verses is universal and time-less. Naidu, belonging to the recent past, her life well documented, also places the yearning soul and its ephemeral feelings in the things of nature that she envisions as the replication of her spiritual drama. The rustic and pastoral setting is in a way essential for expressing purity and wholesomeness of belief and the primeval unity between the finite self and the infinite manifest all around. She depended on pastoral setting to find local name and habitation for airy nothing: past experience, the felt feelings, the euphoria and, longings for reunion in future. This contrast among the two poets belonging to different ages and milieus can be extended to the analysis many of their other poems. A song of Khatoon, “Come back, my Lover of Flowers!” is an example in which rustic and rural landscape is the trigger to her imagination and emotions. She reminisces:

You stole my heart and stole away.

Come back, my lover of flowers!

This song, (basically meant for singing) displays its refrain “come back, my lover of flowers” and word repetitions, presents to our imagination the rustic environs of the medieval past in which there used to be no hard and fast partition amid the yearning soul and the altering experiences of the nature around. People generally free from material cares, in their wild abandon partook in the creative processes of nature and had an organic communion with the elements. They witnessed their subjective feelings externalized in the fast changing hues and contours of nature. The forlorn and woeful young woman in the song shares her anguish with her childhood friends while remaining busy in the usual chores in a rural atmosphere, she says:

Let’s go gather jasmine, friend.

O, I ache to see you flower first

Before I reach the mortal gate.

Come back, my lover of flowers! (Raina 61)

Metaphors and Similes are significant figures of speech and are the medium through which poets articulate their thoughts. Khatoon has aptly used the figures of speech throughout her verses and captures reader’s attention and provides grandeur to her expressions. An excerpt from a song of Khatoon reflects the metaphor where the beloved is termed as callous or cruel woodsman, who is tearing Habba into pieces. She has linked herself first with the blessed greenwood pine, which has been later chopped down by the barbarous woodsman. In the poem, she says:

I was a happy greenwood pine.

Till this callous woodsman chopped me down.

And burnt each piece to ashes!

He makes me languish night and day. (Raina 57)

Sarojini Naidu expressed herself as a bird, which is a free and wild creature in the air and carries a song in her heart. This self-portrait unveils her vital prosaic disposition and lyrical gift. She exploited full resources of the English language, and when it suited her purpose she did not hesitate to introduce her lyrics words from the local lingo like “Ya Allah”, “Govinda, Govinda” etc. In the poem, "Wandering Beggars", Sarojini with remarkable ingenuity weaves the refrain, "Y' Allah! Y'Allah"! usually chanted by Muslims in their prayers. She took these words from the society of which she was a part.

Time is like a wind that blows.
The future is a folded rose.
Who shall pluck it no man knows.
Y' Allah! Y' Allah. (TSF 165)

She used vernacular words effectively and provided a charisma in the expression of her thoughts and captured subtly her native passion. Vernacular words lend rhyming to her poems. The poem, “The Call to Evening Prayer” portrays efficiently the poignant ambience of the twilight. The muezzin’s adhan or call to prayer, “Allah ho Akbar”, “Allah ho Akbar” in stanza first confines the spirit of Islam. In the poem, "The Imam Bara", describing the famous monument, Imam Bara of Lucknow, which is a chapel of lamentation where Muslims of the Shia community celebrate the tragic martyrdom of Ali, Hassan and Hussain during the month of Muharram. Naidu gives a vivid account of the passion- play that takes place to the accompaniment of the refrain, "Ali! Hassan! Husain!"

Hark, from the brooding silence
Breaks the wild cry of pain
Wrung from the heart of the ages
Ali! Hassan! Husain! (TSF 152)

The poet appreciates the mourners' underlying love for the martyrs; and on leaving the Imam Bara, she prays:

So may the hope of new ages
Comfort the mystic pain
That cries from the ancient silence
Ali! Hassan! Hussain! (TSF 152-153)

Khatoon and Naidu introduce a speaking subject, but the lyrical constraints of their poetry make them feel the unreality of that subject, and instead produce dramatic pictures in the outside nature. Since they lived and wrote in the rural environment, much before the expansion of industrialization, their poetry bears many elements from the pastoral poetry. Their poetry cannot be called pastoral in the technical sense, but pastoral imagery adds beauty to their lyrics. In their poetry, one could find a superb lyric with its rhythmic movement, lucidity of diction and spontaneity of expression. Their thinking may not be methodical but there are lofty ideas. They are poets, being of emotions and their emotions direct them to majesty of thoughts. The reality that they did not write any dramatic, epic or narrative poetry or any blank verse shows, that they are only lyricist and singers. Their technical skill, ability to choose right words, rich diction and love for phrases, mastery of melody, emotional intensity and warmth of passion, commend of language and above all the rich imagination obviously makes us conclude that they had

genuine poetic talent. The oppositeness of emotions and descriptions and wonderful organization of the rhymes have framed their songs lovely and memorable.

Therefore, the two poets engage in all possibilities of playing with the stock characters, stock situations and leitmotifs of lyricism to give expression to the never dying desire for freedom from the world governed by male-oriented mores and ethos. The freedom is envisioned as a total oedipal return to absolute oblivion or annihilation into the elemental forces through all effacing death. It is only imagination that helps the two poets achieve this type of visions of freedom.

The two poets under study followed the rules of the lyrical tradition in their respective languages and produced visions of freedom from the rigours of worldly life. Oblivion through euphoria and annihilation into elemental forces of nature are the only possibility of imagining the moments of freedom.

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