

Approach to Literature in the Context of Western and Indian Literature

Dr. Purnima Bhatnagar

Associate Professor, English Department, Government College, Doshapani, District-Nainital (Uttarakhand), India.

Abstract: Indian culture is very rich, unique and so is her literature. The greatness of Indian literature and philosophy lie in the fact that they always explore the realm of spirituality that gives the fundamental and intrinsic truth of the creation. On the other hand, west concentrates on the external side of the creation and that is the material aspect of it. The spiritual tradition in literature has been carried on in the medieval period like Tulsi, Meera, Kabir, etc., and by some renaissance poets like Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo. Many recent poets follow in the footsteps of these poets and keep alive this glorious tradition. Modern Indian colonial mind-set admits the supremacy of the West without realizing India's glorious past. The present paper is an attempt to highlight the grandeur and sublimity of Indian poetry and the spiritual wealth it has.

Key Words: Spirituality, Evolution, Matter, Questioning, The Vedas and Upnishadas.

Ever since man has opened his eyes in his awakened consciousness, he has tried hard to know the fundamental truth of existence. Consequently the real journey of his evolution has started because the animal part of his being might be satisfied with half-digested bits of truth but his higher self always pushed him to know the ultimate truth of existence. Sri Aurobindo explains this deep-seated longing of human being in the opening chapter of his much renowned philosophical book *Life Divine*.

For all problems of existence are essentially problem of harmony. They arise from the perception of an unsolved discord and the instinct of an undiscovered agreement or unity. To rest content with an unsolved discord is possible for the practical and more animal part of man, but possible for his fully awakened mind, and usually even his practical parts only escape from the general necessity either by shutting out the problem or by accepting a rough, utilitarian and unilluminated compromise. (1)

As a result of his curiosity and inquiry, man realized two poles of existence-matter and spirit. These two are the very basic issues on which the entire bulk of philosophy rests in the dualistic existence. The major difference between the two is that matter can be studied, experimented and experienced because it is concrete and observable by the senses. On the other hand the spirit is hidden, abstract and difficult to be proved yet its existence cannot be denied and everyone acknowledges it. Often philosophers debate which one is real-matter or spirit? Human being is a combination of physical material body and *prana* or vital force. Physical body is palpable and within the range of experience but it is activated by the *pranic force*- the spirit. The body becomes dead when *prana* withdraws or leaves it. Similarly the dynamics of creation rests on the workings of matter and spirit. Matter is physical and spirit is the hidden force that activates the physical.

East and West have the two opposite approaches of thought. West always focuses on the matter-visible to the physical and mental senses and draws conclusion on the basis of it. On the other hand East and India in particular, tries to delve deep down and goes beyond the seen. A spirit of inquiry and questioning is at the core of Indian philosophy and unlike others it is not grounded on faith or belief as is seen in Christianity and Islam. This is the fundamental difference between the two. In India, the whole range of ancient texts like the Vedas, Upnishadas focus primarily on this invisible and abstract truth-the spirit. The Vedas and the Upanishads which are both poetical and highly philosophical, were composed when the whole of the world was submerged in the sleep of ignorance and the most renowned ancient cultures of the world had not yet come into existence. The ancient text puts the question-what is true knowledge? The answer is given-knowing which everything is known is true knowledge. This leads to the domain of spirituality because this is the spirit which is behind the veil of existence, the very key to open the secrets of nature and solves the mystery of creation.

* Corresponding Author: purnimabhatanagar59@gmail.com • 9412126770

When it comes to literature, Indian literature is highly spiritual. There has been an old story running in Indian mythology that the life of a monster was in a parrot. The parrot was in a cage in some remote mountain cave. To kill the monster, it was mandatory to kill the parrot. Going by this mythological story, spirituality is the very life breath of India. The creation of the Vedas and Upanishadas is a testimony of it. It has a vision, a revelation and always appeals to our inner being.

Spiritual literature tends to be mystical at some point. Often mysticism is taken as synonym for religion. On the part of general humanity, religion is an attempt to define the secrets of Nature. Belief in the unseen is a universal characteristic of religion. But in the long run, all religions become dogmatic and ritualistic and lose sight of the inner significance of Nature. The religious belief essentially involves commitment and obligation, and may appear mere ritual to the unenlightened eyes. Mystical consciousness is higher than the religious one, and often religious devotion and mystical contemplation go together.

Mysticism, seen rightly, is not something opposed or alien to religion. It stands at the very root of religious experience. The mystic, not content with the bare externals of religion, seeks a direct experience of God or the Ultimate Reality. He aims to bring himself into an intimate relationship with the Divine. This attitude- the insistence on direct experience- establishes his kinship with the founders of various faiths who owed their power and originality to the fact of their personal communion with the divine. (Dhar 1)

Besides Sanskrit literature, Hindi literature has also made its own significant contribution in this regard. In the fourteenth century a school of saintly poets belonging to the devotional cult emerged. The poets of the medieval devotional school such as Mira, Surdas, Tulsidas and Kabir are such mystics. Often devotion or love for God marks the growth of consciousness in man. Through the consummation of love and extreme egoless devotion for God one discovers a method of self-realization. It is the deep-seated desire and tendency of the soul towards its source that manifests itself in this movement. The impact of Sufism, an Islamic philosophical counterpart of this devotional movement, also exerted its influence upon it. The ancient poets open an inner sight in us and this inner sight must have been intense in them before they can awaken it in us. This characteristic is the hallmark, the secret of the greatness of every great poet. Sri Aurobindo says in *The Future Poetry*:

Therefore the greatest poets have been always those who have had a large and powerful interpretative and intuitive vision of nature and life and man and whose poetry has arisen out of that in a supreme revelatory utterance of it. Homer, Shakespeare, Dante, Valmiki, Kalidasa, however much they may differ in everything else, are at one in having this as the fundamental character of their greatness. (29)

A question is often raised as how far the poetic medium can be relied to deeply communicate the mystical and philosophical thought. Dr. Johnson thinks that poetic art is a product of conscious craftsmanship. Eliot considers the value of poetry in terms of the general 'awareness' expected of the poet. Hume is concerned about the image of the 'natural man'. At any rate, the philosophical and mystical verse has its place in the scheme of poetry so long as it is not divorced from human interest. The ultimate value of poetry, of whatever kind it be, depends on its abiding value to man, though shifts in taste may temporarily obscure its worth. It is no exaggeration to say that for poetry the contemplation on nature or the ultimate reality is the all time favourite theme.

Some poets in the west like William Wordsworth, William Blake, W.B. Yeats, Shelley, etc., come very close to the spiritual vision but this is momentary and they cannot sustain it for long. The simple reason is that they come out of the materialistic background. Occasionally they got fed up with excessive dose of materialistic attachment with the worldly desires and made excursions into the enchanted world of mystic reality. Their poetry presents glimpses of it but it does not go far.

In the period of renaissance of the twentieth century India, under the influence of British, a new English knowing generation started writing poems in English. Many of them adopted the medium of English but their literature echoes the very psyche of India- the spiritual urge in which the person wants to cut the Gordian knot of the mystery of the creation. Thus the school of Indo-English poets came into existence in the British India. Though English was their medium, the theme and ideas are embedded in Indian philosophy. That period was the period of spiritual crisis in human history. This crisis had led to the one-sided growth of this modern, rational and scientific civilization. These poets revolted against the growing materialism and the cultural crisis and once again voiced the peculiar Indian spiritual temperament. Among these are the two stalwarts, Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo.

Tagore's Gitanjali incorporates all the shades of Indian philosophy-the yoga of bhakti, karam and knowledge. Rabindranath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu, Nissim Ezekiel, Mohan Singh, Toru Dutt evince typical Indian philosophical

temper of inquiry and questioning the secrets of Nature. Aurobindo Ghosh's position is unique in this regard. Savitri his magnum opus is supposed to be the fifth Veda. One of Sri Aurobindo's main concerns in all his major works is the exploration of Nature in its cosmic, transcendental and individual aspects. He distinguishes the two modes of evolution. Sri Aurobindo had a group of followers who were all well versed in the art of poetry. The Aurobindonian school of poets which includes such major figures as C.D. Deshmukh, K.R. Kulkarni, M.V. Narayana Rao, K.D. Sethna, Nirodbaran, Punjalal, Anilbaran Roy and Nolinikanta Gupta is a group committed to a conscious exploration of the possibilities of writing mystical poetry. In poem after poem, these poets assert their firm faith in the transformation and regeneration of the entire human race in the divine race, the race of the gnostic beings, and the advent of much-awaited Supermind consciousness. They expound Sri Aurobindo's vision to transcend the inferior nature of ignorance and to ascend into the beatific realm of higher one. The sheer number of Aurobindonian poets is astounding and poetry is their natural and spontaneous voice of soul.

The Indo-English poetry faithfully reflects the different phases of Indian Renaissance. In this age of fierce patriotism, in the period of the revival of ancient Indian Vedantic and Upanishadic learning, the focus of the poetry is once again upon Nature in its various dimensions and more particularly, human nature. In the background of two world wars, they think that the change of human consciousness is impertinent. The Indo-English poetry is a fine amalgam of the multi shades of Indian philosophy, such as mysticism, metaphysics and spiritualism. V.K. Gokak very aptly comments about this school in his book, *The Golden Treasury of Indo-Anglian Poetry*:

What is the vision of the Indo-Anglian poet? We shall be able to understand it if we examine his creative perceptions with regard to the major themes of poetry—Nature, Love, Man and the Heritage of Man consisting of myth, legend, history and the fine arts. We have, balancing these, another world of themes—metaphysical longing, devotion, mystical contemplation and spiritual illumination. Reflective and introspective poetry act as a bridge between these two worlds. Needless to say, some of the most significant poetry that Indo-Anglians have produced deals with the second set of themes. But it is the chief glory of the Indian Renaissance that it has revolted against the one-sidedness of medieval spirituality. Indo-Anglian poetry has also several vital things to say about the destiny of man and his heritage. (31)

The age-old truth of the scriptures is—*Aham Brahmasmi* and this is the only object of man's life to achieve. *Brahman* is the infinite reality. The all-encompassing existence in itself, only when the ego dies can this be realized. Man should realize his true self, his divine self. The spiritual Indian poetry will continue to enlighten the people by revealing the truth that the ego is the main cause of ignorance. The present age is really the age of evolution and it always aims at the heightening and widening of the consciousness force. Man's evolution is bound to take him one day to that stage where it will be possible for him to dwell permanently in that level of consciousness of which his present mystic experiences give nothing more than the faintest glimmerings. What is called mystic experience comes from a source slightly higher than the normal experience. There are still higher forms of consciousness of which even man's highest mystic experiences do not give him anything more than the faintest inkling. This thirst of humanity for perfect knowledge, its urge for transcending all limitations of nature and a passion for attaining the rightful status of godhood in the cosmic scheme of things will give birth to incessant seeking, explorations, innovations and inventions. The spiritual urge will continue to stimulate human mind and enrich literature and philosophy as it has done before.

Works Cited

Dhar, A.N. *Mysticism in Literature*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 1985.

Gokak, V.K. ed. *The Golden Treasury of Indo-Anglian Poetry*. 1828-1965. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1970.

Sri Aurobindo. *The Future Poetry*. 2nd Rev. ed. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1985.

— *The Life Divine*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970.

— *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*. Fourth Rev. ed. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1993.