

**Dr. Ghafoor Memon &
Dr. Naheed Abrar**

Concept of Shah Latif: From Metaphysics to Sufism

Abstract

Metaphysical questions are very difficult; history shows that series of philosophers tried to understand those questions and suggested solutions. Science also systematically strives to solve the questions. But, scientists end up with complicating the questions rather than simplifying them. The theory of time and space of Einstein makes it terrible, because people are made to believe that they cannot get out of this particular cage of time and space. Man is compelled to live in this world; it means that man is incapable to understand the universe beyond matter. Is there any thing without matter? Religion base theory is that there is energy which is omnipotent and omnipresent. This world is temporary, man is mortal, and he/she would be judged at the end of the show-time. Mysticism also tries to understand metaphysics. Sufis say that the whole universe is one; which is: God. The material world is manifestation of God. This solution is also a theory not formula; so the problem about metaphysics is still a question. Shah Latif was a mystical poet, who followed religious point of view about God. But, he has a different theory to offer about life. It is the existentialist point of view: humans have to face their existence; then they have to prove their essence of life. Research shows that life in the opinion of Shah is "struggle" without any expectation. Death is mysterious, relentless and unavoidable. Humans convert their terror of death into: creation, love and, struggle. However, this is not the solution of the question of life. When man becomes more aware and more conscious, life appears even more like an unsolved problem. Hence, spiritual practice or meditation is the only way to motivate oneself inside-out.

The word Metaphysics has reached to English through Greek. "Meta" means: beyond or after; and, Physical means: referring to those works on matter. (1) As a whole, we can safely say: it's a discussion which is in different frame of reference than the matter. Science has advanced with leaps and bounds in the modern age; however, scope of science is confined within limits of matter (properties of matter, changes in states of matter, and laws and principles that govern behavior of material phenomenon etc.). Hence, science cannot visualize and fathom any thing which is 'non-matter'. That's why Hidger had said: "Science wants to know nothing of the nothing. But even so it is certain that when science tries to express its proper essence it calls upon the nothing

for help.”(2)

If we ask: “What is life?”; “What is truth?”; “Who am I and why am I?”; “What is death?”; “What is universe and where does it end?”; “What is immortality?”; “What is soul?” and “What is reality of human race?”... If we are to look for solving these problems, we would, inevitably enter into realm of a branch of Philosophy called Metaphysics.

Metaphysics is not religion per se. But, when a religion or school of thought or philosophy or theory seeks to answer such questions, then such attitude is said to be Metaphysics of those particular philosophies . For example, the dialectical materialism is the metaphysics of the theory of Karl Marks, but he was of the opinion that nothing existed save matter. He said: “All things, objects and processes are merely manifestations form of matter in motion that’s all why the world around us is a single material world.”(3)

For that, according to Marxian philosophy, dialectical materialism should be the name for metaphysics.

One of the major areas of consideration in religion is around metaphysical queries. Because of which, discussion on universe, soul, immortality and, annihilation is thought to be religious debate. Whereas, religion does not debate on such things but provides a system of belief.

The scope of Metaphysics is quite vast. It includes discussions on: Parapsychology (dream interpretation), Astronomy, Nirvana (salvation) and, Avagavan (reincarnation) etc.

The first question of metaphysics is: “What is universe? Is it real or imaginary?” Science has tried to appreciate this question in its way but, a conclusion is still to be reached at. There are various theories regarding origin of universe but, Cosmogony is still struggling to explain the boundaries and center of the universe. Nor the age of universe has been known with authority yet. Even the time can be counted upon in the material frame of reference; otherwise, time is meaningless! According to Einstein, time can be stopped when travelling with speed of light.

The sages of ages have shared lot of wise theories about the origin of universe.

Thales (624bc -546bc), for example, believed that water was the basis of universe. “Thales the pioneers of this philosophy , main tented that water was the originative principle of things .it was doubtless in this sense that he said the earth rested on the water.”(4)

Anaximander 610-546 BC said: “It is neither infinite, not water nor any other of the so-called elements.(5) Heraclitus said: “All things pass in the eternal flux or flow of being consisted its reality even in the river the water is ever changing and river exists as a river only in virtue of this continual change.” (6)

After that Plato had thought of the universe as a shadow of an invisible objective reality. Universe is a dream of Brahma. According to Islamic philosophy:

“And then God created a green essence through the sacred and elevated light of Muhammad, and then His sight of ultimate Glory condensed it. Then He created entire universe out of it including havens; the throne; the destiny writing pen and on which it writes; earth and skies; and the sun and stars.”⁷

In modern philosophy, Rene Descartes (1596-1659) recognized body and mind as two distinct realities. To him: the perception of being sprung from thinking. This was quite remarkable, which preceded the theory that ‘perception’ is a separate reality.

In the words of Sachal Sarmat:

میں تا کوئی خیال آن ، لسان نال خیال دی

“I am some thought and would be sought with thought”

Same is uttered by Allama Iqbal:

فرشتہ موت کا چوتھا ہی گوتیرا بدن،

تیری وجود کی مرکز سی دور رہتا ہی. (8)

“The angel of death touches your body but remains away from the center of your existence.”

Albert Einstein (1879-1955) pioneered a big revolution in science. “Velocity of light is the limit to every velocity and all other velocities are relative.” If you travel with speed to light, the time stops by the formula: $E = m c^2$. In a nutshell, matter cannot attain speed of light. If it does, it would get converted to energy.

This leads to the hypothesis that matter is confined to remain within boundaries of space and time. This further leads to the assumption that human knowledge cannot exceed certain limits.

Modern existentialism is also based on the premise that the man is bound. He has been thrown on earth, , which is related with experiences like: self-conceit, dread, boredom and coercion. Liberty and determinism are the two sides of the same coin. One has to accept the predetermined fate or to face the complete freedom. Existence is restrained, surrounded by vultures of vanity, in the limitless universe. The more a man thinks the more freak he becomes. Perhaps, Eric Fromm hinted towards this when he said: "I wonder as to why people are made, but it's the opposite." (9)

We'll now have a look at the metaphysical concept that Shah lateef , the great Sindhi poet, has to share. Shah was close to Sufi school of thought. In Sufi metaphysics, God and religion are different. It would be pertinent to say that God is a metaphysical concept and religion is a social one.

The question of existence precedes every other query. For example: "Who is He?"; "Is the truth what it appears to be or is it a force which is hiding *ab intra* and which needs to be recognized and sought for?" Sufi says: "Recognize yourself; who you are." It is possible when a person gets out of the operculum of his or her 'ego', cleanses his or her internal entity, emerges out of dualism, gets rid of arrogance and haughtiness, and submits his or her being in supplication. This leads him or her to the acquaintance with existence, nearness to gnosis and, glorious God shall glow in the individual existence. The Sufi then proclaims: "I am God". The gist of all this is: There is only one existence "I". The original being of a human is recognized through his or her spiritual attributes not the material qualities. Secondly, there is no distance between man and God, material superstitions are based on ignorance and are unreal; material world is delusion and deceit.

The Sufi existence is in continuous search of a restless reality. What is reality? No answer is the final answer.

Shah Latif's universal concept starts with following poetic masterpiece:

اول الله علیم ، اعليٰ عالم جو ڌڻي ،
 قادر پنهنجي قدرت سان قائم آهي قديم ،
 والي واحد وحده ، رازق رب رحيم ،
 سو ساراه سچو ڌڻي ، چئي حمد حڪيم ،
 ڪري پاڻ ڪريم جوڙون جوڙ جهان جون . (ڪلياڻ)

“The First, Allah, All-knower, Supreme, Creator of the universe,
 The All-Powerful, whose prevalence defies time and space,
 The Alone Owner of the unchallengeable oneness,
 The All-Sustainer, the All-Giver, the All-Compassionate,
 Praise that Truthful Master through wise eulogy,
 The All-Generous, who creates the universe in pairs.

(Kalyan 1/1)

Think for a while, Allah precedes every thing. Who is Allah, the All-Knower? He is the One who knows all. The first attribute of Allah is to be Omniscient. Here, a highly appreciable point is that the Sufi concept of soul is that it is a knower, whereas the Sufi defines matter as ignorance. Because of this, elevated is he or she who knows. Therefore the sole standard for elevation is knowledge. That’s why soul is supreme. Just imagine: Elevated is he or she who has knowledge, wisdom and, the discernment. The One who has got entire of every attribute is the Owner of the universe.

After that, one of His important attributes is to be Omnipotent, meaning having unlimited power and He is Perpetual, Immutable and is there since timelessness. He is Infinite and Omnipresent, Owner of unchallengeable Oneness, Sustainer and Compassionate. The Being who has attributes so high, deserves to be praised.

Allah is the One, who has created the universe and runs the show. This reminds a sentence of Einstein: “God does not play dice.”; but, He has perfectly poised every thing. Shah’s concept of God has been derived from religion but isn’t of religion. Because, all attributes are particular to God but can be there in a person, if that person knows him or her self.

On the other hand, what is the world?

دنيا سڀ دريا، ڪو ڪو تارون تنهن ۾
هڪڙي لهر لوپ جي، ٻيو آتشي اوڙاهه
طالبن توڙان، موڙي چاڙهيون مڪڙيون

The world is like a river, not everyone is a seasoned swimmer,
The wave of greed followed by tumultuous twist,
The knowers turned around and set off the sail from the beginning.

The world is like a river, fraught with fluency and flow; man is dipping in and out. The reality of the world is: nothing could be had out of it; everything thin escapes like the sand grains slip away from the fist. But, the man gets goofed by glamor and glitter. Only one out of blue is a seasoned swimmer. But, who is a swimmer? He or She who knows and understands the world, and seeks knowledge. When faced with reality of the world, the life turns over a new leaf and man starts living in a totally transformed fashion.

Sibte-Hasan had written:

“Love is of two types: one is creative and other is capturing” (10)

Love for the world is always capturing type, in which man runs after so-called goals. For example: Umar incarcerated Marvi. We cage a bird because we like its colors, beauty and food qualities. We desire to have sex with a woman we admire. We yearn to yield the material gains. These are all kinds of the capturing type of love. Creative or constructive love aims at the sovereignty of the soul; it supports the superiority of the soul; and the internal human vacuole starts getting fulfilled. Nuts and bolts of this love are: knowledge, cognizance and, consciousness. Not all can appreciate this love. Hence, the man is sailing soullessly in the sea where islands of insatiability, greed, selfishness and hatred are abundant.

These people cannot achieve anything. For them, Shah says:

محروم ٿي مري ويا، ماهر ٿي نه مٿا،
چڙيءَ جيئن جهنج هٿي، لڏيائون لٿا
حباب ٿي هٿا، انهيءَ واديءَ وچ ۾.

Died as deprived, not as achievers,
Capitalized on casual peeps, like cock-sparrow,
Bubbles were they, between the basins.

What is the reality of man? Where does the man stand in the metaphysical universe? Let's see in the following poetic piece of Shah Latif:

سرديءَ ۾ سالم نہ رھان ڪوسِي سھان ڪين،
امن ڏيڃ امان تون، دور ڪري پيا سڀ دامر
پانڊپ کائي پان، وجهج پڪ پينار تي.

Neither I can withstand the winter, nor can I survive in summer,
Ward off the wailings, secure me and surround me,
Biting the beetle-leaf, just dribble on this down-and-out.

Man is feeble individually. Neither can he bear the strength of the weather nor can he endure pain. No matter how macho he may be, disease will destroy him. He cannot avoid effects of aging, no matter how pompous and wealthy he may be. But, man differs from animal only because he is self-conscious, imaginative, free and creative. His creation carves for beauty. As a whole, a creative person longs to see the universe as an extraordinary masterpiece. It's his creative love that defies annihilation. That's why, man is superior collectively. There are two parts of his existence: the physical one and the spiritual one. Shah Latif has preferred peace and tranquility. Glitter and glamour are like a trap and the real needs are: spiritual serenity and calmness. Shah Latif was quite au fait with the world. He knew it very well that the very first foes of a man are: greed, hatred, false display, craving to capture everything and, selfishness. This is the very reason behind human tragedy. Kabeer Bhagat had said:

رامر ڪسي ڪو نهين مارتا، پاپي نهين هي رامر
آپ هي آپ مين ڪهپ جاتا هي انسان
ڪر ڪر ڪي ڪهوتي ڪامر

God does not kill anybody; Sinner is not the Lord,
The person languishes from within,
Committing crimes after crimes.

The only reality about the world is that nothing can be had and man is running after mirage. The world is trapped in the tick-tick of time. The moment for which a man longs for long comes

and flies a way in a flash. Shah explains it in this way:

چئي چنيسر ڄامر سين ليلا لڪائي مَر تون ،
اي ڪانڌ ڪنهنجو نه ٿئي ، نڪا تون نه مون
روئندي ڏنيون مون هن در مٿي دادليون.
(ليلا چنيسر)

O Leela! Don't open up with the King Chanesar,
Nobody is to achieve this spouse, neither you nor me,
I've seen wailing even the most pampered ones.

The reality of this realm is that every fellow is frail, no matter what. Even the dearest and caressed relationships can vanish within the whirlpools of passing time. People can part regardless of their status, wealth and valor. But why? Shah explain this:

عشق جي اسباب کي پر هر پڇيائون ،
دارون هن درد جو ڏاڍو ڏسيائون
آخر "والعصر" ايهي جو اتائون
تهان پوءِ سڪان ٿي سلام کي . (ڪلياڻ 8/3)

They asked me a lot about origin of love,
They told me the treatment of this illness,
At last they recited the verse" by time"
Only then I understood what it was.

This poetic piece is fantastically full with fathomless philosophy. It hints toward a Quranic chapter "Wal-Asr"; which says: "By the passing, Man is in vain"; because, everything just passes away; nothing can be got hold of; and, nothing is yours. Nothing is going to happen no matter how much a man squirms and writhes except he chooses to practice patience. So, the human reality is analogous to a bubble on the water surface. That exactly is the metaphysics of this universe. Because of not understanding this metaphysics; man tends to be a negative contributor in the society, commits crimes, lies a lot, doesn't respect rights of others and, takes pride in self-praise.

عالم آئون ساڻ ڀريو ٿو پير ڪري
پاڻ ناهي ڄاڻ ته مانڊي مند پڪيڙيو

The world wallows in exaggerated ego,
It doesn't know, a juggler has set the stage

This is all because man is ignorant, lives in obliviousness and, without sense of direction. Jean Paul Sartre, the proponent of the modern existentialism, had said: “Man has to face his existence, and then shape its essence. Man cannot be anything if he escapes this responsibility.” (11)

This means: Existentialism holds a person responsible for his state. In the same way, parallels existentialism is evident in Sufism. Existentialism is a philosophy which, basically, evolves and grows in the lap of nature and thinking process. It has manifested itself in different forms at different locations. It sometimes has taken shape of Vedanta, Sufism or some other form. Whatever manifestation it may take, it really is variant of metaphysical philosophy; which entails long debates on existence, essence, choice and determinism. Shah Latif has also got such debate in which the talks about: self-cognizance, free will, choice, proactivity and understanding, the requisites of the routine life.

For example, Shah says:

وحده لاشريك الجان تو چئين ايش

تان مچ محمد ڪارڻي نرتئون منجهان نينهن

تان تون ويڻو ڪيئن، نائين ڪنڌ پين ڪي (ڪلياڻ 1/2)

If you say: “There is no god but Allah”

Then accept Muhammad as the intercessor,

Then how can you bow your head before others? (Kalyan ½)

Now we can see that Shah does not force anything. Instead, he offers complete freedom of choice. This is a sublime democratic and secular attitude. However, once freely made, Shah calls for sticking to the choice. For making a choice, one has to be self-conscious because an erudite individual can make a right choice. At the same time, he should know his reality that he is not important and perpetual individually but is dependent upon forces of nature.

Everything demands gravity of thought in metaphysics otherwise man can go astray; as Shah has depicted:

قريا پسي قين، ڪرين ڪير نه چڪيو،

دنيا ڪارڻ دين وڃائي ولها ٿيا. (ڏهر 16/17)

Folks fizzled on fizz; morons didn't taste the milk,
They're satisfied on short term pleasure against everlasting ecstasy.

The second area of thought in metaphysics is 'death'. Concept of death is internal and experience exists objectively. Internally, this concept cannot be merged in any objectivity; means: nobody can share the death of another person. Death remains deeply inside the individual existence; therefore, there exists no greater terror than death. Death is the practical annihilation of a person, but nobody can explain it on the basis of individual experience; nor will anybody get a chance to explain it. Hence, following lines of Shah are very meaningful:

ڪو جو قهر ڪن ۾، جو گهڙي سو لهي،
خبر ڪوڏ ڏئي، ترچ ڪڇاڙي رند ٿا.

What's wrong in the vortex? None but the person engulfed can find.
Nobody tells what hinders the fish traps. (Ghatoo 3/1)

Man tries to get a lull by changing internal fear and terror of death into some psychological complex. One of the foundations of the religion is to tell people that death is simply stepping ahead in another world. The 'another world' is the spiritual world and is everlasting. This is temporal world is transitory. Because man is a logical being, therefore no theory and belief can satiate him. Nothingness of his existence and vacillation of terror get spelled out. Hinduism has a concept of re-birth. According to which the life of a person is a penitentiary for the sins of previous lifetime. He won't achieve "nirvana" until he completes the punishment of previously committed sins.

Concept of death, to Shah, is more conscious than physical; means: if an individual remains ignorant, does not recognize himself and, does not struggle, then, Shah names this state as death; because this world is the place to perform. See Shah's following lines:

ويھ مَروساري، پڇا مَڪر پنڌ جي
نرمل نهاري، هلندين هت ڪيو

Neither remain oblivious, nor ask about remaining journey,
Those achieved destination who looked for and who kept on walking.

To forget to struggle without suffering won't avail any-

thing; but, striving and actually acting upon help achieve everything. Death is nothing, if a man understands the reality of the world and comprehends metaphysical mysteries.

اچي رهيا ريل ۾، لڪڙيون ڪوڙي

وٽڙا ڪوڙي، جوءَ نه وٺي جوڳين (پورب 2/15)

They boarded the downstream moving ship with confidence,
The yogis relinquished the journey; they didn't like the place.

To Shah, death appears to be terror if and only if a man does not nail down the mysteries of the universe and considers this world as the be-all and end-all. What reply does Shah have against death? As Sartre named literature as the grievance of the conscience; Sheikh Ayaz deemed creation as the answer to death. In the same way, Shah has got a concept of everlasting love which fulfills the internal vacuoles and offers eternity to the existence.

نڪا ابتدا عيد جي، نڪا انتها

جن سڃاتو سپرين، سي وڃڻ کي ويا (آسا 5/6)

Neither a person has starting point nor has he ending,
Those who recognized the Beloved are the real ones.

Another important topic in the metaphysics is the discussion of determinism and freewill. Is a man free? Is he free to choose? Is he free to exercise his freewill? Or, has he to comply with certain laws? Or, is everything pre-determined?

There is no fixed formula to solve this problem. As the time doesn't know to stop, the man must move on; fate and freedom will follow.

ڏونگر ڏکون کي، تپي ڪندي ڪوه

تون جي پهن پڇا، ته لڳ منهنجا لوه

ڪنهن جو ڪونهي ڏوه، امر مون سين ايئن ڪئو

O mountain! What difference will you make by heating up?
If you've got strong stones, I also have body of steel,
It isn't anybody's fault; the fate has done everything with me.

On one hand there is courage to confront and practice patience, and on the other hand, it's all pre-determined; whatever the case may be, one must not surrender. It means, the essence of

life is struggle and the fate is like hovering determinism. But, human is destined to live and survive in this universe. Following lines of Shah clarify the situation:

ڪي مون مون پريشن ٻڌي وڌو ٻار ۾
اڀا ايئن چون، متان پاند پساتيئين.

My Beloved has tied me and then thrown in the water,
Then demands: "Don't even dip your lap."

Struggle is without hope of achievement. But, never-ceasing search is essential. That's exactly what life is. Because, according to Shah, nothing could be achieved without endeavor. If you got hold of something, it would fizzle away like grains of sand. Pursuit is real fun and is the crux of life. جستجو ۾ جياپو آ

Life is like, as explained in the following lines of Shah:

ڪي در تتي ماءُ، ڪي چر سندي سڄڻين،
هلي ۽ وا جهاءُ، پنهي چيرن وچمر. (حسيني 2/1)

O mother! Some endure scorching sun and some bear the blaze of the loved ones,
In between these two flames, move and pine passionately.

Conclusion:

Basic questions of philosophy come under the umbrella of metaphysics; because, science does not answer many of the universal questions. For example: origin and borders of the universe, resurrection, spiritual aspect of life, death, time and space and, destiny etc. There are numerous questions like these and there aren't any formulated answers.

The debate on the origin of universe, essence, eternity and annihilation is going on since ancient Greeks till today and will go on. Science has made tremendously extraordinary efforts to solve these problems but hasn't been successful yet.

Research has proved that man is trapped in time and space and cannot get out it. Therefore answers to metaphysical questions have always been mysterious to him. Simultaneously, efforts to find answers have revealed spiritual secrecies which have led to signify the importance of humility, love and peacefulness etc., logical conclusion of which appeared as Sufism.

It is important to note that the though content of Sufism is

based on metaphysics, from which spring the spiritual aspects.

Research has revealed that there is difference between religion and metaphysics. Metaphysics is debate; it's a never-ending sequence of human thought process. But, religion provides a firm belief in the answers to metaphysical queries.

Shah Latif prefers to count on Sufism over religion in reply to answer metaphysical queries. This means: to Shah, concepts of God and religion are separate.

God of Shah is Omnipotent. God has all beautiful names and attributes. A complete man is the possessor of all those attributes (Insane-Kamil by Murtaz Muttahiri). He only has to recognize himself. Shah has got an extraordinary perception of God, who is there before the inception and will there after the end; the attributes of whom are important to the godliness of the universe. For example: He is All-Knower and hence is the Highest and Owner of the universe. He is All-Powerful; whose prevalence defies time and space. Therefore, it can be deduced that Shah puts paramount importance on knowledge, and this knowledge starts off with self-cognizance.

In Shah's metaphysics, reality of universe is like flux, flow of time and, everything has to just pass away. Nothing can be got hold of. That's why, he who resorts to: greed, hatred and empty vessel like attitude; is the one who is at loss. But, Shah does not ask for abandoning the worldly life entirely. He calls for meeting both ends. This entails: spiritual tranquility and positive impacts on life.

To Shah, life is continuous struggle. One is free to struggle. Hadn't determinism been there, freewill won't have any meaning.

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Note: All the poetry of Sshah Lateef is selected from “Shah jo Risalo” Bhanu Khan Shaikh, Published by Shah Lateef Chair Karachi University.2003