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Compassion and Forgiveness in Shah Latif's Poetry

Abstract:

This paper deals with the poetry of Shah Latif with particular emphasis on the expression of compassion and forgiveness with reference to his Sufi orientation. Latif is one of the most influential poets of the Indus civilization. Being an exponent of the mystic tradition of Islam, he embeds the Sufi themes in the folk culture of Sindh. This paper reviews Latif's magnum opus, Shah Jo Risalo (Shah's epistle) with specific reference to the themes of compassion and forgiveness. His poetic expression is arguably the richest manifestation, both in content and form, of the Sindh folk culture. To address universal human values, he refers the common man's life in the nexus of the rural culture of Sindh. His ultimate message is that man ontologically belongs to the Perfect Being and that he always needs refuge in God's favour. Being a sinner and imperfect he always needs divine compassion and forgiveness.

Keywords: God, Compassion, Forgiveness, Sindh, folk culture.

Introduction:

Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai is known as the Shah of Bhit. He is arguably one of the greatest poets of the eighteenth century. Shah Latif was born at the close of the seventeenth century and died during the Mughal period in the mid-eighteenth century in the Indian sub-continent, presently Sindh, Pakistan. He was a God-gifted poet. He lived a simple life while highlighting the importance of music with simplicity. He composed melodious poetry known as "surs". The followers of Latif recite and sing his poems in front of his shrine to this day. He also invented a musical instrument called the "tambooro" which has today become a traditional musical instrument.

He received his formal education at an early age; however, his education did not include any formal training in poetry and music. From what we know, most of his poetic expression is a reflection of his profound observations and his local travels. He met with commoners and ordinary people, and expressed their values and virtues through his poetic language. He continued in the tradition of the Sufi predecessors of Sindh such as Lal Shahbaz Qalandar (1177-1274), Latif's great-grandfather, Shah Abdul Karim Bulri (1536-1623), and Qazi Qadan (1463-1551). It is important to note that he was also influenced by mystic Persian poet Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi (1207-1273). Like Rumi, he preached the mystical message of Islam. According to Annemarie Schimmel "Shah Abdul Latif had once called his verses *ayat*, or 'divine signs,' hence comparable to interpretation of Quranic verses." (1)

The verses of his poetry have a unique beauty, being lyrical, spiritual, descriptive, and historical. In his works, he portrays the common beauty of Sindh, unity of the birds, spiritual and cultural values of human beings, love, sacrifice, mystical union of God, suffering, and harmony of the soul. Albeit, his

source of mystical poetry is Islamic mysticism, it has been said that he always kept a copy of the Holy Qur'an and the *mathnawi*, (*masnavi*) written by Persian poet Jalaluddin Muhammad Rumi. He has also great respect for all other world religions. For this reason, Hindus of Indo-Pak consider him to be a great poet.

We can say that Latif's poetic expression permeated with the comprehensive exposition of ontological, cosmological, teleological, and above all, the axiological dynamics of his time through the mystical experience, covering all aspects of human life. He calls for forgiveness, compassion, and salvation by mystical union with *Allah* (God). For Professor Annemarie Schimmel, "Shah's mysticism of suffering contains, in itself, a more positive attitude: he feels secure in the divine promise of help and forgiveness even in moments of deepest despair; he enjoys suffering, not because it leads to absolute annihilation, but because he feels the hand of the Divine Beloved, the King, and Physician in every stroke." (2)

Shah Latif never composed his poetry by himself; all collections of his *risalo* were compiled by his disciples known as '*Shah jo risalo*'. Each *Sur* is divided into the chapters and finishes with the *Vai* (longer lyrical poem), the first line of the *vai* is repeated when singing. As far as composition is concerned, the first *Sur* is *Kalyan* in the (praise of God) and a few draw upon the names of heroines of Indus folk tales such as Sohni, Sassui, Marui, Sorath, and Leela Chanesar.

Schimmel admits in the introduction of her book *Pearls from the Indus* that, "Let me confess, as a woman, that I love the way Shah Latif describes his heroines: full of love, faithful to their country (like Marui), and ready to sacrifice everything for the sake of their love, and courageous enough to face danger and death on the road to the Eternal Beloved." (3)

Latif's poetry may appear mystical wherein the themes of love of folk culture, universal values of love, beauty, truth, loyalty, self sacrifice, and sufferings are prominent.

Sur sarang is a reflection of rain and clouds, and blessing of God, *Sur khahori* reflects the true struggle to reach the real goals and ultimate reality. Latif has two modes of expressing his values: one thought is divine love and the other is by the means of the folktales of Sindh.

Latif depicts divine love in his melodies in, *sur pirbhāti*, chapter one. "(My Lord!) You alone are the (Self-Sufficient) Donor, all others are mere beggars (at your door) Rain is seasonal and its benefit is too occasional. But you are munificent all the year round. If you condescend to visit my house, I would be honoured in spite of my dirtiness, i.e. (if you graciously forgive my sins), I would be honored as sinless." (4)

For Latif, God is the Generous Chief, he is the only Giver and we are all beggars, rains are bound by their seasons and particular regions, but God's compassion and generosity is not bound by space and time.

To discuss the theme of compassion and forgiveness I have referred some melodies from Shah-Jo-Risalo. These selected melodies provide Latif's

contemplative, cultural and mystical approach towards the compassion and forgiveness. Latif requests to Allah for his blessings not only directly but he also symbolizes the folk characters of the Sindhi culture and tradition.

Compassion and Forgiveness:

In Sindhi language, the following words are used: معاف، معافی، رحم. معافی، معاف to mean 'compassion' and 'forgiveness'(5). Latif expressed his thoughts in the purview of compassion and forgiveness at different times under different conditions using different musical tones i.e *surs*. Latif believes that by compassion and forgiveness, one can attain higher spiritual goals and can unite his beloved. His universal message of love and tolerance lead us towards compassion and forgiveness.

It is for this reason that Latif describes in *sur yaman kalyan* in chapter eight the Sufi's character, "If someone is impolite to you, do not reply to them in anger; he who starts aggression will come to grief, and he will achieve nothing in the end"(6). This is the true character of Sufi practice and forgiveness.

In the present traumatic, unstable, and chaotic world, we need to spread the message of Sufis, which is filled with tolerance and harmony. The true Sufi is beyond religious, social, and cultural biases, he has no greed for material wealth; he lives with simplicity and peace of soul. Taking the same lines, Shah expresses the status of Sufi in chapter five, "The Sufi does not believe in sectarianism. No one knows his creed. In his mind he is ever busy with war with his bare-self. His activities are absolutely secret and unobtrusive. Besides he betrays nothing. He is friendly to those who are hostile to him".(7)

This is the universality of the character that one has no enemy and merely fights with his own egoism, inner self and evil desires. The Sufi believes that we are not threatened by external enemies, but are threatened internally, which is why we need to clean and purify our soul through a mystical union with God. In this contemporary world where we observe inequality, oppression of nations, violation of the human rights, decline of the moral values, cultural and ethnic prejudices, suppression of minorities in particular regions of the world, poverty, and many other local and global issues. So this world, which was once beautiful, is now full of sorrows, sufferings and deceptions. The Sufi path can bring change within this cruel and unjust world. With the message of the Sufi tradition, we can bring therapeutic implications for suffering peoples. The Sufis believe that God is absolute truth and the ultimate salvation of human lies in union with God. Latif's poetry is a direct and indirect expression of compassion and forgiveness. It is direct in the sense that he requests the Almighty *Allah* for forgiveness, and indirect because he narrates folk love stories in the context of compassion and forgiveness.

Sur Pirbhati:

The melody of *sur Pirbhati*: *Pirbhati* means *early morning*. It is a musical melody and sung at dawn in praise of God's divine magnificence, kindness, and generosity. It is symbolically dedicated to the Ruler of Las Belo, a

district of Pakistan's largest province Baluchistan. Here Shah Latif personifies the Ruler of Las Belo as a Lord, who was altruistic due to his generosity. According to Kalyan Advani (1911-1994), a renowned scholar of the Sindhi language that, the ruler of Las Bela bestowed as gifts a hundred beautiful horses to beggars. In chapter one, Latif expresses Allah, as a symbol greatness and man as a beggar and inferior.

"You are Sapar! and I am a supplicant; You are Donor and I am a sinner (and therefore unworthy of your donation). You are the miraculous stone, and I am iron core. If you see me (i.e. touch me), I would be transmuted into the gold."(8)

In this *sur*, Latif implies that man should seek a union with God, the best time for which is the early morning, when one can re-remember Allah. One should start his day with a prayer to God, which is expressed in the same *sur*, chapter one,

"I understand that He, the Compassionate, the Sovereign of Las Bella (i.e. universe), is all compassion. He is the Omniscient; He knows the secrets of the minstrel's mind."(9)

This shows nothing is hidden from Him, He is the greatest knower of every secret. His greatness is full of compassion and forgiveness to his creation.

This melody reveals that one can achieve the higher spiritual goals by renouncing the material benefits and self egoism. Ultimately everything will return to its destiny, nothing would remain in this corrupted world. To live a respectable and virtuous life one should submit himself / herself to Allah. He is the supreme authority to forgive everything.

Sur Dahar:

Latif continues the same thematic ideas in his melody *dahar*, *dahar*, which means *desert valley*. The content of this *sur* is bravery and generosity. It also symbolizes this world wherein many civilizations were at their peaks and disappeared, turned into a desert. As noted earlier, Shah travelled a lot. In his travels he passed through many deserts where he observed many things and expressed them through his poetic touch. According to Schimmel, "*Sur dahar* gives in its first chapter a fine description of the dried-up tree, a common sight in the valley of the ever-shifting Indus and its tributaries, but also a sight, which leads the poet to praise the prophet's kindness in the second part while the Sassui imagery is utilized towards the end."(10)

In the praise of God and His Greatness, Latif says in the chapter one of the same *sur*, "O Allah! Your name is indeed sweet and I have complete reliance on you,... I have been to many other doors, but there is none to rival yours."(11)

Latif believes that we have only one way to receive guidance and protection, and that is through the way of God. Latif further reflects on divine compassion and forgiveness, and says, "O Allah! You are full of Compassion, pray observe pardah for me and cover me up, as I am naked (sinful).You are

the One to offer me raiment, kindly cover me up with it as a mark of your protection (implying forgiveness).”(12)

This melody reveals that human is sinful by its nature; there is a tendency in human soul to incline to sinful actions. Despite the good inclination of human soul, Latif insists that one should always seek compassion and forgiveness from Allah.

Sur Barvo Sindhi:

Latif connects his views with a novel touch in another melody called *sur Barvo Sindhi*; *barvo* means *beloved*. This *sur* is a musical melody sung in the praise of *Allah*. *Allah* is symbolized as a beloved. This *sur* is full illustration of human emotions in different situations where there is a beautiful and mysterious touch. Through his emphasis on unending travels of lovers, both real and imaginary, Latif depicts human sufferings, through the message of love and the mystical path.

In the same *sur*, chapter one, Latif says, “Indeed you are my noble Beloved and I am merely your servant. I always do obeisance to you with full devotion, and I express my readiness to execute your orders. My (august) Friend! I shall not abandon your door even for a moment. O Beloved! I request you kindly not to withhold your graciousness from me.”(13)

In the same *Sur* Latif begs for mercy, love, compassion and forgiveness from God. He always looks up to God for His benevolence and guidance.

This melody reveals the deep emotional feelings of the man to his creator. Man finds his ultimate salvation on the way of God. Man seeks to attain the love of God and His compassion not only in this world but in the next world.

Sur Sirirag:

Latif continues his message by exploring the melody of *Sirirag*; this *sur* is one of the chief musical melodies. It is sung from evening until early night. In this *sur*, Latif compares men with traders, sailors, and passengers, advising them to do good and to be good, and to always perform virtuous actions, and by appealing to God for help to keep them away from evil passions. In this *sur*, Latif delivers the mystical message by symbolizing the rivers and boatmen, and advises them to keep all their instruments updated in order to traverse the river and to reach their destination. Similarly, one should seek the compassion of God by adopting good habits, maintaining purity of soul, and by renouncing material desires. Latif says in the same *sur*, chapter eleven.

“O Allah! Whatever exists in the universe subsists on your patronage. Your mercy is unrestricted. I do not expect to be let off on the basis of justice. Kindly blend it with compassion.”(14)

Here Latif praises the greatness of Allah and His power. For Latif, there is will of God behind every living and non living thing, the world reflects the will of God. Latif recognizes that the man is weak, sinful and mean. He

cannot meet the Commands of God in spirit and in truth. In order to be successful at the Day of Judgment he would need God’s favour and compassion.

This melody reveals that God is compassionate to all creatures. Human is guilty and corrupted, it is difficult for him to meet the criteria of God’s justice. Therefore he always needs the mercy of God against his worldly deeds and actions.

Sur Moomal Rano:

Latif has also narrated the *sur Moomal Rano*. This folk love story dates back to the fifteenth century and tells the story of the son and daughter of two Sindh rulers: Raja Nind and Hameer Soomro. The *sur* is based on the love story of Moomal and Rano whereby Moomal loses her beloved Rano purely because of her stupidity. This *sur* contains verses about a pitiable lover separated from her beloved; the musical tone depicts the magical garden of Moomal, known as a *Kak*. She was an intelligent woman, and she impressed everyone with her charming beauty and intelligence, expressed by Latif in the same *sur*, chapter five.

“O Rano! Do not be too sensitive! Banish sensitivity! Pray drop obstinacy, O Meendhara, the wise! Kindly forgive me for my presumptuousness. Ideal (Allah) pray gloss over my immaturity and forgive my sins so that I may be happy, O Sodha!”(15)

Momal again and again requests Rano for forgiveness, and asks him to overlook her weakness and sin, in a similar way Latif says; we request several times kindness from God. This melody reveals that merely intelligence is not enough to achieve that desired goals, in contrast, human is a feeling animal too. All battles of life always cannot be won on the basis of intelligence alone, but sometimes man needs passions and strong feeling to overcome the situations.(15)

Sur Leela Chanesar:

The *sur Leela Chanesar*: is based on the folk love story of Leela, Chanesar and Kaunru. The king, Chanesar, was attracted to Kaunru, a beautiful princess who shares Chanesar’s bed a night in exchange for a precious necklace. It was then that Leela’s suffering began, and despite her many efforts, she could not win Chanesar back. Ultimately, she died while dancing before him. Shah Bhitai used this story as an allegory to depict the fall from grace of *Allah’s* favours in exchange of loyalty to some other worldly benefits. The *sur* shows the repentance and guilt of the wife of Chanesar, and simultaneously depicts the struggle of Leela for the re-union with Chanesar, she wanted her husband back at any cost. The poet first portrays the greedy nature of Leela and then praises when she strives for the union of her husband by recognizing the real and the truth.

Schimmel writes in same contest in her book, “The following *sur* has again a traditional story as its background e.g., that of Leela Chanesar, which can be dated back to the time of Jam Chanesar, one of the Samma rulers in 14th century Sind. It has often been retold in Sindhi and Persian. Chane-

sar's wife, the spoiled and pleasure loving Lila, is enticed by another woman by a necklace worth 900, 000 rupees to allow the former owner of necklace to spend one night with Chanesar. Furious that he had been 'sold' Chanesar divorces Lila, she has to undergo a long process of purification until she is once more acceptable in her husband's presence. Shah tells only her suffering and pining, and describes how the queen has to become a slave in order to be accepted by the Lord."(16)

Latif narrates the passions of Leela in chapter two of the same *Sur* and tells all human beings to continue their efforts for the union with God even if one fails time and time again. Latif depicts the different emotional attitudes of Leela to please her beloved as in chapter three,

"O Dasra! Do kindly utter some words of consolation to me. You are my consort and I have every hope on you. O beloved! Kindly safeguard my honor in public (on the day of judgment)."

This melody reveals the values and worth of human character. Sometimes man loses his value and trust in the exchange of worldly glamour and charm. Then it becomes difficult for man to revive his original position, but not impossible. By realizing the guilt and struggling for restoration of true character one can attain back his real values.(17)

Sur Sarang:

With the same belief in God and His compassion Latif expresses his poetic ideas by mediating on the blessings of the rainy seasons in *Sur Sarang*. Sarang which means "rainy season"; a musical tone that is usually sung during the rainy season. In this *Sur* Latif describes the blessings of the rain and its post effects by symbolizing the mercy, generosity, and blessings of Allah. In *sur sarang*, Latif symbolizes rain with the compassion of God by quoting the names of different regions as L.H Ajwani writes that, "The poet takes the rain and lightning over Constantinople, Kabul, Samarkand over Delhi the Decan, Bhuj, Girnar, Jasilmir, Bikaner and Amarkot, and his native Sindh upon whom he utters the famous benediction :

"O lord ! May Sindh be ever prosperous and fertile, O friend! O sweet Beloved! May all humanity be of cheer."(18)

Latif believes that Allah is the Beneficent, Compassionate and Forgiver; every man should seek the favour of God, not merely in this world but also in the next world. This melody reveals that one should adopt the mystics character and let done be justice to every thing beyond the idea of differences. Everyone needs to behave softly and gently to everything without biases of creed, sect, race, nation and religion. As in this melody Latif symbolizes the rainy season with the compassions of God, that God's compassion is for all, without boundaries because all are His creation.

Conclusion:

Latif's poetry is the cultural and spiritual guide for all peoples; the major share of the poetry composed around the folk stories, which were known to the people of Sindh, as both anchoring and expressing their cul-

ture and folk tradition. Through these local characters, Latif aims to communicate higher spiritual and even universal values. Latif used the folk tales as vehicle for spiritual and universal teachings. By mystifying the folk tales of Sindh, he seems to have led (and still leads) many to the way of inner harmony and union with divine beloved.

Latif places the values of spiritual nourishment in union with God, commitment to higher goals, loving dedication, sacrifice, simplicity, humanity. The message of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai is full of divine compassion and forgiveness. His mystical approach creates the deep relation between creation and creator, and his message may be appropriate to cope with the challenges of intolerance, extremism, insecurity and unrest in the contemporary world. His message of love and forgiveness is significant when it comes to purging society and selfish self. He believes that by exercising compassion and forgiveness one can attain higher spiritual goals and can unite with his Beloved. His verses preach the universal values of sympathy, unity, beauty, spirituality, courage and tolerance. In his poetry the way it is delivered through song and verse, the values expressed are universal values and many can relate at a deep emotional and spiritual level.

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