

Metaphysical Approach to Lalon's Song

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to find out the trends and tendencies of metaphysical endeavor in Lalon's song. Lalon shah popularly known as Lalon Fakir (1774-1890), was a Bengali mystic folk poet and singer as well as philosopher and humanist. Most of his songs were composed orally and sung at the time of travelling. His songs dealt with the themes of love, religion, caste, faith, soul, god, death etc which can be viewed from the metaphysical point of view. The way he dealt his various issues in his songs demands our special concentration to investigate how ornamentally his songs were composed

using metaphysical conceit, incongruous imagery, complexity and subtlety of thought, frequent use of paradox, and often by deliberate harshness or rigidity of expression. So, this study will try to shed lights on the theme, philosophy and style of Lalon's song through the metaphysical perspective.

Keywords: Metaphysical Approach, Lalon Fakir, Song

INTRODUCTION

Lalon Fakir was the most important composer in Indian sub-continent during British colonial rule in nineteenth century. His songs are full of philosophy and meditative in nature. He merges different traditions of devotional cremation. The concepts of Buddhism, Vaishnavism, Sufism and many other beliefs are interpreted through his songs. Throughout his songs he searched for his Moner manush (inner soul). His songs are mostly capitalized the theme of love, religion, soul, God, death etc. He plainly renders a concrete interpretation of what life is, the nature and function of human body and soul, the relation between god and human beings, the role of religion in determining the status of man irrespective to cast and creed, men-women relation and the theory of failure and success in his different songs. Another important aspect of his songs is his craftsmanship of language which is similar to the tradition of seventeenth century's metaphysical tradition.

METAPHYSICAL TRADITION

Generally metaphysics means subjects that deal with things which don't have concrete shapes. Literally 'meta' means beyond and 'physic' means nature. Metaphysical poetry chiefly deals with some abstract ideas or concept like death, religion, faith, god, soul, love. (Dryden, 2004) In the beginning of the seventeenth century a group of poets emerged whose poetry comes to be known as the metaphysical poetry. It is a new genre of poetry with distinctive marks that include a blending of intellect and emotion, striking imagery, wealth of learning displayed in allusion, conversational tone and accent, colloquial language, rough meter, an array of moods, highly suggestive language,

compact style, farfetched metaphors called conceits, intellectual, argumentative evaluation and a passionate reasoning that knits the first line to the last (Eliot, 1961).

LALON SHAH IN BRIEF

Lalon's life history is mysterious. There are differences in opinion about his ancestry, caste, creed and religion. He himself also remained silent and indifferent to the identity of his parentage. Around the age of sixteen he was found floating by the bank of the river Kaliganga, a tributary of Ganga, used to flow through Kushtia, but now died out. At the age of eleven or twelve when he was found by the farmer Malam Shah and his wife Matijan then he was nearly dying from smallpox. He was taken to their home in the village of Cheuria in the area known as Nodia during pre-colonial, undivided Bengal and which is the district of Kushtia in present day Bangladesh (Vabantar.com). Malam and Matijan had no children so; they felt deep affection for the child. The care and love what he received from Malam and matijan helped him recover and for the rest of his life, the couple was his only family. He was died at the age of 116 years.

STUDY OF LALON'S SONG IN THE LIGHT OF METAPHYSICAL PERSPECTIVE:

We will discuss and evaluate Lalon's song according to Eliot and Dryden's definition of metaphysical poetry and seventeenth century's metaphysical tradition. Though his song covers a wide range of verity but here we will focus on the theme of love, God, life, soul and caste which are the dominant features of his song and which has great similarities with metaphysical tradition. Lalon's songs are full of profound philosophy and the greatness of his songs lie in his philosophical outlook to human life, nature and God. His song speaks about the special bond that exists between the creator and the creations. To Lalon God is mysterious and it is very difficult to know him. His mind was perturbed with the queries like "who am I?", "who talks in me?" and "who is that all powerful?" So, his quest continues even though he knows they live so close to each other. He also knows they are so closer yet they are so far. He compares god to Neighbor and God's dwelling place as the city of Mirror (Arshinagar). Lalon says:

I have not seen her even once

My neighbor who lives in the city of mirror near my house (blogspot.com)

Lalon by mentioning his own name in his another song says:

He and Lalon dwell in the same abode,

Yet there are countless light years between them. (bhalomanush.com)

Through this song Lalon presented the heartache of every devoted lover of God, the thirst to behold the countenance of God to whom they dedicate their heart and soul. Here God is called as neighbor because of his living nearby. The "City of Mirror" (Arshinagar) is the world, where every phenomenon is a reflection of who we are. Thus it is really a wondrous mirror. According to Lalon, he and his God is dwelling in the same place but the distance between them is like many many light years, because the way to the great Neighbor's City is unknown to him and also he did never see the great Neighbor. But Lalon continues his search for God as he wants to be united with his illusory Neighbor. Lalon says about his neighbor:

How can I describe My indescribable neighbor,

He who is without form, without a norm (bhalomanush.com)

He also says:

O the bird of mind, say Allah

No sadness will be with you. (bhalomanush.com)

Lalon has deep faith that if that great Neighbor ever meets with him then no worldly suffering would touch him even the death pain would vanish. According to Lalon:

Had my Great Neighbor touched me only once,
In an instant all my sufferings would finish,
Even the pangs of death would vanish. (bhalomanush.com)

Similarly, John Donne, the great metaphysical poet also seeks solace in the Divine in his sadness and sickness. Towards the end of his life Donne continued to write his holly poems. Lying on his death bed Donne composed Hymn to God, My God in My Sickness. The very title shows his urge for a mystic union with God (Walton, 1927). At the end of this poem he prays to God to accept his soul because he has been purified by the sacrifice of Christ. He has suffered for his sin. Donne says in his poem *Hymn to God, My God in My Sickness*:

So in his purple wrapped receive me Lord (Grierson, p.91)

Another great metaphysical poet, George Herbert, in his poem presented such type of urge to meet with the Great Creator. As Lalon can feel his Neighbor and he knows where he does live but till then he doesn't know how to go to that place. In the same way George Herbert is also unable to go to heaven without the help of God. Herbert says in *Easter Wings*: "With thee / O let me rise," (Grierson, p.104). Like John Donne and Lalon, George Herbert also has said that through suffering soul could be pure and then it would be easy to meet with God. As he says in *Easter Wings*: "Affliction shall advance the flight in me." He is also thinking that after his suffering he will be more devoted to God. So he should now get the chance to be one with God. He says:

That I became

Most thinne

With thee

Let me combine (Grierson, p.104)

Another important feature of metaphysical poetry is the use of conceits, which is very common in lalon's song. A conceit is basically a simile or a comparison between two farfetched, dissimilar objects (Johnson, 2004; p. 143). In Elizabethan Age it becomes a tradition to use conceit. But the Elizabethan conceit and the metaphysical conceit is different. The Elizabethans used conceit for mere decoration and ornamentation of their poetry. But the Metaphysical poets used conceits for presenting love and meditation. As John Donne in his famous love poem "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" Compares two lovers with the two legs of a compass joined in the centre. Donne says:

If they be two, they are two so

As stiff twin compasses are two (Grierson, p.14).

In *The Good Morrow* Donne presented the lover and the beloved as two hemispheres. He says: "Where can we find two better hemispheres without sharp north, without declining west?" (Grierson, p.1)

In this poem he also compared the subconscious soul of love to the innocence of a 'sucking baby' and to the sleep of the 'seven sleepers'. This highly exaggerated comparison of two lovers with the legs of compass, sucking babies, seven sleepers and two hemispheres take the readers in a surprised world.

In the same way Lalon also enriches his songs by using all kind of literary ornaments such as simile, metaphor, conceits, personification, allegory etc. In one of his most famous songs, which is frequently sung all over the world, he compares human soul to an unknown bird and human body with a case. Lalon says:

How does the strange bird

Flit in and out of the cage?

If I could catch it

I would fetter it under fetters of my heart around its feet. (Trans: Abu Rushad)

Here the bird and case are the excellent conceit through which Lalon splendidly gives his philosophic idea about human life. Human life is uncertain and nobody can ever say when our life will end even nobody has any control over it. When the unknown bird (soul) flies away from the cage (body), our life meets a sad end on this earth. But nobody in this world wants to face death. So Lalon feels the urge of fettering the unknown bird (soul). In some of his other songs he compares human body with "Room" which is the glorious thorn of God, where he resides gaily.

Through his songs he wanted to warn ignorant people about "death". He mentions about the summon of god which will not discriminate between kings and the commons. He says:

When the net is casts

All fishes will be caught

The salmon and the shrimps

Soon the summon will come

And all the excitement end. (Ibid. Song No. 23)

Here Lalon compares the angel of death with a fisherman, and death with the net of the fisherman and all human beings with fishes.

In his love poems, he compares a woman with a tree and her youth with its juicy fruits and the ardent lovers with bees which are comparable to well-known metaphysical conceits. Lalon says:

A juicy attractive fruit glistened

In the tree of love

The bees become insane to get it. (Trans: Abu Ishahaq)

He again marks love as hardship work which is not easy task, it causes suffering and it also turns even to death. He says

One goes weeping through life

Life itself turns to death

What is love curse is (Movie: Moner Manush, 2010)

The use of conceit we also find very frequently in another metaphysical poet, Andrew Marvell. In his poem *To His Coy Mistress* he presented the picture of times winged chariot hurrying and coming closer and closer to overtake the lovers. He says:

"But at my back I always hear

Times winged chariot hurrying near: (Grierson, p.73)

Here an abstract idea has been made concrete by means of a metaphor, and this is a realistic picture in contrast to the metaphysical conceits. As in another line the poet has compared worms in the grave as the seducer. Marvell says:

Then worms shall try

That long preserved virginity (Grierson, p.73)

Metaphysical poets made poetry of a high order by dint of their imaginative depth and intellectual realization, which they modeled on the art of meditation and which form the distinctive features of their poetry, namely- dialectical, argumentative, and concise. Similarly, Lalon's mystic songs also bear the traits of debate or argument. In one of his songs in the form of a dialogue Lalon seeks the mercy of his Guru and passionately urges him to set his mind right so that he can cross the ocean of life to go to the other world to meet his beloved or God. Lalon says:

For God's sake Guru

Bring my mind to the right track

Without your mercy

How to endeavor austerity? (Harunuzaman, 2008)

In another song he says:

Who wants to go to the other shore?

Come aboard the Prophet's boat.

.....

The murshid himself is the Prophet. (parabaas.com)

So, Lalon tries to rationalize the importance of Murshid or Guru to search out God by placing various arguments. Murshid plays a vital role of mediator for the mystic union with God.

Argumentative nature and logical approach is very common in the great metaphysical poets as in John Donne, Andrew Marvell, George Herbert and others. As John Donne in his poem *The Sun Rising* presents his argument before the sun. The poet rebukes the sun for its disturbing the lovers in their bed room. He asks the sun not to send its rays through the windows and curtains of their bed-room but to go and tell let school boys, apprentices, hunters and ants that it is dawn. Love knows no season, nor any climate. Donne says:

Busy old fool, unruly sun,

Why dost you thus,

Through windows and through curtains call on us?

Must to thy motions lovers', seasons run? (Grierson, p.3)

Another metaphysical poet, George Herbert, presents his argument with God in his poem *The Collar*. Here the poet says that he would no longer continue his life of slavery to his religion and so he would move out of the church in order to enjoy freedom.

I struck the board, and cry'd, no more;

I will abroad. (Grierson.p.111)

But just when his rebellion against God has reached its climax and he is about to break away from the tyranny of a religious life, he hears the voice of God saying to him: "*Childe*. He says:

Me thought I heard calling, *Childe*

And I reply'd, *My Lord*." (Grierson, p.111)

In another poem *To His Coy Mistress* Andrew Marvell also presents that the lover is argumentative to his beloved because she refuses to grant the love of the lover. At the beginning of the poem the lover says:

Had we but world enough, and time,

This coyness Lady were no crime." (Grierson, p.73)

Thus the poem begins with the statement of a condition; then reasons are given why that condition cannot be fulfilled; and finally conclusion is given. The conclusion of the poem is that the lover should lose no time to enjoy the pleasures of love. Marvell says:

Now let us sport us while we may;

And now, like am'rous birds of prey,

Rather at once our time devour.

Than languish in his slow chapt pow'r. (Grierson, p.73)

Thus the argumentative mode of the poem has given definite conclusion which justifies us in saying one should enjoy the present time.

Metaphysical poetry is the product of both intellect and emotion. Neither strong feeling nor intellect by itself would make good poetry. The brain and the soul should work together in this respect. We cannot fully appreciate a metaphysical poem unless we see brain and soul at work. Metaphysical poetry deals with the fundamental problems of the nature of the universe and the nature of human existence. Likewise Lalon also has raised the same issue in his song. He says

The business here is nothing

Where I was

Here I have come

I wonder all the time

Where I will go next

I have pilled al my days to coast (Movie: Moner Manush, 2010)

In Lalon's song we find that he is observant of the social conditions around him, which points out our day to day problems in simple but deeply moving language. He was vehemently opposed to caste, all forms of social and economic hierarchies, communal identities or all forms of social differences that might carry slightest potential to breed political division in the society. He wrote many songs against caste, family status and hierarchy. In one of his songs he says:

All people ask

What caste of Lalon is?

Lalon says, he never fiends

What the shape of caste is....

Or

Our cast is in risk

All at them screaming

What a stage

None is prepared (Movie: Moner Manush, 2010)

Here Lalon strongly rejected the distinction of caste and creed. Rather he rose the question of what cast is. Is that any color, shape or any features? Not at all. What are seen in the world is made by the people. But there is no inner difference. That's why Lalon says:

They are curious to know what Llano's faith is,

Lalon says the shape of caste eludes my vision.

Circumcision tells a Muslim from others,

But what is the mark of his woman?

The Brahman is known by his thread,

How do I tell who is a Brahmani? (blogspot.com)

So, Lalon did not confine himself within any particular religion or cast or creed rather he tried to find his Moner masush (Innerself). He believes the philosophy of Socrates "Know thyself". In his song he says:

If only I knew 'me,' all riddles would be solved! (blogspot.com)

So if anyone can know himself he can know the unknown. According to this idea Lalon does not fit into the construction of any particular religion or so called 'bauls' or 'fakirs' as mystical or spiritual types who deny all worldly affairs. Search for a mystical ecstasy of the soul is the common phenomenon of most of the Baul. But we can also consider him as materialist. According to him there is no truth outside material body and separation of the human body from its capacity to think is simply wrong or absurd. The 'body' is the universe and the universe is the body – it is the first axiomatic principle meaning of 'Tantra' for lalon. Body as material being is the way to know the universe. However, within the body of the human being 'kam' (sexual impulse) and 'Prem' (love) is mixed together like poison and nectar. It is the task of the wise person extract the nectar from poison. One cannot taste love without the material impulse of the body, but love transcends the body – only human being has the capacity to transform 'Kam' into 'Prem' – that is love, love for others and that is his point. (cobbc.com)

Similarly, this idea presents in John Donne's love poem *The Ecstasy*. In this poem he deals with the twin aspects of love physical and spiritual. Donne says, souls are the motivating forces in human love, though they have no existence of their own. They are linked with the body, which is the overt and apparent machinery for love – making. The body is the medium used by the soul to achieve the consummation of love. Thus the poem uses a religious and mystical experience to interpret the complexity and depth of secular love. Donne says:

Soul into soul may flow,

Though it to body first repair (Grierson, p.16)

He also says:

To our bodies turn we then, that so

Weak men on love revealed may look;

Love's mysteries in soul do grow.

But yet the body is his book." (Grierson, p.16)

CONCLUSION

Lalon Shah had no formal education as such but his songs can educate the most educated men throughout the world. It is assumed that he had composed about 10,000 songs of which 2000-3000 can be tracked down at present while others are lost in time and lies in hearts of his numerous followers. However, till now 430 songs have been collected. (blogspot.com). Through the above discussion of his song it is found that his use of ornamental language, ways of presentation and exposition of various issues regarding life and universe have great similarities with the seventeenth centuries metaphysical tradition. It is a matter of surprise that in spite of having a great difference of time and space respectively between seventeenth and eighteenth century in Europe and Bangla, Lalon spontaneously explored his self-knowledge in his own way through his songs. His songs are intensely musical, hauntingly melodious and profoundly thought provoking which have a soothing effect whoever listens to them. It reflects the metaphysical philosophy as well as the natural beauty, social reality and facts of common people of not only Bangladesh but also whole over the world. Like other issues metaphysical philosophy is one of the most buzzing issues to understand Lalon and his song. As a renowned Lalon researcher of Bangladesh, Mr. Anwarul Karim says, "It (Baul Mmusic) has caught the attention of the world for its majestic language, tunes and metaphysical approach to life" (Karim, 2010).

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