

Indianness in the Poetry of Syed Ameeruddin

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Abstract

Syed Ameeruddin is one of the eminent Indian English poets whose poetry is characterized by indianness in terms of both matter and manner. Despite his sizable output, his poetry has not drawn ample critical attention. He is deeply rooted in Indian ethos and his choice of themes, imagery, symbols and vocabulary make him a poet of Indian sensibility. In his poetry, he deals with spiritual themes and in his spiritual quest he transcends the barrier of religion. Despite being a Muslim, his knowledge of Hindu mythology is simply commendable. His poetry is interspersed with Hindi, Sanskrit, Urdu and Arabic words and phrases which reflect his rootedness in Indian ethos. His poetry abounds with such indigenous expressions as Tandava, Nirvana, Moksha, Magfirat, Dharma, Iswar, Allah, Aham Brahman etc. Moreover, in his poetry, he talks about the Indian myths, legends, culture and spirituality and casts a critical glance at the socio-political scenario of India. He espouses the coexistence of different religions and traditions that have unmistakably been the hallmark of our rich legacy. His characters are, more often than not, mythical and legendary figures like Rama, Krishna, Shiva, Parvathi, Radha, Shakuntala, Urvasi, Rambha, Guru Nanak, Mohammad, Kabir, Vivekanand and Gandhi among others. In his poetry, he also refers to such great Indian places as Kurukshetra, Ayodhya, Punjab, Kashmir and India etc. He also employs native idiom which we use in our day-to-day life, viz., Shankh, Mehandi, Patidev, Ardhangini, Khandan, Padyatra, Om shanti etc. He uses these native expressions as their literal equivalent is difficult to come by and also for the reason that if one tries to replace them they are likely to lose their meaning and sense. His poetic ideas and philosophy owe a great deal to the Vedas, the Upanishads, The Gita, The Quran, Buddhism and Sufism etc. He is deeply influenced by the Hindu principle of Bhakti Yoga, Gnana Yoga and Karma Yoga. Overall, his poetry is, by and large, a sort of spiritual quest and it reflects his obsession with Moksha and Magfirat. The paper endeavours to trace the elements of Indianness in the poetry of Syed Ameeruddin.



B.N. Gupta

Associate Professor
Dept. of English
DSN College, Unnao,
Uttar Pradesh, India

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Introduction

Syed Ameeruddin is one of the eminent Indian English poets. He has occupied a pride of place among the modern Indo-Anglian poets by dint of his original and distinct poetry. He has widely been published, anthologized and critically acclaimed globally. But keeping in view his sizable output, critical studies of his poetry may not be said to be ample. However, his poetry is admired by both the older and younger generations. His poetry has drawn the attention of such great Indian critics as K.R.S. Iyengar and M.K.Naik as well as German poet Werner Manheim and of Francis Hackney and Joan Board too. Iyengar praises his 'verbal ecstasy' and 'visual beauty'. Manheim praises his poems saying that they "should be an inspiration for those who seek the meaning of the existence in this world of social and cultural upheavals." (Werner, 1989).

Ameeruddin has so far published seven collections of poems: What the Himalaya Said and Other Poems (1971), Dreadful Doom to Come (1973), A Lover and a Wanderer (1980), Petallic Love Times (1988), Visioned Summits (1995), Visions of Deliverance (2006) and Rainbow Rhapsodies (2014). Besides, he has edited three anthologies of poetry: Indian Verse in English (1976), New Voices (1980) and International Voices (1982). Moreover, he has written several articles for national and international literary journals. He is the recipient of Michael Madhusudan Award (1988) and Australia Day Award (1990).

Ameeruddin, in his interview to Atma Ram, said, "A good poem must have complexity of thought. It must evoke a kind of curiosity, an element of wonder, a kind of thrill and a sense of novelty and freshness in the mind of the reader. It must have a certain element of vagueness and must be suggestive through its well conceived visual images and not empty minds and direct narration" (Ameeruddin to Atma Ram, 1983). In the same interview, he acknowledged his indebtedness as a poet to P. B. Shelley, John Keats, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, W. H. Auden, Kalidasa, Tagore and Iqbal.

In his poetry, Ameeruddin deals with the themes of love and spirituality as well as with his individual self and society. His poetry is, by and large, characterized by Indianness in terms of both content and style and his poetic idiom shows him to be deeply rooted in Indian sensibility. He vacillates between classical Indian values and new poetic consciousness. Though a Muslim by creed, he speaks about Hindu myths and legends in a comprehensive manner. His love of Hindu way of life and his reference to Hindu deities time and again make him a true votary of ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb. His poetry reminds us of the golden past of India when both The Hindu and the Muslim lived together in peace. Though there were political clashes here and there, the common people of both the creeds lived in harmony and respected each-other's religion.

Ameeruddin, in his collection 'A Lover and a Wanderer' (1980), appears as Dante longing for Beatrice. His longing for his beloved is the longing of Lord Shiva for Parvathi. In the poem, 'On One Evening', the lover and the beloved meet in an ancient temple 'Kailasanath' which has many statues in passionate embrace. The beloved sees in her lover "the vivacious victor Shiva", while he sees in her "tumultuous Parvathi". There is a "smile of submission" which ultimately results in the cosmic dance of creation performed by Shiva and Parvathi. In the collection 'Petallike Love Times' (1988), the poet compares his beloved to a "beautiful poem" and to a "statue in Ajanta". To him, she is as fresh as nature and life without her is smothering. In the poem 'My Enchantress', he perceives Radha, Parvathi and Shakuntala in his beloved as he is besotted with her. He writes:

You are my emotions Radha
You are my passions Parvathi
You are my spirits Shakuntala (PLT: 1988:33).

His poetic meditation enables him to visualize the presence of Satchitananda in love:

Let us love each other
To the depths and breadths and heights
Our soul can reach
To realize the ideal of
Sat...Chit...Ananda(PLT:1988:34).

Ameeruddin's maiden collection 'What the Himalaya Said and Other Poems' (1971) contains only eight poems which, as the poet himself puts it, are "serious, metaphysical, symbolic and highly reflective" (Ameeruddin: 1971:11). The title of the poem is borrowed from the last section of T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' (What the Thunder Said). The

poem reflects his deep philosophy and the poet sees the Himalaya as a means of salvation. In the poem, he stresses the need for 'self-discipline' and 'self-realization' as they are the twin principles of our ancient heritage which are essential for spiritual awakening of man. Himalaya evokes in him an altogether different sort of sensation and feeling:

Something like a ray of light
Passed in me from toe to head
Stupor, I felt, my nerves paralysed...
And everything in me...
At a stand still my eyes fluttered
All of a sudden- my lips started
Quivering... In awe and fright (WHSOP:
1971:20-21).

Towards the end of the poem, the thundering of the Himalaya conveys the divine message in a forceful manner:

Bhakti Yoga!!
Gnana Yoga!!
Karma Yoga!! (WHSOP: 1971:23).

The poet is so deeply rooted in Indian sensibility that he is able to discern divinity in the Himalaya. He is proud of his identity as an Indian and he loves the diverse cultures and traditions of India. Dr. Ganasekaran aptly remarks: "A lover of ancient Indian heritage, urges the modern man, 'a product of disbelief to adhere to the Bhakti yoga (the path of devotion), Gnana yoga (the path of knowledge) and Karma yoga (the path of action), which are the final message to the erring mankind "(Ganasekaran: 1994:128).

Ameeruddin's poem 'Dolls of Clay' is special in as much as it is built on the concept of Sufism. In it, the poet points out that in this world "everything is transient" and all the "glory of this vain life" will vanish as human beings are "dolls of clay". The poem 'dome of Gold' is an attack on the growing materialism of the modern man. The poet writes:

This is an age of gold,
People live and die for gold,
Gold is purpose and gold is goal,
Gold is the faith of all the faiths (DDC:
1973:30).

Here, the poet expresses his ire at the growing greed of man. Gold, he believes, has replaced God and religion today. And this is the reason why man runs after money and is never at rest. In the poem, 'Youth of Our Time', the poet reiterates the theme of the poem 'Dolls of Clay' that life is brief and so are all its charms. He says that the youth of today lead a life of confusion and contradiction. They, according to him, should follow the path of Bhakti, Gnana and Karma in order to realize their dreams as all the sages of all ages have been able to attain enlightenment by following the same path.

In the poem, 'The Dreadful Doom to Come' (1974), he prophesies that a new avatar is sure to descend on earth in order to remove all that is filthy and chaotic and establish 'Peace and Dharma':

In order to clear the debris
And to establish Peace and Dharma
A new divine dignitary...Is sure to come
(DDC: 1974:17).

The collection, 'Visioned Summits' (1995), is his chef d'oeuvre. In it, he deals with contemporary realities that are grim and miserable and that lead man into a cavern of darkness, insecurity and uncertainty. Here, he deals with 'Bombay blast', 'Ayodhya devastation', 'the blood shed in the Punjab', 'Somalia shrieks', 'Bosnian Bereavements', and devastated 'Himalayan valley'. The collection offers a gloomy picture of contemporary India and other parts of the world where people have to grapple with massacre and marred environment, religious fundamentalism and degenerated values.

In the poem, 'Eloquent Serenade', he gives vent to his ire when he sees people fighting in the name of religion. He tries to make people believe that God is one and that different religions have only created their various gods and ways of prayer. But, essentially, all religions are equal and all worship the same God. Therefore, we should respect each other's religion and live together in peace.:

Budha's budhi-bewilders
Guru Nanak's compassion-crumbles
Gandhi's ahimsa-gurgles-
In the frenzied endeavours
Of determining an abode
For Ram and Rahim-
The one and only Reality-
Ishwar-Allah-Tere Nam (VS: 1995:27).

The poem, 'My India', highlights the decay of cultural and moral values. This decay has led to the disintegration of Indian society. People have forgotten their glorious legacy and the spiritual teachings of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. He exclaims:

India, where all your grandeur gone!
What happened to-
The lifting lore of Vedas, Upanishads (VS:
1995:59).
Again he bemoans the loss of ancient glory
thus:
India where all your grandeur gone!
Of the timeless tales,
That reverberating echoes.
Of unity and oneness of man
From your towering...
Temples, Masjids, Churches, Gurudwaras
(VS: 1995:60).

Ameeruddin strongly believes in the oneness of all religions and their teachings. The message of all religions is one and the same. The teachings of Moses, Mohamed, Christ, Krishna and Shiva are one and the same. They are just interpreted in different and, sometimes, twisted ways by crooked people.

The poet is a spiritual seeker who believes that one can learn the divine teachings only through asceticism and through an inward journey. In the poem, 'Pilgrimage', he says that if one wants to go on a true pilgrimage, one must begin a journey into one's inner-self because God is present only there. He, thus, affirms the equality of the teachings of all religions:

Moses and Mount Sinai
Budha and the Bodhi Tree
Mohamed in a solitary cave at Mecca
Magis glimpse of Jesus at Jerusalem
Krishna's upadesh at Kurukshetra

Shiva's Tandav on Gauri Shankar
To see the lotus drenched in grace
To feel the feathery float
On the cosmic ocean of light (VS: 1995:82-83).

The poem, 'Visions of Deliverance'(2006), ponders over how man can attain deliverance from the cycle of life and death, pleasure and pain. He exclaims:

The Moksha! The Magfirat! The Nirvana!
The blow of 'soor'
The drumbeat!
The shriek of Shankh!
Deliverance! Deliverance! Deliverance! (VS:
2006:202)

Indianness of the poet is best expressed in his poem 'Indian Bride' where he speaks about the privations of a typical Indian bride. She suffers at the altar of patriarchal social set up of India. She finds no solace and sympathy. The poem is interspersed with such Hindi words as 'dulhan', 'ardhangini', 'izzat', 'khandan', 'mehandi', and 'benares sari' etc. Together, they recreate an Indian wedding scene.

As a poet, Ameeruddin has the conviction that the poets transcend time and place. They belong to all people, places and times. They cannot cease to exist. They will live in their poetry forever:

A poet never dies, he goes on forever
No grave can bury him
A poet is for all times and for all climes (VS:
1995:35)

Having discussed Indianness in the poetry of Ameeruddin, the study now moves on to trace Indianness in the style of his poetry. As a poet, he draws heavily on native imagery, symbols, myths and legends. He talks about Ram, Rahim, Shiva, Krishna, Mohamed, Guru Nanak and Soor among many others. His poetry is interspersed with Hindi, Sanskrit, Urdu and Arabic words like Dharma, Izzat, Ardhangini, Moksha, Nirvana, Magfirat, Masjid and what not. He also uses typical Indian epithets like 'Maryadapurushottam' for Lord Ram and 'Yugpurush' for Gandhiji.

His poetry abounds in quaint and unusual expressions like 'bruised heart', 'lilting lips', 'snaky arm', 'trembling moon' and 'hungry arm' etc. He has also coined certain words like 'halvesonned' and 'twilighty dawn' etc.

As a poet, he prefers to be complex and chooses to be evocative in the use of language. Sometimes his structures are ungrammatical and incomplete with a series of phrases for purposes of sounding novel. For example:

Life, a criss-cross crisis Amidst dwindling destinies
Delirious dreams

And diabolic disillusion (VS: 1995:75).

Sometimes his sentences are short and simple, but the meanings are difficult to decipher:

I am a wanderer. I have a goal. A purple purpose. Long is the journey. I must wander. Dark are the woods. It's time for me to go (VS:1995:35).

The poet consciously weaves a complex thought pattern and further complicates it with imagery, symbols and other stylistic devices in order to be impressive as a poet of substance and style. In his style, it is said, he reminds us of K.R. S. Iyengar, T. S. Eliot and Walt Whitman.

Though he aspires to be regarded a complex poet, his diction is simple and free from complex and unusual words.

From the foregoing discussion, it becomes evident that Ameeruddin's poetry is essentially marked by a peculiar Indianness in both matter and manner, content and style. His poetry is a spiritual quest in which he transcends the boundaries of religion and his poetic ideas owe more to Hindu myths and legends than to the ideas of Islam. As a poet, he is not a Muslim but a true Indian who holds all religions to be equal. He believes in one God and oneness of all religions that teach one and the same thing in different ways. His style, that is, the selection and use of imagery, symbols, myths, legends and native idiom, is also peculiarly marked by Indianness which makes him a representative poet of India.

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