

A Critique on the Writings of Rumi and Pablo Neruda with Reference to the Poetic Theories of Wordsworth and Shelley

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Abstract

Poetry, as some would say, is the food for the soul. The mind needs as much nourishment as the body and poetry would be the best way to provide nurturance to the soul. Poetry is the very articulation of the deepest and darkest thoughts that haunt the minds of human beings in its purest form. Critiques throughout the ages have lost their sleep over the subject of poetry. What defines poetry appropriately? This is a question that has remained unanswered, because there is no one definition that could hold good for poetry. Many have debated on the need to be a poet of the highest order with wisdom and credibility in their poems. Language used by the poets is also considered in evaluating them as the torch-bearers of the society. Poet is often expected to possess virtue. However, definitions of poetry and requirements in a poet is ever changing, vast and expansive. It thus, becomes increasingly onerous to place poetry or the characteristics of a poet into any one watertight compartment. The paper aims at understanding the characteristics of a true poet and the essence of good poetry by referring to established critics like Philip Sidney, William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley. This research is also an effort to examine the applicability of the given theories. The researchers have used the classical theoretical framework to understand and analyse the poems of Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi and Pablo Neruda.

Keywords: *diction, happy, wisdom, good poetry, poet's purpose.*

Introduction:

Poetry by definition, has no single clear-cut definition and it is futile to even attempt to define perhaps the greatest art, poetry. If one were to be mistaken that in order to be able to write poetry, one had to have the embellished of languages or the highest of education, they are often proved wrong. Composing great poetry is not always limited to possession of the highest education or the most ornate language skills as many individuals without the mentioned qualities are also capable of doing the same. All one needs is the power to feel intensely, observe and be true to one's feelings and emotions about the same. Poetry can talk about the simplest of things to the laws that govern the movement of planets. Poetry is everywhere and all one needs is an eye to spot it. As the great American poet James Tate would put it, "Poetry is everywhere, it just needs editing".

Decoding Wordsworth and Shelley

"Poetry is the spontaneous flow of powerful emotions...recollected in tranquility"- William Wordsworth

Our great literary minds of the 18th and the 19th century, namely William Wordsworth, and P.B. Shelley have been extremely didactic in their essays and criticisms regarding the true nature of a poet and poetry. They have laid down strict ground rules and if one were to be rightfully known as a poet, or if a poem had to pass as a good poem, these ground rules were to be strictly followed. However, the question that arises is, how far is it wise to lay down stringent rules when it comes to composing poetry or any piece of literature for that matter? The answer to the question shall be discovered by taking examples of different poems that were composed at a time period prior and after to their age.

In Wordsworth's "Preface to Lyrical Ballads", he emphasizes on the fact that the best poetry has the simplest of dictions, should be raw and rustic. He claims to have broken away from the 18th century structure of poetry which were artificial, overelaborate, and which were under the influence of 'social vanity'. He declares that poetry should be based on the simple incidents and events of life, and should not have to struggle to find the motivation behind the poem. In simple terms poetry is all about finding the 'extraordinary in the ordinary'.

This can be held true if one were to analyse the different subjects that had been taken into consideration while composing poetry. Consider for example, the poems "This Is Just To Say" and "Red Wheelbarrow" by the American poet William Carlos Williams. The subject of the poems is as simple as it gets. One talks about plums and the other talks about a red wheelbarrow. However, the analysis of the poems can go as deep as Biblical connotations and the daily struggles of life. Thus, one could seem to agree with Wordsworth's point of view in "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" that poetry should be based on the simpler and routine aspects of life. However, the statement made by Wordsworth in his "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" cannot be held as a universal rule or a formula that can be applied to every poem ever composed. While it is truly easy for one to understand a poem that takes its inspiration from nature, one that talks about 'daffodils' and a 'solitary reaper', this is not a mandate; and poets who compose poems that do not follow the criteria laid down by Wordsworth, cannot be brushed aside as poets whose poems are not good enough. These are the poets who probably have more to teach than any other nature poet, owing to their poems which is rich in its political, cultural, philosophical and spiritual relevance. Further, if one considers reading any poem by Sylvia Plath or Emily Dickinson, the subject matter of their poems is not bright, happy or even simple. A surface level reading of the poems would not reveal even half of what it truly means. However, these are the poems that

nourish the human life with their poignant lessons on life, grief and isolation. Plath battled all her life with depression, Dickinson struggled with the pangs of her feelings of isolation and alienation. Their poems are the very articulation of these struggles, something that is relevant even to this day. Their poems do not appear to agree with Wordsworth's view of emotions that have been recollected in 'tranquility'.

Further, reading Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Defence of Poetry", one can raise certain objections with reference to the essay. Shelley notes in his essay, "Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds", and he also goes on to justify his statement by saying that a true poet drives happiness even from the worse of situations. He argues that, "A poet as he is the author to others of the highest wisdom, pleasure, virtue and glory, so he ought personally to be the happiest, the best, the wisest, and the most illustrious of men". This statement is only true in parts where he says that a poet should have wisdom and must be illustrious of men, because a poet paints a vivid picture with just his words and he truly must have wisdom of some kind or another to be able to compose poetry. However, the statement also emphasizes that Shelley was truly under the illusion that all poets are happy and a good poem can only be composed from a happy state of mind. In order to refute the argument, one must consider poems that are centered around subjects of political consciousness. Auden's "Refugee Blues" is a poem centered around political events and the tone of the poem is not that of bliss or beauty. It only highlights the pain of being alienated from one's land due to political turmoil and atrocities of the authority in charge. Dickinson, Plath, Woolf and the like's oeuvre of poetry can be taken into consideration here, for refuting Shelley's obsession with the word 'happy'.

The objections raised in this paper with regards to the essays of Wordsworth and Shelley about the attributes of true poetry and a poet can be further understood in greater details in the light of

Rumi and Neruda's works. Two poets who belong to a completely different socio-political and socio-cultural timeline. Both the poets from different literary periods have been taken for analysis and interpretation to evaluate the universality of the poetic guidelines laid down by critics of English Literature.

Rumi: The bridge to a greater understanding of love, life, death and beyond!

Masnavi the great work of the world's greatest Sufi poet, Rumi, has often been hailed as the 'Quran in Persian'. Rumi's poems are spiritual, without being religious. They are philosophical, without being didactic. His verses implant in the minds of individuals and sow the seed of passion and of love, they provide nourishment to the mind. Rumi can be addressed as the poet who serves as a bridge between what is right in front of us and what cannot be articulated. It is truly a bridge to a greater understanding of every element of life, death and beyond.

Few of his love poems (all in translation) like "Land of Love", "Romance", "Secret Love", "The Furnace" and "Love is Surrender" cannot be limited within the periphery love poems. It is more than that. Rumi celebrates various forms of love in his poems, love in secrecy, the passion that dominates love, love that transcends all religions and emerges as the ultimate religion.

His other set of poems that has been taken into the study are "Seed", "The Beyond", "Tongue", "Woman", "Sufi's Wisdom", "Life", "The Light Inside", "The Prison". These poems are highly philosophical and spiritual in nature and unmistakably they give shape to what cannot be seen or heard. In all these verses, Rumi only states what he feels can help human beings understand the philosophy of life. He puts into words something that is so abstract, intangible but palpable at the same time. However, never does any of his poems go to the extent of being didactic or polemic in nature. In "Sufi's Wisdom" Rumi says that, that which we seek outside, the true meaning of life, the meaning of a Sufi's preaching, cannot be understood by visiting the dry pages of books.

It can only be understood by probing deep inside our own minds which is white as snow, untainted and pure.

Rumi's genius lies in being able to convey the greatest wisdom without any exhaustion. His verses seem to come spontaneously to him without any speck of inhibition or a moment of doubt. Rumi is one of those poets, born in a completely unrelatable age of the 13th century when seen in contrast to the contemporary times, whose poems are highly relevant across all timelines. His take on love, life, death and spirituality is incomparable and are of a different level. Rumi is also one of those very few poets who is able to condense all the wisdom of life and death and distill them in few lines. He proves, in much contrast to our great English poets, that one does not need to go on writing lengthy poems or try hard to reach something with their poems in order to be hailed as a true poet.

Coleman Barks, the translator of some of Rumi's poems notes in "Rumi: Bridge to The Soul" that "Rumi devotes a lot of attention to silence...It is truly one of the mysteries that flow through him. No other poet pays such homage to silence". He also states that when Rumi was once told that it is strange that he talks so much about silence, Rumi had answered, "The radiant one inside me has never said a word". There is truly no poet who could articulate silence the way Rumi did.

Neruda on Love, Despair and Political Consciousness

"In his work, a continent awakens to consciousness", wrote the Swedish Academy on Neruda in bestowing Neruda with the Nobel Prize. Critics and scholars have noted that Pablo Neruda, the Chilean poet, through his poems finds representation of many significant political events of the 20th century. Pablo Neruda was is not to be mistaken as just a love poet, though he is most known and rose to national recognition after publishing his "Twenty Love Poems and A Song of

Despair” in 1924, at the tender age of 20. Many consider him as ‘people’s poet’, and a ‘political poet’ due to the vivid themes he touched upon through his poetry.

In his political poem “I am Explaining a Few Things”, Neruda sympathizes with the Republican cause during the Spanish Civil War. The poem though begins with few images of flowers and nature, ends with “come and see the blood in the streets”. This is not just true to this poem, but to almost all of his protest poems. It portrays a gruesome and a vivid picture of what war does to human life. There is no romanticizing of nature, but the real picture of the real world out in the open. A world that is full of conflicts, revolution and bloodshed. Going according to Wordsworth’s statement that poems must be written about the simple things of life, and must derive inspiration from the beauty of nature, one may develop a difference of opinion in this context. If poets are the ‘unacknowledged legislators of the world”, the onus is also upon the poets to enlighten the human race. The world is not just lilies and meadows, but also bloodshed, poverty and hunger. Also, if one pays attention to the tone of the poem, it cannot be agreed upon that Neruda found peace and happiness out of war and bloodshed, as is argued by Shelley.

Neruda’s range of poetry truly ran from exceedingly political poems of protest to the most passionate of love poems.

In Neruda’s much celebrated love poem, “Tonight I Can Write”, we come across a feeling of love, longing and loss. It is true that the poem is an undebatable masterpiece, one that fills the heart of a reader with passion. One that makes the reader find beauty amidst grief. However, it is not sure whether Neruda himself was in the happiest state of mind, or found happiness in his loss. “Because through nights like this one I held her in my arms/my soul is not satisfied that it has lost her.//Though this be the last pain that she makes me suffer and these the last verses that I write for her.” (“Tonight I Can Write”. Twenty Love Poems and A Song Of Despair)

These lines prove that there is an unquenchable thirst for passion, a longing for the completion of the love affair and deep sorrow for the loss of the loved one.

In Neruda's "A Song Of Despair" too, we find a similar tone. Though the poem is an out and out love poem, it also celebrates despair and pangs of separation in a way that is possible only by Neruda. He says in the final lines of the poem, "It is the hour of departure. / Oh abandoned one".

Conclusion:

To put Rumi and Neruda under microscopic investigation to decode what they have tried to convey through their poems, is an injustice to the poems. It not only spoils the beauty of the poems, but it also makes it difficult to give any one interpretation to the poems. There is no one way to understand Rumi. However, in order to understand the vastness of knowledge and ideas that Rumi imparts, one has to completely surrender their self to him and allow his poems to serve as a guiding light to the greatest meaning of birth and death - the cycle of life. Neruda gives one the feeling of being in an eternal limbo, of a feeling of being lost in a land where time itself is suspended. Thus, it is nothing less than a herculean task to compartmentalize these two poets from different time and culture in any one specific genre.

Both Rumi and Neruda, become the torch-bearers or the guiding spirits to the society as pointed out by Sydney in his theories on Poets. Rumi through his works serves a greater purpose to understand one's soul, whereas, Neruda through his protest poems enlightens a greater mass with reference to the modern-day issues. Both of these poets communicate a greater order of truth by establishing a greater understanding of the society around us. In their own terms, without confining themselves to any limitations of the society, both Rumi and Neruda have redefined human understanding of the simplest aspects of life. Their poetry certainly touches upon the underlying philosophy of one's life. Neruda's simple usage of language to convey the greater

matters of one's life, emphasis Wordsworth's philosophy on the importance of use of a simple diction.

The analysis of various poems, more so those of Rumi and Neruda raises objections on few of the statements on poets' moral code of conduct made by Shelley and Wordsworth in their works. It is no less than a crime to demand of specific characteristics in order for someone to be known as a true poet, or entail strict guidelines to write good poetry, because given the dynamics of Literature, there cannot be laws or formulas that govern literature, and by extension, poetry.

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