Mystic Poetic Tradition of Kashmir: A Study

By Sabreen Javid

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Abstract- Kashmir is immensely bestowed with exotic beauty and grandeur. It has lush green forests, mesmeric rivulets, mountains and attractive flower laden gardens that truly depict a heavenly ambience. Moreover, this region has been blessed with the mystic and spiritual personalities who represent the literary and cultural ethos of Kashmir that has been acknowledged in academic and literary world. There are many saints, sages and seers who visited Kashmir from Central Asia and few were the natives of Kashmir as well who spent their lives in disseminating their message of spirituality and their love for the Absolute Being. The paper highlights the poetic and mystical backdrop of various poets till Shaikh-ul Aalam. The study is important as it will pave way to demonstrate the Kashmiri poetic tradition to the international audience.

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I. Introduction

The language spoken by Kashmiri people is called Kashmir by its speakers and major dialects are Marazi, Pogli, Kishwari and Kamrazi. Every country has its own culture, literature, language but what keeps the language alive is through the acceptance of words from other languages and Kashmir is one such place which has been highly influenced by the languages of other places especially from Sanskrit and Persian.1 Further it is important to mention that the Kashmiri language had no script of its own, rather it happened to be Sharada, a branch of Brahmin script used for languages which is itself felt in the later Sufi poetry.2

Further it is important to mention that the Kashmiri language had no script of its own, rather it happened to be Sharada, a branch of Brahmin script used for Sanskrit from Kashmir to Kabul upto mid 14th century. Sharada was replaced by Devanagari for Sanskrit, but in Kashmiri Sanskrit itself got replaced by Persian as an official language in 15th century and Muslim poets used the new script.3 In the light of the above it can be concluded that Kashmiri language has gradually emerged and had the deep-rooted affiliations with other languages which is itself felt in the later Sufi poets of Kashmir. Before we have a peep into the poetic tradition of Kashmir it is important to have the glimpse of the past Sanskrit tradition that formed the main basis of our literary past and thereby making Kashmir a place for highest seat of learning. P. N. Pushp while highlighting the contribution of Kashmir in poetics says:

More than ninety percent of what we know today in Indian poetics has been the valuable contribution of Kashmir. For about six centuries (vii-xii) it had remained the homeland of almost all the bold speculations and cool-headed theorizing about the form and content, spirit and significance as well as the appeal and aesthetic judgment of poetry. Infact out of the dozen most outstanding names in history of this branch of Indian learning no less than fifteen positively hail from Kashmir.3

It can be said that major works on the poetics has been done from the Kashmir itself and Kashmir has always remained in forefront in its contribution to Indian aesthetics. There were several schools of thought that emerged in Kashmir and in this context Toshkhani says:

One cannot but be overwhelmed by the fact that almost all the major schools of Indian aesthetics were founded by Kashmiri theoreticians -the Alankara School by Bhamaha, Riti School by Vamanana, Vakrokti School by Kuntaka, Dhvani School by Anandavardhana and Auchitya School by Kshemendra.4

Kalhana’s Rajtarangini speaks of numerous poets who flourished long before and who thought and wrote with ability on different branches of literature. The poets that Kalhana mentions in his Rajtarangini are Anand Vardana, Bilhana, Bharatmetha, Bharatmuni, Kshemendra, Ratana Sankhadhimat and Sanukhasakhadhatra. However, the greatest contribution to Indian aesthetics was given by Anandvardana, Abinavagupt and Mammeta. These poets had a deep insight over the Indian poetics and gave theories about the poietical aesthetics. Anandvardana’s Dhanyaloka (the theory of illumination) is based on Dhvani or suggested sense of poetry. About the theory of Dhanyaloka P. N. Pushp states that:

The theory, no doubt, seeks a unity in diversity so that the emotions expressed are harmonized with the dominant emotions suggested; and, accordingly, all other equipment of literary excellence, idiom or diction is significant only in the context of collaborating with the power of suggestion in the aesthetic endeavour of awakening the dominant mood.5

Anandvardana’s theory is based on the power of suggestion that argues that Dhvani alone is the soul of poetry. Then we have the famous poet-philosopher Abinavagupt who was the genius and above all well versed with Natya Shastra and the Dhvanya Ioka. He analysed in the Lochana that for Anandvardana Dhvani was an important aspect of the poetry and not only that

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he laid emphasis on the new theory called as Rasa. Again in this context Pushp states:

Anand vardana theory of ‘Rasa’ is revealed by a special power assumed by words in poetry and drama, power of revelation to be distinguished from the power of denotation, consisting of and animated by the action of generalizing the determinants etc. This power has the faculty of suppressing the stick peel of mental stupor which cloaks one’s own consciousness… Rasa revealed by this power is then enjoyed with a kind of enjoyment different from direct experience, memory etc.. This enjoyment is of same order as the tasting of supreme Brama.  

Thus Rasa became a powerful element along with the Dhavani in framing a new picture of poetics. Later on another poet Mammata though did not directly mentioned Rasa and Dhavani theories but rather defended them in his book Kayvaparakasha a unique book on Indian poetics in every aspect, this book gave a sort of pattern to the poetry and has attracted almost seventy commentators all over the country, the book on whole will help us to know the influence it had laid on the later poetry. Prof. Majruh Rashid in his article on Kavya Prakash: Akh Tabsure writes:

‘में ते छुरे काव्य आखेदियारे शुभ र्मात नेवारी मज्जामा मारे।
सुझैके म्भूतको मंदिरका आरुः कुन जीवकालका राम में मुरी चंचलीने मेरी।
रतर तुजे रचियो ते मक्ततेमो राम देव ज्ञान देवता नेवार ग्राम गायक जन्मे।’

…..Mammat sund Kayvaparakasha chchu Hindustani shairiyatras akh aham duet te ye heaki az te ase khasa karith Lale Vaakh, Shaikeh Shruke te vatchun shairi hinz qader shinasi karnas manz madadgaar saebit sabdith har gah Kareshran naqaadan our kun kal ganne….7

(Mammatas Kayva Prakasha is an important contribution to the Indian poetics, infact it is a useful book that will help us to know and understand the poetry of Lal and Shaikh in the proper context).

By the above statement it can be said that the influence of the Sanskrit poetics was creative and critical on the Kashmiri poetics. Also one of the famous Sanskrit scholar Prof. S. S. Toshkhani in his article titled as “Beginnings of Kashmiri language and literature” writes about the major influence on the poetic tradition:

“It needs to be noted that pre-modern Kashmir was centuries a part of the Sanskrit metropolis”, to use the words of Sheldon Pollock, and the space occupied by it was so significant that it was able to determine the intellectual and the cultural climate in the whole country by contributing in fields as varied as literary expressions, theory of language, philosophy, aesthetics, grammar, logic, historiography, theology and so on.8

From the above statement it is educed that Sanskrit tradition had a long lasting effect not only on the poetics but also on overall cultural climate of Kashmir. Now coming to the beginnings of the Kashmiri poetic tradition, a brief account of the folk tradition is as under:

A Kashmiri muses when his herd winds over the verdurous lea. He sings to dance when he takes his sheep to the pastures. He describes the boat he piles in the water of Vistara or Jhelum, which he calls river of love. He entertains himself with the ‘song of love’. He entertains himself with opera songs. He is enchanted by the natural beauty of environments and grows romantic to sing to his love. He sings even when carrying the load. The maid sings even when she washes clothes or cleanses utensils and grinds corn. As a matter of fact, Kashmiri women unlettered mostly, have ‘relieved the tedium of their life’. By finding in these songs ‘a sincere echo of emotion.’ The Kashmiri sings in chorus on matrimonial occasions. His lull by notes lulls the child in cradle. He elegizes, at their death those near and dear to him. He is, besides mystical.9

From the above lines it is evident that Kashmir has had a rich folk tradition which included all the songs pertaining to the day to day activities of the common people. The roots of Kashmiri language and literature begun from:

II. Chumma Sampradya

Within the heyday of Sanskrit tradition Kashmiri language was gradually gaining grounds, though very less information is available to us in the form of written records but one comes across the works such as “Chumma Samprádaya” or “Shangra Shelok”, an earliest specimen of the Kashmiri language. Although this work is not poetical but it amply explains esoteric Tantric sects of those times. These verses were highly sanskritised and were accepted by the Hindu, Tantric and Buddhist priests and those who were the priests of Shaivism and only their disciples understood the language of chumpadas. In this context, S. S. Toshkhani writes:

The ‘Chumma Sampádaya’ is an unpublished text though an exercise for publishing it was started by the Research and Publication Department of Jammu & Kashmir in the sixties of the last century and was aborted later for reasons not known. It seeks to expound the tenets of an esoteric Tantric sect aligned to the Karma school and can be assigned to the 11th century. It is a text not entirely written in Kashmiri but has only thirty odd verses in that language, which complements the seventy-four verses written in Sanskrit. But though mediated by Sanskrit and not exactly literary in content, these verses announce the inauguration of the Chumma Samprádaya as a language.

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of a departure that was to be of great significance in the
literary history of the Kashmiri language.\textsuperscript{10}

Some of the verses are:

\begin{quote}
\begin{align*}
\text{Bhāva svabhavā saba avināśi} \\
\text{Svapna sabhavana vi upanna /} \\
\text{Te aj nirāvidhi agama prakāśī} \\
\text{Idassa dishti kāla vipachhanna //}^{11} \\
\text{Vigalāni shunñya āshunñya svārūpā} \\
\text{Vividha padārthā sāthu kavaļḍ /} \\
\text{Āshayu chitti sadā nirūpā} \\
\text{Vicchī vijjū virtha pragherḍ //}^{12}
\end{align*}
\end{quote}

The specimen of the \textit{Chummpad} in Devanagari are as:

\begin{quote}
\begin{center}
\text{G.S.(MS.), foio. 1.}
\end{center}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\text{Quoted from the \textit{Kula-Kridavatara},
\textit{T.A.V.}, XI, pp. 228-29.}
\end{quote}

\section*{III. Mahanaya Prakasha}

Shiti Kantha’s \textit{Mahanaya Prakasha} is the earliest recorded form of Kashmiri language. Shiti Kantha belonged to Pampur district and lived and wrote in 13\textsuperscript{th} C, there are no evidences about the birth and death of Shiti Kantha. The book is preserved in Bandarkar Institute Pune and its manuscript has not been modified and changed. This book was published by Mukund Ram Shastri for J&K Research Library. Due to very little information about the book there was confusion about the authorship of ‘Baalbodni Nayasuk’, which Grierson has claimed to be written by Shiti Kantha. Grierson while mentioning about the language of Mahanaya Prakasha writes:

The work consists about 94 verses in old Kashmiri, not easy to understand. The language is old, belonging to the period when Prakrit, in the Apabharmss stage, had just merged into the language that finally became Kashmiri of the present day. On enquiry, I have obtained the following information from Nityanand Shastri. Shitikantha was the author of Bala-Bodhini-nyasa, a vyakhyā on the Bala-Bodhini of his ancestor Kavindra Jagaddhara. In the introduction of this vyakhyā, Shitikantha states that he wrote it during the reign of Hassan Shah, the son of Haider Shah\textsuperscript{1}. This opinion has had to be revised in the view of the fact that Shitikantha, the author of Bala-Bohdhini, has been found not to be the Shitikantha who wrote Mahanaya Prakasha. The manuscript, Shitikantha Vamshavali, gives the genealogy of the author of Bal-badhini as prepared by himself; and gives the name of another Shitikantha, an ancestor, four generations earlier. He does not, however, mention ancestor wrote Mahanaya Prakasha, probably because he gives names of Sanskrit works, not Kashmiri. Moreover, the internal evidence of it

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
has persuaded the Kashmiri scholars to place Mahanaya Prakasha as an earlier work.\footnote{Kaul, Jaylal. Lal Ded, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, 1975, pp. 59-60.}

From the above quote we can infer that Grierson has placed him in 15th C, but Shiti kant’s guru lived during 12th C and it was also found that Shitikantha was born 150 years before grammarian of same name. Also the text and context does not belong to the 15th C as Kashmiri language had fully emerged at that time. So it was concluded that Shiti kant belonged to 13th C. Further, the importance of Mahanaya Prakasha lies in the fact that it is the oldest evidence of the Kashmiri written in 13th C. The book was based on, ‘sarvogenic desha basha’. About the internal content of the Mahanaya Prakasha, S. S. Toshkhani writes:

Mahanaya Prakasha (illumination of great system or system of great meaning) is a work of karma (gradation) school which is akin to kula (familial) school and is based on shaktopaya or the energetic way. It deals with goddess, the wheel of energies and ritual sex and emphasis that great meaning or the absolute sense expresses itself through four forms of speech; para (transcendent and undifferentiated), pashyanti (visioning), mardhyama (interjacent) aikhari (displayed) word. Obviously all this terminology and esoteric practices of jnaansiddhi, mantrasiddhi and melapsiddhi associated with the propitiation of deities like vameshi, khechari, bhuchari, sambaebhakshini and rudreshwari cannot by any stretch of imagination be taken to be poetry.\footnote{Toshkhani, S.S. “Beginnings of Kashmir Language and Literature.” Dialogue, July-Sep 2008, Vol-10. file:///D:/Beginnings%20of.htm}

So this book is prosaic in nature than being poetic in content and further the text is written in very tough language.

Avtar Krishan Rahber while analyzing the Grierson’s comments on Mahanaya Prakasha states:

1. It was time when Kashmiri language was at the stage when Upranaya was gaining status.
2. He acclaims him a great scholar
3. He was well versed with Shiviate Philosophy.
4. He did not think in Kashmiri but thought in Sanskrit.

The text of the Mahanaya Prakasha consists of 4 lines quatrain which are:

\begin{quote}
Yasu yasu jantus samvid yasu yasu \\
Nilā pīta sukha dukha sarūp / \\
Udayisdatta samārīi samarasa \\
\\
Devat akka kishī paru rāji \\
Jaga ghasmaru bhairu bhakshçt / \\
Nant shatta gāska ncrāji
\end{quote}

\footnote{13 Kaul, Jaylal. Lal Ded, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, 1975, pp. 59-60.}
\footnote{15 Rehber, Avtar Kishan. Kashmir Adbhuch Tawareekh, published by the author, 1965, p.139.}
\footnote{17 Ibid.}
\footnote{18 Kaul, Jaylal. Kashmiri Literature (three special lectures), Prasaranga University of Mysore, 1970, p.8.}
\footnote{19 Ibid.}
IV. Lal Dyad

The dawn of Kashmiri poetry begins with the famous mystic poetess of Kashmir Lal Dyad. She was attributed with many names Lal Arifah, Lal Muaj, Rabai Thani, Mariam-ul Makani, Lal Granny and Majnuni Aqila. She is the first medieval mystic poetess who through her mystic verse gave a new life to the Kashmiri language. She is counted among the greatest poets that Kashmir has ever produced and has left an indelible impact on the poetic tradition. Earliest Sanskrit chronicles are silent about Lal Dyad, however, her earliest mention is given in hagiographic document by Baba Davud Mishkati in Asrar-ul Abrar (the secrets of pious) written in A.D. 1634.  

Abdul Wahab Shayak, who wrote chronicle of Kashmiri in Persian verse, gives 735 A.H./A.D. 1334-35 as the date of Lal Dyad’s birth in a verse:

Fazun bud bar haft sanj siva paranj
Za wair une shud bedidar gahnaj

Greirson calls her a ‘wandering ascetic’, since Lal Dyad was spiritual heir of Shaikh Nur ud Din Nurani who paid glowing tributes to her in the following verses:

That Lalla of Padmanpur - she drank
Her fill of divine nectar
She was indeed an Avar of ours.
O God, grant me the same boon!

Nineteenth century Kashmiri poet Shams Faqir mentions about her:

Lalla merged her Prana in the transcendent;
For while she went ostensibly to bathe
At the sacred shrine of Shurayar ghat,
With a leap and bound she jumped across
To where there is none other than God.

Lal Dyad’s poetry shows distinct characteristic of modern Kashmir and one can identify the linguistic transition from pre-modern to modern Kashmiri, her verses have been translated by Baskher Razdan in 18th century. Moreover, she used aphorisms that testify her keen insight of wisdom and judgment she was gifted with. She rendered her verses in the form of Vaakh. The Vaakh in the words of Jaylal Kaul can be defined as:

The Vaakh is mostly four lines stanza, complete and independent in itself, sententious gnomic verse. The sense seldom, if ever runs on to another Vaakh as it does in one instance. There are, however, several Vaakh that have common refrain, and few are put in the form of question and answers all these have close connection with each other. Each line of Vaakh completes the sense, it does not overflow into the line that follows; and therefore it has both compactness and pointedness, giving it the edge of proverb.

From the above statement it can be comprehended that Vaakh were four lined stanzas and some of them were in question answer form and moreover, these Vaakh had the compact and the terse texture. These Vaakhs represented the mystical and spiritual stature of the poetess and reflects the inner conflict in order to have union with the One Being. Some of the mystical gleanings of Vaakh are:

Asthen ay te gatchun gatche
Pakun gatshe den kiho rath.
Yoral ay ta turi gatshun gatshe;
Kenh na-ta kenh na-ta kenth na-ta kyah?
We have been coming into existence continuously,
and we cannot escape death;
It is inevitable to move on this path night and day.
We ought to go back to the place wherefrom we came.
There must be something in this;
otherwise what is (all-this)

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21 Ibid., p. 4.
22 Ibid., p. 88.
23 Ibid., p. 89.
24 Ibid., p. 66.
These verses show that Lalla was highly influenced by the sufistic trend where she expresses her wish for eternal being thereby showing the transitory nature of this life, even about the sufistic trend of Lal Dyad, R. C. Temple remarks:

Lalla, in her verses, sometimes seems to have been under the influence of Sufi doctrine, for she uses words with a plane and an esoteric meaning throughout them, according to deliberate habit of Sufis 26

26 Damah dam kormas damanahle
Prazalyom daph ta naneyem zath
Andarium prakash nebar tshotum
Gati rotum ta karmas thaph.

For a moment I suppressed bellows of my respiration,
Lo and behold! The lamp lit up brightly and realized myself!
The light within me sparkled out;
In the encompassing darkness,
I seized at it (the bright gem of self) and gripped it tightly. 27

Again we have the quatrain:

Dihchi lari dari-bar troprim,
Prana-tsur rotum ta dyutmas dam;
Hradayi chuthi andar gandum.
Omaki cobuka tulimas bam.

Closing fast the windows and doors of the house of my body,
I caught hold of the thief, prana and barred him in;
Tying him hand and foot inside the closet of my heart
I lashed him hard with the whip of Om. 28

27 Parimoo, B. N. Ascent of Self, Motilal Banarsidas, Bungalow Road, Jawahar Nagar, Delhi, 1987, p. 162.
28 Ibid., p. 74.

Lal boh tsayas savaman bagabaras,
Vuchum Shivas shakt milth ta vah!
Tati lai karmas amritrasar.
Zindai maras ta me kari kyah.

I, Lalla willingly entered through the garden gate,
There, O joy! I found Shiva united with shakhti;
there and then I got absorbed drinking at the lake of nectars
Immune to harm am I, dead as I am to the world, though 29

29 Ibid., p. 103.

From the above verses it can be inferred that Lal Dyad had a distinct style of writing poetry, and infact, it seems that these verses highlighted both the mystical doctrine as well as her great command over the poetical aesthetics which was the legacy of the past Sanskrit tradition. Also we find that these verses are heavily loaded with alliteration, metaphors, lyricism and above all they have defined poetic diction. About Lal Dyad’s mystic power, Abdul Ahad Azad remarks:

Shaikh-ul Aalam was the founder saint of Reshi order. Abul Fuqara Baba Nasib-ud Din Gazi and Baba Khalil have respectively given Shaikh-ul Aalam’s biographical details as:


Shaikh-ul Aalam kay jamaleyati shaaror ki pukhthagi aur rachaven ki hasyati peker tarashi ke khubsurat namunu se bi mutarish hota hai. Un key yahaa aise peker kasrat se milte hain jo un ki basri, samaei, shami aur lamsi hisyaat ki nazakat ka ehsaas dilate hai aur qari ki hisyaat ko bi mutasir karte hain.32

In the poetry of Shaikh-ul Aalam one finds almost every poetical quality which a poet should possess. One who reads his poetry is significantly influenced by the aesthical aspect of his poetry.

Shaikh Nur-ud Din was the founder saint Reshi order. Abul Fuqara Baba Nasib-ud Din G speaks about Rishis:

The candle of religion is lit by Rishis
They are the pioneers of the path of belief
The heartwarming quality of the humble souls
Emanates from the inner purity of the hearts of Rishis
The vale of Kashmir that you call paradise:33
Owes a lot of its charm to the traditions set in vogue by Rishis.

Regarding his birth dates there is a sort of disagreement. Rehber in Kashmiri Adbech Tawareekh mentions that Rajtarangini and Jaina Rajtarangini are silent about his existence.34 But later Baba Naseeb ud Din Gazi and Baba Khalil have respectively given Shaikh-ul Aalam’s biographical details as:

Shakir Nur ud Din’s father was Salar Sanz and mother’s name was Sadra Mouj. He gives his family background as:

Being an exponent of Rishi cult, he lived a very ascetic life. Allama Khaki says about Rishis way of living as:

Roshnai shamae Deen az Rishiyaan ast
Rahnunmae rahe yakeen az Rishiyaan ast
Dil nawazi murdame ahle niyaz
Az safai baatini dill az Rishiyaan ast
Khush sarayee khilde a Kashmir raa
Khush rawaaaj az davlate een Rishiyaan ast
Nuri afsaan ruh iram az hat taraf
Goshaye har astaan az Rishiyaan ast
Shaikh Nur-ud Din, the preceptor of all Rishis, was a great devotee and had a deep communion with God. In addition to leading a retired and solitary life, he was also one of those who continually fast. He had given up eating flesh, milk, onions and honey for many years. He was a man with intuition, had spiritual powers and had fine mode of speech, he was like Uwais (in that he had no known, spiritual guide), as an eloquent narrator he stated.  

Being a religious preacher, his poetry was didactic and exhortative in tone. But in spite of that one finds number of *Shruks* where the aesthetical sense has been fully exploited thereby imparting the poetic charm which his *Shruks* were loaded with and also the influence of past aesthetics tradition of Sanskrit. Moreover, he rendered his verses in the form of *Shruk*. Some of the *shruks* are four-lined while some are long poems which can be fitted in the genre of Vatchun. Rehber and Azad give the evidence of the work of Shaikh in Sanskrit proving it deep-rooted tradition of past and his Sanskrit words in the *Shruk*. Azad gives the account of Reshnama as:

Some of the poetic verses of Shaikh are:

*Kal hai kara k hai viz*  
Pulai lagi allah hu  
*Che yur gazakh su to ruzi*  
*Dil hai viz* Allah hu.

Probe the heart of things, flooded you will be with impulse divine.

And the spring of divinity in the full swing will be.  
Was his path and half way he will meet you,  
And the holy music will gush out from your soul.

*Bul bul poshi –vari garan*  
*Mogul garan huni vaas*  
*Sah shai shuni –lay garan*  
*Khar tsharan guhiled ta saas?*

In search of flower-gardens roams the song-thrush,  
And the owl seeks the ruined corner,  
The lion and the jackal wander in the wilderness,  
And the wood-louse looks for dung and dirt.

Thus, from the above verses it can be comprehended that Shaikh-ul Aalam’s poetry had a great aesthetic appeal and has used excellent poetical language and diction. Both Lal Dyad and Shaikh were the upholders, rather beginners of the poetic tradition of Kashmir, who, through the *Vaahks* and *Shruks* conveyed both the mystical message as well and became the role models for the post-modern poets of Kashmir.

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