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A Study on Spiritualism in the Lyrics of Shah Abdul Karim

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Abstract

Baul Shamrat Shah Abdul Karim was a distinctive Bengali spiritual saint, mystic lyricist, song composer and a social reformer of modern era. His works and ideology have an immense influence on sub-continental music and culture especially in Bengali and Indian culture after almost two hundreds years of the period of great Lalon Shah. Most of his lyrics have simple messages, but the appeal is utmost universal. Mysticism, optimism, truth, spiritualism, pragmatism, straightforwardness, morals and ethics are simultaneously profound in Karim's lyrics. Some of the lyrics are concerned with the behavior and attitude of common men. Karim's lyrics were the great devices for changing the society and human thoughts as well. He believed in the power of music to alter the intellectual and emotional state in order to be able to understand and appreciate life itself. He has become an iconic figure for practicing religious tolerance.

Keywords: Spiritualism, Body & Soul, *Fanaa*, Libido, Self wisdom, Humanism.

1. Introduction

Shah Abdul Karim, the legend of *Baul* songs and a versatile genius had all through lived a very simple life often faced with harsh reality. However, with the recent trend of popular modern versions of his spiritual songs in Bangladesh, he is now widely recognized and honored by the multitude, even by the younger generations who had never been 'fans of traditional folk songs'. Though enough belated, his contributions to Bengali culture has now been officially recognized by the State and the people. In fact he was a great man of simplicity, modesty and honesty. In this work we will find out the original *Baul Shamrat* (বাবুল সম্রাট).

Spiritualism escorts Abdul Karim to the development of a unique spiritual and philosophical system that accentuated the role of fate or the belief that events have been inevitable. Karim had accepted humanity early in his life, and his lifelong ideas of spiritualism, philosophy, and the occult reveal his deep curiosity in the divine and its interaction with humanity.

Shah Abdul Karim's spiritual lyrics are sometimes too ambiguous to be understood for the common people. He faced a lot of troubles in the way of his meditation. Very often ignorant people could not realize his mystic and humane philosophy. He never felt bothered with people. He just enjoyed and remained silent in facing any difficulty. But he was desperate for songs. No obstacle could stop him from singing and composing new lyrics. Moreover obstacles forced him to compose more and more songs. Thus he composed the songs about Muhammad (SM), divine love, Radha-Krisno, *Murshidi* (মুর্শিদি), soil and nature, common man, ancient events etc.

2. Objectives

Our principal objective is to find out the spiritual philosophy and mystic qualities in the lyrics of Shah Abdul Karim in the sub-continent after almost two hundred years of great Lalon Shah. This work will also make out the effectiveness of mysticism in youth studying the mystic ideas of Shah Abdul Karim. Spiritual elements can be the factors to remove spiritual barrenness from the heart of the modern people. Readers can be more self-controlled, self-reliant, self-restraint and self-confident after being informed about the original *Baul Shamrat* Shah Abdul Karim and his mystic philosophy of meditation in contemporary sub-continental context.

3. Materials and Methods

Based on the criticism of Shah Abdul Karim, a few articles and analysis were published in the shapes of different books and in few literary journals, newspapers and websites that become useful as the supporting materials for the study. Collected lyrics from his followers and information from his son Shah Noor Jalal remain helpful for the part of the study.

Shah Abdul Karim is quite mystic in his philosophy to present the universal needs of people to achieve eternal peace by meditation. This work will take an attempt to find out his spiritual philosophy from his famous lyrics in a brief way in the typical context of meditation in sub-continental perspective.

To develop the premise, the primary idea is found from the study on the lifestyle and the lyrics of Abdul Karim. Some recognized sources including Abdul Karim's son Mr. Shah Noor Jalal and a 12 year attendant of *Baul Shamrat* Mr. Sejul Hussen are found helpful for information about Abdul Karim's life and lyrics whose names are enlisted in the acknowledgments part. For the development of the hypothesis; the only helpful method was 'Observation Method' for this non-fictional work. By using this method, the researchers went through different literary articles, critical compositions, and websites in order to be acknowledged in the related topics. The researchers have used necessary transliteration for Shah Abdul Karim's Bengali lyrics before and after every explication.

4. Etymology of Spiritualism

Spiritualism or mysticism is the belief that there is hidden meaning in life or that each human being can unite with God. It also means the belief that living people can communicate with people who have died.

In Islam spiritualism lies in Sufism that is a discipline within Islam. A practitioner of this tradition is known as a Sufi. Sufis believe they are practicing '*Ihsan*' (an Arabic word that means the perfection of worship). Sufism believed that the *Qur'an* and *Hadith* have esoteric, connotative meaning and symbolism what Sufis try to expose. The word 'Sufi' means 'purity'. Sufis emphasize the purification of the heart from vices such as greed, lust, envy, wrath, pride etc by practicing remembrance of God. Ultimately, the purified soul is said to contain God Himself; this may result in ecstatic experiences.^[1]

This philosophy has similarity to *Darshan* in Hinduism. *Darshan* is the act of seeing and being seen by the deity to attain grace, is one of the central aspects of Hindu worship.^[2] Hindu ideas of Liberation from cycles of Karma (*moksha*), self-realization (*atma-jana*), non-identification (*Kaivalya*), experience of ultimate reality (Samadhi), Innate Knowledge (*Sahaja* and *Svabhava*) are the forms of mysticism. This philosophy is also related to the '*nirvana*' of Lord Buddha.

Christian Spiritualism can be realized from the definition of the National Spiritualist Association of Churches- "The science, philosophy and religion of continuous life, based upon the demonstrated fact of communication, by means of medium ship, with those who live in the Spirit World."

So, there are thousands of religions but the spirituality is only one type. Spirituality is for those who want to reach the Spiritual Ascent without dogmas. Religion is not God. Spirituality is infinite consciousness and all that is - it is God. Spirituality is divine without rules.^[3]

5. Discussion

5.1. Lifestyle of Shah Abdul Karim

Shah Abdul Karim was born on February 15, 1916 in Ujan Dhol village, Derai Thana, in Sunamganj District in Sylhet Division, one of the remotest villages of Bangladesh. Growing up with poverty and hardship, he started expressing his thoughts and emotions musically from very early age. Ektara, a traditional single string instrument has been his constant companion. He never had a chance to enroll himself in a school. So, he had to garner knowledge from what nature could present him in cryptic language that only a saint or a Sufi could decipher-the knowledge that turned him into a legendary poet-cum-singer. His songs had spell-binding effects on the people in and around his village, not to mention his melodic, soothing and pleasingly rustic voice. He was so indulged in music. As he was growing up, he received training on spiritual and *baul* music from '*Shah Ibrahim Mastan Baksh*'. Abdul Karim was made famous purely from the one and only respectable person Shah Ibrahim Mastan. At one point Abdul Karim lost his voice and he then came to Shah Ibrahim Mostan's feet and begged for forgiveness of his sins and then couple of years later Abdul Karim regained his voice again and even at the age of 90 years his voice was recognized to be the loudest yet beautiful for an elderly person, purely because of Shah Ibrahim Mostan.

Baul Shamrat Shah Abdul Karim got married when he was 38 years old with a girl Momojan Bibi. But Shah Abdul Karim called her name 'Sorola'. Their only child's name is Shah-Noor-Jalal. *Baul* Shah Abdul Karim has written and composed over 1600 songs. These songs are organized in six books, like: Aftab Sangeet (1950), Gano Sangeet (1954), Kalnir Dheu (1984), Dhormela (1990), Bhatir Chithi (1998) and Kalnir Kooley. Bangla Academy has translated ten of his songs into English language.^[4]

Abdul Karim was always a patriotic man. In 1952's language movement, 54's Juktfront election, 66's 'soy-dofa' movement, 70's election, 71's Liberation War, 90's autocracy opposition movement he maintained the rightful role against all oppression. In 1965 from a club of London invited him to perform in London. There he got enough love and respect. Shah Abdul Karim regularly sang rustic songs at Sylhet Betar. In 1974, it was announced from there that now '*Baul* Abdul Karim and his team' would sing a song. For his popularity he went to London for the second and third time in 1985 & 2002.^[5]

He was awarded the Ekushey Padok in 2001 for his outstanding musical achievements. He also received *Drouhee Kotha-shahitayk* Abdur Rouf Choudhury Award in 2000, Rajib Rabeya Literature award 2000, Lebak award 2003, *Meril Prothom Alo* lifetime achievement award 2004 etc. He left us on 12th September 2009 at the age of 93 due to respiratory problems in the other world after years of his probing into the mystic philosophy of body and mind.

5.2. Remarks

Different times many scholars comment on Shah Abdul Karim. Their remarks vividly depict the greatness of Shah Abdul Karim.

Distinguished columnist and lyricist Mustofa Jaman Abbasi says that Shah means King, it means the emperor. No more epithets are required for him.^[6]

Abul Ahsan Chowdhury says about his boldness of speaking against the oppressors straightforwardly without

any hesitation. His songs are of vigilance, protest and rebellion.^[7]

Eminent writer Abdur Rahman Khokon says about his meditative self-wisdom. He says that Abdul Karim is a bard of good conduct. He should not be regarded as a singer of a particular nation or country.^[7]

5.3. Philosophy of Shah Abdul Karim

The mystic philosophy of Abdul Karim has inspired many poets and social and religious thinkers, including Mawlana Vashani, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and many others. His disciples are found in all over Bangladesh and in many parts of India.

He was against all religious conflicts and violence and always held a common space for all religions. The mainstream of religious life in Bengal, Hindu or Muslim, has always had a parallel marginalized counterpart- that of the lower class - the outcast and excluded, who were rebelling against all fundamentalist strictures. The culture of silence takes forms through the *Baul*-Fakir faith and expression at first from Lalon Shah before two hundred years ago.

Like the great saint Lalon Shah, he did not believe in classes or castes of the fragmented and hierarchical society. Abdul Karim is considered as the "*Baul Shamrat*" for his popularity and extra ordinary contribution in Bangladeshi culture and literature. The popularity of *Baul Shamrat* is deeply rooted with the people. His soul-searching *baul* songs have hugely captivated his countrymen in Bangladesh and many of his fans living abroad. So he has many true and faithful followers. Abdul Karim, the mystic philosopher and artist, exists on his own and in his own right only.

Through the myriad *baul* songs woven with colorful threads of allegories, Shah Abdul Karim tried to take our souls away from this busy world at least for a while to unite us with God and to open our eyes to the mystic world. He took us as his companions to show us the state of separation existing between the souls of men and the spiritual ground. He made us understand many other mysteries, which are not touchable, viewable or audible in this world full of noises made out of greed, envies, and sins.^[8]

Abdul Karim's grand style lies in his lyrics on physiology. He thought that man's body is formed according to a subtle purpose about which we can not realize anything without the help of a *kamel Pir* (A mystic term for Sufis that means a spiritual *guru* with divine knowledge). He deals with the 'expression of body' (*Deho Sadhona*) and 'expression of mind' (*Mono Sadhona*) to open the mystery of the creation and spiritualism. Here are reflected some evidences of his mystic philosophy in some of his most famous lyrics.

6. Major Findings

6.1. Similarities with the Islamic Sufis

Karim had similarities with the Islamic Sufis. Sufis and *Bauls* are almost of the same opinion that there are some mysteries lying in the universe of which the data come to the lovers' soul from the soul of Rasul (SM). Only the God seeker can receive those holy verses. Only the devotee can understand the mystery of Allah. He depicts this sense in his lyric titled as "*Ved bujhia pore namaz Mumine*". He also exposes another sense of the Sufis that five times prayer has some inner meaning. We stand in the prayer in

the form of '*Alif*'. Then we have been in the shape of '*Hwa*' while doing *ruku*. We shape the '*Mim*' form in *Sijdah*. Our body takes the shape of '*Dwal*' when before completing our prayer with *salam*. Thus the word '*Ahmad*' forms from our body language while saying prayers. Ahmad was the name given by Allah to the great prophet Hazrat Muhammad (SM). So, these are all mystic and cosmic philosophy of Abdul Karim. Common people never even think about this.

6.2. Mysticism in human body and Soul

Abdul Karim finds human body full of mysteries in his spiritual lyric "*Gari cholena, cholena*". The word *Manobgari* is man himself. *Bondhu* refers to very close one who is affectionate to him that significantly symbolizes the Almighty Creator. At the end we can understand about the last world that life will not be stopped. '*Condemgari*' means the worthless vehicle and it represents the imperfect people and "*Bishom ondhokar*" represents death and the life after death for the evil doers in the world. In that moment nothing will be hidden.

In a man's body he brings four branches and leaves of trees in the lyric titled as "*Ajab ronger ful futeche*". He says that there are twenty leaves in every branch. Here, in fact he symbolizes the two hands and two legs with their twenty fingers. Here, he brings a word *mohajon* but doesn't bring the meaning of the word. According to his followers and disciples, this word means the Guide of one's life. One cannot go closer to the Almighty without a spiritual guide. He again says that Saints can enjoy the pleasures of from the beauty of the Almighty's appearance. But they become silent and never tell about the matter what is happening in their mind.

The song "*Hawar pakhi vora amar matir pinjiray*" is written on the human body and the soul relationship. The word '*hawarpakhi*' means human soul. It is not to be seen but we feel about the works of soul. It only can stay in the human body. '*Matir pinjira*' means the case of human body where soul lies. Anytime soul can fly but those things love each other. Here '*Dui Janala*' represents the Nose & Mouth. Our breath we can take by those two organs. '*Ghore Baire*' signifies the place of human body and another is outer world. It is a system of blowing indeed. This running process of our breath will not run forever. It will stop one day in a twinkle of eyes.

6.3. Fanaa- Devotion to Divine Love

Abdul Karim's divine love reflects in the lyric "*Tumi amar pran sokha*", and "*Mon Mojale ore baula gaan*". There is found complete devotion to the Almighty God in his lines. He is also grateful to Allah for giving him enough blessings. His verses show his platonic love to his creator. Love is everything to satisfy Allah. Everything will be ended but love of Almighty will never end.

Abdul Karim also deals with a spiritual term *Fanaa* (an Arabic word that means to stay with the existence of the Almighty) that means to dedicate everything and to be lost in the vastness and resourcefulness of the Almighty God. He also emphasizes in the place that to get the Rasul (SM), people must have a '*Usila*' (an Arabic term for the meaning of means or ways). As he says in "*Vabcho ki mon pir bine*",

"*Vabcho ki mon pir bine nobire pawa jay
Pirer bakko koro lokkho ved bujhe naw isharay*"

He says about *fanaa*. He says that if anyone can dedicate his/her everything for the sake of God before his/her own *Pir*, he/she can get the *bateni* (an Arabic word for the meaning of holy secrets) identity of the Rasul Mohammad (sm). And this will only happen when a man is in the right track of honesty, humanity and civility. *Baul Shamrat* says, “*Fanaa pir sheikh hasil hole fanaa pir rasul mile Fanaa fillai jabe chole thakile soja rastay*”

His lyric titled as “Dayal baba, kebla kabaa, aynar karigor” is also much spiritual. He urges his spiritual guru to set a mirror in his heart as he can enjoy the beauty of the Almighty.

6.4. Libido

Perhaps the most important songs of Abdul Karim are related to the man’s libido, which often misinterpreted or misquoted, refers to perversion, but in ancient times it was a means of platonic and eternal love. Accepted or unaccepted, it had been considered as the most utilitarian way to get the self purification. We find such opinion in T S Eliot’s *The Waste Land* where the people of waste land are indulged in such fruitless sex. In his song “*Kaam nodir torongo*”, he says not to fear seeing the force of lust. One should conquer lust for one’s self purification. He can get the final destination of mysterious island of the Sufis. As Abdul Karim says,

“*Kaam nodir torongo dekhe kore voy
Jante pare porom totto, gurur montro je jon loy*”

In the song “*Satar na janiya jole diona satar*”, he says about a mystic theory. Here he says about the imaginary river named ‘*Maya*’ which has three branches named ‘*Tribeni*’. Lalon Shah also told about *tribeni* in his lyric “*somoy bujhe badhal badhlana*”. He says, “*tribenir oi tirodhare, meen rupe sai biraj kore*”

If any one doesn’t know how to swim in that river and how to control breathe; he shouldn’t swim in that river. His ignorance will destroy him in the darkest part of the river. Here we get another idea of controlling breathe while doing intercourse as Lalon Shah also mentioned such thoughts in his famous lyric “*Dekhna re sob hawar khela*”. Lalon says, “*dhoru chor hawar ghore faand pete*”

Baul people compare swimming with man’s sexual act. They think sex is perverted in these days. But it is an important device to have the mystery of creation. If it is done in a polite and gentle way, cosmic knowledge will come before our eyes. But the modern people make sex in a wild way considering it only an enjoyment. Sex is not only for satisfying our lust but also for completing our eternal love. And Love can not be obtained with force or lust only. So Abdul Karim says,

“*Jhok bujhiya gelere mon, monimukta mile tokhon
Kew kine omullo ratan, kew kore vober bepar*”

6.5. Self-wisdom

Abdul Karim also emphasizes on the man’s self like the great philosophers Abdul kadir Jilani (R), Socrates, Lalon Shah and many others. He says that man has the most valuable celestial power inside him but no man can think

about it. He regrets for man’s failure to understand the self in these lines of the song “*Gurur bakko lawre mon*”. Love is eternal according to the words of Abdul Karim. But this love must be only for the creator. It is also the theme of the Islamic Sufis. So Abdul Karim says, “*Premar totto premik bine pabe koi sastro purane Voktojone totto jene nishate ace bivore*”

7. Semblance of Lalon Shah as a Humanist

In the lyric “*Asob niye dandwa keno*”, we get the touch of humanism. Man is the best creation of God. The creator sent us to pray. There may have several groups such as the Muslims, the Hindus, the Christians, the Buddhists, etc. Some people may call Allah, some call Jesus, Some other call Bhagban; but indeed we all pray to the same Supreme God.

Shah Abdul Karim says that our exits and entrances in the world are not eternal. We came with an empty hand and will leave like that. So, we should love people and love the creator because God exists in every human being. This is the main way to get God. Here Abdul Karim Says, “*Karim bole kangal beshe, jonmo niyeci deshe Manush ke valobeshe hok na jibon oboshan*”

Here we can go back to Lalon Shah. He was also a humanist. According to his words, God’s presence in man or among human existence is the Supreme Being which should be recognized and honored. In his lyric “*Sohoj manush*”, he gave this idea: “*Sohoj manush voje dekhmare mon dibbogyane*”

Again in “*Sorbosadhon siddho hoy tar*”, he depicts the way to get salvation by acknowledging a man of divine knowledge.

“*Sorbosadhon siddho hoy tar,
Vobe manush guru nistha jar*”

8. Conclusion

Lalon Shah was the torchbearer of *Baul* culture in sub-continent from last two hundreds years. Shah Abdul Karim became the most eminent lyricist and singer for the revival of *baul* tradition of Lalon at modern period in sub-continental context. His mystic lyrics are full of spiritual suggestions for the eternal peace seekers in practical life and the life after death. The mystic songs are helpful for the development of moral sense among young generation. He pulled us to a tranquil world far above this earth. He let us rediscover the meaning of life lived, passion of love translated into marriage and also the glory of love unrequited---all through his *baul* songs.

He was the man beyond all castes, customs, religions and groups. He boldly protested all extremism of religions. His mystic philosophy showed the process of *baul* meditation but indeed, had great moral values for entire humanity.

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