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Indian Tavern and the Grecian Urn: A Comparative Study of Bachchan and Keats

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Abstract

Intoxication of mind, oneness of hearts, timelessness of beauty, unfulfilled desires, and eternity of truth are universal ideas. They exist in every age and get reflected through the best works of that time. The mysteries of life, relationships, societal norms, death, after-life, awareness of pain and flux, desire to escape the painful reality and seek repose in the 'ideal' are expressed in the poetry of John Keats and Harivansh Rai Shrivastav/Bachchan. This article aims to discuss John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and Bachchan's "Madhushala" ("The Tavern") on the comparative parameters of intoxication, oneness, timelessness, desire, and truth.

Keywords

Comparative Study; Timelessness; Desire; Truth; Tavern; Urn; John Keats; Bachchan; "Madhushala".

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Introduction

Life is a pool of desires that are eternal yet limited by the inevitability of death. The quest for happiness is never ending; everyone seeks it all their lives. One wishes to be protected and free from the vicissitudes (Sharma). This state of eternity is found in the form of intoxication of mind, oneness of hearts, timelessness of beauty, unquenched desires, and eternal truth in John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819) and Harivansh Rai Shrivastav's/Bachchan's "Madhushala" (1935) ("The Tavern") - which create an opportunity of comparative study between them.

This article aims to discuss these two masterpieces on the comparative parameters of intoxication, oneness, timelessness, desire, and truth in both works. The body of the paper has been divided into three continuous parts. Part one consists of the analysis of "Madhushala"; part two consists of the analysis of "Ode on a Grecian Urn"; and part three concludes the discussion by restating the identical paradigms.

The Indian Tavern

"Madhushala" is the basic metaphor in the poem that speaks about the fullness and intoxication of life as well as its pain and frustration (Siruguri). Love, beauty, pain, sorrow, death – all of these and more are woven into the rich texture of the poem. Madhushala (tavern) embodies the entire philosophy of life: the passionate yearning of the soul for beauty ending only in frustration, the pathetic scarcity and transience of beauty in the world, the agony of disillusionment, the inevitability of death and a stoic acceptance of fatalism as the only armour for the soul (Siruguri). In "Madhushala" Bachchan's reflections on life are conveyed through the emotions he expresses via the interplay of liquor, goblet, barmaid and the bar. The mysteries of life, relationships, societal norms, organized religion, death, after-life are all expressed via these symbols. But a discerning person would soon realize that this is a celebration of the joy of life.

Joy in its purest form; celebration of life devoid of dogma, make-believe, and orthodoxies (Ojha).

Bachchan expresses the intoxication and madness of love in the following lines where the persona is willing to serve the entire wisdom of the ages like a bar girl. The persona has already dedicated the beauty of his life but now with his dance he wishes to lay the universe at his beloved's feet (Sharma):

*Pyas tujhe toh, vishwa tapakar purna nikalunga hala,
Ek paon se shaki bankar nachunga lekar pyala,
Jiwan ki madhurta toh tere upar war chuka,
Aaj nichchawar kardunga mein tujhpar jagki madhushala. (2)*
(Bachchan 25)

Should you be thirsty, I will fire the world, distil its sap away,
Then I will lift the Cup for you and like a Handmaid dance and
play.

In lavish showers of tender sweetness I drained my life for your
completeness

Now as an offering at your feet this world, your House of Wine, I
lay. (Boulton 127)

Bachchan, while setting the stage, repeatedly points to the interconnectedness amongst people. Constantly, he reminds that people's stories (at the deepest level) are not different in the least. The manifestation of individual lives may vary, but at the psychological level, people are one and the same. When people recognize their oneness, they can be ecstatic in each other; for then they know that they cannot hurt each other without hurting themselves in the process. The understanding of this oneness is central to the understanding of the "Madhushala" (Sharma).

*Priyatam, tu meri hala he, mein tera pyasa pyala,
Apne ko mujhme bharkar tu banta he peenewala,*

*Mein tujhko chak chalka karta, mast mujhe pe tu hota,
Ek dusre ki hum dono aaj paraspar madhushala (3) (Bachchan 26)*

My beloved! You are my wine and I am your thirsty tumbler,
Filling yourself within me you yourself become the drinker,
I play with you while you drink me, both brimming with joy,
We both make and complete the Tavern, one within the other.
(Mshubhadeep)

The timelessness of life trickles down to the hearts of the readers with the suggestive disguise of the eternity of tavern and cemetery. The poet harps upon the fact that if death is eternal and perpetual then so be life; so also the pleasures of life.

*Sab mit jayein, bana rahega sundar shaki, yamkala,
Sukhein sab ras, bane rahenge, kintu, halahal au hala,
Dhumdham au chahal pahal ke sthan sabhi sunsan bane,
Jaga karega awirat marghat, jaga karegi madhushala (22)
(Bachchan 32)*

Even if there is apocalypse, the wine bearer and *Yama* shall
continue to live,
Even if all juices dry up, the poison and the wine shall continue
to flow,
Even if the busiest of the places become deserted,
The cemetery will be alive and so will be the Tavern. (Mshubhadeep)

Desire – how strong they become when they remain unfulfilled – just like the rock which emerges from years of lithification, they become the foundation of identity – the foundation on which life builds storeys after storeys. In “Madhushala” Bachchan talks about permanency of the thirst of the drinker; which symbolically suggests - expectation is better than satisfaction.

*Bani rahein angoor latayen jinse milti he hala,
 Bani rahe who mitti jis se banta he madhu ka pyala,
 Bani rahe who madir pipasa trupt na jo hona jane,
 Bane rahein ye peenewale, bani rahe ye madhushala. (28)*
 (Bachchan 34)

May the grapevines from which wine is made be always there,
 May the clay from which the wine cup is made be always there,
 May the wine thirsty who never wants to quench the thirst be
 always there,
 May the wine drinkers be always there, so be the tavern.
 (Mshubhadeep)

One wants to live life but one does not want to be subject to its uncertainties. Human being in confusion sets out to seek happiness, and therein lies the problem. Happiness, as Bachchan conveys is always within. The only path to the tavern of happiness is the desire for the eternal truth which can be achieved through the perpetual journey towards one direction (Sharma).

*Madiralay jane ko ghar se chalta he peenewala,
 'Kis path se jaun?' asmanjas me he woh bholabhala,
 Alag-alag path batlate sab par me ye batlata hoon-
 'Raah pakad tu ek chala chal, pajayega madhushala'. (6) (Bachchan
 27)*

The drinker leaves his home to go to the tavern
 But becomes confused on which road to take,
 Different people show different paths, but I suggest him,
 Choose one path and keep walking, you will reach the tavern
 (Mshubhadeep)

The Grecian Urn

Rooted in awareness of pain and flux, John Keats's odes reveal the poet's desire to escape the painful reality and seek repose in beauty, in the 'ideal'. More than any other of the odes, the implicit subject of the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is the 'ideal' itself (Wigod 113-121). The urn states what it stands for aesthetically. An aesthetic experience is the only knowledge of permanence, eternity, and truth that we can apprehend. That is, only through the physical, ordered form of art, as perceived by the senses, do we know the metaphysical or any intuition of it (D'Avanzo 95-105). *Ode on a Grecian Urn* portrays Keat's attempt to engage with the static immobility of sculpture. The Grecian urn has passed down through countless centuries to the time of the speaker's viewing, yet it exists outside the 'time' in the human sense (Barnes & Noble).

In the first stanza of the ode Keats talks about the "mad pursuit" and "wild ecstasy"; he pictures movement, pursuit of love, dancing, music, and passionate and intoxicated joy in physical being (Shackford 7-13). Perhaps the "maidens loth", the "mad pursuit", "struggle to escape," and "wild ecstasy" suggest the imaginative way in which Keats animated the "wild," "gamesome," "lurking Satyrs" and Pan with a sexual life that Wordsworth only hinted at (D'Avanzo 95-105):

What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? (Keats 258).

Lovers depicted on the urn are beyond the touch of times' tyranny. They will enjoy the oneness of being in love for ever whereas the common humans will suffer the sorrows of love and life. In placing the "all breathing human passion far above", the text affirms desire that buys immortality by permanently deferring the gratification that would spell desire's death. This suspended state becomes the paradigm for the poem's generalized strategy of "teasing," and its impossibility either to possess or lose the desire (Friedman 225-243):

More happy love! more happy, happy love!
Forever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
Forever panting, and forever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue (Keats 258).

The concept of timelessness has been dealt in the ode where Keats talks about the melodies which the musicians depicted on the urn play. Transient heard melodies are posed against the eternal unheard ones, which define the relation between two kinds of love – one is a human experience and the other is an unrealizable ideal state (Friedman 225-243):

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone...
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new (Keats 258).

In the second and third stanzas the poet advances from the obvious external delights of life to those which depend upon imagination. The very audible and present melodies of every-day life are sweet, but beyond these pleasures of the immediate senses exist delights which involve the spirit, joys that owe their appeal to the fact that they are visionary, unachieved, and forever ideal. The “fair youth beneath the trees” is carved on the urn; the lover is just about to kiss his fair beloved but though the kiss will not find fulfillment, it exists as enduring imagination, in conditions that eternalize all the charm of youth and passion and desire. Here is a world without change, where spring and love are immortal in the supreme moment of quest of love that will never know satiety or decline (Shackford 7-13).

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave

Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (Keats 258).

In the real world, the poet has mourned, beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes (“Ode to a Nightingale”) and the lover's mistress dwells with beauty that must die (“Ode on Melancholy”). But the tree, piper, lover, and maiden will always be enjoying: the tree, its green leaves; the piper, his song; the lover, his pursuit and passion and the hope of winning his bliss; the maiden, her spirited youth and radiant beauty. The graceful movement and living action of human creatures – moments of being and becoming, aspiration and growth - have been held and suspended permanently in art (Wigod 113-121). The concluding stanza of the “Grecian Urn” has long been accepted almost universally as Keats's final proposition and permanent contribution. It has been taken for granted that the lesson of the urn is found in the last two lines of the final stanza and that it is addressed to all mankind (Wood 837-839): “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know”. (Keats 259)

By truth Keats does not mean any literal fact, external phenomenon, or reality, primarily important in man's material, physical world, but “ideas” which concern innermost ultimate reality -- the sentiment, the hopes, the meditations, the true wisdom of man. Wordsworth’s “She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways”, and Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” are truth in the way Keats used the word, for these works do not declare facts of objective importance but truths of deep inner import, what Plotinus called “true-knowing,” and Plato, “beholding beauty with the eye of the mind.” The great criterion of beauty is its truthfulness - not blunt, crude statement of fact, but sincere faithful expression of idea. Beauty is eternal; in its concrete reality it is a symbol, a “shadow” of the absolute; its

tangible; visible being is merely a mode of revealing divine, ideal, immutable truth (Shackford 7-13).

Conclusion

Bringing together both these works one finds that the ideas of intoxication of mind, oneness of hearts, timelessness of beauty, unfulfillment of desires, and eternity of truth are universal – they exist in every age and get reflected through the best works of that time. Bachchan expresses the intoxication and madness when the persona is willing to sacrifice the universe and dance in the madness of love for his beloved; Keats writes about the “mad pursuit” and “wild ecstasy” of men who are chasing the women madly in love. Bachchan talks about the oneness of the soul and body of lovers when he writes “*Ek dusre ki hum dono aaj paraspar madhushala*” (26) [We both make and complete the Tavern, one within the other (Mshubhadeep)]; Keats also builds his ideas on the concept of oneness of lovers when he says that the lovers depicted on the urn will always remain in love as they will remain “Forever panting, and forever young” (258). Bachchan speaks about timelessness of life and death; Keats also says about timelessness when he writes on the eternity of the melodies which the musicians depicted on the urn play. Bachchan celebrates unquenched desire when he writes, “*Bani rahe who madir pipasa trupt na jo hona jane*” (34) [May the wine thirsty who never wants to quench the thirst be always there (Mshubhadeep)]; Keats also celebrates unquenched desire when he writes “Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss” (258). Bachchan expresses the idea of eternal truth by suggesting the readers to choose one path and keep walking until they reach the Tavern of life; Keats also summarizes the eternal truth of life by saying “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” (259).

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