



Poetry and Nationalism: Comparative analysis of Emerson and Mehjoor

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Abstract

Poets are the nation builders. Poets have always fueled the nationalistic movements all over the world from ancient times. Whatever be the nativity of the poets, they use the same motifs, themes and the historical representations in order to proclaim the nationalistic fervor. I have chosen two representative poets of the east and the west and under different political conditions to argue their similarities on the subject of nationalism. Ralph Waldo Emerson from America and Gulam Ahmad Mehjoor from Kashmir are the subject of my analysis. Both these poets are great in their own field. But they have the same nationalistic zeal. Both these poets advice and entreat both leaders and the common men to stand and defend their nation with courage, proper dedication and spirit. The focus of my study is to compare the two great poets on the theme of nationalism. There are many things common between the two poets such as veneration for nature, mysticism, belief in communal harmony and fraternity, and above all zeal of nationalism. Although they lived in different times and situations they deal with the subject of national consciousness in the same manner and brevity.

Keywords: Nation, Nationalism, Emerson, Mehjoor, Fraternity, Unity in Diversity.

The word 'nation' has been derived from the Latin *natio*, meaning "people, tribe, kin, genus, class, flock." Blake's Law Dictionary defines a nation as "A people, aggregation of men, existing in the form of an organized jural society, usually inhabiting a distinct portion of the earth, speaking the same language, using the same customs, possessing historic continuity, and distinguished from other like groups by their racial origin and characteristics, and generally, but not necessarily, living under the same government and sovereignty." In this way nation refers to the idea that unites people on the basis of some common inheritances. These inheritances can be of any form- history, culture,



literature, language, religion and so on. Communication is only way available to human beings by which we can express or propagate anything. And then to proclaim and propagate nationalism, communication is only option. Communication is done through language and consequently literature is the basic element to inspire and propagate nationalism. Poets make the nation. This maxim is undoubtedly true. Poetic language is highly motivated; it can mould the people towards any ideal. Poets have always inspired people to the ideals of unity that contributes to the idea of nation. Veneration of heroes, movements, and revolutions; glorifying the martyr; singing the ballads of wars and battles in the most exquisite verses makes people proud of their history. Calling for moral regeneration poets inspire people with the memories of heroism, real or imaginative and by myths unique to nation. The poetry has such an influence in inculcating the spirit of nationalism that Slavoj Zizek in his “*The Poetic Torture-House of Language*” is helpless to say:

Plato’s reputation suffers because of his claim that poets should be thrown out of the city- rather sensible advice, judging from this post-Yugoslav experience, where ethnic cleansing was prepared by poets’ dangerous dreams. True, Slobodan Milosevic “manipulated” nationalist passions—but it was the poets who delivered him the stuff that lent itself to manipulation. ¹

Talking about the nature and its surroundings, praising rivers, mountains and arts by poets has always inspired people to give their lives for their nation. Who could have united America and dreamt that the nation would one day become a world super power if its soil had not given birth to the poets like R.W. Emerson, Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau. Who could have fueled the freedom struggle of our nation if there were not the poets like Aurbindo Ghose, Allama Iqbal, Rabindra Nath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu. The very language they use, the very rhythms they create reverberate with the history of a nation. Nations have been known only through the verses of the poets. What has remained of the ancient civilizations and nations, nothing but the verses, the poets have created. Ancient Greece is known only by the poets who left their works. Homer and Euripides made ancient Greece a model of civilization. Virgil and Horace fascinate us by their works about the magnificence of Roman Civilization. Dante gave Italy its magnum opus, *Divine Comedy* which will always give Italy an inspiring unity. My words are insufficient to say what William Shakespeare is for England. Who can deny the works of Kalidas whose works have made Indian nation proud of its creative as well as thought provoking lessons to the world. Thus, it is proved beyond doubt nations



and civilization can be destroyed materially, the poets give it immortality. Nationalist poetry has roots in ancient literature as far back as to Hebrew Bible and as modern as French Revolution or recent Arab crisis. National poets are politically active and even serve government. One of the basic needs for proclaiming nationalism is to glorify your nation and the poets are best for this purpose.

The first phase in the nation building process or civilization is concerned with cultural assimilation and literature and art are the most important elements of culture. For instance, from the beginning the Americans wanted to define their identity in terms of literature, “indeed very few literature have been preoccupied with the idea of nationality” (Ruland and Bradbury,1991). And a great American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, Founder of Transcendentalism was very conscious of this. He strongly believed in literary nationalism. In his poem *The Poet*, he says that the America is a poem in our eyes. The philosopher and poet, he is the pivotal figure in the emergence of the American Renaissance. Most of the writers in their own way have responded to Emerson’s call for national literature. In essays such as *Nature (1836)*, *The American Scholar (1837)*, *Self Reliance (1841)*, Emerson both defines what he sees as the principal characteristic of American identity, and calls for authors to represent them. Thus in *The American Scholar*, he announces that “our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close,” and demands that American writers follow his lead and “embrace the common... the familiar, the low. Despite the learned nature of his own prose, Emerson stresses the need for the literature that can celebrate the individualism, democracy, and equality that he identifies at the heart of American life.

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s classic poem sung on American Independence Day “Nation’s Strength” is the most thought provoking poem that can inspire any nation in the word:

What makes a nation’s pillars high

And its foundations strong?

What makes it mighty to defy

The foes that round it throng?²

In this poem the poet goes on and says that neither wealth nor power nor the pride can make a nation strong but only the men who are brave and dedicated can make a nation strong. The poem is such a moving tale that there seems no doubt of why America is super power today. That is because of such poets. Yet again his another poem sung at the completion of the Battle Monument on 4th of July, 1837 he gives an inspiring tribute to the martyrs who fought for the freedom of their country:



On this green bank, by this soft stream,
We set today a votive stone;
That memory may their deed redeem,
When, like our sires, our sons are gone.

Spirit, that made those heroes dare
To die, and leave their children free,
Bid time and nature gently spare
The shaft we raise to them and thee.³

In those lines it is clear poets are conscious of the fact that what can inspire men to the unity of nation. There is nothing greater than the account of the martyrs that can unify a nation. There are frequent references to the sacrifices given by the leaders for the freedom of America and dedications and daring courage of the great leaders in his poetry.

Emerson's description of everyday American life, nature, and the concern with the natural language form the basis of literary nationalism. Frederick summarizes the three requirements made by Emerson in his essay *The American Scholar* as "Independence, the avoidance of too much reliance on the past, active participation in the everyday life America and moral earnestness." Independence and self-reliance didn't mean isolationism, instead as a way of existing in harmony with society. As Emerson wrote in self-reliance: "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true of all men, --that is genius,"

One of the great poets of Kashmir probably known throughout the world, Peerzada Ghulam Ahmad Mehjoor's poetry is filled with the same nationalistic zeal as that of Emerson. In his mature poetry we find majority of poems concerned with the issues of nation and nationhood. He spoke about the unity among the different religious sects of the nation and glorified the persons for their sacrifice and servitude beyond the barriers of religion and caste i.e hindus and muslims:

Ye! Native of this Nation
Retrospect and Remember
The inspiring acts
Of sacrifice and fortitude
By muslims for pundits



By pundits for muslims

Like that of

Quad Gojwari and Sirij Kak!⁴

In his poems he advises and entreats the saviours of the people to work for the welfare of the people so that the nation may progress, however, he says in one of his verses:

Ye! The care taker of the Garden

Toil hard to make it flourish afresh

Cater to its blossoming glory!

Birds and flowers will thrive and Rejoice

In unison;

Love for one's Nation

Make one's life very rich and full! ⁵

In recent article on the daily newspaper Greater Kashmir by an eminent Kashmiri personality and ex-union minister and senior congress leader Saif-ud-Din Soz, Mehjoor has been acclaimed as Poet of Kashmir. Saif-ud-Din Soz pays a glorious tribute to the poet with calm and profound language. He also confirms to the fact that Mehjoor sought to lay the foundation of nationalism in Kashmiri poetry. Before him Kashmiri poets were concerned only with the social romantic and mystical subjects, however Soz Sahib says:

Mehjoor always laid stress on maintaining the secular character of the freedom movement and pleaded for restraint, mutual respect and tolerance when whole of India was suffering from riots and communal fire was raging in the sub-continent. How visionary Mehjoor was and how concerned he felt about the need for social and economic regeneration of masses and his deep concern for togetherness and social harmony can be judged from the following couplets:

O' my lord

Grant me boon of such heavenly

Words;

Words; that can quell hatred and mistrust

Words; that evoke love and affection

Beautiful sweet sacred Words;



My Lord!

Guide me to peace, truth and Light ⁶

Probably Mehjoor is the only poet from Kashmir in whose poetry we find an overt expression of nationalistic stance, the reason that he is called the Poet of Kashmir. He speaks about the beauties of Kashmir, in a zeal and zest that none can imitate in his native language. His veneration for the natural scenic beauty of Kashmir can be compared with that of William Wordsworth. Mehjoor offered a lot of fire and ignition to the freedom struggle during the British rule against the autocratic feudal regime of Kashmir as a princely state in favour of democratic principles. He expresses his patriotic zeal in one of his poem Come, O gardener, thus:

Come O' Gardener! Create the glory of new spring.

Create the garden where flowers bloom and bulbul will sing.

The garden is desolate, the dew is mourning,

And the dove in torn robes looks perplexing;

Come O' Gardener;

To rekindle the flower and to rejuvenate the dove. ⁷

Paying his glorious tributes to the beauties of his nation he says:

Bulbul says to blossoms, glorious garden is our nation,

Surrounded by mountains white, like the walls of marble. ⁸

Thus from this account we can assume that whatever be the motherland of the poet his love for his nation is archetypal, his sense of unity, fraternity, tolerance is ubiquitous. From the account of the poetry of the two great poets for instance we infer that whatever be the advancements of the nations the spirit of nationalism in poets remains the same. Here we see that both the poets are trying their best to proclaim the legacy of their respective nations and assert to its people to serve their nation with proper dedication and spirit. In their poetry we find the references to the ideals that are the basis of a strong nation, such as unity in diversity, fraternity, secularism and tolerance, he says:

Come O' Gardener create the glory of new spring

Create the garden where flowers blossom and bulbul will sing.

Birds sing in the garden but with the voices different

Oh' God, give their voices the unified effect. ⁹



Communal Harmony is the most important factor of national unity. Mehjoor was also conscious of this. Mehjoor appeals to the nation to maintain communal harmony and not to get divided on the basis of religion and community. He pleads to the nation to leave the path of animosity and hatred amongst yourselves and get united, by neglecting the boundaries of religion, class, caste or sect. He says:

Leave strife and keep love among yourselves,
Share honest love among yourselves.
Muslims are milk and Hindus are sugar, unadulterated;
Mix the milk and sugar yourselves.¹⁰

This is how the poet of Kashmir has proclaimed and spoken about the national unity of India at a time when it was engulfed by the flood of communal hatred between different religions of the country and also influenced by Two Nation theory of Muslim League which demanded a separate nation for muslims. Mehjoor showed in his poetry that unity, equality and tolerance are the basic foundations for the strength of a nation. Against this Emerson's poetry doesn't claim unity and tolerance as the foundations of a strong nation because he was writing in a different situation. His nation, America, at that time was not conscious of the fact that the unjust practice of slavery might one day engulf the whole country on the brink of war. Emerson regarded bravery and dedications as the basic foundations of a nation, because at that time America was fighting a war of independence from England. Emerson was writing poetry on free America and composed verses to make its foundations strong, while as Mehjoor was writing when India was still fighting against autocratic foreign rule and thus he encouraged his leaders not to lose heart and then watered their passions by narrating the beauties and resources of their land for which they were fighting. Both these poets were the true sons of their soil. Most of their mature poetry is concerned with the themes of national unity. Both poets were also great prose writers. They frequently wrote about nature and in this way glorified their nation by referring to its natural bounties. But on the whole both of them used poetry as the means to proclaim nationalism in a way that was feasible to their respective nations.

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Jai Maa Saraswati Gyandayini

An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(Peer Reviewed, Open Accessed & Indexed)

Web: www.jmsjournals.in Email: jmsjournals.in@gmail.com

ISSN: 2454-8367

Vol. 3, Issue-II
Oct. 2017

Impact Factor : 4.032 (IJIF)

UGC Approved e-Journal No. - 43919

e-ISJN: A4372-3118

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