

EPIGRAMMATIC AND EARTHY TONE IN THE POETRY OF KABIR

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Abstract

Kabir is not easily categorized as a Sufi or a Yogi or a Saint- he is all of these. He is revered by Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs. He stands as a unique, saintly, yet very human, bridge between the great traditions that live in India. The life story of Kabir is surrounded by contradictory legends, but none of them is suffice to be cited as a sufficient and authentic evidence. He is believed to be lived perhaps during 1398-1448. He is thought to have lived longer than 100 years and was later strongly influenced by a Hindu ascetic, Ramananda. He had enormous influence on Indian philosophy and on Hindi poetry and his verses are found in Sikh's scripture *Adi Granth*. The tone of the poetry of Kabir seems to be epigrammatic and earthy. It means expressing something such as a feeling or idea in a short and clever or funny way which is resembling to the matter of earth. It is noticeable that though he puts emphasis on earthy way to attain spiritual blissfulness yet at the same time he also seems not to agree with the rituals. Some of his assertive sayings take the shape of epigram. Kabir's utterance which is very earthy and epitomizes epigrammatic tone as he says: "The home is the abiding place; in the home is reality; the home helps to attain Him Who is real. So stay where you are, and all things shall come to you in time." (XL)

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The life story of Kabir is surrounded by contradictory legends, but none of them is suffice to be cited as sufficient and authentic evidence. Some of the legends about Kabir emanate from a Hindu, some from a Mohammedan source, and claimed him to be a Sufi and a Brahman saint. However, his name is practically a conclusive proof of Moslem ancestry: and the most probable tale is that which represents him as the actual or adopted child of a Mohammedan weaver of Benares, the city in which the chief events of his life took place. All the legends did not disagree on this point that Kabir was a weaver, a simple and unschooled man, who earned his living at the loom. He knew how to combine vision and industry. He is believed to be lived perhaps during 1398-1448. He is thought to have lived longer than 100 years and was later strongly influenced by a Hindu ascetic, Ramananda.

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Kabir's poetic temperament has been variously defined by the religious traditions that revere him. For Sikhs he is a precursor and interlocutor of Nanak, the founding Sikh Guru (spiritual guide). Muslims place him in Sufi (mystical) lineages, and for Hindus he becomes a Vaishnavite (devotee of the god Vishnu) with Universalist leanings. It is considered that he composed 227 Padas in 17 ragas and 237 slokas. Kabir's hymns appear at the head of 'BhagatBani' (Poetry of a devotee), a generic name for the works of contributors other than the Gurus. He is against all ritualistic and ascetic methods as means to salvation. Kabir composed no systematic treatise, rather his work consists of many short didactic poems, often expressed in terse vigorous language in the form of Padas, Dohas, and Ramainis (forms of poetry in Indian languages). Besides his work recorded in 1604 A.D. in *Guru Granth Sahib* by Guru Arjan Dev, Nanak V, and preserved inviolate since, two other collections exist - *KabirGranthavali*, and *Bijak*. His poetry is sermonized of moral and spiritual truth in the framework of day-today lives of a man.

The tone of the poetry of Kabir seems to be epigrammatic and earthy. It means expressing something such as a feeling or idea in a short and clever or funny way which is resembling to the matter of earth. It is clearly evident in-

"The flower blooms for the fruit: when the fruit comes, the flower withers.

The musk is in the deer, but it seeks it not within itself: it wanders in quest of grass." (VI)

To elaborate this earthy idea Kabir takes the help of an abstract idea and says-

"As the seed is in the plant, as the shade is in the tree, as the void is in the sky, as infinite forms are in the void, So from beyond the Infinite, the Infinite comes; and from the Infinite the finite extends."

Even his efforts to introspect himself is not bereft by terseness and the matter of the soil. He utters-

"TELL me, Brother, how can I renounce Maya?

When I gave up the tying of ribbons, still I tied my garment about me:

When I gave up tying my garment, still I covered my body in its folds.

So, when I give up passion, I see that anger remains;

And when I renounce anger, greed is with me still;

And when greed is vanquished, pride and vainglory remain;

When the mind is detached and casts Maya away, still it clings to the letter.

Kabir says, "Listen to me, dear Sadhu! the true path is rarely found." (v)

It is noticeable that though he puts emphasis on earthy way to attain spiritual blissfulness yet his sense is not devoid of the omnipotence of the Almighty. He admits-

"I may never express how sweet my Lord is. Yoga and the telling of beads, virtue and vice--these are naught to Him."

It means that for Kabir earthy ways are the initial supportive substances to take of to attain the spiritual bliss. In fact the pilgrimage has still to follow a long way. It seems that the sun and the moon strikes him more than any other symbols to mould his abstract ideas into an earthy way-

"THE light of the sun, the moon, and the stars shines bright:

The melody of love swells forth, and the rhythm of love's detachment beats the time.

Day and night, the chorus of music fills the heavens; and Kabir says

"My Beloved One gleams like the lightning flash in the sky." (XVII)

The following stanza is also supportive of the idea that is told of-

"THE moon shines in my body, but my blind eyes cannot see it:

The moon is within me, and so is the sun.

The unstruck drum of Eternity is sounded within me; but my deaf ears cannot hear it." (V)

Kabir openly criticized all sects and gave a new direction to the Indian philosophy. This is due to his straight forward approach that has a universal appeal. It is for this reason that Kabir is held in high esteem all over the world. Another beauty of Kabir's sense of an earthy tone is that he picks up situations that surround our daily lives. Thus, even today, Kabir's poetry is relevant and helpful in guiding and regulating our lives, in both social and spiritual context.

It is a marked characteristic of mystical literature that the great contemplatives, in their effort to convey to us the nature of their communion with the super sensuous, are inevitably driven to employ some form of sensuous imagery. In that intuition it seems to the mystics that all the dim cravings and partial apprehensions of sense find perfect fulfilment. Hence their constant declaration that they *see* the uncreated light, they *hear* the celestial melody, they *taste* the sweetness of the Lord, they know an ineffable fragrance, they feel the very contact of love.

Yet in this wide and rapturous vision of the universe Kabir never loses touch with diurnal existence, never forgets the common life. His feet are firmly planted upon earth; his lofty and passionate apprehensions are perpetually controlled by the activity of a sane and vigorous intellect, by the alert common sense so often found in persons of real mystical genius. The constant insistence on simplicity and directness, the hatred of all abstractions and philosophizing, the ruthless criticism of external religion: these are amongst his most marked characteristics that seem to be take shape of epigram.

It is not out of place to note that in some of his poems in the form of dialogues the epigrammatic and earthy tone seems to be evident. For example-

"Gorakhnath asks Kabir:

"Tell me, O Kabir, when did your vocation begin? Where did your love have its rise?"

Kabir answers:

"When He whose forms are manifold had not begun His play: when there was no Guru, and no disciple: when the world was not spread out: when the Supreme One was alone-- Then I became an ascetic; then, O Gorakh, my love was drawn to Brahma. Brahma did not hold the crown on his head; the god Vishnu was not anointed as king; the power of Shiva was still unborn; when I was instructed in Yoga.

I became suddenly revealed in Benares, and Ramananda illumined me; I brought with me the thirst for the Infinite, and I have come for the meeting with Him. In simplicity will I unite with the Simple One; my love will surge up. O Gorakh, march thou with His music!" (XXIX)

This willing acceptance of the here-and-now as a means of representing supernal realities is a trait common to the greatest mystics. For them, when they have achieved at last the true Theopathic state, all aspects of the universe possess equal authority as sacramental declarations of the Presence of God; and their fearless employment of homely and physical symbols--often startling and even revolting to the unaccustomed taste is in direct proportion to the exaltation of their spiritual life.

Some of his assertive sayings take the shape of epigram such as-

Kabir says: "It is the Spirit of the quest which helps; I am the slave of this Spirit of the quest." (III)

Kabir says, "O Sadhu! God is the breath of all breath." (I)

Kabir says, "O brother! he who has seen that radiance of love, he is saved." (XIII)

Kabir says: "Dive thou into that Ocean of sweetness: thus let all errors of life and of death flee away."(XVII)

Kabir says: "Put all imaginations away, and stand fast in that which you are."(XX)

Kabir says: "Verily he has no fear, who has such a Guru to lead him to the shelter of safety!"(XXII)

To conclude, it is very apt to quote Kabir's utterance which is very earthy and epitomizes epigrammatic tone as he says: "The home is the abiding place; in the home is reality; the home helps to attain Him Who is real. So stay where you are, and all things shall come to you in time."(XL)

Work cited

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