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Creativity in poetic expression: A contrastive analysis of pseudo-longinus

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Abstract

This paper is an endeavour to explore the divine reality that creativity in Art, particularly in poetry, is not confined to the use of formalistic poetic style and language. Language of art is a way as well as a mean in itself. The writer flows ahead in mind, body and soul in a state of divine frenzy. With the linguistic and stylistic analysis of an Urdu poem '*Departmental Store mein*' [In a Departmental Store], by a Pakistani poetess Parveen Shakir, I try to show that the poetess ascends beyond the poetic boundaries. The research analyzes a sharp contrast to Longinus concept of sublimity.

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Introduction

Critics assert sublimity as the litmus test of great poetry which according to Longinus is based on elevated thoughts, noble diction, figures of speech and dignified word arrangement. "Divinity School Address" delivered in July 1838, Ralph Waldo Emerson stated, "For all our penny wisdom, for all our soul-destroying slavery to habit, it is not to be doubted that all men have sublime thoughts." Thus sublimity lies in every creative artist but with a difference. Shakespeare's sublimity marks a clear difference with that of Milton. Wordsworth, Keats, Coleridge and Eliot are sublime in their own style. Thomas Hardy creates his own theory of the sublime by questioning the miracles, mysteries, and purpose of nature and the terror of unknowing. Hardy's theory of the duality of nature, of its grandeur and gloom scores a characteristic of his sublime. They all use lofty language and flowery images. But the present study elaborates that sublimity in poetry does not necessarily hinge on these postulates and can be characterized by simple diction as exemplified by Parveen Shakir in this poem "Departmental Store Mein" [In a Departmental Store].

The poem is simple, effortless and straightforward expression of a female, while shopping in a departmental store where she sorts out different accessories of her everyday use when suddenly her eyes catch sight of a scent placed in a corner. Her mind propelled her to test the fragrance. As soon she smells the aroma, her mind blazes with the fragrance that always spring from her beloved's outfit. The poem in fact is a very bold utterance of poetess' intense

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love, which is considered immodest in Asian society and as well in Urdu poetry. It breaks the tenets of ‘Sublimity’ in the work of art, as documented by Longinus in his book *‘On the Sublime’*. Parveen’s free verse is much bolder, modern and up-to-date. She is known for having employed the usage of pop culture references and English words and phrases, which have mixed up with Urdu, in her free verse - a practice that is both generally considered inappropriate, and criticized, in Urdu poetry. In the poem Departmental Store Mein [In a Departmental Store], which is named thus despite the fact that there the term 'departmental store' could easily have been substituted with its Urdu equivalent, and where words like 'natural pink,' 'hand lotion,' 'shade,' 'scent' and 'pack' are brought into use, and references made to cosmetics brands like, Pearl, Revlon, Elizabeth Arden, and Tulip.

The poetess herself studied and taught English Literature. She started writing at an early age, published her first volume of poetry *Khushbu* [Fragrance]1976 subsequently publishing other volumes of poetry - all well-received - including *Inkaar* [Refusal]1990, *Sad-barg* [Marsh Marigold]1980, *Khud Kalam* [Conversing with the Self] 1990 and *Kaf-e-Aa'ina* [The Edge of the Mirror]1994, besides a collection of her newspaper columns, titled *Gosha-e-Chashm* [The Sight Corner]. Her first book, *Khushboo*, won the Adamjee Award. Later she was awarded on of the Pakistan’s highest honours, the Pride of Performance. Her poetry was a breath of fresh air in Urdu poetry. She used the first person feminine pronoun, which is rarely used in Urdu poetry even by female poets and created sublimity out of a simple language, natural expression and most simple relationship of man and woman.

Categorical Contrastive Analysis:

1: *Defect in matters of passion ... unseasonable and empty passion, where no passion is required, or immoderate, where moderation is needed. For men are often carried away, as if by intoxication, into displays of emotion which are not caused by the nature of the subject, but are purely personal and wearisome.*

The great passions, when left to their own blind and rash impulses without the control of reason, are in the same danger as a ship let drive at random without ballast. Often they need the spur, but sometimes also the curb.

Personal Emotion as well the display of personal emotion is equally a subject of poetic writing and interest. The poetess describes an experience, entirely personal but not tedious to be a poetic matter. Wings of poesy are not mentored to fly in a single direction. Passion is a philosophical interpretation of emotion, in which mental and psychological states are associated with a wide variety of feelings, thoughts and behaviour. Further, Wikipedia defines emotions as subjective experiences associated with mood, temperaments, personality and disposition. Therefore, it measures no scale; seasonable or unseasonable it all depends upon the person who’s creating a work of art that what counts propitious and what not. The whole age of Romanticism is an outcome of personal experiences whether it is Wordsworth or Keats.

Bombast is said to be a mode hardly avoided by writers; “Who fails in great endeavor, nobly fails”. The poem in analysis actually endeavors to highlight a single emotion and thus is a bravado expression of affectation. It presents the apparently random thoughts going through a person's head within a certain time interval, in which the transitional links are psychological rather than logical.

2: *All these ugly and parasitical growths arise in literature from a single cause, that pursuit of novelty in the expression of ideas which may be regarded as the fashionable craze of the day.*

Without novelty, the literature is stale and stagnant. From Puritan to Renaissance, Victorian, Romantic age and onwards all spring from this craze of striking new thoughts- what Longinus explain as ‘the most childish absurdities’. The pursuit of novelty in thoughts is considered as the cause of ‘improprieties of language’. I hereby believe that it is the only cause which owes to the coining of new words and phrases in the language.

3: *The effect of elevated language upon an audience is not persuasion but transport.*

Language is bound to be elevated. Persuasion is a process of steering people towards the embracement of an idea, approach or viewpoint by rational and symbolic (not always logical) means. The poem in analysis does perform the function of transportation. The language is allusive rather metaphorical. Here I would like to draw upon the reference to T. S. Eliot; his poetry is usually described as allusive because of his constant references to names, places or images that may only make sense in the light of prior knowledge. His first remarkable publication ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ is regarded as the masterpiece of modernist movement. An iconoclastic movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century which challenged the traditional forms of art, architecture, literature, religious faith, social organization and daily life were becoming outdated in the new economic, social and political conditions of an emerging fully industrialized world marking self-consciousness as its projecting feature. Similarly, in this poem she gives simple references, not the crafted ones, like Tulip shampoo. Tulip is a national

flower of Holland. According to Persian legend, the first tulips sprang up from the drops of blood shed by a lover and for a long time the tulip was the symbol of avowed love.

4: So also in the case of sublimity in poems and prose writings, we must consider whether some supposed examples have not simply the appearance of elevation with many idle accretions, so that when analyzed they are found to be mere vanity--objects which a noble nature will rather despise than admire.

The audience reception, according to Longinus concept is biased, that the material should be sublime and for a sublime and noble class reader only. *In general we may regard those words as truly noble and sublime which always please and please all readers. For when the same book always produces the same impression on all who read it, whatever be the difference in their pursuits, their manner of life, their aspirations, their ages, or their language, such a harmony of opposites gives irresistible authority to their favorable verdict.* Reception theory, proposed by Stuart Hall a cultural theorist and sociologist, emphasizes the reader's reception of a literary text or media. This means that a "text"—be it a book, movie, or other creative work—is not simply passively accepted by the audience, but that the reader / viewer interprets the meanings of the text based on their individual cultural background and life experiences. In essence, the meaning of a text is not inherent within the text itself, but is created within the relationship between the text and the reader. A basic acceptance of the meaning of a specific text tends to occur when a group of readers have a shared cultural background and interpret the text in similar ways, otherwise their reading of a text will vary greatly.

5: There are, it may be said, five principal sources of elevated language.

i). *First and most important is the power of forming great conceptions...*

Every individual's conception is great. It is not required that only the work of art dealing with great heroes and kings is only a great conception. Poetry of a layman by Faiz, a romantic Wordsworth or a beauty lover Keats is equally a creation to be admired than despised. Creativity in art is unaccountable of a series of greater conceptions, in which 'great' itself is an arbitrary term, for what is great for Longinus may not be great for Parveen Shakir and vice versa. Longinus terms *puerility*, as a *failing of feeble and narrow minds,—indeed, the most ignoble of all vices in writing a pedantic habit of mind, which by over-elaboration ends in frigidity. Slips of this sort are made by those who, aiming at brilliancy, polish, and especially attractiveness, are landed in paltriness and silly affectation.* Puerility is considered to be '*diametrically opposed to grandeur*'.

Grandeur here refers to sumptuousness, luxury and lavishness in the creativity of art. Therefore, Writer's input as well as the Reader's output (point 3) both are subjects to grandeur- an opulent display of elevated language. According to Wikipedia, in colloquial usage, one who is said to have 'delusions of grandeur' is considered to be one who overestimates ones own abilities, talents or situation.

ii). *Secondly, there is vehement and inspired passion. These two components of the sublime are for the most part innate. Those which remain are partly the product of art.*

Intense passion blended with innateness can not be formulated or devised under certain rules. Fervent and vigorous passion is like an unshackled horse, when bridled looses its natural pace. (Reference to Point 1)

iii). *The due formation of figures deals with two sorts of figures, first those of thought and secondly those of expression.*

Expression needs no boundaries. Poetry is a three dimensional process; feelings, expression and medium. There are as various definitions of poetry as there are poets. Wordsworth defined poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings;" Emily Dickinson said, "If I read a book and it makes my body so cold no fire ever can warm me, I know that is poetry;" and Dylan Thomas defined poetry this way: "Poetry is what makes me laugh or cry or yawn, what makes my toenails twinkle, what makes me want to do this or that or nothing." Most of the definitions encircle feelings and emotions, and thus defined them as indefinable.

iv). *Next there is noble diction, which in turn comprises choice of words, and use of metaphors, and elaboration of language.*

Noble diction is not about grand language. She created sublimity out of a simple language, natural expression and most simple relationship of man and woman. The 'Banafshi' colour is a colour of feminine romance in Urdu and especially Punjabi literature. That fragrance is actually an association of his memories for her, for which she doesn't need to have material things.

v). *The fifth cause of elevation--one which is the fitting conclusion of all that have preceded it--is dignified and elevated composition.*

It is free verse, written in a very simple style. It is close to heart because creativity in art is empirical not formalistic. At the same time, composition is equally simple and serene entirely conveying the meaning and emotion. The word ‘dignified’ is from ‘dignity’ which Wikipedia defines as a term used in moral, ethical and political discussions to signify that a being has an innate right to respect and ethical treatment and thus is closely related to concepts like virtue, respect, self-respect, autonomy, human rights and reason. In Asia, and particularly in Pakistan, expression of love is always by a male never by a female and the one doing so is considered brazen, shameless and having no cultural values. The poetess transcends the so-called ethical boundaries of Asian society, where female expression of love is considered immoral, unethical and against the dignity of a female. Arguably, Parveen Shakir can be termed the first poetess to use the word *larki* (girl) in her works-the male-dominated Urdu poetry scene seldom employs that word, and uses masculine syntax when talking about the 'lover'. Similarly, she often made use of the Urdu first-person, feminine pronoun in her verses which, though extremely common in prose, was rarely used in poetry, even by female poetesses, before her.

Appendix

Departmental Store Mein (Urdu Version)

Pearl ka natural pink,
 Revlon hand lotion,
 Elizabeth Arden ka blush on bhi,
 Medora mei phir nail polish ka koi naya shade aye?
 Mere iss banafshi doppate sae milti hui
 Rimmel mei lipstick mile ge?
 Han wo Tulip ka shampoo bhi dijiye ga

Yad aya
 Kuch roz pehle jo tewzer liya tha,,wo bilkul he bekar nikla,
 Dosra dijiye ga!
 Zara bill bana dijiye!
 Arey! wo jo koney mei aik scent raka hua hai
 Dikhaein zara,
 Issy test kar ke tu dekhon
 (Khudaya! Khudaya:
 Ye khusbu tu us ki pasandede khushbu rahi hai
 Sada uss k maloboos sae phoot'ti thi!)

Zara is ski qemat bata dein!
 Iss qadar!!
 Acha, yun kijiye
 Baqi cheezein kabhi aur ley jaon ge
 Aaj tu sirf iss scent ko pack kar dijiye!

In a Departmental Store (English Translation)

“Pearl natural pink,
 Revlon hand lotion,
 Elizabeth Arden blush-on,
 Did any new shade of Medora nail paint appear recently?
 Any matching of Rimmel lipstick,
 Available with this violet stole of mine?”

And yes, do pack the Tulip shampoo as well!

I remember,
The tweezers, I purchased a few days back, was defaulted
Give me another one!
Make the bill please!
Hey, that scent in the corner
Can you show me!
Let me test it
(O God! O God!
It has been his favourite fragrance;
That always sprung from his attire)

“How does it cost!
So much!!
Alright, will ask for the remaining stuff some other day
For today, just pack this scent!”