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Escapism in the Poetry of John Keats and Akhtar Sherani: A Comparative Study

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Abstract: *This paper depicts escapism as a romantic element in the poetry of a British English poet John Keats and a Pakistani Urdu poet Akhtar Sherani. Although they belong to different ages, the early 19th century and 20th century respectively, still have many commonalities. This work discusses their selected poems and compares them to find out their similar romantic traits. The selected poetry of Akhtar Sherani is translated into English by the author of this work to prove that both poets have a lively style of expressing their feelings and emotions. This study qualifies the readers to think outside the box and conventional values. It helps to broaden their perceive horizons and mental realm. This work is also beneficial for those who are critics and analysts of romanticism and have an interest in John Keats and Akhtar Sherani.*

Key Words: John Keats, Akhtar Sherani, Romanticism, Poetry, and Comparison

Introduction

Poetry is the language of feelings, emotions, imagination, and passion. It is a bridge between the heart and nature. These concepts have been thoroughly touched by romantics of all times in every literature of the world including English and Urdu literature. Love for nature in English Literature gave us William Blake, Lord Byron, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, P. B. Shelley, William Wordsworth, and many more. In Urdu Literature, the romantics such as Saghar Nizami, Hafeez Janlandhari, Josh Maleeh Abadi, Ehsan Danish, Taseer, and Akhtar Sherani among others have discussed these topics. John Keats and Akhtar

Sherani hold a very distinctive position in the poetry of English and Urdu literature respectively due to their work, service, and endowment. This work presents those elements in which John Keats and Akhtar Sherani are similar.

John Keats

Keats, a Romantic English poet, opened his eyes on October 31, 1795 (London, England), and died on February 23, 1821 (Rome, Italy). He is considered the backbone of English Romanticism. He is also considered the purest poet of all the romantics. Keats's work does not carry the burden of politics, like no French revolution in his poetry, no

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regionalism, no nationalism, no poetry reformations, no criticism, no American war of independence, etc., thus proving himself as only and only a poet.

John Keats is naturally a poet of nature, beauty, love, and life. We find that imagination is an essential element in the poetry of Keats. He always wanders in the realm of fantasy and imagination with the help of his poetic wings, his poetic wings helped him for being sensuous, a poet of warmth, expression of sensitive emotions, and humanistic feelings. All these traits kept him away from selfishness and self-centeredness. The quality of being sensuous is his greatest quality, complemented by many critics till now. It does not mean that Keats has not polished other qualities, but rather the sensuousness is so abundant in his poetry that it has belittled his other qualities. He is also devoted to truth, but that factor of truth is depicted through aesthetic sensations rather than thoughts. Hence, in this way we see the simplicity in his poetry. Keats wants to convey his ideas with sensations and senses. He tries to avoid philosophical thoughts. In one of his letters to his friend, Benjamin Bailey (22 November 1817), Keats says; "O' for Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts".

His most celebrated works which had impressed many great critics, writers, poets, artists, and other literary giants are; "Hyperion", "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", "Ode on Melancholy" (1819), "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819), "To Sleep" (1816), "Ode to Autumn" and some other poems. He was a staunch and firm believer of love and beauty. He is always seen around love, beauty, and nature. Among the romantics, he is the poet who sees the truth in this natural world. The concept of Keats' beauty has connections of beauty to different things. In this approach, it has three stages. The first stage is that Beauty is power. Keats in Hyperion says;

"First in beauty should be first in might"

In the second stage, he says that beauty is the source of joy and happiness; Endymion;

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever".

In the third stage, Keats has connected beauty with truth. Beauty is the source of truth. In "Ode on a Grecian Urn", Keats notes;

*"Beauty is truth, truth beauty, —that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."*

*This worship of beauty made him famous.
Many believed that Keats was an escapist, but
inside deep he was not an escapist, according to
him; sufferings play a vital role in the
development of human personality.*

Akhtar Sherani

Akhtar Sherani is one of the greatest Urdu Romantic poets. His actual name was Muhammad Dawood Khan and used "Akhtar" as his pen name and "Sherani" as his family name. He was born in the well-known family of Hafiz Mahmood Sherani on May 04, 1905 (Tonk, Rajasthan, India) and died on September 09, 1948 (Lahore, Pakistan). In the galaxy of Urdu poets, he holds an important position. His poetry is an expression of the imagination of love, beauty, and nature. Sherani's romantic essence is fully expressed through the Urdu language. He is the only poet who was entitled by many critics as "*Shayer-e-Romaan*" in Urdu literature (Hassan, 1955).

Akhtar Sherani proved to be a fragrant bridge between classical Urdu poetry and modern progressive (ترقی پسند) poetry. He introduced Serenading Poetry in Urdu, which means, a young man expresses his love for his beloved girl. In traditional Urdu 'ghazal', we find a beloved described as male, but Akhtar expresses his love for Salma, Azra, and Raihana. The youth liked and appreciated this mode in poetry. His poetry is also the amalgamation of beauty, scenes of nature, and his beloved pride and blandishment. He connects the beauty of sceneries to the beauty of his beloved.

"بہارِ حسن کا ٹونچہ شاداب ہے سلی
شبستانِ جوانی کا ٹوک زندہ ستارہ ہے
تو اس دنیا میں بحرِ حسنِ فطرت کا کنارہ ہے"
(سلی)

Translation:

Salma, you are the lush blossom of beauty
You are a living star of glaring youth
In this world, nature has its ocean of beauty
And you are the shore of that ocean.

He, like Keats, passed away at a young age as compared to his contemporaries. His life was a stream of tragedies and miseries. His young son Javed Mahmood died in an accident. His close friend Mirza Shuja Khan committed suicide and his son-in-law Naziruddin Sherani drowned accidentally. He also faced failure in his love, as the lady Salma, whom he loved, rejected him. The consequences of these tragedies made him to alcohol and alcohol affected his mental and physical health and put him to death.

Like Keats, Akhtar Sherani too flies to the world of fantasy, ecstasy, and tranquility with his poetic imaginative wings. He loves life, but he is also known to the harsh realities of life. His poems are full of life passion, beauty, sorrow, longing, fluency, melody, youth, joy, love, and excitement. Most of his poetry is full of love, beauty, nature, and patriotism. His mind and heart were factories of verses and their love. He was so daring to express his emotions of love, pain, and natural scenery. Like Keats, he had no political life, but rather he was a strong lover of poetry and poetry remained his beloved all his life. He was a firm believer of love and beauty. Poetry and love were his two moons. In the light of those moons, he sat and wrote his strong emotions for love and beauty. His soul is only satisfied when he sings the songs of love and nature. He was full of romantic elements and no other aspects have come to the front. His romanticism was coined at the top of all the poets in Urdu literature. Some critics argue that he played such a role in romanticism alone, which was played in English by Keats, Shelley, and Byron collectively (Hassan, 1955). His essence of love and strong emotions can be seen in the following verses:

"محبت کے لئے آیا ہوں میں دنیا کی محفل میں
محبت خون بن کر لہلہاتی ہے مرے دل میں"
(میرا موجودہ مشغلہ)

Translation:

"I have come for love to the gathering of this world
Love becomes blood and flutters in my heart."

Research Objectives

Objectives of the study are as under:

- i. To show the similar aspects in the poetry of John Keats and Akhtar Sherani.
- ii. To provide a comprehensive review of these two romantics.
- iii. To explore more opportunities for students in getting the verses of young romantic poets.
- iv. To provide translation of selective verses of Akhtar Sherani.

Research Questions

The research questions of this term paper are:

- i. What are the areas where the Romantics of the English language are similar to the Urdu language?
- ii. What are the similar realms of fantasy which catch young poets; Keats and Sherani?
- iii. What are the traits through which students can do a comparative study of English and Urdu Romantic poets?

Significance of the Study

The study will contribute to the field of comparative studies in literature for a better understanding of romantic concepts and the effect of language shifts in poetry for the same conception. This term paper will help students to easily compare different writers of different languages by putting the example of John Keats and Akhtar Sherani. It will also enable students to get the concepts of literature from one language and apply them in another language despite the era.

This study does not share the concept of death, the response of Keats and Sherani towards wine, their love for the homeland, revolution, and poetry reforms. This research will also not provide any single view of those areas where these poets are not identical.

Literature Review

The comparative study in the literature of different languages has always been very interesting and heart-catching for critics and readers. The comparison of the literary taste of English and Urdu languages has been looked at thoroughly. It has

been appealing to researchers and people of literary personalities. There is always a huge impact of English literature on Urdu literature. Urdu literature highly appreciated the literary tendencies of other kinds of literature of the world, including English literature as we see the shift from Marxism to Progressivism and then from Progressivism to Modernism. English literature has the era of modernism in the last quarter of the 19th century but Urdu literature took its time in creating the atmosphere of modernism in it. The researchers have found out that Urdu literature has been appreciating many new things and literary advancements in other literature of the world like Arabic, Persian, and English (Ashrafi, 2016).

Similarly, the comparative and contrastive analysis of many poets of one language to another language has been winsome for many scholars. The modern concept in literature has the emergence in both the languages and their enriched literature. Sylvia Plath and Parveen Shaker, in this regard, have constructed the edifice of poetry in its perfection (Ghafoor & Parveen, 2015). The literary sense of a person does not seek a specific language all the time to read. It is the phenomenon of love towards the expressed purity in words beyond the language of expression. We see that being modern poets of the 20th century both poets have played a role in literature by creating a beautiful view of this world out of frustration, suffering, and pain. Researchers have acknowledged the role of Plath and Shaker.

Within short span, they got all repute
The worth of their work no can refute.
Pathos, mystery, color and fragrance
Are the traits gave them significance.
(A Researcher)

The chapter of Romanticism is the most everlasting element in every literature of the world. It has influenced many writers of every age. Urdu literature is broadly compared and studied with English literature in many aspects, especially in Romanticism. Aimillia Ramli (2011) has clicked the folder of English Romanticism and Iqbal in a well-organized way. The work has been carried out very beautifully in making a comparison of English Romanticism and Iqbal. English Romanticism seeks

the pantheism and extreme idealization of imagination while Iqbal chose the imagination of the significance of intuition in creating an intense Love for Allah (s.w.t) in the creation of 'self' of man. English Romanticism and Iqbal have the ideology of appreciation of nature and imagination in similar (Ramli, 2011). The research has shown the qualities of being closed and a lover of nature in the concept of Iqbal's poetry and English Romanticism.

The comparative study of English Romantics and Urdu Romantics have been explored much in many aspects. Muhammad Ismail Mir (2016) has compared the treatment of nature by Muhammad Iqbal and William Wordsworth. Both are giving the nectar of love to people for nature and this kind of world. The comparison has been done in a way that the researcher has introduced them to people as caring souls for nature who always tried to convince people to respect and save this beautiful and kind-hearted nature. The researcher has only compared one aspect in their poetry i-e nature caring (Ismail, 2016).

Among the English Romantics, Shelley is the person for whom Nature is the cause of change. Most of his poetry is having revolutionary elements. In Urdu literature, many poets are revolutionary i-e. Faiz, Faraz, Jalib and many more. Ali Nawaz and Dr. Abdul Ghafoor Awan (2019), in their studies, have comparatively analyzed Percy Bysshe Shelley and Habib Jalib as revolutionary poets.

As a dominant figure of Romanticism, John Keats has also been explored much in the field of literature by many good critics and Ph.Ds. In Urdu, some researchers have evaluated and analyzed John Keats and have remarked that Keats is the one who loves pain and miseries.

Talking about Akhtar Shirani, he has been looked at individually. Dr. Younus Hasani (1976), in his book; "*Akhtar Shirani aur Jadeed Urdu Adab*", has scholarly explored the concepts of romanticism in Akhtar's poetry.

S. Akhtar Jafri (1964) in his book "*Akhtar Shirani aur uski Shayeri*" has much explored his qualities. He is, no doubt, the first romantic poet in Urdu literature for all the great critics of Urdu literature.

The study of the comparative elements in the poetry of John Keats and Akhtar Shirani is still untouched.

Research Methodology

The nature of this study was qualitative. John Keats and Akhtar Shirani were compared in their concept of escapism. All their poetry cannot be covered in a single term paper but this paper dealt with their selected work. Some of their best iconic poems were selected and thoroughly discussed for better analysis of the comparative elements.

Poems of John Keats taken for this research are;

- i. "Ode on a Grecian Urn".
- ii. "Ode on melancholy".
- iii. "Ode to a Nightingale".

Poems of Akhtar Sherani taken for this research are;

- i. *Barkha Rut* (برکھات) or The Rainy Season.
- ii. *Ay Ishq Kahi'n Ley Chal* (اے عشق کہیں لے چل) or O'Love Take me Somewhere.

Escapism is a variable of romanticism that was looked for in the aforementioned selected poems of Keats and Sherani. Primary data was taken from their selected poems while secondary data was taken from different books, research articles, newspapers, and dissertations.

Analysis and Discussion

Both the poets are identical in many aspects as they share some qualities in them. Poets do share a dying spirit for poetry. Both these poets, too, are full of love and passion for poetry. This love and passion for poetry made them universal as poetry is a universal phenomenon. Despite the fact that they lived in different ages, different backgrounds, different cultures and traditions, different religions and even their language of expression is different. They are also having different age times. Keats died too young while Akhtar remained for 43 years in this world of miseries and sufferings. Akhtar Sherani studied and read Keats' poems but Keats couldn't do the same because of the difference in the time period. Keats was criticized for his poetry when he published his first collection of poetry. He was considered as unripe and immature by some critics. They claimed that Keats was a slave of passion and

a slave of impression of feelings. Some journals like "Quarterly Review" and "Blackwood's Magazine" remarked that Keats is an ill-mannered, underbred and low character person. Even Keats admitted the faults he had in his poems but he still not spared. His fame started its journey when P. B. Shelley paid attribute to him in his elegiac poem, "Adonais". On the other hand, Akhtar Sherani was appreciated in a very young age when he started poetry. He remained as a chief editor of some monthly journals, "Faraan", "Sahail", "Inqelab", "Khayalistan", "Roman", and "Humayoun".

For Keats, love was a garden of happiness, peace, and solace into which one enters under the shadow of prosperity to find release from pain, miseries, responsibilities, and moral suppression. Keats did not use poetry as an instrument of social revolt, but rather he used it for the expression of beauty. He arranges a world of beauty to escape the dull, gloomy, depressing, and painful effects of the ordinary experience of life. He flies to the world of imagination in order to avoid this world's social and political problems. He was also a poet of truth and showed a closer contact with the reality of life which assumes that he was not wholly a poet of escape. But rather escapism is found in his poetry (Chauhan, 2019).

He has discovered a new realm of wonder and beauty. He wanted to live in such a world which is a golden world to take a breath in. We find this tendency in his poems; he always wants to flee into another world where there are no human sufferings and miseries. To fulfill this desire, he chose the world of a bird which is free from human sufferings and burdens of responsibilities, there is only harmony and melodies. He wishes for a life of joy and happiness. This can be seen in his odes; "Ode to a Nightingale";

*"Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow*

And leaden-eyed despairs,

Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,

Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow."

(Line 21-30)

The things he experienced around him in his life and in the midst of all the suffering from which he has found nothing but sorrow, he tries to find peace of mind. Keats wants to use his poetic wings and flee to the world of joy, peace, serenity, and immortality;

"Away! away! for I will fly to thee,

Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,

But on the viewless wings of Poesy,"

(*"Ode to a Nightingale"* 31-33)

Akhtar Sherani, like Keats, also wishes for a world where gleeful sounds are produced and where he can find serenity in them. Where beauty is truth. Where there is not even a shadow of deceit, deception, and envy. Where there is peace, serenity, and joy. Where there is everything that does not exist in this material world.

"آنکھوں میں سائی ہے اک خوابِ نمادِ نیا
تاروں کی طرح روشن مہتابِ نمادِ نیا
جنت کی طرح رنگین شادابِ نمادِ نیا
لہو ہیں لے چل!
اے عشق کہیں لے چل!
(اے عشق کہیں لے چل)

Translation:

There inhabited a world of dreams in my eyes

That moon-like world, dazzling like stars,

A colorful world like Eden, abloom,

For God's sake, take me there!

O' Love, take me somewhere!

(O' Love, take me somewhere!)

Akhtar longs for a peaceful world because here keenness and desires are squashed. Here hopes and aspirations are blood bathed. In this world, man cannot sleep peacefully because destructive elements like villainy, violence, and insurrections are always awake. This world is a slaughterhouse of emotions and an abattoir of desires. This world is full of

impure and poisonous thoughts like selfishness, mischief, egotism, narcissism, and homicide. Therefore, Akhtar wants to satisfy his restless soul by leaving this world for the world of harmonies, melodies, and natural lights.

"ان چاند ستاروں کے بکھرے ہوئے شہروں میں
ان نور کی کرنوں کی ٹھہری ہوئی نہروں میں
ٹھہری ہوئی نہروں میں سوئی ہوئی لہروں میں
اے خضر حسین لے چل!
اے عشق کہیں لے چل!
(اے عشق کہیں لے چل!)

Translation:

To those scattered cities of the moon and stars

To the slack channels of these gleams of lit

To the stagnant canals, in the dormant waves

O' elegant Khizr, take me!

O' Love, take me somewhere!

(O' Love, take me somewhere!)

Akhtar looks very disgusted with this world because to him it is an encampment of maltreated, tyrannized, and forced narcissists. Here the poisonous calamity and iniquity destroy humanity by sucking the blood of truth and nobility from its veins and filling them with the poison of shame, malice, prejudice, hatred, and enmity. He writes in his poem; "*Ay Eshq Kahi Ley Chal!*" Or "O' Love, take me somewhere!";

"اے عشق کہیں لے چل اس پاپ کی ہستی سے
نفرت گہرے عالم سے لعنت گہرے ہستی سے
ان نفس پرستوں سے اس نفس پرستی سے
دوراور کہیں لے چل!
اے عشق کہیں لے چل!
اک ایسی جگہ جس میں انسان نہ بستے ہوں
یہ مکروہ جنما پیشہ حیوان نہ بستے ہوں
انسان کی قاب میں یہ شیطان نہ بستے ہوں
چل اس کے قریب لے چل
اے عشق کہیں لے چل!
(اے عشق کہیں لے چل)

O' Love, take me away from this evil encampment
From this atrocity, world of malediction

From these narcissists, from this self-absorption
Take me away!
O' Love, take me somewhere!
A place where humans don't dwell
Where don't dwell brutes of guile and oppression
Where devils don't dwell in the guise of humans
Let's go to its town
O'Love, take me somewhere!
(O' Love, take me somewhere!)

Akhtar wants to flee to the world of beauty, ecstasy, and the realm of fantasy with the help of his beloved. Where he can get satisfied with the beauty of colorful springs, greenish dense trees, meadows, and the songs of high mountains. He wants to escape to the harmonic light of the moon and the rhythmical flow of waterfalls.

Conclusion

Keats and Sherani are considered as the backbones of English and Urdu romanticism respectively. Both these poets write with musicality, harmony and smoothness. They have the same taste of life and truth. For John Keats, the life is full of miseries and obstacles. Similarly, for Akhtar Sherani, life is enmity, vice and selfishness. Both try to flee into the world of fantasy through the wings of poetic imagination. Both share the quality of being in love with beauty. For them the whole life and world is the beauty. And it is the beauty for which we are here. Looking at the beauty of woman, both stand at the same position of eternity. They rarely laugh unlike other romantics because of the sufferings life has forced on them.

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