



Critiquing Kabir from a Structuralist Perspective

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One of critical tenets that we have in Contemporary critical appreciation in the context of Structuralism is to get to the deep structure of the text. It is the discovery of that essential thing that makes any text a text; any poem a poem. It is this vital and indispensable critical device that makes a poem distinct form as compared with the other genres of literature. In fact, Structuralist theorists are interested in identifying and analyzing the structure that underlies all cultural phenomena – not just literature (<http://www.shmoop.com/structuralism>). A proposal is thus made to critique and analyze Songs of Kabiras translated by Rabindranath Tagore from a Structuralist point of view.

Ferdinand de Saussure, the linguist, gave the notion that *everything* could be analyzed in terms of a deep structure. Although much has been explored in the context of Kabir, it would be interesting to note the sign-systems and thereby identify the absences that lie deep within the text. The question is whether unchanging patterns and rules emerge from the poems of Kabir? And do they reflect ideas that could be referred to as being universal in nature? This and such allied inquiries would be addressed in this paper.

God as an Omnipresent, Omniscient and Omnipotent Being:

Let us begin with the idea of Omnipresence as implied in the first stanza. Having stated that God is neither in the binaries of temple/mosque; neither in Kaaba/Kailash; neither in rites and ceremonies; neither in Yoga and renunciation, the poet says that only a **true seeker** could see and meet Him. Here the poet wishes to bring to the surface the idea that the principle of God is transcendental in character. He cannot be bound or limited to places of worship. The poet rightly says in **Song II**,

It is needless to ask a saint the caste to which he belongs (lines 1)

In fact, it is futile to assign caste, creed or religion to a True seeker. Only a mumukshu – one who has steadfast yearning for liberation – can experience Him. Kabir says,

It is the Spirit of the quest which helps; I am the slave of this Spirit of the quest. (Song III, 13)

Secondly, the poet defies the orthodox notion of deliverance and advocates the ‘here and the now’ philosophy. Kabir beautifully sings:

... for in life deliverance abides (Song III, 2)

The approach is in complete contrast to the traditional notion of **liberation**. In fact, there are many schools of thought, including the **Mahayana** school of Buddhism, that believe that one can only attain complete (*Poorna*) **Nirvana** only after one has left his mortal coil. However, Kabir and many other *non-panthis* strongly advocated the ‘here and the now philosophy’. Tagore, similarly, echoes in **Gitanjali**, Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. Thus, binary between old/new; ancient/modern practices appears to be seen here.

Let us take **Song no. IV** as an example, to illustrate the idea of bringing to the surface the deep and hidden structures inherent in the poem. When the poet says:

*...In your body is the garden of flowers...
Take your seat on the thousand petals of the lotus, and there
gaze on the Infinite Beauty.* (lines 03-05)

or

...The musk is in the deer.... (Song VI:13)

One obviously notices the Christian mystical echo of a popular maxim uttered by Jesus Christ, “*The Kingdom of heaven is within you.*” That the inner self is the repository of all that is seen and observed without is made structurally apparent. The body/mind; infinite/finite binaries are suggestive of a total comprehension and assimilation of existing philosophical ideologies. How **Man** becomes the be-all and the end-all of all existence finds communication in the simplest of terms. In mysticism, the human heart is visualized as a garden that needs to be tended with love and care. Kabir similarly refers to the lotus flower that



symbolizes the path within. The thousand petals of the lotus carry within it layers and layers of Infinite beauty. This is the majesty of God. Likewise, man's exploration of his inner-self through the multifold recesses of his mind and soul brings him into contact with his true self. However, the poet cautions the true seeker saying that the true path is rarely found (Song V:11-12). Moreover, the path to God is very narrow. Either love for the Lord moves or the ego-self (Song VI:05-10). In a very similar context, Kabir sings:

प्रेम गली अति सांकरी, तामें दोऊ न समाई |

जब में था तब हरी नहीं, अब हरी है में नहीं ||

(The street of love is very narrow; two cannot pass through it at the same time
When I was, there was no God (hari), now there is God but I am not)

Meaning that, to attain true love, one has to give up his ego. When the ego disappears, God appears. So the devotee must give up his ego to realize God.

(<http://santkabirdas.blogspot.in/2011/06/prem-gali-ati-sankari-tamein-dou-na.html/29/07/15>)

God has no beginning no end:

The poet visualizes in **Song VIII** how God the un-manifested (Brahma) would manifest himself. Beginning with the un-manifest/manifest binary, the poet takes us to the suggestive dualities of seed/fruit; shade/light; tree/sapling; void/full; Infinite/finite; limitless/limited and concludes saying that:

The Supreme Soul is seen within the Soul...(18)

The unfathomable mystery of God continues to find poetic rendering in **Song IX** when he sings, *O How may I ever express that secret word?* Here the individual / universal; falsehood / Truth; indivisible / divisible; conscious / unconscious; revealed / unrevealed dichotomies find suggestion and resolution for the inexpressible (There are no words to tell that which He is) - (9). It is only God's grace that could be an individual's savior. He is the **upholder** (X: 5) and looks for total surrender (aatmanivedanam).

The Supreme One:

The theme of God consciousness continues to reverberate in **Songs XII, XIV, XV, XVI, XVII**. From addressing God as the *Supreme One* (7) who cannot be bound in the language of words, the poet talks about His majesty and the interdependence of man and God. There appears to be an echo of a famous maxim from the Upanishads in **Song XIV**:

**“Om poornamadahpoornamidampoornaatpoornamudachyate
Poornasyapoornamaadaayapoornamevaavashishyate
Om shaantihishaantihishaantihi.”**

(<http://aumamen.com/mantra/om-purnamadah-purnamidam-shanti-mantra>)

(Om, That is complete, This is complete, From the completeness comes the completeness/ If completeness is taken away from completeness, Only completeness remains/ Om, Peace peace peace)

This completeness finds visible illustration through the water imagery comprising of rivers, waves, water; God imagery of Krishnas, Vishnus, Brahmans, Shivas, Indras, Saraswatis etc. (**Song XV**); elemental imagery of sun, moon, sky, earth (**Song XVI**), stars (**Song XVII**) shows the deep influence and impact of Indian mythology, traditions and legends.

The Devout Seeker:

Defining the true seeker the poet in **Song XVII** beautifully sings,

The devout seeker is he who mingles in his heart the double currents of love and detachment. (Lines: 16-17)

In fact, the theme of love and detachment is right at the heart of Kabir's poems. In keeping with the *navadha* bhakti tradition, one of the ways of worshipping God is as a Beloved. Let us see a few illustrations:

1. *My Beloved One gleams like the lightning flash in the sky*(**Song XVII**)
2. *I long for the meeting with my Beloved* (**Song XXXI**)
3. *My body and my mind are grieved for the want of Thee; O my Beloved! Come to my house* (**Song XXXV**)
4. *Dear friend, I am eager to meet my Beloved!* (**Song L**)
5. *Kabir says: “Listen friend! There is no other satisfaction, save in the encounter with the Beloved.”* (**Song LII**)
6. *Waver no more; think only of the Beloved* (**Song LXXI**)



The poet wisely puts aside the disputes and confrontations of the Yogi, the Sanyasi and the Ascetic and advocates that God is nothing but Love. As a universal value term the poet wisely states that everything in this universe is bound by the principle of love. Whether it is the relationship of the river with the sea; the individual with the Universal; the natural elements; the bee and the nectar; the moon and its moonlight, it is Love alone that holds the entire cosmos together. Kabir says that the true seeker would thus dive deep into that Ocean of sweetness (Love) and thereby annihilate all the errors of life and death. Secondly, the principle of detachment helps the seeker to transcend all sorrow and attain to that land of rest. The poet says,

“If you merge your life in the Ocean of Life, you will find life in the Supreme Land of Bliss.” (Song XVII:76-77)

This realization of Truth implants fearlessness in the seeker and consequently the entire universe echoes with divine music. Nectar rains and all disagreeables evaporate. *“The inward and the outward become as one sky...” (Song XVII:99)* Holding steadfastly to one’s beliefs (Song XX) the seeker puts all imaginations at bay and crosses over to the shores of eternity.

The True Guru and the Lotus Simile:

The poet sincerely longs for the true guru (Song XXII) who would remove the veils of ignorance and grant him the true vision of God. It is the guru alone who could grant a limitless life (Song XXIV) to the seeker who should be *like a lotus, which lives in the water and blooms in the water; yet the water cannot touch its petals, they open beyond its reach (Song XXIV:3-5)*. This is one of the finest examples of the detached approach that a seeker of truth should have. Such a seeker experiences intimacy with God (Song XXV) whose essence has been epitomized in the *ekakshar mantra –OM (Song XXVI)*. The poet rightly says,

The Guru is great beyond words, and great is the good fortune of the disciple.” (Song XXVII:12-13)

This unique relationship between God as the true Guru and the individual; between the Unconditioned and the conditioned (Song XXVIII:1) is nothing but the philosophical position of Advaita. The poet sings, *Thou and I are one. (Song XXVIII:1)* And this immortal, everlasting relationship has been there since times immemorial. Even much before the beginning of the world (*...when the world was not spread out: when the Supreme One was alone-(Song XXIX:6-7)*) the bonding has been in existence. In fact, all the *mahavakyas* in the *Upanishadic* tradition state this non-dual position:

1. *Tat tvamasi* (Thou art That)
2. *Ayamaatma Brahma* (This self is Brahman)
3. *Pragyanam Brahma* (Pragna is Brahman)
4. *AhamBrahmasmi* (I am Brahman)

– (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mah%C4%81v%C4%81kyas>)

In this rapturous divine state, the seeker’s heart dances with joy (Song XXXII:1) with the ultimate realization that the Lord dwells within him (Song XXXIII:8). This union with the Indweller is equivalent to the bonding between a lover and his beloved. In this heart to heart relationship (Song XXXVI: 4), the true seeker gets awakened only when His heart is pierced with the arrow of His music (Song XXXVI: 10-11).

The Quest:

The poet also states the qualities that the seeker of truth should possess. He should not be lustful (Song XXXVII:6), but should be brave, courageous, (Song XXXVII:11) pure, contented and truthful (Song XXXVII:15). Such a seeker obtains the knowledge and grace of Brahma (Song XL:5). He starts beholding His beauty everywhere; Blessed with divine insight, the seeker resolves all contradictions (Song XL:5) and drinks deep into the maddening ecstasy of self-realization (Song XLIV:6). The poet beautifully sings,

O Kazi, O Pundit, consider it well: what is there that is not in the soul?

(Song XLVI:8)

And this thought that everything lies within us and that this self-realization is possible here and now finds resonance in the famous lines from Tagore:

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee! ...

Deliverance? Where is this deliverance to be found? Our master himself has joyfully taken upon him the bonds of creation; he is bound with us all for ever.

(<http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/tagore/gitnjali.htm>)

The poet understands that there is no state like being liberated or attaining deliverance. Defying orthodoxy and traditional ritualistic observances, the poet lays emphasis on love and renunciation. He says:

He who has found both love and renunciation never descends to death.

(Song XLIX:11)



An echo of the same idea is found in one of his dohas:

पोथी पढ़ी पढ़ी जग मुआ पंडित भयो न कोई
ढाई आखर प्रेम के जो पढ़े सो पंडित होई

Which when translated reads as, “Reading books everyone died, none became any wise. One who reads the word of Love, only becomes wise.”

Kabir in this doha shows the way, in his simple but dynamic style. He daringly says that despite all our readings, despite all our knowledge, we cannot become wise. Only if we 'read' Love, become loving and loveable, only then wisdom will dawn on us. Only then Life will be worth living.

(<http://www.boloji.com/index.cfm?md=Content&sd=DohaDetails&DohaID=13/29/087/2015>)

However, the relationship between the true seeker and the True-Guru (God) should mandatorily be as between a lover and his beloved. The qualities of ‘eagerness to meet’ (Song LI:8), the ‘pain of separation’ (Song LI:9 & LII:1), total ‘satisfaction’ (Song LII:7) and ‘dedication’ (Song LIII:7) define this ‘encounter’ (Song LII:7) with God as Beloved. But again, the path of love is ‘Subtle’ in nature (Song LV:1) and only the real Sadhu (Song LVI:1) experiences the form of the Formless and perceives the all-pervasive Supreme Spirit (Song LVI:7) and *ever immersed in bliss, having no fear in his mind, he keeps the spirit of union in the midst of all enjoyments* (Song LVI:10-11). This condition is no different from the *Sthithaprajnaavastha* (state of equal-mindedness) mentioned in the Bhagavad-Gita.

The poet further adds,

He who is within is without (Song LVI:16)

which quintessentially is a direct echo of a verse from the Taittiriya Upanishad:

antarbahischa tat sarvamvyapyanarayanahsthitah .

"All that is seen and heard in this material world has its basis in Lord Narayana, who manifests everything within and without."

(http://nitaiveda.com/All_Scriptures_By_Acharyas/Vedas/Narayana_Suktam.htm)

Correspondingly, in the very next Song, the poet talks about the ‘Word’, its meaning, its practice; its mystery etc. (Song LVII:1-15) which is and has been a part of the Christian mystical tradition. The KJ version of the Bible states in the very first book:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

(<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+1&version=KJV>)

The word *shadabrahma* is alluded to as the very first source enunciated by our scriptures as the reason behind the origin of the world. However, the mystery behind the origin of the word cannot be comprehended. Kabir says:

But who knows whence the Word cometh? (Song LVII:15)

In fact, it is futile effort to even attempt to know the Supreme through cleverness of words (Song LIX:2). Kabir says that this would amount to self-deception (Song LIX:3). The poet very appropriately refers back to the glorious Indian tradition and cites the examples of Dhruva, Prahlad, Shukadeva and Raidas (Song LXI:6) as the embodiments of the virtues of detachment and renunciation and these need to be assimilated by the true seeker. The Taittiriya Upanishad similarly states:

न कर्मणा न प्रजया धनेन त्यागेनैके अमृतत्वमानशुः |
परेण नाकं निहितं गुहायां विभाजते यद्यतयो विशन्ति ||
(nakarmananaprajayadhanenatyagenaikeamrutatvamanashuh |
parenanakamnihitamguhayamvibhrajateyadyatayovishanti ||)

“Not by work, nor by progeny, nor by wealth, but by renunciation, some attained immortality. Higher than heaven, seated in the cave (Buddhi), that shines, (which) the self-controlled attain – the self-controlled, who being of pure minds have well ascertained the Reality.”

(<https://in.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20120214015644AAz43EU>)



And Kabir echoes the same thought when he says:

Keep within you truth, detachment and love. (Song LXI:15)

Put away all fear for this poor body. (Song LXIV:9)

The man who is kind and who practices righteousness, who remains passive amidst the affairs of the world, who considers all creatures on earth as his own self. (Song LXV:14-16)

The qualities of truth, detachment, love, fearlessness, kindness, righteousness that Kabir refers to also remind one of the equal-minded one (*Sthithaprajna*) mentioned in the **Bhagwad Gita** and the *Saahrydaya* (Buddha: The Compassionate One). In this pursuit of self-realization inner not outer transformation is essential (Song LXVI). The external expressions and apparels of devotion as the Mullah who cries out loud or the matted locks of the yogi (Song LXVII) become irrelevant when the seeker looks within his heart and finds the evaporation of all disagreeables a reality. This self-contentment (Song LXX) re-instills the belief that every man has to eventually carry his own cross (Song LXXIV) in the quest of enlightenment.

God: The Light of all Lights

Kabir in the final few Songs again makes a futile attempt to describe the indescribable God. He calls Him as:

The Master, who is true, He is all light (Song LXXV:9);

Hepervades this world (Song LXXVI:1);

He is the Ultimate Rest unbounded (Song LXXVI:15);

The Truth of truths, in whom all truths are stored (Song LXXVI:31-32);

He is in you from head to foot (Song LXXVIII:22);

He is the Mind within my mind. He is the Eye within mine eye (Song XCIII:3)

Thus having identified the recurring patterns and motifs in Kabir's poems, the starting response from a structuralist's perspective would be to state **that there is indeed a common structure – the structure of God's consciousness that permeates the entire work.** And this reality/nature is realized through one's individual's experience with or without meditation. The meanings produced could be a result of language or the awareness of the presence of a supernatural being. In Kabir, quite interestingly, language reflects and elevates one to experience Godhood. Instead of distorting Reality, Kabir succeeds in creating a very benevolent aspect of Reality. In fact, all-through the entire work, God is visualized as either a Lover or a Beloved.

Langue or the signifying system in Kabir would be God and Parole or the individual utterance would be Man. The meaning that is created through symbols like the temple, mosque, moon, earthen vessel, lotus, Fakir, rain, bird etc., does not suggest any kind of arbitrariness. On the contrary the intimate relationship between the concept of God (and Man) and the sound-image (for these are Songs to be sung) further enforce the linguistic idea of God and assists in recalling the entire Advaitic tradition. One may argue about the role of binaries hidden in the terms like manifest, seed, shade, light, tree, void, Infinite, limitless etc., which again add up to the philosophical dimension of Kabir. These units serve as catalysts in transporting the avid reader to an ecstatic experience. Finally, the question of unchanging patterns and rules & universality of approach in Kabir's 'text' etc. find a construction that is very **natural** because of Kabir's language system that at all times speaks for itself.

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