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Shaikh Ayaz a Poet of Optimism: Textual Analysis and Thematic Interpretation of Poetic Work

Abstract:

The present study aims at discussing the sentiments of optimism in the poetic works of Shaikh Ayaz. It is revealed after reviewing the literature and reading the poet's Sindhi poetry and its English translation that hopefulness is tremendously exhibited and constitutes a profound theme of his poetry. Optimism is expressed amid trials and tribulations of life. Love, beauty, truth, courage and struggle are the leading dimensions which have been revealed through this study. These are the vital characteristics and concepts which help a human being to be optimistic amid the challenges of life which he encounters. Hence, this study find that Shaikh Ayaz was utterly optimistic- though sometimes we also witness some random contrasts in his handling of the very theme as a poet and a human being.

Key words: Shaikh Ayaz, Optimism, love, beauty, courage, humanity, human beings, hopefulness, hopelessness.

Introduction:

Shaikh Ayaz is one of the most inspiring poets in Sindhi language. Though he has written various short stories besides autobiography in four volumes and the biographies of the leading poets of international repute. Born in 1923 in Shikarpur, Shaikh Ayaz has penned down sixty-three books, among which thirty-nine are his poetic collections (Shaikh 2020). His works are translated in English by Asif Farrukhi and in Urdu by Fahmida Riaz (Naeem, 2021). However, one of the most important sources of the poet's English translation is '*Songs of freedom*'- a collection of his five books which is used as the main source of primary data collection for this study. It was under the influence of both that the poet agreed to compose verse in Urdu language- *Booye Gul, Nala-i- dil and Neel Kanth aur Neem ke patay*. Ayaz emerged as a very inspirational and prolific author after his severe criticism against President Ayub Khan in wake of one-Unit. Since then, he never looked back and continued to haunt the tyrants, please the common man, and satisfy the intellectuals. Shaikh Ayaz is considered as the greatest poet in Sindhi language after Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai due to his powerful lyrics, striking thoughts, anti-colonial sentiments and the deep degree of optimism which he conveys in his poetry.

It is necessary to know the period in which the author has produced most of his work, and it shall only be made possible to criticize and analyze his poetic prowess. Shaikh Ayaz began

to write as a student during the last decade of the British Empire when the colonial masters have usurped the freedom and the rights of people. Shaikh Ayaz wrote against the colonial rule:

“Whomsoever, wherever oppression is done, I feel it upon myself.

Whenever the sanctity of a home is perished, it hurts as if it were my home.

Oh you! The oppressed and enslaved people of the world,

If anyone among you sets free from slavery and oppression,

I feel the burden lowering from my neck”.

(Songs of Freedom, 2010, P-15)

Shaikh Ayaz witnessed the horrors of WWII and the gradual decay of colonialism very minutely. After creation of Pakistan, there were certain profound events which led to revolt the young poet in his very youth: derailing of democracy, imposition of Martial Law, One-Unit, Assassination of Z. A. Bhutto, Zia regime’s Islamist policies, and few others in the following years as well. This all was enough to create a hard core out of the poet’s delicacy and kindness. During his visits to Thar with Jamal Abro- poet’s friend and story writer- he found beauty besides hunger, poverty, ignorance and disease. ‘Wheat is a fruit for us’, Shaikh Ayaz quotes a man from Thar in his travelogue and autobiography ‘Kithey na bhanjbo thakk musafir’ (Never to rest anywhere O’ traveler). Thus, the poet has seen a lot of upheavals in his life, and yet he is hopeful that the things would change and conveys the message of optimism to his readers.

Scope of the Study

This research focuses exclusively on the theme of optimism in the poetry of Shaikh Ayaz, particularly as it appears in Songs of Freedom and other translated texts. The study is limited to English translations and selected poems, not the entirety of his 39 poetry collections. It examines optimism as a philosophical and emotional construct rather than as a linguistic or psychoanalytic category. The study also restricts itself to Shaikh Ayaz’s poetic works, excluding his prose writings, autobiographies, and critical essays except when necessary to clarify context.

Limitations of the study:

The study relies primarily on translated versions of Ayaz’s poetry, which may lead to partial loss of linguistic nuance and poetic rhythm found in the original Sindhi text. The analysis reflects interpretive subjectivity, which is an inherent limitation of qualitative literary research. The focus on optimism excludes deeper comparative or stylistic analysis that could broaden the literary scope. The research does not employ quantitative content analysis, which could have measured frequency or proportion of optimistic imagery statistically.

Review of the current literature:

The prominent researchers, reviewers and analysts believe that `Shaikh Ayaz` is the poet of love. They highlight the core dimensions of Ayaz's poetic genius followed by his greatness to enrich Sindhi literature. Some are fascinated by his rebellious spirit when he aims at reawakening the people of Sindh and the world in general, while the others attribute him yet bigger genius. We here mention all such views of the critics about Ayaz in detail. According to Zahida Hina , "Ayaz loved Sindh and when you love someone you dream to see all the good in the world happen to it.... The conspiracies are still afoot to wrest Sindh from its real heirs.... In 1958 when some conspiracies divided the Urdu and Sindhi literary persons, Ayaz was among the few who promoted and wrote about harmony, loyalty and love. He wasn't among the writers who used their pens like knives but he was the one who tried to unite the hearts." (1)

In this regards, she continues about a great diversity in Ayaz's themes and presentations, "Ayaz with Bhitai, describing the 18th century Sufi poet as Taj Mahal and the former as Qutub Minar among the Sindhi poets from 18th to 20th centuries. For his poetry contained spirit of Bhagat Kabir, Amir Khusro and other poets. Ayaz regarded highly Urdu's first poet Amir Khusro Dehlvi who also finds mentions in his poetry." (2)

While, another scholar, Dr. Asif Farrukhi, highlights the novel dimension about poetry of Ayaz. He states that Ayaz developed a dimension of a messiah. Commenting about the leading distinction of Ayaz, he finds that the poet never remained associated with establishment and wrote profoundly against it: "Ayaz nurtured an approach of a messiah.... His rebellious poetry during the 1965 war which landed him in jail." (3)

However, Noor Ahmed Janjhi believes that Ayaz has profusely contributed to enrich Sindhi Literature that no other poet could do the same in hundred years. He argues that there were several aspects of optimism and pessimism in his poetic works, because: "Ayaz was true that he was the poet and writer of future generations, adding that he (Ayaz) kept on writing despite the severe criticism resorted to by those who did not understand the message he succeeded to spread across the globe. His prose and on `Thar` were of great inspiration for `Thari` writers, singers and student of literature; he immortalised the mesmerising beauty of sandy dunes and hilltops of Karronjhar." (4)

According to Amar Jaleel: "A poet of paramount prominence must pronounce his like all great poets, writers, scholars and intellectuals Shaikh Ayaz was at times misunderstood, misinterpreted and misjudged not only by his die hard adversaries, but by his admirers as well. Intrinsic meaning in his poetry and prose had an aura of profundity and always surpassed the apparent meaning of the words he used in his compositions. Surrounded by controversies and shrouded in mysteries. Shaikh Ayaz was an enigma. More than thirty years before he embarked upon his eternal journey into the unknown on Sunday 28 December 1997 he had become a legend in his lifetime. He then had produce remarkable literature of resistance to wage a gruelling war against the dictator Fieled Marshal Muhammad Ayub Khan. In the final analysis his pen proved mightier than the sword. Thereafter the world saw the emergence of a totally different Sindh imbued with defiance." (5)

Below mentioned reference is quoted from Ishaq Samejo's book 'Gheru Wess Ghazal' (گهڙو ويس غزل), opinion delivered by Mehtab Mahboob about Shaikh Ayaz poetry in the following words:

”اياز پنهنجي پوري دور کي متاثر ڪيو. ان کي نئين ٻولي ڏني، شاعريءَ جا نوان فارم ڏنا... غزل جيتوڻيڪ سنڌيءَ ۾ تمام گهڻو لکيو ويو، پر غزل جي شاعريءَ جو ڌرتيءَ سان رشتو نه هئڻ برابر هو. اياز غزل جي فارم کي، جيڪو بنيادي طرح ڌاريو فارم آهي، ان جو رستو سنڌ جي ڌرتيءَ سان جوڙيو ۽ غزل ۾ جيڪي فارسي ترڪيبون استعمال ٿينديون هيون، ان کي ڪڍي، هن نچ سنڌي غزل لکيا.“ (6)

Methodology:

This study is based on the Interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes understanding human experiences, emotions, and meanings embedded within literary texts. The interpretivist approach enables the researcher to explore how and why Shaikh Ayaz expressed optimism within specific socio-political and historical contexts. Rather than seeking measurable data, this paradigm focuses on subjective interpretation and contextual meaning derived from the poet's language, symbolism, and philosophy of life.

Research Design:

The research follows a Qualitative Literary Analysis design, which is most suitable for exploring themes, patterns, and meanings in poetic texts. Through textual analysis and thematic interpretation, the study identifies and analyzes the recurring motifs of optimism, love, courage, and struggle within Ayaz's poetry. The qualitative design allows a close reading of his poems to understand how optimism emerges as both an individual sentiment and a collective resistance to despair and oppression.

Research Method and Data Collection

- The main source for analysis is "Songs of Freedom" (English translation of Ayaz's Sindhi poetry) along with selected poems from Gherru Wess Ghazal and other translated works available online Khokhar, Muhammad, Ibrahim. (2019, December 30). *Translation of Shaikh Ayaz poetry*. Google Chrom. 7. Retrieved January 11, 2022, from <http://mikesalu.wordpress.com/2019/12/30/translation-of-shaikh-ayaz-poetry/> and in published anthologies, in addition to the Sindhi published books of Shaikh Ayaz.

However, the critical essays, reviews, and biographical works by Dr. Asif Farrukhi (2018), Noor Ahmed Janjhi (2010), Amar, Jalil (2010), Mehtab, Mehboob (2004), and others were consulted to support interpretations and provide historical and literary context.

Analytical Framework:

The poems were analyzed using thematic textual analysis, identifying patterns of optimism in connection with Ayaz's recurrent ideas- love, courage, humanity, truth, and resistance. Attention was given to imagery, tone, diction, symbolism, and contrasts between hope and despair to understand Ayaz's philosophy of life.

Discussion and findings:

After analyzing the works of Shaikh Ayaz, we find that his optimism rests on beauty, truth, love, intellect and struggle. As said earlier, he has written much against tyranny, oppression, occupation, injustice, and slavery. But he does not draw a gloomy picture which may lead to hopelessness, confusions, complexes, and darkness. Instead, he depicts the vivid pictures and decorates with beauty and love.

”بي خبر ناھ، پر مرڻ کان پوءِ
تو سان گڏجڻ جون حسرتون رهنديون.“
(گيڙو ويس غزل، 2004ع، ص: 97)

The poet does not know anything else as what to happen after death, yet he expresses hope to unite and meet his beloved. This also refers to the great degree of hope where Ayaz believes that death is no tool to keep away the lovers. In fact, it brings closer. It is awe-inspiring to note that death is not something to be scary of, but it is something which helps to unite. Referring to death and glorifying it, Ayaz still stand bold and courageous and equally hopeful too when he asks the moon to send message to his beloved that life is very close to its end, but he has not surrendered yet.

*“When clouds overcast the shadows,
When sorrows bring your memories
To moon shall you ask:
Yet oil lamp of desires is lit,
Yet heart bears hope,
And yet I have not surrendered.”
(Khokhar, M. Ibrahim, 2019)*

Courage is yet another dimension of the poet's optimism through which he motivates the readers for doing noble deeds and instills them a sense of resistance by arguing that the darkness would soon perish, and the moonlight would be the sole order of the society where all would be equal and happy. The world is loaded with injustice, oppression and exploitation, and

such evil is often symbolized by the poet through the mention of 'darkness, whirlwinds, storms, and hurricanes'. On the other hand, the glorious days are characterized by 'breeze, gentle wind, love, and moonlit nights'. Ayaz strongly believes in the stout nature of human being and argues that all storms are diverted by the might of man, if he wills so. The storms hurl; light shades, and darkness prevails, but in all tough circumstances the role of daring and courageous man is very vital and inspiring for all. The darkness would only be replaced in light through the people who are as towering and bold as mountains. This means to say that Ayaz fondly advocates towards the intellectual heights of man along with his critical reasoning to understand their rights and know their foes. As the 'changing wind' would only cast when the intellectual class of the society takes the front post to motivate and reawaken the slumbering masses. In this regard, Ayaz keeps his poetic thoughts sublime and does not fall to the level of common folks as he wishes them to raise their thinking flight to the great heights. In this regard, the following piece of his poetry is cited as strong evidence:

*"The little moonlit light for a while,
Has been taken away by the darkness and its style.
The whirlwind has engulfed all,
The storm has raised the loss toll.
The inner self of the man is stout enough,
To counter even the mountains though tough.
When this inner self wakes and roars loud,
The earth trembles and the mountains sprout.
The stars bow down to the greatness of the man
the mighty mountains fall in prostrate then."*

(Khokhar, M. Ibrahim, 2019)

The word 'style' refers to a striking notion which the researchers, biographers and thinkers could not altogether attempt to ponder over. Hence, it needs a brief mention to understand the word and the whole verse (*Nazm*)- which is untitled like the rest of Ayaz's poems. Everything is engulfed by darkness and whirlwind, and the light is taken away in 'style'. It gives an impression of 'conspiracy and treachery', and that the freedom of people across the globe is often forcefully subjugated by conspiracies through the mighty hands of usurpers. Ayaz firmly believes in the strength of man to remove all heavy shackles and attempt to bring back the 'moonlit night'-the glorious, happy, prosperous days- by the might of man. Everything pales before his power; the exploiters and oppressors terrify before his lion-like roars, and the mountains prostrate in terror when the man awakens. The awakening of man is discussed at the classical degree of intellectual rise because Ayaz wants the man's 'inner self and inner being' to be awakened. It is only then the superfluous myth of strength would look weak, dull and awkward when inner being- the true spirit of man- rises to his feet to encounter the social evils no matter how strong like mountains they are.

Romance is also revealed as the dominant force to message hopefulness. In all dark moments of the poet's life, he was marvelously a romantic poet. He wrote romance even when his books were banned; house at Karachi and Shikarpur was stoned and blazed; he was put

behind bars at Sahiwal Central Jail where he was kept next to Bhutto's cell and both would secretly exchange papers and poems, and he practiced law at Sukkur and Karachi. In all sweet as well sour moments of life, Ayaz exhibited a passion for romance, and this dimension remains equally magnificent in terms of expressing hope and optimism for the miserable folks of the world.

Ayaz's optimism rests on love –*Ishq*. He challenges God after the declarations of clerics against love calling it *haram*- unlawful. He believes that life is worthless without love and the very emotion creates delicate sentiments in human heart. Tender feelings further lead to create sympathetic corner in man's heart and further helps to save him to be callous, cruel, exploiter, unjust and inhumane. Owing to this, love is greatly glorified by the poet. In one of his finest ghazal's, he says,

”جي محبت کي گناه تو سمجهين

پو ته انسان بڻائينم نه ها.“

(گيتو ويس غزل، 2004ع، ص:62)

*O, Lord! If you deem love a forbidden thing,
You should not have created me as a human being!
(Translated by Prof. Jam Jamali)*

It is considerably evident to note that Ayaz challenges the creation of human beings without love, and thus he keenly adores love considering it the very vital essence of creation. Hence, the sheer note of optimism is prominent in his love lyrics and romantic ghazals as well where by advocating love, he gives hope to the people. We know that love and beauty produce tender sentiments in human heart, and it is because of their delicacy that more productive work can be initiated for the betterment of human beings.

*“O love,
You free man
From joy and sorrow....
O love
You're mankind's salvation, the sole salvation.”
(Songs of freedom, 2010, P-174)*

We also find contrasting opinions of the poet about optimism as well. At certain moments, he is hopeful that the period of ignorance, injustice, exploitation and oppression would soon doom as such evil concepts are destined to perish.

”هيءَ پنهنجي ڪرڻي ڀرڻي آ، پر سنڌ ايازنه مرڻي آ،

آخر هيءَ رات گذرڻي آ، توڇو گهٻرايو آ پيارا!!“

(گیتزو ویس غزل، 2004ء، ص: 171)

*Ah! It is our own sown crop, we reap,
But, Sindh is immortal, O! Ayaz, keep it in mind,
This dark night would not long last,
Why do you dear feel downcast?
(Translated by Prof. Jam Jamali)*

But on the other hand, he expresses the height of pessimism in his *Nazm* when he claims that the whole nation is sick and does not rise to his feet. Besides none is worthy to be advised, and none deserves to be discussed and suggested.

Such glaring contrasts are evident through the pages of his poetry, and the reason behind them are multiple. Ayaz wrote purposefully and extensively on revolution under the influence of communism. After creation of Pakistan, the country was ruled by elite class and the fruits of freedom were shared with the common people, but the industrialist class had flourished. Ayaz sought to eliminate the inhuman policies of the rich towards poor and thus wrote openly, boldly and extensively against tyrannies of the state. In this period of his youth, he seems to be 'a young, angry rebel'. Later, it seems that he realizes that the hopes for revolution and reforms are doomed, and then we find in his verses disappointment, dejection and anger towards the unsuccessful reforms which were hijacked among the irony hands of industrialists, military and politicians. Thus in the later period, we find contrasts and antithesis of his long association with revolution and revolutionary ideas.

In this connection, the present study finds that Ayaz is a superb optimistic who presents the darker aspects of life with such an artistic style that it seems appealing and awe-inspiring. It may be because of flow and rhythm of his verses that he made beauty out of gloom. His optimism relies on playing an active role to bring constructive change to uproot social evils which make people's lives miserable. For this, he motivates people to rise and awake to the higher degree of their consciousness and prefers attaining the intellectual glory, for it is the finest tool to rebel against the set social and political norms based on exploitation and injustice. He realizes the people that nothing is permanent, and so is the oppression, injustice and exploitation. This has to pass; it has to decay, and it is destined to degenerate. To bring the glorious days and change the destiny of the common folks, Ayaz stresses upon struggle, active role to be plays, love and optimism.

As said earlier, courage is also one of the influential parameters which the poet applies to express and preach his ideal of hopefulness. As a man and a poet, he himself has remained pro-active and courageous in face of danger, life-attempts, prison, and much more. He never surrendered and remained stout facing all hardships which befall upon him owing to his firm attachment with his poetic ideology- reforms, revolution, love, change, and prosperity. In the end, the *Nazm* is presented asunder to validate optimism expressed by Ayaz:

"Fortune of awakening

*We're eyes of slumber, love.
When asleep, our spirit, our conscious wakes,
Takes wings too far and wide,
Beyond bounds of time and space,
Treads over stars.....
On our way back we,
Lift moons in multitudes,
Snitch stars aplenty,
With which
We adorn the whole wide world;
We are the fortune of awakening, my love.”
(Songs of Freedom, 2010, P-233)*

Conclusion:

The present research was aimed at exploring and interpreting the spirit of optimism in the poetry of Shaikh Ayaz, one of the most celebrated and intellectually profound poets of Sindh. After a comprehensive review of his poetic works, especially “Songs of Freedom”, “Gherru Wess Ghazal”, and other translated collections, it becomes clear that Ayaz’s poetry is not merely a reflection of his personal experiences or historical realities but a living philosophy rooted in hope, courage, love, and human resilience. His verses embody the perpetual struggle between despair and hope, where optimism finally emerges as the dominant force that defines his poetic and philosophical outlook.

Shaikh Ayaz lived and wrote during one of the most turbulent periods in the subcontinent’s history—the end of British colonialism, the partition of India, and the rise of political repression under successive regimes in Pakistan. Yet, amidst these chaotic times, Ayaz’s voice remained that of faith in humanity and reform. His poetry resonates with the belief that light shall eventually conquer darkness, that the human soul possesses an inner strength capable of resisting tyranny, and that beauty and love can transform suffering into spiritual awakening. This recurring pattern of thought places Ayaz among those rare poets whose work transcends time and circumstance and continues to inspire generations towards hopefulness and creative defiance.

Equally significant is Ayaz’s portrayal of love (Ishq) as the central pillar of optimism. For him, love is not confined to romantic passion but expands into a universal and divine sentiment that unites humanity. By challenging religious orthodoxy and social conservatism, Ayaz presents love as the moral foundation of life and the only path towards salvation. His declaration, “*If love*

is tantamount to sin, You would not have created me as a human,” demonstrates his conviction that love is the essence of creation and the source of human compassion. Through love, he urges individuals to overcome hatred, division, and despair. Thus, Ayaz’s optimism emerges not merely as a poetic theme but as a philosophical stance that advocates emotional liberation and social harmony.

Another vital aspect that this study has identified is Ayaz’s faith in human courage and intellect. He consistently emphasizes that the destiny of mankind is shaped not by external forces but by the strength of human will. In his symbolic representation, the awakening of man’s inner being can move mountains and change the course of history. This belief in human capability aligns Ayaz with the global tradition of humanist and revolutionary poets such as Pablo Neruda and Faiz Ahmed Faiz. However, unlike many revolutionary writers who descend into pessimism after political disillusionment, Ayaz’s tone remains profoundly hopeful even in moments of despair. His optimism does not depend on the success of political movements alone but on the eternal capacity of the human spirit to rise again after every fall.

Nevertheless, the study also acknowledges certain contradictions in Ayaz’s outlook. At times, his poetry reveals disappointment and bitterness toward the social and political decay of his age. His lament over a “nation sick of jaundice” expresses his frustration with collective inaction and moral stagnation. Yet, these moments of despair are not permanent; they serve as artistic contrasts that highlight the poet’s enduring faith in renewal. By confronting hopelessness directly, Ayaz gives greater depth and authenticity to his optimism. His hope is not blind or idealistic—it is tested, rational, and born out of suffering.

In essence, Ayaz’s optimism is dynamic and transformative. It evolves through different stages of his life—from youthful rebellion and political resistance to mature reflection and humanistic philosophy. He never isolates himself from the people or their struggles. Rather, he stands among them, sharing their pain and urging them to awaken their consciousness. His poetry functions as both a mirror and a beacon: a mirror that reflects the sufferings of his people, and a beacon that guides them toward liberation, enlightenment, and beauty.

Therefore, it may be concluded that optimism in Shaikh Ayaz’s poetry is not a passive emotion but an active philosophy of life. It is a moral and intellectual force that challenges darkness and redefines human dignity. His belief in love, beauty, truth, and struggle reaffirms that art can be a means of social reform and personal enlightenment. The poet’s courage to hope, even amid adversity, provides an enduring message for contemporary readers who face new forms of despair in a rapidly changing world.

Finally, the significance of this research lies in its attempt to reintroduce Ayaz to modern literary scholarship as a poet of universal human optimism. His words continue to whisper across generations that even when “the whirlwind engulfs all,” the lamp of desire remains lit, and “yet I have not surrendered.” Shaikh Ayaz’s optimism thus remains not only a poetic vision but a moral legacy- one that urges every human being to rise above fear, nurture beauty, and believe in the eternal dawn of hope.

Recommendations:

The present study opens a vast arena for the researchers and the lovers of Shaikh Ayaz and his poetic works in the following ways:

- **Future Research:** Comparative studies could be conducted between Ayaz and other South Asian poets (e.g., Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Pablo Neruda's influence, or Shah Latif Bhittai's spiritual optimism).
- **Translation Studies:** Scholars should explore how Ayaz's optimistic tone is retained or altered in different translations- Sindhi to Urdu, English, or other languages.
- **Interdisciplinary Approach:** Further research can link Ayaz's optimism with postcolonial theory, humanism, or existential philosophy.
- **Pedagogical Use:** Ayaz's poetry can be incorporated into literature and peace studies curricula to promote critical thought, cultural understanding, and hope through literature.

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