



My Sufi Sonnets

Stephen Gill

Love has and is still being used as a pivotal theme in poetry in the East as well as in the West. I believe that love is faithful and is the yearning of human beings. This is the -cardinal message of my sonnets.

Love is the important feature of ghazal also. Literary meaning of ghazal is conversation with women--it means also affection. Ghazal developed in Persia in the 10th century from its original form in the Arabic language. It was brought to India by the Mogul invaders in the 12th century. It is popular these days in India and Pakistan both.

My lyrical compositions in Stephenean sonnets are in Sufi, Bhakti, mystic and Christian traditions. These are unlike the Elizabethan sonnets which are in iambic pentameter of fixed rhyming schemes and are divided into two sections.

Elizabethan sonnets have been around for centuries. Readers dared not say anything against them for fear of being bracketed as naïve, shallow or rude. I have loosened some requirements of the traditional sonnets. In addition to the use of the last two rhyming lines, I make use of alliterative devices or poetic net wherever possible. This poetic net richly used in ghazals is woven largely with the beams of the rhymes, because ghazals are meant also for singing or applause for their musical presentations. I have colored

my presentations with the brush of both sonnets and ghazals in Bhakti, Sufi, mystic and Christian traditions.

The Bhakti movement started in the 7th century AD in the South of India. In the 14th and the 15th centuries the movement touched its peak when it stretched its wings to the North, replacing rituals, customs, castes and idolatry with unwavering devotion to the Almighty. The essence of the Bhakti Movement was tied-up with *The Upanishads* and *The Puranas* that link human with the Supreme, the embodiment of love. Literary critics have ascertained the virtues of love of the Bhakti tradition in my poetry and prose.

In addition to the followers of the Bhakti Movement, the Almighty is the embodiment of love for Sufi poets, who believe in worshipping God in the houses with no walls, and speaking the language of kindness that even deaf people can hear. They perceive prized jewelry hidden in the good that is the passion of the person in the state of the artist in creation. It is not the outside, but the inside of the humility that matters to both Sufi poets and the followers of the Bhakti traditions. This passion is the invincible flame of the Buddha and the mystery of the Divinity. In other words, the Bhakti and Sufi traditions focus on selfless love in action.

This selfless love in action is also the path for the followers of Christ. 1 John 3: 18 says "Dear children, let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our action." This kind of love is not fascination and sentimentality. It is rather an action. In the gospel of John 4: 18-16 it is written that love is the attribute of God. Therefore the quest for Him will be successful only through the unconditional love that is based on action, not on fear or expectations. Unconditional love is the truth that sets a person free from rituals and traditions. This love is beyond any definition, because it is an experience.

Tracing the Bhakti and Sufi traditions, particularly in my modern epic *the Flame*, Professor Dr. Sudhir K. Arora says in his critical study, titled *The Flame Unmasked*:

“As a Sufi, he talks in a sufiana tone”:

*I wish to swing
under the wings of our affinity
on the steps of a Sufi (p. 201)*

His tones vary according to situations in which the speaker is placed. He speaks in a romantic tone while talking about the Flame. He expresses his desire to become a lamb that needs a good shepherd. In sufiana or bhakti tone, he is submissive and loving. He has a longing for total surrender before the Flame as he knows that it is she who can guide him and instill in him a kind of driving force that will make him face the odd circumstances in life. (p. 201).

The driving force that Professor Dr. Sudhir mentions is unconditional love. Something along the same lines Professor Dr. Kalpna Rajput in *An Interpretation of the Mind and Art of Stephen Gill*, edited by Dr. Anuradha Sharma, says: “The poetry of Stephen Gill is an appeal to man to make his existence authentic by adopting the indelible policies of being, conscience and spirituality. Dr. Shaleen Kumar Singh in the preface of his critical study *Essays on the Poetry of Stephen Gill*, includes Sufism:

Dr. Stephen Gill has always believed in the tradition of Sufism. Sufism is an ancient school of wisdom which puts emphasis on the basic unity of underlying ideals in all religions and mystic school’s considering love as the first and foremost principle. (89)

To me, Sufi, Bhakti and mystics were mere words before scholars started pointing out my affinities to their traditions. This led me to independent studies, which strengthened my belief in these expressions making them meaningful for me. The more I meditated on these expressions, the more I became convinced of their strength. I am convinced that love is the single most emotion to bind every relationship that can be experienced rather than be

defined. I believe in the illumination of self in the unity with the Almighty, who is the flawless ideal of love. I list below some examples of this devotion or love from my sonnets:

“Your love is my oceanic compass/ that keeps me aggressively saing.” (18); “My unceasing passion for prosody/ Springs from you, who spices creativity...”. (22) or I live to sing/ the enriching lyric of our love/ and hear your opiate symphony /that is a welcome boon for me (3).

Or

*My love for you has no barriers,
no color, no age, no lies
and has nothing to hide. (12)*

In addition to unconditional love, nature is the sacred manuscript of the Sufis. This is also a belief of the followers of the Bhakti Movement. Both believe in a close harmonious relationship with nature because Divinity exists in all the elements, including plants and animals. They discover permanent patterns in the laws of nature that may be called Cosmic Power.

The devotees of Christ also hold respectable views about nature that is clear from the fact that Christ came to save not only humans, but also the entire planet and nature is a part of the planet. It also is clear from the Epistle to the Romans, chapter 8, verses 19 to 22 which explain that physical creation and mother nature are parts of God’s plan.

William Wordsworth, a Romantic poet of the 19th century, presents nature as the dwelling place of the Divine Being. In *Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth finds God in “the light of the setting sun/ and the round ocean and the living air/ and the blue sky, and in the mind of man.”

From the view of the rendition of nature, my poetry comes closer to the poetry of William Wordsworth. Here are some lines from my sonnet 49, which describe the same view:

*You enliven the larks
on the sloppy lawn
where they run making lisping notes.
I see you jogging slow and fast
on the narrow windy path
along St. Lawrence where
your dignity moulds the Maple leaves.*

In sonnet 39, I say along the same line: "You live/ in the hazy shade of the twilight that caresses St. Lawrence beach/ with muscles supple and sweet." In sonnet 42: "You're the sun that rotates/ on the axis of my obvious bliss. "And I find His manifestation in sonnet 51 as, "I salute when I sight you in the unclouded zone of Canada geese/ where reigns an elevated soul of peace."

In sonnet 46, I say:

*I see you elated in ravishing aroma
as the sovereign reign.
While you frisk in woods and plains
I soak alone here in rains. (46)*

In sonnet 49:

*"I see you jogging slow and fast
on the narrow windy path
along St. Lawrence where
your dignity molds the Maple leaves.
12-the singer of life updated*

*You appear behind the bridge
as adornment of majesty
In orange and yellow images.
Also in the air that casts off
the weariness of the aged sages.
You are the honk of the geese...*

The message in my sonnets is certainly closer to the message in the poetry of Wordsworth because my poetry also finds infinite in the finite and everlasting in the lasting. My vision is mystic like that of Wordsworth that is a common vision of the Sufi and Bhakti poets. Wordsworth is a genuine mystic.

The Bhagvad Gita, a sacred treasure chest of the adherents of the Bhakti tradition, is clear on this view about nature. Professor Dr. Rita Garg explains it in *The Singer of Life*, released by Vesta in 2016:

In the sonnets various Modes of Nature appear intermittently and all through. While Sattava is talked about in the Sonnets 13 and 14, Rajas is taken up in Sonnet 17.

According to the Gita, the three Modes of Nature are simultaneously latent in a human and at a time, one mode of nature has dominance. In Sonnet 48 when the poet is pretty close to his object, he knows only Sattava Guna. Secondly, Soma (Sonnet 17) is the nourishment meant for gods. Thus, the poet's desire to reach that world is prevalent here as well.

Sonnet 22 talks of the heavenly habitat for birds: 'My passion for prosody springs from you, who spices creativity that inspects also the fine prints for the cruise to spot my Chakora that sings in Shambhala where the birds of paradise for ever play.'(p.81)

Robindernath Tagore, a Nobel Laureate, was the product of the Bhakti tradition. About the traces of the Bhakti tradition in my modern epic *The Flame*, Professor Dr. Sudhir K. Arora, a literary

critic who has authored two books on my works, says in his book *The Poetic Corpus of Stephen Gill*, released by Sarup Book Publisher in 2009:

“As he sings in praise of the flame, he sees her everywhere because of his belief the “The life disintegrates/ where the flame is “the spectacular sight/ of the first appearance of light/ that dissolves discomforts/ of the pilgrims of peace”. Both the poets—Tagore and Gill-- sing the songs in praise of Light and seek her grace in their lives so that they may serve humanity through their contributions in spreading peace and prosperity in the world by helping the fellow beings.” (p. 167)

About Sufism in my sonnets, a US born Canadian literary critic professor Dr. Daniel in *The Singer of Life*, released by Vesta Publications in 2016, says:

Stephen Gill’s sonnets reach out and transport us to the absolute realms of Beauty and Truth—and Love. The Beloved embodies these absolutes. Her face “is the model of the highest perfection” (Sonnet 4); she “is the calm of my lake that derives its energy from the order of eternity and love is the spark of eternity” (Sonnet 5); she is “the lotus of my cosmos” (Sonnet 21). Each sonnet in effect records a different manifestation of the sublime. (p. 96)

The followers of the Bhakti Movement and the Sufi poets walk on the same path as far as their beliefs in God and Nature are concerned. For both, a gaze at a flower leads the gazer to think of its Creator as provider of life. This kind of thought exists in most scriptures of the world religions, including Christianity.

The Christian view is obvious in *The Bible*, Psalms 96: 11-12 says, “Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it. Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.” Christ praised even ordinary flower such as the lily as per Matthew 6: 25-34 when

he says: "Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ..". This again is a Sufi thought.

I would quote also from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 13: 18-19, where Christ says that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which a man took and threw into his own garden; and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches." This again a Sufi thought.

The word Sufi means wisdom in the Persian language. The Greek word Sophia can also be its possible derivation. For Christians and Sufis, God is the source of wisdom, and wisdom without humanity or love is lifeless. For a Sufi, love and devotion are the ways to harmonize with God. Love will find perfection in the Sermon on the Mount of Christ, described in Matthew 5: 3-12.

About the message of Sufism on Supreme Power I feel happy to add that in my sonnets love is the single thread that unites humans and the unity of humans is the strength of humans in love and those who are in love are united with eternity and eternity is the all-pervading power and this all-pervading power is present in every tree, in every flower and in every moment. This truth, the other name of love, is the pivot of my sonnets. This truth is the heritage of civilizations from the beginning of life and is even now, in spite of the fact that these civilizations and cultures have developed in different ages and in different geographical regions. I find this truth in the *kirtans* in the Hindu temples; in the *quawallies* at Muslim *Darghas*; in the songs of *Gurbani* in Sikh gurdwaras and in the hymns and psalms sung in the churches of different denominations.

Among the Sufi poets of India, Bulleh Shah (1680- 1757) from Punjab tops the list. He believes that love is the essence of God. Another, also from Punjab, is Baba Farid who believes that to receive the love of God one should love fellow beings. For him every human heart is pearl. He was against violence. In one of his poems, he says:

*Tear down the mosques
And also temples
Break down all that divides
But do not break the human heart
Because it is there
Where God resides.*

In my belief, love is God. My sonnets celebrate love that links creation with the Creator. Unlike rules and regulations, love rules in these sonnets. In sonnet 3, I say:

*I live to sing
the enriching lyric of your love
and hear your opiate symphony
that is a welcome boon for me.
I shall wear your ring
as the just tribute of my eulogy.*

Love is the ruling passion also in my prose. My novel *The Coexistence*, based on the ideology of live and let live published in 2011 by Orientalia, India, has direct references to love. At one place, I adore it:

When the waves of the ocean fuse, they drive their energy from eternity. Love is the spark of eternity, and eternity is not born in time. Trusting love is trusting the arms of mother that are without strings. Abuse of love is the rape that is the reckless disregard of the trust, ending in the demise of relationships to become a

sepulcher of emptiness. Love is the absence of the dust of self-desire, and self-desire uproots serenity to seduce infirmities. Love is the language of God and God is peace. (Coexistence, the. P. 279)

In my novel *The Chhattisgarh*, published by Prakash Book Depot in 2017, I note:

Love is an endless process to dust off the diamond to live and let live under its radiance. Love is a fathomless ocean. It is a bird in flight—a lotus of the cosmos—the sun that brings every dawn and the stars that twinkle in the darkest hours. Love is a singer of life, not a singer of the lifelessness of detachees. God is unchanging; so is the love. (p. 544)

In my long poem *Amputee*, I bring out the devastation caused by the lack of love in a loveless family. I paint love's beauty in canto 4, second paragraph:

*You are
the center of aesthetic taste,
the grain of the promised land
for the orphans of emotional hunger.
The mystery behind knowledge
and the opening of a flower
in the spring of the countryside.
As in every blade of grass
you twinkle in the morning glow
and in the glances of amputees. (p.39).*

Another element often traced in my poetry and particularly in my sonnets is mysticism, which is an experience and experience cannot be caged with words. Mysticism opens the portal of the divine understanding with the key of nature. This understanding

strengthens my conviction that there is nothing outside the realm of Divinity.

The nets of my sonnets are largely different from the nets woven by Shakespeare, Spenser and other traditional sonneteers. Each of my love sonnets is of eighteen lines and is in a single paragraph without any division and each sonnet consists of one hundred words. The last line rhymes with the preceding line, sometimes even with the line before.

I do not stick to any traditional regular rhyming scheme. A rhyme is a repetition of the same sound at the end of the line to produce musical effect. These two lines at the end may or may not have the same meter. For example, I write in sonnet 51:

*I salute when I sight you
in the unclouded zone of Canada geese
where reigns an elevated soul of peace.*

In sonnet 54 *I see you standing under the light/making me utterly alive.* And In sonnet 56:

*In my pagoda of truth and faith
they are the bounty of the bride
at best, blessed and benign.*

In addition to the use of the last two rhyming lines, I make use of alliterative devices or poetic net wherever possible. This poetic net is richly used in ghazals. They rely largely on rhymes, because ghazals are meant also for singing or applause for their musical presentations. Ghazals will stagnate if they are rhymed poorly.

As I say above, Ghazal means conversation with women. Love is an important part of a ghazal, and is associated closely with Sufi poets. The net I talk about is the sound of the words, not letters, used in the quick succession. The last line in my sonnet 56 is a

good example. In sonnet 54, the opening lines provide another example where the letter “b” alliterates: “No bird or butterfly /Maple leaves in blustery breath bite.”

I have already mentioned Professor Dr. Sudhir Arora, who traces Sufi and Bhakti traditions in my poetry. In an interview that he has included in his book *The Poetic Corpus of Stephen Gill*, published by Sarup Book Publisher, and later included in *A Selection of Stephen Gill's Interviews*, he rightly asks: “Your phraseology always offers newness and never lets the reader feel dull. You attempt to use every word carefully as a brick to build the edifice. You do not like to use clichés.”

My answer is below to his question:

I have discussed this aspect in my prefaces and also in some interviews. To produce a palatable dish, the cook has to work diligently to know the kind and right amount of spices to use. The goal of an artist is a journey that never ends or a destination that can never be achieved. (p. 37)

I use these poetic techniques to weave a net to catch the attention of the reader. I believe that a poet can gather any material from any source to present his or her art aesthetically. Any presentation without any newness becomes the breeding ground for monotony. Change brings color to the rainbow of life. This change includes the use of phrases, symbols and other devices that refines the aesthetical taste. It also includes the cult of beauty that is the base of art. There can be a message, but the ruling atmosphere should be suffused with refined beauty.

Elizabethan sonnets in iambic pentameter of fixed rhyming schemes are divided into two sections. They have been around for centuries. Readers dared not say anything against them for fear of being bracketed as naïve, shallow or rude. I have however

loosened some requirements of the traditional sonnets, believing that a poet can gather material from any source but the presentation should be fresh and alive, not repetitive, may cause monotony.

I am convinced that because of these variations some literary critics term my sonnets as Stepheneans. At the same time, they find in Stepheneans strong elements of Sufism, and Bhakti traditions as well as mysticism. These components are traced also in ghazals. Therefore I call my Stepheneans ghazals as well as sonnets.

Stephen Gill
Canada