

Visions of Divinity In 'He And I', A Study Of Puran Singh's *The Temple Tulips*

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Our idea of the poet is that of a man who can, by the mere opening of his own eyes, enable others to see the Divine, whose one glance can be our whole knowledge. Whatsoever weighs down the inner self and seeks to imprison it in illusion, is foreign to the spirit of poetry. It is irreligious. True poetry must free us. There is no freedom in sorrow and renunciation however perfect. Freedom lies in the full realization of the Divine within one soul.

The Spirit Of Oriental Poetry

This is an attempt to appreciate and analyse the poetics of Puran Singh as reflected in "He and I", a Section of *The Temple Tulips* which was published forty nine years after the poet's death and is one of his major works. As Madan Mohan Singh, son of the poet, tells us in *Puran Singh: Jeevni Ate Kavita* (2009), it was composed sometime in the third decade of the last century. The book has approximately two hundred short poems and is divided into six sections: all written in the same mood and similar mode verbalising the spontaneous outpourings of an inflamed mind. What strings them together are the poet's mystic flights in which the unseen and the visible are merged like different hues of a rainbow. The poet's soul yearns to meet the Divine Beloved who is realized in rare moments of solitude and meditation.

The bulk of Puran Singh's poetry celebrates his transcendental experiences, that state of mind when his imagination hovers in extra sensory regions and goes beyond the visible. He visualizes through the inner eye forms and phenomenon which lie latent in the sub conscious mind. This includes an intuitive cognizance of moral and other truths which transcend the limits of human sense perception.

While talking about life and reality, he dwells upon its multidimensional and multilayered nature. Ordinarily the concept of reality is limited to something that can be felt through sensations and can be reproduced or experimented with. However, this is only a physical definition of reality. Philosophers consider it as "Maya": an illusion or a mirage or, as Plato would call it "Shadow". This reality is temporal and subject to change, but the Ultimate Reality is more profound and everlasting. It can be perceived only in a super-conscious frame of mind. The soul- the Reality- like a dew drop while positioned on a strand of the cobweb of *maya*, realises its own share of the absolute balance in the sunshine of its own song.

The human mind has many vistas, there are regions beyond regions which are impossible to fathom. It is when the poet's mind visits these regions and his inner consciousness is refashioned in new moulds that he perceives this super reality. It is in this state of mind that most of Puran Singh's poetry is generated. Puran Singh himself asserts in *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry (TSOOP, 1969)*, that the poet reveals to our souls his own self-realization and in an instance he can inspire sensitive readers to undergo the growth of centuries. The power of giving peace to the life-beaten man can be seen only in the poet. Puran Singh uses the simile of the banyan tree which is like the poet in that it affords shade to the sun-beaten wayfarer. The poet, he considers, is the messenger of God, His prophet; a God in human clay. No one else can talk like him with the Invisible. The poet has the gift of gods which ordinary human beings do not know. If the poet's words are no consolation for the

suffering man, nothing else can be. The poet's greatest work is to maintain His divine breath. His beliefs are idealistic, mystical, eclectic and individualistic. At the core of his philosophy is a monism holding on to the unity of the world and God, and the immanence of God in the world. It is because of the inherent belief in divinity that everything in the world becomes a microcosm for him containing within itself all the laws and the meanings of existence. Likewise, every individual soul is identical with the eternal soul of the world and inherently contains all the qualities latent in it.

Transcendental philosophy also holds that there are modes of being and principles of existence that are beyond the reach of mundane experience and manipulation. Transcendental experience means the cognizance of forms and images imposed on that which we perceive by the constitution of all human minds, an experience beyond our senses, an intuitive acceptance of moral and other truths that transcend our conscious experience. Transcendentalists are opposed to rigid rationalism, highly formalized religion, social conformity and materialism or what today we call consumerism. As we shall see a little further, all these perceptions are present in abundance in Puran Singh's poetry.

Transcendentalism has, in essence, an affinity with spiritualism for both of them aim at realizing the Ultimate Reality in the universe. Being a Sikh poet, Puran Singh's spiritual Vision corresponds with the teachings of Sikh Gurus, who, by virtue of their word and deed, liberated religion from all sense of formalism, ritual, ceremony and liturgy. The One Personal-Absolute God of Sikhism is all - embracing and whole in His Being .He is transcendent and yet Immanent. He is the God of all human kind and of the whole universe .It is He who created what He created and how and when He willed .He is the source of good as well as evil. But He Himself in his essence is nothing but pure and good. This God is not merely a distant transcendent God, but also all - pervading and indwelling. He is farthest of the far and yet nearest of the near.

His universe is constituted of *sehaj* and *sohaj* i.e. harmony and Divine Beauty: Harmony with the world and devotion to the Timeless Reality. Talib opines in *Sri Guru Granth Sahib in English Translation* (Vol. 1, 1984) that mysticism as viewed in the context of Sikh faith, *sehaj* being its aim, can be achieved through traversing the path of prayer and meditation. In the process of spiritual ascent it never loses itself in the mists either of nescience (*shunya*) or of emotional abandon. Basing itself also on the awareness of Duty in a world oppressed by evil, its accent on Action is always pronounced. The ideal to be striven after in the spiritual life is *sanjog* which implies union -- union of the individual self with the Universal and the Absolute. This experience, of perpetual joy and blessedness (*Anand*) consists in the ever-present remembrance (*simran*) of God, who is felt as much to be *Nirguna* (unattributed-transcendent) as *saguna* (attributed-immanent): *Nirgun aap sargun bhi ohee* (*Sukhmani*). To have perpetual consciousness of the Divine Presence is mysticism as voiced in the Sikh scriptures. Again, Puran Singh's idea of a Sikh is not circumscribed by considerations of creed and community. A Sikh is a man with a universal outlook, a man with a passion for embracing the whole world .A Sikh, Puran Singh says in *The Spirit Born People* (TSBP, 1969) is one who looks upon the sun and the moon and the stars as his kith and kin , who looks straight at the sky towards the Infinite and weaves the design of the Divine into the texture of his soul.

Sikh spiritualism may thus be summed up as belief in one God and His grace, a complete surrender to Him and acceptance of His will. It insists on having and an unflinching faith in the Guru, recitation of God's sanctified name and mediating on the meaning of the Guru's word. It also advocates the cultivation of a sense of service to mankind; singing of hymns in the praise of God and His creation. It results in a feeling of wonder and practicing and assimilating the Truth, with mind, word and deed. (*Man, Bachan, Karam*). It is appropriate here to mention Puran Singh's own observation about Sikh spirituality. The life of the Spirit, according to him, (TSBP) descends on man as Heaven's great favour. It is truly the alighting of the Holy Ghost on one's shoulder as a little White Dove. Initiation into Discipleship, or *Sikkhi* as we in the Punjab call it, is *Inspiration*. It is the intimate and perennial companionship of the immortals, the powerful Ones belonging to the Unseen Realms. In the rapture of

the soul, one sees the vision of the Beautiful, of the sublimated moral and spiritual world of souls. And there are the great Emancipated Ones who protect the Initiated from all harm on the path of divine love. This inspiration is not limited to any chosen race or colour or caste, it is flowing invisibly on all the white threads of life that bind it back to its sources. It is like the sea flowing and filling all the creeks.

"He and I" which has twenty nine short lyrics, has been selected from *The Temple Tulips* for detailed analysis to illustrate the vision of divinity in Puran Singh's mind. These compositions though not couched in a traditional format of the lyric (without rhyme and metre) are yet lyrics of a high order. They are lyrical because of the presence in them of the poet's overwhelming passion, deep devotion, limitless love for the Divine and his dedication. They are also infused and saturated with soul stirring music. These are mystical melodies in which the poet sings of the immeasurable glory of the Divine Lord, His gracious bounties, the seeker's yearning for Him and the joys of being His disciple. The poems uniformly harmonize the unseen world and world of visible appearances. The disciple lover expresses an undying love for the Beloved and sings of His Glory. This string of love binds them together and they become One. The unending love of the seeker and the undiminished blessings of the Divine Presence permeate through the lines of these poems.

The expression of Divine Love as a metaphor of the man-woman relationship has been a notable feature of mystical poetry in all languages with some insignificant variations. For example, in the Persian *Sufi* Tradition, the Divine is regarded as Beloved and the seeker is referred to as Lover. But in the Indian tradition, especially among the poets of the *Bhakti* movement as well as in the Sikh Scriptures, the metaphor is reversed. Here it is always the woman, actually the wife, who seeks and yearns for the love of the husband, to be precise. The Punjabi *Sufi* poets, following the local tradition, have also adopted this idea and refer to the seeker as a woman.

In Indian parlance it is called *Prema Bhakti*, a term which denotes that the seeker not only loves and adores his idol but is also subservient to Him, completely surrenders to Him and regards Him as his patron and master. It is assumed that God should be an object of love rather than any human being. This expression of divine love (*Ishq-i-Haqiquki*) in terms of worldly man-woman love is (*Ishq-i-Majazi*) fascinating and helps in understanding the intensity of seeker's desire and the pain of separation he experiences. The two Sikh Poets of the twentieth century, Bhai Vir Singh and Puran Singh, the former in Punjabi and the latter in both Punjabi and English, combine in their poetry the Sikh mode of love with the *Sufi* mode. Perhaps this is unconsciously, due to their contact with English Romantic poetry and novel of the 19th century and of their readings and interpretations of Punjabi *Sufi* love and *Quissa* poetry.

Puran Singh, it is believed, was strongly influenced by the American poet Walt Whitman (1819-1892). That Puran Singh did admire Whitman is a well known fact. He even saw similarities in Whitman's themes and Sikh thought. He referred to him as a Guru Ka Sikh born in America: From the striking identity of Whitman's spirit with the spirit of the Sikh, I do feel as though a Sikh of the Guru had slipped out to America from behind the screen to plant the Guru's ideals for the future humanity in the New Soil (*Walt Whitman and The Sikh Inspiration*, WASI, 1980). Comparing Puran Singh's poetry with Whitman, D.S. Maini in his article Puran Singh: Towards a Whitmanesque vision (Puran Singh Studies, Jan. 1979) opines that the Whitman-Puran Singh identity is so complete as to almost suggest the idea of poetic reincarnation.

This view has, however, to be taken with a pinch of salt. For, there are major differences in their outlook--in their concept of spirituality--in their ethos and in their attitude toward urges of flesh. Puran Singh, like the Oriental mystics believed that communication between the seeker and the Divine Soil can be established only through meditation, conquest of the senses and sublimation of physical desires, while Whitman thought that spiritual experience is possible- rather desirable-without harnessing the senses. He is at once a mystic and a celebrant of physical pleasures. It is most notable in his "Song of Myself" where the poet explores the inversions of sex as well as its sunny places;

As the hugging and loving Bed fellow sleeps
At my side through the night
And withdraws at the peep of the day
With stealthy tread.

Such brazen description of sensuality is both alien and anathema to Puran Singh who defines poetry as 'Sacred words of a saintly soul' (*Khule Lekh*) Profanity in poetry is for Puran Singh blasphemy.

The poems in "He and I" are expressions of poet's passionate love for the Divine Lover and his intense desire to search for, and communicate with, Him. These poems sing of the splendour of the Infinite in different manifestations of finite. They also tell of the pleasure and ecstasy of the blossoming and growing of love in poet's mind. Various facets of the poet's relationships with God their, amorous hide and seek and the agony of separation, as also the ecstasy of Union. In the first poem of the series "The Day of Naming Him" when the poet sees a person (*Bhakta*) meditating on the name of God, his soul flutters in ecstasy and he visualizes the presence of the Divine in the *Bhakta*. The poem celebrates the fusion of worldly with Godly. The same theme is elaborated in the next poem. "At The Well" in which the poet perceives the presence of the Divine in an ordinary scene of the village belles drawing water from the well. Such a scene, it seems, has deep fascination for Puran Singh who has expressed similar views in a Punjabi poem too:

Yesterday I saw
On the mound of a village well under a peepal tree
Maidens of the Punjab
Some young, some younger still
With their pitchers tied to ropes – long and short
Pulling water from the well.
In a joyous mood
Washing their hands and feet
As they sprinkled water on the faces
of their friends
also serving water to strangers
in their cups of hands.

Khuh Ute (Khule Maidan)

In "Strange Are His Ways" Puran Singh refers to the beauty and grandeur and the power and glory of God who manifests Himself in many shapes and many forms, so much so that ordinary people do not recognize Him. God patronizes the poor and lives in their hutments, and He shuns the rich and the obstinate. "At His Feet", the poet expresses the joy, the ecstasy of the union with the Divine. With the clouds of 'Maya' cast away and a direct realisation of the Truth, the poet feels like flying as a bird in the sky, surrendering completely at the Lotus Feet. The same theme continues in the following composition where the beauty of the infinite flashes upon poet's soul.

After the ecstasy of union the agony of separation comes. "My Fixed Star" speaks of the poet's wistful search for his Beloved: his travels in the unknown lands _ celestial regions, hills and oceans_ trying to touch the rainbow but reaching nowhere and

Finding the dead autumn leaves red and yellow,
Looking at destiny, and the many fates.

The inaccessibility of the Divine, however, neither disheartens him nor does he abandon his search for the Love which is and shall stay ever young. In "The King of Life" the seventh poem of the series, the poet sings of his complete and uninhibited surrender to the Supreme Lover. He feels like a puppet in the hands of his Maker. Devotion to God and perceiving His image in one's inner eye is an occasion of ecstasy and delight. Puran Singh expresses this joy in his "The All-Attracting" when the poet sees his ideal in the lap of Nature on the snowy heights and in the fragrant music "leaping beyond the mountain walls". The theme continues in "Met At Last" which describes the ecstasy of the Divine Union. "I Am Never Alone" "I Do Not Aim" "When I Become Alive" and "When I Died" are the next four poems which are very short. In these poems the poet recreates his moments of ecstasy when his mind roams in higher regions and he experiences the joys of the spiritual exaltation. Death here signifies the human soul's amalgamation with the Supreme Self.

The red lacquered cup of my lips dropped from me in the
dust and the nectar of His song was spilled.

I had stopped; but the dust began singing Him.

"The Night When He Was with Me" is a song celebrating the seeker's union of self with the divine soul. The devoted disciple remembers with nostalgia the moment when he had met his Love. But he laments that he is no longer with his Beloved "In Separation" the next poem in the series, records the poet-seeker glimpses of his past and union with the Guru ages and ages ago:

As He spoke I saw sparks of fire falling from His lips, my
strength was gone again.

Now the poet regrets having left Him. The endless wait for a second union has not borne fruit and he feels as if the separation has become eternal: "Ah! We met in an eternal separation".

The next three poems "Come As Thou Comest" "The Barge of My Beloved" and "He Left Me" take the theme of separation further. In these poems different metaphors are used to emphasize the romantic pain, mixed with both hope and despair. With deep fervour the seeker beseeches the Lord to grant him a union again:

Pray, delay no more, come from behind as is Thy wont.

"The Barge of My Beloved" also describes the disciple's yearning for a glimpse of his Master. "He Left Me" reiterates the tussle between doubt and faith in the poet's mind.

In "My Cup of Joy" the poet sings of the glory of the Divine Union, the seeker's complete surrender to and amalgamation with the Lord-Lover. It is that state of supra-consciousness which pierces the curtain of dualism and the Seeker and the Sought become one: the Ultimate Reality. By achieving this blissful state, which Gurbani refers to as *Sehaj* and *Anand*, Puran Singh illustrates how even complete happiness doesn't make the seeker jump with joy nor does utter sorrow make him morose.

There is similarity of theme in "If Thou Be Mine" and "Live With Me, Love!" the twentieth and twenty eighth poems. In 'If Thou Be Mine' the poet preaches the religion of Love and discards all traditional forms of worship--ecclesiastical denominations and religious rituals. This theme continues in "Live With Me, Love". Here the poet asserts that all ceremonials--singing of songs, prayers by mouth, blowing of trumpets and conches etc.--are superfluous and mere rituals with no significance at all.

In "I Knew Not the Value of His Gift" the poet laments man's ignorance and his indifference to the great mercies of God. This regret is evident in many of his articles especially in "The Mystic Hair". Hardev Singh Virk has republished this article in his monogram on Puran Singh. (*Professor Puran Singh: Scientist, Poet and Philosopher*. 2008) In this article Puran Singh calls hair as gifts of the Guru. Adorning hair unshorn is not a

mere ritual but the identity of a Sikh. Taking away the Sikh's hair, according to Puran Singh, is to put him off from his divine inspiration which has been, so far, a source of strength to him. The long hair makes him distinctive. The Sikh spirit would die without this exterior feature

"I Thought I Knew", as its title suggests, is a candid admission of man's ignorance about how he would feel if the Divine Lover in His benign mercy showers His kind benevolence on him. Even the most passionate devotion has its limitation but the divine grace has no bounds. "Love Me More" is a supplication to the great Lord seeking His Love, more Love and still more Love. The disciple as if on his bent knees begs of His Master to take him in His arms & grant him His magic touch which will transform the dross of him to gold. The divine touch is a panacea, alchemy of Love, which cures all ills of human soul.

Drown me in the liquid gold of the infinite every day
Kill me with joy of Thy return--ever new to me.

It reminds the reader of Donne's similar appeal to God in "Batter My Heart" in which he wishes to be utterly destroyed in order to be rejuvenated:

Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me .

"My Love", describes a seeker's quest for the unknown. In this poem Puran Singh has, like Persian poets, used the metaphor of a cherished woman for the divine Beloved. As a rule he has rarely done so. If in "At The Well" Puran Singh could visualize the Divine in a group of young maidens drawing water in a carefree mood from the village well, in "Why Are Things Upside Down"? Puran Singh perceives God in a merry crowd in a village fair, engaged in romantic festivities.

The theme of "My Boat Was Tossed in a Storm" underlines the mysterious ways of God. Sometimes an individual apprehends some trouble in his life but the man who is truly in Love with the Master visualizes and accepts this as God's will. He remembers that every cloud has a silver lining and realizes that He can both be the tormentor and the Redeemer. An absolute surrender to Him and acceptance of His Will, can help ward off all evil. As he says,

"I dropped the oars, and let go the boat on the surf"

The similarities between Sikh theology and Puran Singh's thought can be seen if we look at some of hymns in Sri Guru Granth Sahib. This poem seems to have been inspired by the following verse of the Fourth Master Guru Ramdas: *Je Sukh Dein Ta Tujhe araadhi-- Dukh bhi tujhe Dhiaii* (Suh- 4/757)

If He Blesses me with Pleasure,
I Call on Him
I Dwell upon Him even in Pain.

The poet's belief that God expects complete and unswerving devotion is also reflected in the poem "Majanu And Leila" which is an allegory. This legend, which was originated in Persia, is very popular in Punjab's folk-lore. The idea that the poet wants to convey is that even the best worldly offering that a devotee offers his Love-Lord is too little and insignificant.

Last, but not the least. "Salutation", the small poem with which this anthology concludes is a sort of epilogue, so to say. This is the substance of all: *Bhakti*. Always remember Him, Submit before Him, Look for him everywhere and anywhere, in all forms, in all objects of Nature, in all manifestations; Meditate on His Name with utter humility, with deepest love. Seek and ye shall find:

Name Him:" with the lips of the flame.
He has lit in the shrine of thy heart,
And lay thy head on the grass, thinking of Him.
He stands just there, blessing thee.

The poems included in "He and I" (*The Temple Tulips*) make it rather difficult to agree with Sant Singh Sekhon's view (*The Temple Tulips, Introduction*) that Puran Singh's divine Lover is elusive and unattainable. On the contrary, in Puran Singh's whole poetry the Divine Lover is ever-alive, breathing in all objects, in all actions of His devotees and at all those moments when one tries in solitude to look into one's own mind and converse with one's own soul. In almost every poem of this collection, the Divine Lover comes alive. An embodiment of grace and charisma, He is always reaching out to the Seekers, blessing them with gifts and bounties, decimating their troubles and charming them with His ameliorating touch and word. In his famous Punjabi poem, *Puran Nath Jogi* (Khule Maidan) he clarifies his concept of the Supreme Being in the speech of *Sundran*, an ardent devotee of Puran, the legend hero of a folk tale:

I seek a living God,
One whom I can see and talk to,
Whom I can smell and touch,
One whom I can drink and eat,
With whom I can live and worship,
Who cares and feels for me and
Loves me throughout my life,
With whom I can sing a song of my soul.

Love, according to Puran Singh, is not governed by logic. It is a matter of faith and trust: unfettered love and unbound trust.

Complete surrender to the will of God, is the Golden Edict of Gurbani:

*Je Ko Sikh Guru Seti Sanmukh Howai
Howai Ta Sanmukh Sikh Koi Jeeo Rahe Gur Nale.
Gur Ke charan Hirde Dhiaye Anter Aatmai Samale
Aap Chad Sada Rahe Parne Gur Bin Avar Na Jane Koi.
Kaho Nanak Suno Santo So Sikh Sanmukh Hohe.
(Guru Amardas, Anand, 21st stanza)*

If a seeker remains ever in Lord's remembrance
And his soul abides with Him,
And he cherishes the Lord's feet in his inner self,
And sheds his ego, leans over on the Master,
Knows not another sans Him,

Such a seeker alone abides in the Divine Presence.

A poem since it uses overt devices like stanza, form, rhyme, rhythm, metre (or absence of it) and other phonological and syntactic verbal patterns, is, frankly speaking, non-paraphrasable and non-translatable. This is more true if it happens to be a work of Puran Singh. These poems not only inspire the reader and exalt his mind but also create an atmosphere of piety, as if enjoying the benign presence of some sacred soul. These are

couched in an exuberant language and life-like images. Puran Singh's style in these poems is so lofty that while reading them one feels as if he were sitting in the company of holy men and listening to their words of wisdom.

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