

Love Poetry

By Harekrishna Deka

What an infinite variation in expressions of love! There is no language with an accepted script that is not enriched by different forms of love. It would be a difficult task to determine or conclude in which language the first love poem was scripted. A conclusive deciphering of many ancient languages has not yet been done. The texts of the unknown script salvaged in the excavation of Indus Valley Civilization sites can also be included in that list. Of course, in India, a part of some text written in an ancient script discovered on the walls of Jogimara caves in the Ramgarh hills has been deciphered. These words written in stone have been dated to be from the Maurya era. The meaning of the words comes out thus: 'Sutanuka devadashi (temple danseuse), Sutanuka devadashi, Devadeen, the artist from Varanasi, loves her.' We can consider this line expressing the message of a heart in written form to be one of the earliest love poems in an Indian language. Here the woman is a consort of God beyond the reach of mortal humans. But an artist has pronounced his longing for something beyond reach as his devotion for love. It is not known if the name of the artist is true or has been adopted for the sake of love. But the name is definitely meaningful. He is very poor in case of godly receipt, Devadeen (Deva – god, Deen – poor or pauper) but his heart is throbbing with the feeling of desire and is expressed as a form of love.

In 1350 B.C. in the ancient verses of Egypt, the physical beauty of a female beloved made imagination come alive in the heart of her male suitor and it was expressed in beautiful similes – 'the colour of her hair is like transparent sapphire, even gold appears pale compared to the colour of her arms and her fingers appear like a blooming lotus.'

Poet Salvador Osprey of the Catalan language of Spain said, 'People are different and their language different/ and the same unique love will have different names.' It is true that there are different words for love in various languages and such words may ever be pronounced in novel ways with newer metaphors in the coming times, but the Canadian poet – novelist Margaret Atwood lamented the fact that there was only one word in English to denote the bountiful greatness of LOVE – while there are 52 different names used by the Eskimos to denote ICE – because it is their life – the most necessary thing for them, English should at least have that many words for LOVE too, she felt. In these words of disappointment of this famous litterateur, the importance of love in human life, its necessity and its sublime enormity has been expressed. In the backdrop of the disappointment of a solitary word by this modern author, we can also mention here a different attitude expressed in a famous quote purportedly by Dante – 'One whose love can be expressed and counted only in words, his love is very ordinary.'

In an anthology of verses of ancient Greece, we find a lady named Sappho from the city of Lesbos as one of the main poets of love verses. Of course, an unusual sexual relationship too got ordained in the form of exulted love in some of her poems. Though we get acquainted with such an unusual lady poet in the literature, it is the menfolk's longing for women in multiform

expression that seems to abound in the pre-modern world literature, notwithstanding liberation of female mind in modern times and their free expressions in contemporary literature. Perhaps the fact that in the family system in various cultures the women were treated as mere homemakers and as a kind of property for men, their silent voices of the heart could not normally cross that psychological barrier and become vocal.

Women have been idolized in many ways in the poems composed by male poets. What I mean to say is that the woman in poetry transcends the property relationship and turns into a created idol in male poet's vision and that is projected in their poems. The persona in one of the poems of Assamese poet Debakanta Baruah pronounces his woman as 'just a flesh and blood stuff, an earthly mortal bloom.' Though that flesh and blood stuff is the reality, even in this cynical comment, the woman has been idolized in a way through the use of a metaphor (she blooms). In the eyes of the persona, the woman is a thing (object) and a 'mere doll'; she is mortal but still she is a 'flower' and it is she that ignites the vision of a serene, calm idyll that once was encountered in mostly lost oral pastoral poetry. The poet says, 'Still, my love, you ignite the memories of the lost heaven'. This expression of romantic longing brings to mind the lyrical impulse of an integral relationship between the human and nature vibrating through Bihu songs and Bonghosa. In these spontaneous outpourings, not much difference is observed between love and the longing for lovemaking. It is to be noted that Vatsayana elevated the act of lovemaking to an art form. The idol imagined by some poets in Sanskrit literature is not only adorned with physical beauty, she is also blessed with the sparkle of a sweet voice. There the erotic look of the men poet appears entwined with the longing for beauty. The geography of a female body is expressed in definite similes. The lovelorn subject of the 'Meghadutam' converted his Yakshapriya to an incomparably beautiful idol through the art of simile and ingenuity of word arrangement, and the look of a lusty man has been elevated to the look of an admirer without showing any sign of having veered from this meditative mood. The poets of Vaishnava Padavali have sublimated the love of 'Radha-Krishna' to a spiritual longing of the human soul to get assimilated with the Supreme spirit as we learn from the suggestive poetry of 'Geeta Govinda' of Jayadeva.

In the Assamese Vaishnava poems, this form of love is ignored, because in Assamese Neo-Vaishnavism, the path for spiritual aspiration has been directed through a sense of unconditional surrender by the devotee to God in a servant-master mode, not through the allegory of love between men and women. In Europe, especially in France, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the literary practice of expressing love by the elite section of the society was highly formalized and in the poems through which this expression of love was pronounced, there the woman sought after was painted as an unattainable idol of love bereft of worldly longings. Such love was christened Courtly Love at a later time, because the subject of the poems had been from the class of knights and the poets enjoyed royal patronage. Later, the matchless lyrics composed by the Troubadour poets popularized this form of poetry in Europe.

The exceptional story of love by Dante for Beatrice has an exemplary place in the great traditions of love events and his incomparable but one-sided love has its poetic fulfillment in Vita Nuova. The woman, who had been married to someone else, but still remained Dante's object of love was portrayed as an exceptional divine icon after her death. In the allegory of Divine Comedy, the shadow-soul of Virgil, the deceased great poet, could not get the right to lead the subject to

heaven even after it had led the subject through hell and purgatory. The poet bestowed the right to lead him to paradise on the soul of his idol Beatrice.

In most of the old tales of world literature, the womankind has been idolized in many forms, where they do not remain ordinary; they turn extraordinary, being ordained with virtues. Sometimes the woman is given a dual image to make her appear hallowed in the eyes of men. A pseudo-Sita is found for Sita. Arundhati becomes a star. It may be that the men poets, in order to conceal their erotic longing, express it in the form of appreciation and send the message from the heart to an imaginative form of an ideal woman. Of course, Socrates in Plato's Symposium shall deny that. Socrates had compared love with longing for beauty and presented it in a form endowed with virtues segregating beauty from a superficial or outward feeling. There, the sexual urge of men-women has been denied any equation with love while defining the abstract image of an ideal love. This outlook differs from the body-mysticism we find in the poetry of Sanskrit literature. But in love poetry perhaps both these opposite outlooks become eventually supplementary to each other in creating a rich genre of poetry. It is to be remembered that Socrates could not claim the concept of ideal love that he advocated as his own – he leans on the shoulder of a learned woman named Diotima. That means, for the definition of perfect love, the mind of the 'perfect' philosopher-man had to reach out to the mind of the 'perfect' philosopher-woman.

.....
Bihu – the festival to celebrate the advent of a new year in Assam.
Banghosa – A type of oral folk song in Assam.

(The article was originally published as an introduction to the poetry collection titled *Mor Manuhjanir Babe Eta Premar Padya*, 2011)

Translated by **Bibekananda Choudhury**

Harekrishna Deka is an Indian poet, short story writer and literary critic of Assam. He is an Adviser of *Poetry without Fear*.

Bibekananda Choudhury is an Assamese writer and translator based in Guwahati. He translates from Assamese to English and vice versa. He has several books in Assamese and English to his credit.