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Sufi Poetry and Symbolism: From a River to the Divine Dark in Shamas Faqir's Poetry

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Shamas Faqir

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Abstract

This paper explores some of the recurring symbols as observed in the poetry of Shamas Faqir, a nineteenth century Sufi Poet. The paper presents an account of how mystic thought and mystic symbolism complement each other to foreground the universal mystic experience. The paper is based on simple textual analysis and presents a coherent explanation of the mystic experience irrespective of any particular theoretical framework which may be outlined by some readers.

Key words: Mysticism, Sufism, Symbolism, Mystic Experience, Mystic union.

Introduction

Shamas Faqir is a well-known nineteenth century Kashmiri spiritual whose spiritual verses have stood test of time and have enjoyed immense success in the Kashmiri literature and culture. Shamas Faqir is regarded as a great Sufi poet whose poetry captures the essence of spiritual teachings in Kashmir. Shamas's poetry is the poetry of a sufi who is lost in the bliss of

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love which crosses all the boundaries of time and space. A musical quality, rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, consonance, repetition and other stylistic devices are so naturally concentrated in his poetic expression of Sufi experience. The Sufi poetry of this great Kashmiri poet has a deep sense of music which reverberates in the mind of a reader or listener of Shamas. The poetry of shamas is of universal significance and local and universal elements combined in such a harmony that one forgets the limitations of time and space.

In Search of the Essence of Life

Contentwise, Shamas Faqir's poetry represents a spiritual growth where a person is in search of the real essence of the life. But the form of Shamas's poetry is also a representation of spiritual and artistic excellence. It is the poetry which is close to the music of a common and a special type. The poetry of Shamas is sung today in most of the *mehfils*, marriages and also by many Kashmiri singers. The true excellence of any poetry is in close relation to the musicality of its delivery. Besides, its spiritual significance, Shamas's poetry represents a true literary achievement. Every word, every pause, every locution in Shamas's poetry carries a weight and contributes to the wholeness of his poetic expression.

Formal and Functional

Shamas Faqir's poetry has all the features of a great art in both formal and functional aspects. This poetry can be evaluated and analysed as per the tenets of any school of criticism including classical criticism, Romantic criticism, modern and post-modernist school of criticism. The artistic, religious and folk items are combined in an organic manner in the poetry of Shamas and what a discerning reader obtains is an artistic experience of true significance. Both linguistic and non-linguistic attributes of this poetry are satisfying, universal and cultural, moral and religious, divine and earthly items are involved throughout the poetry of this great Kashmiri Sufi. The musical element in Shamas's poetry evokes and sustains a spiritual experience where one is bound to feel a vision of ecstasy.

Shamas as a Symbolist

A prominent feature of Shamas's poetry is the symbolism which abounds and enriches the poetry of this great Sufi and this Sufi symbolism forms the subject matter of this paper. The

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symbolism employed by Shamas in his poetry can be studied in more than one perspective. These symbols can be studied at historical, social, political, religious and spiritual levels. However, this paper focuses mainly on some of the recurring symbols in Shamas's poetry. This paper does not claim an in-depth analysis of all these recurring symbols but an attempt will be made to present an overall account of these symbols which one encounters again and again in Shamas's poetry. This paper does not claim the adherence to the principles of any single school of criticism in the interpretation of these symbols. This paper presents a general interpretation of these symbols which are not only relevant and powerful but are common and beautiful.

Common and Simple Symbols

The symbols employed by Shamas Faqir are not complex and ambiguous but are uniquely simple and miraculously very common. The symbols carry the load of meaning in an effective manner and immediately catch the attention of a reader or listener in a mixture of a simple and complex perceptual act. The simple symbols evoke a deep response in a learner's mind and one is involved in a deep act of contemplation as soon as one encounters these semantically loaded simple symbols. The symbols have been used in such a manner that thinking about a single symbol opens the way for the interpretation of the other symbols and a poetic experience is ensured in the network of these effectively used symbols. The effective use of symbols guarantee a poetic experience for a discerning reader of Shamas Faqir. The symbols have been employed to foreground—some of the most important universal facts in a cultural framework. The symbolic dimensions of Shamas Faqir's poetry gives it a uniqueness which is quite its own and is strikingly original and effective. Some of the commonly used symbols in Shamas's poetry include:

1. **Nothingness:** The symbol of "nothingness" has a unique position in Shams's poetry.

bI chus kenhnay khoud panay bI kenh nay kas vanay panay dapyoum kenh nas karay manay vanay kenh nay kuhu zanay bI gous sharmand pasheemany bI kenh nay kas vanay panay. I am myself the nothingness

I am nothingness who should I tell myself

I tried to decipher the meaning of nothingness

I shall tell you nothingness but who shall know

I felt ashamed and frustrated

I am nothingness who should I tell myself

Symbol of Nothingness Central to Many Schools

The symbol of nothingness has attracted the attention of scholars, philosophers and poets

worldwide. The concept of nothingness is central to many schools of thoughts like

Existentialism, Nihilism, Absurdism and has been widely utilised throughout the literatures of

the world. The use of the concept of nothingness as a symbol in Shamas's poetry is highly

effective as this symbol effectively conveys the richness of Shamas's experience which is

common, religious, philosophical, ethical, cultural and universal at the same time.

Operates in Many Levels

The symbol of nothingness operates at many levels in the poetry of Shamas Faqir and

different meanings can be attributed to its usage. The symbol of nothingness links Shamas to a

great tradition of poets' poetry and philosophy. The expression "I am nothingness" points to the

conglomeration and convergence of self into nothingness which in turn means the presence and

absence of the phenomena of the universe. The concept of nothingness and its use can be studied

in a post modernist or deconstructionist point of view in the poetry of Shamas.

The concept given in the above lines points to the fact that the meaning of nothingness is

hard to decipher and the poet expresses the sense of shame and frustration in deciphering the

meaning of nothingness. Further, even if the poet says if he shall express the meaning of

nothingness, who shall understand the meaning of it. Thus the symbol of nothingness raises more

questions and an open ended-ness has been maintained for reader to decipher the meaning of

nothingness. The poet expresses his helplessness in explaining the meaning of nothingness. The

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effect of using nothingness as a symbol is like the feeling expressed by these lines of W. B. Yeats:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; (The Second Coming: W.B. Yeats)

2. **River:** The second symbol which is discussed in this paper is the "river" which has been used by Shamas in the most effective manner. All the connotative senses associated with the word "river" come to the forefront as one experience the beauty of Shamas's poetry and one is swept away by the spirituality of this symbol of river. "River" as such is a simple word but as a symbol as employed in the poetry of Shamas; this word encompasses a wide variety of meanings.

Sath samandar chI pyeth myanI tale tath dariyavas kith bharI naav
Seven seas flow together over my head
How can I row a boat in that river?

Yath saedras katI aagur
Preth joyan chu phaeraan
katrI manzdraav yI samandar
vandiyo sar madnou
Where is the origin of this sea?
He moves over every wave of it
This sea emerged out of a drop
I shall sacrifice my life for you

Arifiy zanI muqamI Irfaan

Dariyaav pyeth saer chI nI sapdaan

An Arif (Pure spirit) knows the essence(The Pure vision)

The thirst is not quenched at the river even

daeryavI manz katrah draav

katras manzay darIyav tsaav

A drop emerged from a river

and a river entered a drop

Sadri khats ladri maal gaenzrimas phaliyee

Laliyee karsay lolI mat lay

A garland of pearls emerged from the sea

and I counted the pearls in it

Oh Lali I shall shower my love to it

Life in Death

Other associated word with the river, namely, *sea* has also been effectively used as a symbol in the poetry of Shamas. The above given verses clearly illustrate how the greatness of thoughts and knowledge is conveyed through a simple symbol of river. The symbol river as employed by Shamas expresses different kinds of meanings as is clear from the above verses. A river is a continuum, a river is a motion, a river is a state of stature, and a river is a symbol of death and life or life in death. A river represents being and non-being. A river is a symbol of knowledge, a symbol of a complete whole. This river represents knowledge; this river is a mystic river, or Keatsian Knowledge immense or Arnold's sea of faith. Thus river as a symbol is open ended and can be interpreted in many ways. River represents romanticism, life and death, materialism, being and non-being and is dependent on reader's response to this particular symbol.

3. Diamond, Pearl, Precious Stones and Pearl Necklace: One of the recurrent symbols found in Shamas is Diamond, pearl and other precious stones. These are used symbolically and operate on two levels in a reader's mind. On the visible level, these symbols evoke a sense of beauty and charm and on the covert side of it; these represent something everlasting and unique. On examining different verses in Shamas, other connotative meanings can be linked to these symbols. These symbols represent a unique knowledge, a perennial knowledge. The pearl or diamond is an object of beauty and of everlasting charm and so is the mystic knowledge or knowledge of union with the God in Shamas.

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Saedras manz chuy laal taabvoniyee

sanI khoti sounyee choun dariyaav

Shining bright is a diamond in the sea

Deep and deeper are your waters

Diamond represents a destination, a goal, an end and a lover has to search it, find it and experience it. This diamond is the beloved, the beauty, the everlasting reality in Shamas and whose search and desire should shape every aspect of a lover.

Ha moukhtI haaro

Poukhti karan mouw rouz tschay tay

Oh pearl necklace

Don't hide from the righteous one

poukhtI kar youd chukh noktI bozanIy

moukhtI manz vouch durdaanay

If you are righteous inhaling wisdom

Select the unique one among the pearls

bebaha sadras laal taabanay

har zari kin chuy ayaanay

The infinite sea is decked with diamonds

Every particle contains His face

The above verses clearly illustrate the symbolic greatness in Shamas's verse where diamonds and pearls stand for an object to be desired, to be searched and to be loved. The diamonds and pearls represent beauty, purity, the divinity, the object of love and love itself. The sensori-motor coordination through diamonds, pearls represent a mixture of good, beautiful, Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 16:2 February 2016

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innocent on the one hand and constant, everlasting and perennial on the other hand. Diamonds

and pearls represent the absolute and relative aspects of the divine being in Shamas. The

diamond and pearls represent the unity in duality, Shiva-Shakti, Brahma-Maya and other such

dualities. Thus spiritual concepts are presented in a very simplified manner in the verses of

Shamas Faqir.

4. Ishq, Ashiq and Mashooq (Love, Lover and Beloved): Shamas has repeatedly used the

symbols of human love, lover and beloved to represent the mystic truths of a mystic heart. The

search of a lover for his beloved and the difficulties and tribulations and tragedies a lover faces

in the journey towards beloved is used to represent the difficulties involved in the search of the

beloved. This is similar to Persian conventions of poetry and true of many British poets like

metaphysical John Donne who calls himself the bride of the God. Thus Persian tradition is

adapted in Kashmiri folklore tradition and great spiritual facts are put forward through these

symbols. The unique use of these words in symbolic terms ensures a poetic and spiritual journey

for a discernible reader. The earthly love gets transformed into the heavenly love as one reads the

verses of Shamas Faqir. The transformation occurs so naturally in the verses of Shamas.

KatI kortham Ashqun tschaloo

Walo matI mashooq deedar haav

Where have you deluded me in this love trap?

Come sweet beloved show your face

Youdvay ashaq chukh mashoaqs

Mashooq zaantan sahibe-haal

Mashooq panas seet gatchi hyonyee

sanI khoti sounyee choun dariyaav

If you are a lover to the beloved

Consider beloved to be omnipotent

Beloved must be one with the lover

Deep and deeper is your river.

Bouz ashqun doud yaar goum

Mout mashoog yaad pyoum

Love has sickened me; listen friend

Gravely I miss the sweet beloved

bI lougthas zaalI ashqinI aavlinaey

tanay chus bi divan naalo

you trapped me in this love net

wailing and crying am I since then

ashqas husnas koniy kaan

ashqan sar kour husnuk vaan

Love and beauty are from the same ore

Love has explored the shop of love

Aem ashqi naaran zoulnam badan

Partav aftaab pyoum cheshman

The fire of love burned my whole self

My eyes dazzle with the bright of the sun

Hayaat ki aab seet shehlaav

Valav mashooq deedar haav

Quench my thirst with the serene waters of life

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Come beloved show me your face

bI chus shaeda taamis yaaras

mye gouv yatskaal baalyaar daeshnas

setha kaal votum intizaras

mye gouv yatskaal baalyaar daeshnas

I am dying to have his one glimpse

It has been so long to see my childhood beloved

I have been waiting since long

It has been so long to see my childhood beloved

Haa ashqI tsooro raeshkI kaerthas deevanitay

Panun aesith chukh tsI lagan begaanitay

Oh thief of love, you conceived a burning desire inside me

You are mine and still you pretend to be a stranger

The Trio Of Love, Lover and Beloved

The trio of love, lover and beloved is so inter-wined and so frequent in Shamas that one gets surprised by the dextrous mixture of this trio in such a lucid, simple manner which is more than rich at the semantic, the conceptual and at the philosophical levels. Love becomes a multidimensional entity in the hands of Shamas with multiple meanings at the connotative level. The mystic quest, the mystic struggle, the fana(self annihilation) aspect of the Sufi is pictured in these verses. Love becomes an instrument of the search of the truth. Love becomes an entity where lover and beloved merge into one another. The worldly love overlaps with the haqeeqi love (the Divine love) in the verses of Shamas and this symbol also remains open ended at the hands of Shamas. In other word, love becomes the essence of love and this worldly love gets transformed in that worldly love. The unique usage of these symbols speaks of the artistic

greatness of Shamas which presents mystic struggle, mystic journey and mystic path in such familiar terms. These simple words carry such heavy loads of meaning and remain open ended to be interpreted in newer and more new ways by the discerning readers of Shamas.

5. The symbol of Feminine Beauty: One of the most common symbol used in Shamas is feminine beauty. Different aspects of feminine beauty in Shamas represent different spiritual qualities. These symbols are used in such a way that a reader consciously or unconsciously transits the gap between physical and spiritual world. On encountering these symbols, one is immediately transported to spiritual world where different qualities surround a reader in a mystic play. A physical symbol or a physical correlate of human beauty is mapped on to some spiritual quality. Apparently Shamas speaks of the beauty of eyes, lips, ears, cheeks, hair but in actuality, it is the description of a spiritual quality, it is an objective correlate of some deeper spiritual truth.

SurmI cheshman chuy khumar

harnI karithakh yats bemaar

your eastern eyes are with puffiness

giving a heartache to a beautiful dare

zi roukhsar mah taabaan

gatI manz kyah gah pevaan

Your two cheeks are two shining moons

wonderful shine is born in this dark

dand moukhtI vouth rats phali

kathav chanev kaer totI kali

Your teeth are pearls with lips so beautiful

Even parrots can't compare your sweet talk

maenzi rangI met athi khour

shamas faqirouv shaed bar

Hands and feet are coloured with hina

Shamas Faqir celebrate this joy

khaal wa zulfav kourham sham

sar ti pay valni aam

Your skin and hair engaged me immensely

I was overwhelmed with your unique beauty

dand kandI phael kyah chi ritiyee

asi voun gounchee dahaan

How beautiful are your pearl like teeth

An opened rose is your smiling mouth

kad nazneen choun kya shooban

rumI zaevij chaen bumI kamaan

Your maiden height is so graceful

Beautifully thin is your arch like eyebrow

kanI dooran sonI jalar

donivay chakh alIraan

gah chu travaan gaashi ambar

vandiyo sar madIno

A golden net over your ear rings

You move these ear rings in such a grace

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The brightened sky emits lights unique

I shall offer my head for your sake

tschaay kaesith voulthas mayi vaesiyee

kanI dooran may maar grayi vaesiyee

You lured me by waving off the shades

Don't move your ear rings my lady friend

laal lab kya chi rehmatiyee

naeri latiyee rouv karaan

The red lips are a blessing disguised

Lati! Leave this abode in a joyous dance

Shamas uses the aspects of feminine beauty as a correlate of some spiritual quality whose effect is felt by any reader and when put to music, the transformation from the physical to the spiritual world speeds up. The spiritual beauty is portrayed through feminine beauty. The physical symbols are mapped on to some abstract spiritual entities in the verses of Shamas Faqir.

These symbols of feminine beauty are the vehicles whose destination is a land of surprises and a land of spirituality. The physical beauty gets dissolved in a spiritual plane as one reads the verses of Shamas Faqir.

6. **Darkness as a Symbol:** In addition to light or divine light in Shamas, what is of primary importance is the symbol of Darkness or blackness. Black has been used as a symbol of many mystic and Islamic facts. The use of black as divine and secret can be approached from a post modern point of view where divine light is replaced by the darkness as darkness is presented as the origin and container of the divine light. The darkness or black is used in a special way in the poetry of Shamas and can be described to be used in a post modern manner where it stands for secret aspects of the religion.

Siyah chu bag siyah chu kul

Siyah yasman siyah sumbul

Black is the garden; black is the tree

Black is yasman black is sumbal 2

Siyahi seet doun gouv milaav

valov mashooq deedar haav

The darkness caused the union of the two

Come beloved and bestow me with your vision

Siyah manz chu aabe hayaat

Siyah nuras dapan nurI zaat

The darkness contains the life giving water

The black light is called the light of God

Siyahi manz chu gashuk basaav

Valav mashooq deedar haav

The light is a resident of darkness

Come beloved show me your face

The above verses clearly point out to different dimensions in which darkness and blackness has been used by Shamas to represent many secret truths. The darkness and black represents a number of mystic secretes. In Shamas's world, the garden, the flowers are dark. The Darkness is the source of light, the dark is the destination for the Divine Union, the dark is the source of the waters of life, the dark is the nuur (Light) of God himself and dark is the container of the universe. Thus again a post-modernist vein can be discerned in the verses of Shamas or in the mystic universe of Shamas where the light is substituted by dark as dark represents many aspects of the reality in the verse of Shamas. The deconstructionist strain is apparent where the

darkness serves as the fountainhead of the waters of Life (aabe-hayaat) and where darkness stands as the source of light.

7. **Bird Symbolism:** One of the recurrent and most important symbolisms in Shamas is that of bird symbolism. A variety of birds have been used by Shamas in a symbolic way sharing some of the features of universal nature as well as some cultural specific features. A bird is a symbol of innocence, flight, imagination, desire but in Shamas birds are used to represent many of the secrets associated with the mystic or Sufi philosophy of life. Some of the birds as in Shamas include hoopoe, crow, owl, King vulture and pigeon among others.

Zani kus amis hud hudas

Taaj kyah shooban chus kalas

Who can know this hoopoe?

The crown on it's head is so enchanting

Thaevmas shech athi kaavas

tsI van ratI mouglas logus daavas

I left a message with the crow

Tell the owl that I am on stake

Khabardaeri zikirchi hudhudas

m'e gov yats kaal balI yaar deshnas

Awareness is zikr (remembrance of God) to the hoopoe

I have not seen my childhood beloved from times immemorial

Dilkuy doukh doud pritchoom kavas

Kaavov myenis yaaras van

Taav Taav kornay sir gouv faash

m'e haa gaey ashqI vaalI vaashay nael

I asked the crow about pains and grief of heart

Oh crow tell my beloved friend

The crow could not keep the secret of love

I was trapped in the net of love

Vairaan bounI hyend hairaan kaavov

Vantou athI kyah aavo lo

Oh estranged crow of a desolated Chinar

Tell me what we got from it

Shamas Faqiro maney tsaroo

Razi hounzas chuy mukhtIharo

Shamas Faqir decipher the meaning

The king vulture has a pearl necklace

Ashiq mashooq raazI hounz moukhtay

yithI taelib matloobay

Shamas Faqiras siit kull aalmay

Raaz hounz manz chuy jamI jamas

The lover and the beloved are king vulture and the pearl

as if the seeker and the seeked

The whole universe is one with the Shamas

The king vulture is inside the supreme wine cup

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Ashiq bulbul gulzar chaavanay

Raaz hounz manz chuy jamI jamas

The lover bulbul enjoys the flowers around

The king vulture is inside the supreme wine cup

The use of bird imagery can be interpreted in literal, cultural, religious, philosophical and mystic ways. The hoopoe is a famous bird in Sufi literature representing the most courageous and the most devoted traveler of the Sufi path. Similarly, the crow has different cultural connotations in Kashmiri culture and Islamic religion. In the above verses, hoopoe is presented as a bird with many adorable and much wanted qualities as poet says that who exactly knows this hoopoe i.e., it represents a true Sufi whereas crow is represented as someone who cannot keep the mystic secret to himself and like an estranged crow of desolated chinar remains lost forever. The king vulture is a recurring image in Shamas and is paired with pearls almost everywhere in the verses of Shamas. Thus, a discerning reader obtains the insights about the mystic path and requirements of a true mystic in bird symbols as utilized by Shamas in his poetry.

8. Wine, Wine House, Wine Fetcher, Music and Melody: Like Persian Sufi literature, the symbols of wine, wine house, wine fetcher, music and melody abound in the verse of Shamas. These symbols represent different stages of a mystic path. The mystic quest, the mystic search, the mystic union, the mystic bliss, the mystic struggle, the concept of fana (annihilation of self) and baqa (Life in God) are represented by these symbols in a comprehensive and expressive manner.

mekhanI andar gouvum nida

change-rabaab saaz o nava

I was called from the inside of the winehouse

It was Chang and rabbab, music and singing

adI mouy chovum damI damay

az dramay tamanna

Then I drank wine moment after moment

Today I witnessed the fulfilment of my desire

maer maer chum zindagi devan

mouy chus chevaan mouy chus chevaan

He bestows me with life by killing me again and again

The wine I drink, I drink the wine

poukhtI kaar faraq kar shaeran tI shaalan

chovnas mourifat mouy

Oh righteous man, differentiate a lion from a lamb

He made me drink the wine of marifat (Oneness with God)

aem kalvaalan chaevnas mouy mouy KhanI taey

Phir phir m'e ditnam pay dar pay paymanI tay

The wine fetcher made me drink the wine and the wine house

He served goblets again and again in a sequence

maer maer chum zindagi deva

mouy chus chevaan, mouy chus chevaan

He bestows me with life by killing me again and again

The wine I drink, I drink the wine

adI mouy chouvum damI damay

az dramay tamanna

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Then I drink wine in a stately manner

today my desire bloomed itself

tanI chus pannuy maaz khevaan

mouy chus chevaan mouy chus chevaan

From that moment I eat my flesh

The wine I drink, I drink the wine

mouy Shamsas damI chaavay

Bouz naavay rouvvayee

He will make me drink wine vigorously

He will make us listen to the musical dance

Zaero bum tamI shayi gouv gumay

Yeti su chumay tatI su chumay

The music and lyric vanished at that place

He is there where He is

The above verses clearly illustrate the bliss a mystic receives in Union with the desired goal. The wine represents achievement of that goal and a talib or one who searches the rehbar or guru is blessed once he receives the vision of the absolute. Similarly, the music, musical dance in the above verses represent the Sufi ecstasy and Sufi bliss which one receives on witnessing God. His thirst is quenched with the wine of marifat (oneness with the God) and he experiences the mystic bliss.

Conclusion

From the above discussion of symbols in Shamas, it becomes obvious that Shamas as a symbolist is successful as an artist in terms of the open ended-ness which his symbols possess.

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Another success as an artist lies in the dexterity with which Shamas extracts meaning from the day to day words like river, love, beloved, crow etc. The philosophical, religious, cultural and Sufi dimensions are inter-wined in such a manner that guarantees a literary experience for the reader of the Shamas. Shamas as an artist is an artist of details and in presenting a detailed description of the experience; he is more like the pre-Raphaelite poets. The worldly love and divine love go hand in hand and a post-modern narrative is created in Shamas. The dextrous use of symbols in addition to use of many stylistic devices like parallelism, repetition, use of metaphors, similes, synonyms and antonyms render a great artistic value to the verses of Shamas and make it a unique contribution to art as well as mystic literature.

These symbols have metaphorical, paradoxical and post-modern dimensions and operate on physical and spiritual planes in a usage characterised by dialectical oppositions which create an artistic experience immersed in spiritual, physical and metaphysical waters. The open ended and day to day nature of these symbols provides a unique experience to the discerning reader of Shamas Faqir.

End Noes:

- 1. "Yasman" is the Persian name of a scented flowering plant, is a given feminine name and means 'Gift from God'.
- 2. "Sumbal" is a local flower found in Kashmir.

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