

Aestheticism vs. Philosophy: A Reading of Kumaran Ashan's *The Fallen Flower*

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ABSTRACT

Kumaranashan is one of the most popular figures in Malayalam Literature. He was a champion of the underprivileged and a great visionary. He gave a new direction to the classically structured Malayalam poetry through his exposure to English Bangali and other streams of literature. He also played a pivotal role in introducing the spirit of modernity, revivalism and renaissance in Malayalam literature.

Ashan's works are widely translated into many languages and many of them are relevant and universally significant even today. The present paper is an attempt to read Ashan's *The Fallen flower*; one of his most creative and thematically challenging works. While, the symbol of flowers is mostly used by poets of various generations to deliberate upon different shades of the concept of beauty, Ashan here uses the symbol of fallen flower to dwell upon the evanescent nature of human life and to create a strong moral vision in his readers. Though Ashan is widely studied and discussed in Malayalam, an analysis of the present kind attains great significance in English, especially in the present context of postcolonial exchanges and universal appreciation.

The researcher uses available critical materials and translations to analyse, the philosophical, technical, social and political relevance of the work.

Kumaran Ashan is one of the most refined geniuses in the whole gamut of Malayalam literature, who has used his creativity to epitomize the reason for his fighting in his life. His writings are the conscious expressions of the low and the lost in a hierarchically structured society. He firmly believed that a writer draws the lifeblood for his writing from the society in which he lives and as such he is bound to partake of the joys and sorrows of his society. Ashan had begun his poetical career at a time when both literary and social horizons were dominated by the upper class intellectuals. So his works which had in fact instilled the energy to establish a new tradition both linguistically and socially has their relevance in all times.

Among Malayalam poets, Ashan's unique distinction is his commitment to lofty human values. He was not content to be the empty singer of an idle day. He lived through and survived a life of intense stress and strain, an existence characterised by conflict and a heroic will to win. Further, in all that he did was ever present the endeavour to reconcile opposites and to achieve the Advaitic ideal of perfect synthesis. This is, perhaps, the hidden source of the strength and vigour of his poetry" (Dr Srinivasan:14 - 15).

The above quote from Dr. Srinivasan clearly explains the superiority and uniqueness that Ashan enjoyed in the Malayalam literary world as compared to many of his contemporaries. In this postcolonial and postmodern era where regional literatures are widely translated and reread, reading Ashan's works especially in an alien tongue like English would be both insightful to the readers and a profound service to the visionary.

Here an attempt is made to read Ashan's *The Fallen*

Flower from a philosophical point of view. The book *The Fallen Flower* is unique in many respects in the entire literary array for various reasons. Firstly, when most other poets have used the imagery of flowers to describe their beauty and aesthetic richness and to highlight the fundamental wonders of nature, Ashan uses a fallen flower to speak about the evanescent nature of life and to discuss in detail various other complexities that usually challenge human life. Secondly, most of the poems on flowers in any language are sonnets, small odes, lyrics or other comparatively smaller compositions, *The Fallen Flower* is a considerably long poem with philosophical overtones, artistic subtlety and poetic ingenuity. All these mandates a comprehensive analysis of the work from a sensible perceptive.

The early lyric of Ashan which opened up new vistas on the horizon of Malayalam poetry was *Veena Poovu* or the *Fallen Flower*. This is a symbolic poem depicting the various aspects of human life and philosophizing on the meaning of life. In this poem, the poet calls for bestowing faith in Sruti or Vedic teachings, which require the readers to keep equanimity of mind in sorrows and pleasures. A beautiful emperor No wonder that George K.M. remarks about the poem "a moth came out of the cocoon in 1908 and it flew across the Kerala sky enchanting the lovers of poetry by its colourful wings" (K. M. George 28 29).

The publication of *Oru Veena Puvu (A Fallen Flower)* marks the take-off stage in the poetic career of Kumaran Ashan. Indeed it caused so great a thrill among the connoisseurs of good poetry and set a new norm of verse composition, that without exaggeration the emergence of this

poem of 41 slokas can be considered a great event in the history of modern Malayalam poetry. The poem was first published in the periodical *Mitavadi* edited by Murkoth Kumaran, the celebrated critic. Very soon it was reproduced in the more well-known literary monthly *Bhashaposhini*, with a fine introductory note by the well-known litterateur C. S. Subramanian Potti. In a note he tries to clear certain mistaken notions about the function of poetry which led to a kind of stereotyped, artificial composition of verses. *Veena Puvu* came as a most welcome change and by its innate power greatly influenced contemporary writing. The author of such a poem had to be acknowledged as a poet of outstanding creative ability. Thus Ashan's *The Fallen Flower* marks the blossoming of a new brand of poetry in Malayalam, a poetry which is fresh and sensitive without the burden of rhetoric. Dr. Srinivasan adeptly captures the essence of Ashan's poem:

The forty one well-wrought stanzas of *Veena Pooovu*, (*Fallen Flower* 1908). Written in an elevated and dignified style, unfold allegorically the issues of Being and Becoming. The fallen flower is transformed into a personalised symbol of life and its vicissitudes. The three stages of life dealt with here are childhood, adolescence and youth which are terrorised by treacherous death. By the choice of the symbol of the fallen flower, the poet is successfully focusing on these three stages. The intensity of the emotional disturbance envisaged and the final mood of consolation and reconciliation evoked through the aid of philosophy, make the poem an elegy of incomparable beauty. (Srinivasan 55 - 56).

One may wonder what the immediate reason for the creation of a poem on a flower, and that too, a fallen flower could have been. One is not sure if there was a specific ground for even writing such a poem. Sometimes circumstances play a part in the creation of a poem. This poem was written when Ashan was away from home and under duress of special circumstances. In his short note to the poem, Ashan says that it was written while he was detained at Palghat for some days during the month of Vrishigom 1083 M.E. (1908). Why he was detained there could be gathered from the poet's own detailed note published in an issue of *Vivekodayam*. Accompanied by Kumaran Ashan, Narayana Guru had gone on tour of Calicut with the main purpose of consecrating a Siva temple there. While they were at Ernakulam the Guru contracted cholera. Soon the situation became worse and one disciple who accompanied him died of the disease. The Swami's critical condition continued for some days, but eventually it was brought under control and the Swami was taken to the hospital of one Dr. Krishnan at Palghat. Further treatment and medical care was given by Dr. Krishnan. It is reported that there were many flowering trees around the hospital building. The condition of the Guru and the fallen flowers must have driven the poet to muse in his own inimitable style. One is not sure of what happened in Ashan's mind, but one is sure of two things: firstly, that Ashan had the greatest attachment to the Guru who was oscillating between life and death; and secondly, that the poem was written during the period when Ashan suffered the most poignantly agonizing and anxious days of his life. In every language, scores of

poems are found on flowers. In fact it will be difficult to spot out a poet who has not felt and written about the charm of flowers. They are the most widely used poetic material. But few have considered a fallen flower, something that is usually trampled and lost in the mud, a fit, subject for poetry. Ashan was Able to -project a whole life while reflecting over a fallen flower. The poem has many features of an elegy. It looks plausible that, the condition of his Guru drove him to such thoughts; and each thought crystallized into a beautiful verse; "*Veena Puvu* is nobody's elegy, yet everyone's elegy, because it is a symbolic elegy (K.M. George: 28 -29). Again it would be apt to mention the words of Dr. Srinivasan in this regard:

It is far superior to Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard", to which it is often compared. While Gray helplessly muses, Ashan seeks the aid of philosophy to explain the riddle of Life and Death. Further, the philosophic speculation and its denouement have a dramatic quality unlike in Gray where the narration is simply the unleashing of a train of general observations. *Veenapooovu*, like all other works of Ashan, is essentially dramatic in structure. It is an impassioned ode with a profound theme, clearly marked conflict, even identifiable characterisation and a logical evolution of form and theme (Dr Srinivasan 56).

It was at a time when Malayalam poetry was experiencing stagnation in the neoclassical pattern that Ashan came forward with his romantic poetry, wherein emotions dominate over other aspects. The influence of Western poetry was largely responsible for this fresh sprout in the poetic mind of Ashan.

The path chalked out by *Veena Puvu* in the field of Malayalam literature is something special. There were many poets before, who were fully conversant with Western literature; but it was Ashan who first introduced the Western style of, introducing the subject and description. Ulloor states "In the literary firmament *Veena Puvu* introduces a star which is exceptionally bright" (Ulloor S. Parameswara Iyer, qtd. In K.M. George 30).

The poet sees a fallen flower and recounts the important stages in its life. Every stanza and every word is suggestive of human life and not the vicissitudes of plant life. The poem begins thus:

Ah lovely bloom, once thou didst shine High like a Queen

How sad thou liest down in dust, Shorn of thy sheen
Inconstant is Fortune on earth Impermanent is loveliness.

(Lines quoted from K. M. George: 30 - 35) .

The poet refers to the flower's childhood:

Dearly the creeper gave thee birth
and tended thee

Within its leafy bosom soft, so
lovingly

And stirred by the gentle gale the
leaves Lisp'd low and long thy
lullaby.

Starting from the simile of Queen in the initial stanza the flower is conceived in terms of a person of the fair sex. Bathed in milkwhite moon-beams, dancing in the warmth of the rising sun, the bud passes through its childhood. Then her countenance becomes aglow with youth. And her charm according to the poet, was simply irresistible:

Be it a self-renouncing saint,
Or a coward fleeing distractedly the pursuing foe
Whoe'er be they, had they eyes,
They would tarry a while
To, gaze at the perfection of thy bloom.

The 'young lady of stunning beauty could not but attract lovers. Several were the suitors, but she chose a dark blue beetle and rejected all others. They had a wonderful time, but alas it was all too brief. Now the lover is seen hovering round the dead body of his beloved weeping and wailing. "I have given my body to one Once and for all"- saying thus 'You have refused other lovers o! my dearest, do not leave me". 'The beetle seems to say all this. The goblet of wine was withdrawn, when it just neared the lip and a sip was about to be taken. Love is at once the fountain of great happiness as it is also one of great sorrow. When love is not returned with equal devotion it leads to disappointment and frustration. But there is nothing on earth like Love which brightens life in its give and take. And life itself is just a play-thing in the hands of fate. The greatest enemy to life is Death.

Alas, alas, my darling bloom, Upon thee Death
Has placed his pitiless hands and froze, Thy perfumed
breath;

Doth a hunter in the woodland wreck, A vulture or a
dove he kills"
The flower is the offspring of nature and when Death
has placed his cruel hand on her, all nature shares
the sorrow:
And soon small spiders wove thy white Soft silken
shroud
And Dawn with tender hands did deck (In death yet
proud)
Thee with a chaplet gaily strung
With dew-drops like to peerless pearls
And grief struck at thy fall the stars In dewy tears
rain.
Whilst from the densely-leaved trees Sparrows in pain,
Do drop on earth and clustering thee,
They chirp a shrill continual wail.
The poet now goes into the why of the disaster:
Why wert thou so rich-bestowed With virtues great?
O, why shouldst they be smitten thus By baleful Fate?
Who could fathom the mystery
Of creation? The good die soon

Several such questions arise in the mind of the poet and when no answers convince him, he too relapses into the corner of consolation:

To grieve is vain, upon the earth Misfortune kills
All joy sometimes; and deathless soul The body fills,
And whatsoe'r a shape assumes Through the infinite
power of God.

eyelids, fold on humid eyes
For soon this bloom
Will shrivel, rot and turn to dust; This is the doom
For all; and what can tears avail? Our life is but a
dream alas."

It is true that the whole poem is 'thought and feeling' soaked in sadness. The opening word and the closing word of the poem 'ah!' and 'kashtam' both meaning 'alas!'-emphasize the theme of grief in the poem. It is also true that in the elegiac context Ashan considers 'Life as a dream'. But he doesn't consider it as an empty dream; but a meaningful dream-yet a dream in comparison with what is to follow. The life of the flower does not completely end with the disappearance of its earthly existence. Like a star that slowly sets

In the western sea,
And rises over the eastern mount In white jubilee,
O Flower, thou may'st on Meru great Bloom on that
Kalpak branch again

He foresees a glorious future for the flower. Hence the accusation that Ashan is a poet of pessimism is not well founded. *Veena Puvu* occupies a supreme place among Ashan's poetical works. It reveals the unique personality of the poet and what followed was by and large an extension of the same genre. It has been seen that the 'Fallen Flower' is not a mere flower but a symbol into which a whole life has been cast. Two aspects pulsate in the poem; one is the elegiac tone and temper, and the other is the tendency to focus attention on the weaker and suffering side. The flower belongs to the weaker side. In all the major poems of Ashan, these two aspects dominate. Whether it is *Nalini* or *Leela*, or "Sita" or *Karuna* one can notice the elegiac sentiment. One also notices that the heroines are in the focus and all of them are presented in their fallen condition. When Ashan introduces them, they are either about to leave the physical world or at least renounce the mundane life of carnal pleasures. Even the technique of introducing the subject is the same. The poem commences with a most dramatic moment in the life of the Chief character-a situation which can capture the full sympathies of the reader. Something like: "How sad thou liest down in dust, Shorn of thy sheen" And then a series of flashes back into the past. Coming back again to the disturbing present, without stopping there, he gleams a little into the future, hopeful and consoling. This is the overall pattern. "every major poem that Ashan has written is a sequel or revised version of the 'Fallen Flower'-where the symbolism has been surrendered to incidents and names. The characters *Nalini*, *Leela*, *Sita* and Vasavadatha take the place of the flower. And the poem entitled "Prarodanam" is an elegy proper on the distinguished poet and scholar A. R. Rajaraja Varma. Thus Kumaran Ashan's special imprint is seen in the fallen flower. It happens to be the finest expression of his philosophy of life"(K.M.George 34).

Thus unlike other poetic creations around the theme of flowers where exaggeration and hyperboles are frequently used to enhance the aesthetic representation of the universe, here the focus is towards the complexities of human life as any other form of life in the world and the image concentrated is not a shining flower like a Daffodil or Rose but a fallen flower

whose signature is not its beauty but its vulnerability. What emerges finally is a matchless philosophical speculation with enough depth and creative ingenuity. Ashan should be

commended for his excellence in poetic creation and his skill in converting an 'insignificant' thing to a most important web of solemnity and subtlety.

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