

# Diasporic Elements and alienation in poems of Kahlil Gibran and Bendre

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**Abstract :** Kahlil Gibran (1883 – 1931) and Dattatreya Ramachandra Bendre (1896 -1981) are considered as the forerunners of new era in the literary history of their respective lands. Gibran is at times compared to the great Romantic William Blake and Bendre is compared to Kalidasa. They migrated from their birth place and settled in their choice of lands. Their contribution to literature is qualitatively and quantitatively of high order and greatly appreciated by the critics. Both writers are deeply rooted in their past and project a romantic future. They employ a new style of form, thought and expression and were instrumental in ushering a new era in their respective literary circles. In kannada it led to neo-romanticism and in English it paved way for prose-poem form. This paper studies the elements of diaspora and the strains of alienation in their poems. There is also a sense of disillusionment in their works which is a derivative of alienation. The scholar scans through the poems of these poets to trace how the migration and longingness for the motherland have fuelled their imagination. Both borrowed powerful images from nature. Their works are found to be human-centric and they propound a spiritual destiny for the mankind. They lament for the loss of love and humanity in social, political and economic arenas. This disturbs the writers greatly and they respond to it in their works. The paper presents the analysis in a comparative style with suitable examples and quotes.

**Key words :** Gibran, Bendre, neo-romanticism, comparative study, diaspora, alienation.

## INTRODUCTION :

Man is the product of his environment and the literature is the product of a culture. Hence, while studying the texts and contexts of the poet one has to comprehend the socio-cultural as well as political background of the life time of the poet. Bendre a Dravidian (Kannada) poet and Kahlil Gibran, a Lebanon born American poet who represent their cultures have produced many acclaimed works. The present paper focuses on the elements of alienation, melancholy and disillusionment in their poems. This is an attempt to explore the nature, cause and reflection of these elements.

One way of understanding an author consists in deciphering his thoughts through his works. A book is a perfect self-projection of personality, desires, ambitions and frustration of the writer. In good philosophical language we can say that there is a relation proportionality if not identity between the “cause”, the producer and “effect”, the product. The postcolonial and diaspora studies have redefined the concept of ‘culture’. Migration either by choice or compulsion has affected the writers and their literature. Though the writer is productive in terms of volume and quality of his produce, his constant struggles and turmoil form the undercurrent of his works. Diasporic study is not just a study of shifting of geographical position of a writer but to identify his struggle to find the gravity and balance for his literary work. James Procter says, ‘diaspora’ can appear both as naming a *geographical* phenomenon – the traversal of physical terrain by an individual or a group - as well as a *theoretical* concept: a way of thinking, or of representing the world.”(Diaspora 151).

Bendre and Khalil Gibran had many similar referential points. Both of them had nostalgic memories of their roots and always had the problem of identity. The ‘displaced’ position and a longing to find an equilibrium in the pendulum of the world made them find solace in writing. The diasporic element is predominant in their works. In personal as well as professional and literary lives these poets lacked the sense of belongingness. Their anguish took the form of poetry. It is true that a cool and contented person could never be a poet because poetry is a product of pain and anguish imposed by the life. It is testified by sage Valmiki too. Gibran says:

We are the sons of sorrow; we are the poets  
And prophets and the musicians, we weave  
Raiment for the goddess from the threads of  
Our hearts, and we fill the hands of the  
Angels with the seeds of our inner selves. (A Treasury 87)

The political, social conditions of the time of the two poets had an influence on their works. At that time their native countries were under the foreign yoke. The poets took the opportunity to give a call to their nation. With respect to India, Swami Vivekananda who had rejuvenated the nation by his fiery lectures had a bearing on the literature too. Kannada literature was also influenced by the Swami’s thoughts. Shankar Mokashi Puneekar in ‘Jnanpith Laureates of Karnataka’ says: “His (Vivekananda’s) was an intellectual movement and the elite trained in the economised liberal traditions of England, but missing in it an alternative ideal to sustain their cosmologically charged cultural values, found in Vivekananda’s thought, the right catalyst to Indianise themselves. Among these, the Kannada poets made a creative use of the Vivekananda philosophy.... (p.6). Gibran too has a high esteemed place in the Arab world. Andre Dib Sherfan says: “The Lebanese of today, not to exempt the Arabs of the countries, feel proud of Gibran, because with a sole hand he has elevated the dignity of the immigrants and proved to foreigners the erudition and wisdom of the Middle-East mystics.” (Third Treasury 210). But Gibran and Bendre were disillusioned after their respective motherlands gained freedom, since the freedom could not guarantee a dignified life to all the citizens.

### Kahlil Gibran; His life and times

Gibran came from a modest socio-economic class. He was born on January 6, 1883 in a small village of Bsherri. Bsherri is located in the Northern part of Lebanon, near to cedar forests of Biblical times, at an altitude of over 5000 feet. His mother was a daughter of a Maronite priest, was baptized by his grandfather in rites employing Syriac, or Aramic, the language Christ spoke. The Maronite church is typical of Lebanon's tradition of being not only physically but philosophically and intellectually at the cross roads of the world. The Maronite rite came to Lebanon directly from the church of Antioch and the Middle East, but preserving also its allegiance to Rome. Maronite priests are often married, for a married man may become a priest. A man may not, however, marry after he takes the Maronite vows of priesthood. Probably this religious background played a vital role in his personal life, particularly his sex life. Though he had lovers, he did not marry. He also had a platonic love towards a woman (Miss Mary Haskell).

In 1869, Suez Canal was formally opened. This sounded the death knell for all caravan routes across India, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey and even Egypt itself. People involved with businesses connected with the caravans were uprooted. With this, the Middle East became a sinking ship forcing its inhabitants to abandon their homes. Many Syrians and Lebanese migrated into Africa, many simply boarded ships at Beirut and ended their migration wherever the ship left them, whether it was Australia, South America, New York or Boston. When Gibran was born, the economic conditions of the Middle East were bad and political conditions were even worse. The boundaries of Turkish Empire was shrinking. Minority groups were abused and persecuted. In 1894 the Gibran family too left home seeking new life in the New World. The agony of leaving his birth place had an everlasting wound on the poet's heart. Gibran went back to Beirut in 1896 and studied at Madrasat-Al-Hikmat (School of Wisdom) till 1901. His study visit to Paris was cut short because of his mother's sickness. In 1903 Gibran returned to Boston with grief of the death of his beloved sister and also to take care of his ailing mother. His brother succumbed to plague in March, 1903 and within three months his mother too passed away. These losses left deep traces of sadness and melancholy on his soul. In *Broken Wings* he says: 'Solitude has soft silky hands, but with strong fingers it grasps the heart and makes it ache with sorrow. Solitude is the ally of sorrow as well as a companion of spiritual exaltation.' (A Second Treasury 19)

Gibran went to Paris to study art from 1908 to 1910. Then he returned to Boston, moved to New York in 1912. Gibran's reputation spread with the publication of *The Prophet* in 1923. This also paved a new way for Arabic literature by introducing the "prose-poem" poetic form. Gibran passed away peacefully on April 10, 1931 at the age of forty-eight. As per his wish he was cremated in the old deserted monastery of Mar-Sarkis in WadiKadish of Lebanon.

### Bendre; His life and times

Dattatreya Ramachandra Bendre was born in a Maharashtrian Brahmin family in 1896 on January 1896. At that time the family had settled in the town of Dharwad the then composite province of Bombay. He finished his schooling in Dharwad and college in Poona and Bombay. After graduation he returned to Dharwad as a teacher in the Victoria High School. He also started gaining reputation as a poet. He got married in 1919. In 1923 he started Geleyara Gumpu (The Friends Circle). Bendre was never economically sound neither his family life contented. Though the couple had many children only three survived. His poem *Narabali* (Human Sacrifice) drew the wrath of the British Government and he was imprisoned. He got all credits and glory by the end of his career and life, which even the poet had felt was too late. Poverty and unemployment were his closest companions. Life was an enchantress as well as a witch testing, teasing and cajoling him. He was surprised at the beauty and cruelty of life. *The joy of dance* inviting us to forget all imbalances reads thus:

Come let's dance  
 Come let's dance  
 .....  
 Twisting the hands,  
 Swaying the body,  
 Thak, thak, thak  
 .....  
 Becoming spring-leaves,  
 Becoming buds,  
 Becoming slumbering tops  
 Becoming lighter than the wind (Spring Fire 4-5)  
 .....

Soon the life breaks from dance to a forlorn tune, at another place poet asks;  
 When first I saw you on the bank of the stream,  
 What laughter was there!  
 What laughter and how much of it!  
 Tell me once, beloved, laughing as you did then,  
 Where has flown that laughter of yours? (2)

Bendre's place among the Kannada poets is unchallenged but while he was in flesh there was always doubt regarding his credentials as Kannada poet because he had Marathi roots and the Marathi World did not accept him whole heartedly because he lived in Karnataka and wrote in Kannada. Even the 'Jnanapith' award was delayed on him. It was conferred on him in 1974 for *Naaku Tanti* (Four String), which he had published in 1964. The constant pangs of identity, pain and anguish is reflected in his poems. Later, after the independence when the masses were not uplifted, his disillusion took the form of poems which have the imagery drawn from the folklore, a typical characteristic element of Bendre style. Bendre passed away in a hospital in Bombay on 26 October 1981.

### Melancholy and disillusionment in the works

As mentioned earlier both Gibran and Bendre had loneliness, identity crisis and socio-political upheavals around them. One of the scholars admit: "Historically, I believe that if Gibran has become a philosopher of human sorrows, and a great psychologist of the finitude of human nature it is because he immensely experienced the existential anxiety of suffering and the facilities of human predicaments." (A Third Treasury 205). Probably that is the reason why Gibran says: "your life my brother, is a solitary habitation separated from other men's dwellings. It is a house into whose interior no neighbour's gaze can penetrate." (A Second Treasury 43)

Bendre's position was also similar, it is beautifully summed up thus by the editors in his anthology of poetry. It reads: "Any serious examination of his work would perhaps lead us to nothing less than the central dilemma of traditional third world literary culture, its struggle to reach out for humanism and its compulsions to cling to a traditional world. Among the few writers facing such a dilemma, who have achieved a creative tension transcending the polarities, not evasively but through searching self-search, Bendre must be counted as one." (Spring Fire viii). Bendre himself gives this dimension a beautiful expression in his poem 'The Mirage';

Your laughter was the welcome wink of monsoon,  
It flashed like lightning once.  
Now all I do is to hold a candle to your face,  
And seek in vain the lost laughter. (p. 2)

The imbecile population, its headless servitude to the colonial powers infuriated both Bendre and Gibran. The bitter experiences of being under the yoke of colonial powers brought fire power for their pens. The futility of such morose existence haunts them. In one of his poem Bendre declares:

Urchins of our street are never idle,  
Make garden wrecking forts and such structure.  
Eating wheat, transmuting it into manure, they dig wells,  
They make combs out of dead man's teeth! (p. 21-22)

Gibran whips his countrymen with his words in his work 'My Countrymen.' He speaks:

What do you seek, My Countrymen?  
.....  
What is it you would have me do,  
My Countrymen? Shall I purr like  
The kitten to satisfy you, or roar  
Like the lion to please myself? I  
Have sung for you, but you did not  
Dance; I have wept before you, but  
You did not cry. Shall I sing and  
Weep at the same time? (The Greatest Works of Kahlil Gibran 184-185)

After the political freedom the disillusionment increased, the freedom did not bring relief to the masses. Either the caste or the class became a vital tool for oppression. Even religion was used to divide and persecute the masses. Bendre and Gibran were not against religion but they were against 'institutionalised' religions. It is noted that: "Gibran was a rebel, but only against ceremonial practice, not against the ethos of his ancestors. Careful reading proves that Gibran was not agnostic; his anger was against religion as it was practiced, not against the religious man. His secretary Barbara Young has written, 'Organised religion had no attraction for this man.' " (A Third Treasury 48)

Bendre though born in an orthodox family too had revolutionary ideas or religion. His religion was live and vibrant, not dogmatic and ritualistic. Bendre's knowledge of mythology had its own effect on his poems. While lamenting on the condition of the masses and trying find the reasons, Bendre gives a rousing call in his poem *Arise! Awake*. The alienation arising from religious bigotry is brought out in the poem. The beauty is hidden not in the message but the way it is delivered questioning the myth and idol worship which, instead of serving the inclusive factor or the spiritual aspect of religion has left out and discriminated the masses in the name of religion. A few lines from the poem:

Propitiating stone gods  
They carry on exploitation.  
Nothing can be bought for tag-price  
Without the routine graft.  
Transactions proceed without receipts,  
This is a market in open daylight;  
It is not even black market; it has no name.  
.....  
The straight and the upright need not don Gandhi cap.  
The name Bharat  
Should earn a name  
It is no rubbish to be swept aside! (Spring Fire 33-34)

Gibran is more romantic and mystic in his dream for his homeland. He weaves a magic of words trying to project what he desires for his country, in *Your Lebanon and Mine*. He says:

Your Lebanon is two men one who pays taxes and the other  
who collects them

.....  
 Your Lebanon is appointees, employers, and directors,  
 My Lebanon is the growth of youth, the resolution of maturity  
 and the wisdom of age  
 .....

.....  
 Your Lebanon is laws, rules, documents, and diplomatic paper,  
 Mine is in touch with the secret of life which she knows  
 without conscious knowledge. (A Third Treasury 271-272)

Regarding the hypocrisy in administration and the failure of Governments both Gibran and Bendre present a gruesome picture. When the promises of new land, liberation and freedom fails they paint a pathetic picture. Gibran gives us a glimpse of his striking image of liberty in the following manner:

“When midnight came and the spirits emerged from hidden places, I saw a cadaverous, dying spectre fall to her knee, gazing at the moon. I approached her, asking, “What is your name?” “My name is Liberty”, replied this ghastly shadow of a corpse.

“And I enquired, “Where are your children?”

“And Liberty, tearful and weak gasped, “One died crucified, another died mad, and the third one is not yet born.”

“She limped away and spoke further, but the mist in my eyes and cries of my heart prevented sight or hearing.” ( p.67)

In his political polemic *Decayed Teeth* he denounces the slumber which the people lived in. He writes: “Then visit the nimble-fingered dentists (metamorphically the leaders), Possessors of delicate instruments, dental plasters and tranquilizers, who spend their days filling the cavities in the rotten teeth of the nation to mask the decay. And if you suggest extraction to them, they will laugh at you because you have not yet learned the noble art of dentistry that conceals disease. (Thoughts and Meditations 28-29)

## Conclusion

These two poets born and lived continents apart but their response to social stimulus results in a similar, parallel literary reaction. They enriched their skills by absorbing the rich cultural backgrounds of their environment and found the themes and tones form the pain and pleasures of mundane people. The folk tune behind the words they strung are filled with human nostalgia and universal appeal. The political, social and economic condition of the time and their personal experiences found their way into their works. They got displaced from their places of birth, wrote in both mother tongues and an acquired language. However the longingness for the lost native is ever resonant in their works. Many a time that led to lamentation and dejection. However, it is to be noted that these poets do not end up in that state forever. There is also hope at the end of the saga. Bendre puts it very sensibly at the end of his poem *Dyamavva's Fair*. The poet prays:

The bridge between here and there, the roots ripening into words,  
 They look like blood relations!  
 Mother, you are the arbiter of Duty and Action,  
 And blood relationship is a mystery.  
 The drums and instruments; the earth which is its own wealth;  
 Manifested was group distinction-  
 Let distinction between the still and  
 the moving, divided from each other,  
 be dissolved into a new harmonious Universe. (Spring Fire 30,31)

Even Gibran has a formula for perfection, he says: “you ask me brother, when will man reach perfection. Hear my answer: Man approaches perfection when he feels that he is an infinite space and a sea without shore... (A Second Treasury 113)

Thus the two great poets from East and the West use the experience of disillusion arising out of diasporic element in a creative way to produce best literary pieces. We can observe that for these poets the act of literary creation was a social act resulting from intuition on one side and dynamic interaction with the society they were embedded on the other.

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