

Stephen Gill Pens Poetry for Personal Therapy

Dr. Aksa Rao

Writer Jammu University

India

About 300 years before Christ, Aristotle describes catharsis in his *Poetics* to show the impact of true tragedy on the audience. In the nineteenth century, Josef Breuer, the companion of Sigmund Freud, was the first to use Aristotelian concept in the realm of psychology. One template of catharsis is the use of a musical instrument for a tired person to feel relaxed. In literature, one example is *Oedipus Rex* in which Oedipus unknowingly marries his biological mother. Another example is Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. It is often said that reading any work about murder or to see it on the television can be a healing therapy.

Keyword: Stephen Gill, Poetry, Tephden Gill Poetry, Personal Therapy

Aristotle, a Greek philosopher, who tutored Alexander the Great, is still considered a prominent thinker in politics, ethics and psychology and his theory of catharsis for personal therapy is still the focus of debates. Aristotle's theory is linked with the elimination of traumatic experiences including fear, anxiety, anger, stress and other negative emotions, to achieve the state of liberation from them. This state of liberation is gained by expressing these unwanted emotions. Expression of pain acts as catharsis that means the purification or cleansing of emotions. This is the base of Dr. Anuradha Sharma's views in *Stephen Gill's Poetry: A Panaroma of World Peace* by Professor KV Dominic, released by Authors Press in 2010: "Many psychotherapists argue that

Hitler wanted to be an artist, but was refused by an art school. Humanity would have avoided destruction if Hitler had been accepted as an art student.”¹ (100). Carl Jung finds a close

2..aka/gill connection between poetry and psychology. He believes that a work of art impacts the psyche of the artist.

Impact on Stephen Gill’s art is clear from the subject and poetic techniques he uses to convey his subconscious, unconscious and conscious messages to eliminate toxin elements from his mind. By dancing with words, Stephen Gill gains aesthetic values also. Stephen Gill’s poetry is tied with psychology. To evaluate and enjoy Stephen Gill’s poetry, it is important to know the environment in which he has spent his childhood and boyhood and that forced him to seek refuge in his poetry and abroad. This gives the color of autobiography to his writing.

Autobiographical color is evident from the poet’s tone. It is evident from his use of images, symbolic gestures and particularly from his use of the subject matter and the element of hope. To keep distance from his reader, he uses persona to establish his connection to purge his mind and psyche which are laden with the bitterness of the past in New Delhi. This compulsion for purge is the force that compels him to write. The result of this compulsion is catharsis that is the figurative cleansing of emotions. This relief is gained by writing about the tragic situations of others like in his poems “Refugee”, “Discriminators”, “Let us Hibernate” and several others from *Songs Before Shrine*, and “Me,” “Religious Fanatics,” “Terrorists”, and others from *Shrine*. Purgation or catharsis is clearly obvious in Stephen Gill’s modern epics *The Flame* and also in *Amputee*.

The Flame, a modern epic, is about the destruction caused by maniac messiahs, an expression he uses for terrorists. The back of the book says that Stephen Gill wrote *the Flame* “to help others to be aware of the enemies of peace.” Stephen Gill’s another epic *Amputee* is about the

sufferings of a sexually abused child. The back of this book says that “Dysfunctional families continue spreading the virus of indignities which pollute the atmosphere of peace. Parental education is a notable way to stop social and criminal viruses.” Personas in both these modern epics evidently represent the poet.

The bulk of Stephen Gill’s poetry is to get relief from the repressed feelings. This aspect of Stephen Gill’s poetry brings his writings closer to the view of Carl Jung who finds a close relations between poetry and psychology. Stephen Gill uses his poetic techniques to share his repressed emotions. Aristotle believes that catharsis leads to forgiveness and renewal. Stephen

Gill’s use of unconditional love in his writings is to seek forgiveness in a healthy way.

3..aka/gill

Professor Sudhir K. Arora uses the expression “spiritual liberation”² as well as the word catharsis and purification for the poetry of Stephen Gill. Poet himself uses words, including compulsion, refuge and catharsis. K. Satyamurty, a scholar who is doing his doctorate on Stephen Gill’s works has written a beautiful poem on catharsis in the poetry of Stephen Gill.³

To evaluate Stephen Gill’s poetry without knowing the environment in which he was raised would be self-defeating, because that environment forced him to seek refuge in poetry and also to seek refuge abroad. This may brand his poetry as autobiographical. To conceal identity, the poet takes the help of persona. The words of Dr. D. Parameswari, the Senior Professor and Head of the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Kamraj University in India, are worth noting when she acknowledges this suffocating climate in the Preface to *The Poetic Corpus of Stephen Gill* by Professor Sudhir K. Arora, released by Sarup Book Publishers in 2009. She notes that Stephen Gill “witnessed the massacre of people of all faiths in and around his neighborhood. But this experience taught him the rich and valuable lessons on the need of peace for all.”⁴

Aju Mukhopadhyaya also from India, author of several novels and collections of poems, agrees in his article that appeared in Professor Dr. KV Dominic's book *Stephen Gill's Poetry: A Panorama of World Peace*. He confirms what Professor Parameswari says:

*On the basis of his experiences of shock and fear from the childhood and the present sociopolitico-economic conditions of the world, the poet has become peace prone. He earnestly wishes to establish a peaceful order. Not only has he written poems urging peace but edited two volumes of anti-war anthologies of poems with the hope that his writings about peace would cause change in the thinking of his readers. He has been writing essays in support of peace.*⁵ (p. 125)

The opinions above support what Stephen Gill writes in his preface to *Songs Before Shrine*:

It is the pain of these wounds of my life in India that I carry with me no matter where I go. I have struggled to catch a glimpse of that pain in the preface to Shrine, a collection of my poems of peace and social concerns. That pain is still alive in the caves of my arteries and comes to life as spectres, particularly when it is night. The more I try to escape those spectres the more they torment me. That is also my well from where I have and even now I draw the waters for my inspiration. I find that well inexhaustible

*4..aka/gill and its water more satisfying with every visit to it. These visits are like that of a child to its mother.*⁶

The spring of Stephen Gill's inspiration is the sufferings of his family and his own when India was divided in 1947. He has witnessed the bloodshed that he can never forget. Though extremely brief, his description of his childhood in his articles, prefaces and interviews is very touching. He shares his childhood experiences with Dr. Peggy Lynch, a prominent poet of Texas and editor of *Poetry in the Arts*:

I have seen the glass of peace being smashed into pieces when I was growing up in India. My family did not know if there would be another dawn and when there was, it brought horrific tales of more brutalities. I have seen old people running for help and being pelted with bricks and then burnt alive while the patrolling police ignore the clusters of misguided zealots; I have perceived death dancing in the eyes of minorities; I have heard the cries of infants; I have read about the butchery of the innocent. Both the Hindus and Muslims were engaged in this ugliness for religious reasons. Mahatama Gandhi was assassinated because he tried to end this drama of degradation to humanity. It is the pain of these wounds that I carry with me no matter where I go. I have struggled to catch a glimpse of that pain in the preface to Shrine, a collection of my poems of social concerns. That pain is still alive in the caves of my arteries and comes to life as a ghost any time, particularly when it is night.⁷

It is about catharsis when Professor Dr. Sudhir K. Arora talks of Stephen Gill's pains in his authentic study *The Poetic Corpus of Stephen Gill*, released in 2009 by Sarup Book Publishers:

Incidents like the terrorist's attack on the innocent citizens in London and the communal riots brought him back to the days of his boyhood and reminded him the past. He has suffered the bitter experiences in his life and these experiences have become the stuff for his writing. He has befriended poetry as it relaxes him by giving him an outlet to his pent up feelings.⁸(14)

The words of Professor Dr. Chhote Lal Khatri are enlightening when he refers to Gill's modern epic *The Flame*. In *The Flame Unmaked*, edited by Professor Arora and published by Prakash Book Depot in 2010, he enlightens:

This poem seems to me a long soliloquy of a tormented and agitated soul anatomizing his subject to understand the genesis and nature of the problem of peace, to articulate

5...aksa/gill

*his traumatic experience, may be to achieve catharsis; and in this poetic process he gives extension to his quest for peace by making it a pleas for the humanity.*⁹ (P. 93)

Expression of pain and anguish helps to feel lighter and at ease. Their suppression can lead to depression, and depression can lead to ailments. Stephen Gill's childhood memories are painful. His poetry on peace is the outcome of the painful climate in the country of his birth. In his poetry he keeps the door of hope open for reconciliation and forgiveness. This door of hope is useful when purgation from dark emotion takes place.

Hope is there even in the early poetry of Stephen Gill, right from his first collection of poems, titled *Reflections*. About forty-six years ago, Professor Dr. Frank Tierney focuses on hope in his write-up in *The Canadian India Times* of November 15, 1973, when he was the Head of the

Department of English Literature of the University of Ottawa: "There is in Mr. Gill's work a public despair but private hope." ¹⁰ Dr. George Hines in his study *Stephen Gill and His Works*, released by Vesta in 1982 and later by Authors Press in 2008 states that "many poems express frustration, sorrow, regret and despondency because of the present state of man and the world, but other poems express hope in a better future."¹¹ (p.90).

Hope is the ideal way to keep moving. Theology of hope is for a better world without withdrawing from the world of action, even if the situation around is deeply dissatisfying. For Stephen Gill poetry is a way for emotional healing that opens the door of hope for forgiveness and reconciliation. Aristotle uses the word catharsis as a means for self-healing. For catharsis, Stephen Gill establishes a connection with readers to purge his mind and psyche that are heavy with the bitter memories of his early life. This compulsion for purge is the force that forces him to write,

resulting in catharsis that is the cleansing of negative emotions to pave the way for harmony and absolution.

Works Cited

Dominic, KV. *Stephen Gill's Poetry: A Panorama of World Peace*, India: Gnosis, 2010, HC. Page

100

Arora, Sudhir K. *The Poetic Corpus of Stephen Gill*, India: Sarup Book Publishers, 2009, HC. Page

232

www.stephengillcriticism.info (see poems addressed to Stephen Gill)

...aksa/gill

Arora, Sudhir K. *The Poetic Corpus of Stephen Gill*, India: Sarup Book Publishers, 2009, HC. Page

viii

Dominic, KV. *Stephen Gill's Poetry: A Panorama of World Peace*, India: Gnosis, 2010, HC. Page

125

Gill, Stephen. *Songs Before Shrine*, India: Authors Press, 2007, PB. Page xvi

Lynch, Peggy, ed. *Poetry in The Arts*. January 2001, (Texas. USA).

Arora, Sudhir K. *The Poetic Corpus of Stephen Gill*, India: Sarup Book Publishers, 2009, HC. Page

14

..... *The Flame Unmasked*, India: Prakash Book Depot, 2010, PB. Page 93

Tierney, Frank. Ottawa: *The Canadian India Times*, Nov. 15, 1973

Hines, George. *Stephen Gill & His Works*, India: Authors Press, 2008, p.90