

The Architecture of Unresolved Sorrow: Negative Capability and Existential Surrender in the Poetry of Shiv Kumar Batalvi

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Abstract

This research paper aims to examine the concept of "Negative Capability" in the poetry of Shiv Kumar Batalvi. John Keats, an eminent poet, coined the term 'Negative Capability' in a letter written to his brothers George and Thomas on 21 December, 1817 and he defined his new concept of writing: "Negative Capability, that is, when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." While Keats traditionally explored this phenomenon within the Western norm, Batalvi's poetry—rooted in the profound cultural and emotional idiom of Birha—implies one of the most fascinating non-Western realizations of Keatsian aesthetic surrender. Batalvi did not pursue intellectual resolution, moralization, or ideological consolation for anguish, but he surrenders entirely to raw, untainted emotion. A rigorous study of his masterpiece verse-drama Loona (1965) alongside key lyrical collections including Peeran Da Paraga and Alvida, demonstrates how Batalvi operationalizes Negative Capability. Keats promotes a removal of the intellectual self while writing (or reading) poetry as he observes: 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all Ye know on earth and all ye need know' - Ode on a Grecian Urn, lines 49-50. Throughout his poetry and letters, Keats emphasizes that beauty does not need to declare its profound significance. This research paper not only identifies Batalvi as a forlorn romantic poet but also examines his philosophical outlook on life alongside that of John Keats. The study details how Batalvi is tangled in emotional uncertainty and existential doubt, without offering rational or moral resolutions. The paper highlights his deep empathy and his subversion of societal dogma, and he surrenders himself to the raw emotion of Birha.

Keywords: Negative Capability, Birha, Morality, Sorrow, Doubts, Mysteries, Uncertainties.

Shiv Kumar Batalvi dwells on the tragic modesty of marginalized characters without passing judgment or remark. He undermines traditional patriarchal morality and embraces ambiguity. Conventional romantic melancholia is transcended by creating a philosophical framework in which aesthetic truth is fetched not from dogma or logical synthesis, but from the inflexible vivid experience of emotive and existential uncertainty. Shiv Kumar Batalvi, known for works such as *Mainu Vida Karo*, *Aarti*, *Loona*, and *Alvida*, was born into a Brahmin family on July 23, 1936 in the Sialkot district of Punjab Province. His family later migrated to the Gurdaspur district following the Partition. According to the legend and biographical records, he intensely loved the daughter of the great Punjabi writer Gurbaksh Singh but marrying her was halted on account of difference of caste and class, which had fundamental influences on his emotional life. This paper deals with how Batalvi interprets his vehement emotional torment in his artwork and how he overcomes a harsh life through art.

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This dichotomy between conceptualization and intuition of the aesthetic was commonly encountered in the intellectual history of literary criticism. The notion of 'Negative Capability' coined by John Keats is one that redefines the ability of the creative genius in Literary history with the great authority. Keats envisioned an alternate way of being artist -- open, reflective honesty, and the suspension of the rationalizing and controlling ego. It would seem Negative Capability consists in not being able to think decisively about the subject before oneself, but to think tentatively, and to think with those who do not already look at it with certainty. Negative Capability would seem to consist in not being able to think about the subject in hand tentatively, but to think about those who did, with something like a constitutional inability to think about it otherwise. First there's nothing to do with doctrinal exegesis or moral condemnation. The aesthetic trajectory in Shiv Kumar Batalvi's oeuvre is simultaneously present in many literary works in South Asian traditions, especially in the writings of the twentieth century of the Punjabi Sahitya. Feted as the 'Birha da Sultan' Batalvi is a unique figure in contemporary Indian verse. His lyrical and romantic compositions have been often labeled as only romantic with a personal approach to heartbreak and early death, but the philosophical depths of his lyrics cannot be ignored. Batalvi's work on sadness isn't just about sentimentality, or autobiography, it's a proper epistemology of immersing oneself in one's feelings.

This study shows how Shiv Kumar Batalvi's poetic approach can be said to be a direct example of the Keatsian Negative Capability. He does not separate the anguish of disassociation from socio-political critique - he does not dwell on religious transcendentalism or the moral commentaries - he simply increasingly connects with the vulnerability of humans. By textually analyzing his foundational verse-drama *Loona* as well as his vast body of lyrical works, this paper investigates how Batalvi's insatiable curiosity about unexpected possibilities of living in existential uncertainty enables him to disrupt firmly established dogmas of the patriarchal system and show radical empathy to the tainted. He has come to realize that the only way to achieve this pure aesthetic truth is to suffer, to be justified in that suffering, because it is not argued.

In a span of years, Shiv Kumar Batalvi had created a wealth of fame with his notable books. *Loona* is an exploration of the old Punjabi legend of Puraan Bhagat, by the acclaimed Shiv Kumar Batalvi, from a unique perspective bestowed on the character of *Loona*, a young lady that is caught in the societal binds. Batalvi received the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in 1967 for the play which deals with the theme of unfulfilled desire, passion and feminine agony. The poem begins with the speaker speaking to the moon as a messenger, requesting the moon to relay his message to his beloved. The poem starts with the speaker speaking to a moon as a messenger, asking the moon to deliver the speaker's message to his lover. "Moon!

Be the messenger of light / Alone in darkness I remain, without my lover's sight." (Luna, Act 2, lines 5- 6)

Loona showcases Batalvi's deft use of language and vibrant imagery. He conveys the immense emotional suffering of the speaker by utilizing the Jhelum River as a metaphor for wailing cries and hopelessness: "The Jhelum's waters are my wailing/when will the nightingale sing at her door?" (Singla) Batalvi conveys a universal experience of love and loss that transcends cultural boundaries through the image of Jhelum as a metaphor for the speaker's longing. Shiv Kumar Batalvi poignantly depicts universal human experiences as Loona undergoes deep personal emotions.

Batalvi's Loona carries several narrative structures which are integral to the cultural life in Punjab. It then starts with an intimate scene of the Nati and Sutradhar (drama performers in Sanskrit) in the jungle near Chamba, in keeping with the Sanskrit dramas of traditional style. Whereas Batalvi's story unfolds among the hills of Chamba and on the banks of the Ravi, with Sialkot featuring as the birthplace of Chamba's Puran, Qadar Yaar's story starts in Sialkot and takes an excursion to the hills of Chamba. Batalvi portrays a woman vocal and expressive about her sexuality, whose desires are unjustly demonized. In the opening of the third part, Loona identifies herself as "fire":

"O friend, / Why shouldn't I speak?

Why shouldn't the fire speak?

Why shouldn't I unlock my tongue?" (Sachdeva).

Loona is vocal and expressive about her sexuality and desire. She questions King Salwan's decision to marry a young girl of his daughter's age without her consent. Loona's father did not ask her when the marriage was fixed. She laments her plight:

My father committed a sin

He did me wrong

He tied my knot with Salwan, a withered flower

Who Ichhran had conjugal pleasures with

I am of Puran's age

But now I am Puran's mother.

[...]

When a man espouses a girl of his daughter's age

People find no shame in that

If Loona loves Puran, then

Why does this world

Call her a fallen woman? (Sachdeva).

As critic Singh notes, "Foregrounding Loona's suffering in age and youth, Shiv Kumar questions the system which does not object to this mismatched marriage but raises the scepter of morality if she longs for fulfilment in a man equal in age and youth" (Singh 111). Born as Baru Shudra's daughter, Loona's tragedy is compounded by her lower-caste and lower-class status, making her oppression the intersection of gender, class, and caste exploitation. Shiv K. Batalvi encircles Loona's economic class as equally responsible for her tragedy. Their oppression and exploitation are the result of their gender, class, and caste. Batalvi universalizes this pain:

Every man in this world

Is Salwan/ Every Loona in this world

Carries the blotch of insult on her forehead. / This world is

A naked impotent world

Where woman costs

Cheaper than Roti

[...]

The bed of every woman smolders

As Loona's does

And every woman wails

As Loona does. (Sachdeva).

By keeping the voice of the margins at the center of his narrative, Batalvi transforms a traditionally hated mother-figure into a tragic heroine. He reveals her psychological trauma, rejecting the binary of good versus evil and emphasizing the ambiguity of her pain. Turbulent nature metaphors mirror her internal state and showcase a mind operating outside conventional human morality. Batalvi forsakes rigid moral certainty, allowing Loona's agony and societal oppression to coexist without a neat, didactic takeaway. He shows her psychological trauma and rejects the binary of good versus evil. He highlights the ambiguity of her pain. She is tied to a forced marriage against her will. She is desperate, being devoid of emotional and physical intimacy, and is attracted to her stepson, Puran. Luna swings between asserting her right to love and drowning in societal shame.

Batalvi is not just being cold and heartless, he would like to introduce himself as water set free from his river, from his tears. He has made Keat's vision of a poet void of all certainty, an existential need, into a spiritual fact by turning the lack of answers to the trauma into a fact. In Birha ka Sultan, he blesses divorce: "Let us sing of separation, / Separation is king. / A body that does not know separation, / Is but a corpse." (Batalvi 1-4) Anguish is not an enemy to flee from, but a sacred fire and womb from which the universe births change. Batalvi writes: "I was supremely fortunate that this separation from you / Attached itself to me. / Without it I would have been just a piece of clay, / In an empty graveyard. (Batalvi 17-20)

Shiv Kumar Batalvi and John Keats both face the suffering of man, but for opposite consolation. In the poem "To cease upon the midnight with no pain", Keats is hoping to be free of human suffering by becoming immortalized through a female voice: the nightingale's song. Keats's pursuit of human painlessness is in contrast to Batalvi who sees pain, physical and emotional, as his supreme companion.

For Batalvi, birha does not mean just to "be born; it entails a complete relinquishment of identity as all that is born comes from the earth and the sky. In order to properly appreciate Batalvi's aesthetic resonance with Keats, it is essential to delve into an understanding of the Punjabi cultural phenomenon of birha. In Punjabi Sufi and Bhakti, Birha also has a strong Metaphysical significance in English, it is often translated as 'separation' or 'sorrow of longing'. Historically, poets like Bulleh Shah, Shah Hussain and Baba Farid used the Birha as an allegorical tool to convey the sufferings of the human soul for its yearning to find union with the Divine. As part of their devotional framework, the suffering at separation had its purpose, it was a purgative fire that would burn away earthly ego, leaving the way open for the ultimate spiritual transcendence.

Shiv Kumar Batalvi changed this when he secularized and existentialized Birha. In Batalvi's poetry, the teleological "safety belt" has been removed from Birha. This isn't a promise of reunion in Heaven or a stopgap to a great synthesis of spiritual BS somewhere up the "path of life" tree. But only Birha becomes real, is the condition of human existence, it becomes a reality that is self-contained and self deepening. Batalvi does not try and cure, escape or intellectualize his grief. He is completely devoted to it and Birha becomes the main focus of his creative consciousness:

When sorrow comes, bringing with it
Loneliness and pain,
I pull it close to me,
This separation from you. (Batalvi 17-20)

This 'scale of the dark' and complete immersion into sadness and grief without an 'irritable reaching' towards spiritual comfort or psychological healing is at the very heart of Batalvi's Negative Capability. Unlike other contemporary members of the Punjabi Progressive Writers' Movement, like Paash or Jagtar, who advocated for literature to have definite socio-political goals which was a quest to explore the social class struggle, criticism of systematic exploitation, and the revolutionary imperative, Batalvi steadfastly denied that art should become so, (stateful and political). He was repeatedly vilified by the political ideologues of Marxism as an 'antidote to scientific materialism' and 'bourgeois despair. It was, on the other hand, this aspect of his willful refusal to instrumentalize emotion for dogma which saved him his Negative Capability. Batalvi, like Keats, knew that construction of complex truths of sentiment into stiffened ideological containers stifles the vibrancy and liveliness of aesthetics.

Batalvi's finest statement of Negative Capability is in his magnum opus, *Loona*, an epic verse play, which won him the prestigious Sahitya Academe Award when he was still a very young man, at the age of thirty-one. A retelling of the ancient Punjabi folk tale of *Puran Bhagat*, it is called *Loona*. This story had been retold for centuries and told as a moral lesson of male chastity and female treachery. The folklore is traditional as it was King Salwan who marries a young woman named *Loona*, the daughter of a village into which Salwan fell in love. According to the traditional folklore, King Salwan falls for a young woman from a low caste named *Loona*. *Loona* falls for Salwan's beautiful son *Puran*, of his former wife. After being rejected a sexual advance on moral and familial terms, a demoralized *Loona* mistakes *Puran*'s advances for trying to rape her. Outraged, King Salwan instructs *Puran*'s limbs to be cut off to be thrown into the bottom of a wide yawning well.

In old literature like that of *Qadir Yar*, *Loona* is represented in a one-dimensional light as a deceptive, lewd and wicked woman; the model temptress who defiles patriarchy's honor and social order. But Batalvi conveys this story with the full and entire negative capability. He deliberately flouts these centuries of accumulated moral judgment; he refuses to accept society's platitude towards the destruction of *Loona*. Batalvi doesn't look at her as a moral righteous or a social reprobate, rather, she's in her mind, and she extends her sympathy to her sad story.

In the temple of separation each one of us

Burns like incense...

From separation emerged / This earth, this sky. (Batalvi 9-12)

Similarly, the "chameleon poet" effect is also manifested as Keats's physical reality vanishes as the sensory realm of the nightingale dominates him. In the end, both poets dismiss cold

rationality in seeing death as the inevitable end and the terminal sorrow as a natural one. Batalvi leaves the reader in the midst of eternal birha just as Keats ends his Ode, with complete uncertainty and doubt, wondering if he is awake or asleep.

As you'll see, throughout the work, Batalvi examines the transformative nature of love, and how it can bring great joy yet cause great pain. Batalvi's nightingale is a symbol of yearning, his hope for "Beyond the loved home door" finding recognition; John Keats expresses a desire to go beyond death through the immortal "song," of the English nightingale. The epic starts with the speaker speaking to the moon as a messenger to carry a message of parting and yearning.

The sound of the speaker's heart beats like a drum which has no logical control but is driven by emotion as what Batalvi describes is a perfect metaphor for full emotional surrender. Longing and loss are major themes that are further amplified by strong imagery – the Jhelum River that echoes on the pages a stream of voices of loss and despair, and a dust storm that fills Loona's mind with inner turmoil and distraction. The speaker is prepared to embrace fates as they come, to welcome whatever light may be shed—even before he faces an impassable void of emotion. The notion of emptiness emphasizes a permanent separation, upheld through metaphors of a withered garden and the speaker's distance to the loved one "like a prisoner." Rather than portraying Loona as a conventional villain or a symbol of unbridled lust, Batalvi allows Loona to articulate her existential rage and physical frustration without interposing any paternalistic commentary or moral disapproval.

If Puran is considered my son by societal decree,

Then what am I to the elderly Salwan?

Tell me, in this youthful blooming of my age, (Luna Act 6 72).

How could she tame this raging tempest of desire, this insatiable, unchained wild animal? He brings a commonly forgotten young girl of lower caste to light, one forced into an unequal marriage with a king, an adult older than her own father, from whom she has also been dispossessed.

The moon is representative of change and passage of time – from waxing to waning, from young to old, etc. Batalvi unmasks his moral arrogance to walk in Loona's circle. While this play with her longing, anger, and moral ambiguity is enough to disrupt and defy the orderly didactic resolution of the typical Punjabi folk tale, she also does not settle for the binary of good versus bad.

It is interesting to see the comparisons of John Keats and Shiv Kumar Batalvi in terms of style, themes and philosophy. Poets' lives are short and eventful, both were extremely frail, sick and sad with personal tragedy, Keats died at the age of 25 from tuberculosis and Batalvi died at the age of 36 from chronic health problems. Their long-lasting gifts, however, do not lie in their personal drama, but in their side-by-side understanding of how passionate, unsettled emotion is a source of creativity.

A Comparative Analysis of John Keats and Shiv Kumar Batalvi

Dimension of Analysis	John Keats (1795–1821)	Shiv Kumar Batalvi (1936–1973)
Philosophy of Suffering	Views the world as a “World of Pains and troubles,” necessary to “school an Intelligence and make it a Soul.” Emphasizes passive endurance and receptivity.	Elevates Birha (existential separation) into an absolute aesthetic state. Surrenders completely to grief without seeking spiritual redemption or moral escape.
Poetic Philosophy and Didacticism	Explicitly rejects “irritable reaching after fact and reason.” Resists didactic poetry and criticizes Wordsworth’s egotistical sublime.	Rejects moralistic parables and ideological constraints, resisting the demands of the Soviet-style Progressive Movement. Humanizes marginalized and condemned figures such as Loona.
Sensory and Symbolic Imagery	Rich, synesthetic, and lush imagery rooted in nature, mythology, nightingales, urns, and autumn foliage.	Visceral and poignant imagery drawn from rural Punjab: withered flora, desert heat, stray hawks, funeral pyres, and moonlight.
Egoistic Depersonalization	The poet has no fixed identity; he becomes a chameleon, taking equal delight in creating Iago or Imogen.	Dissolves personal ego into tragic characters and nature itself, merging personal grief with collective human suffering.

There is also the way in which Negative Capability has been compared to Keats, which can be seen as validation that it can extend beyond the original Romantic/Fusion sentimentality embraced by poetry that is western. For Keats, 'the poet never writes a poem...'; for Batalvi, 'poem is Birha itself, poem is our characters who live as the Voiceless'. Both poets accept that although their context and poetic traditions vary, great artistic truth cannot always be conveyed in logical or moral explanations. Rather it can arise from the desire to stay in the absence of resolution within the emotional experience. In another famous letter to Richard Woodhouse in October 1818, Keats asserted that “the poetical Character... has no self—it is everything and nothing—it has no character—it enjoys light and shade... A Poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—

and filling some other Body.” Batalvi is up there with other great works that demonstrate the quality of self-annihilation. But when Batalvi writes *Loona*, it is not an external perspective on *Loona* that he shares, it's Batalvi who delivers the lines written by *Loona*. He releases his male privilege, his middle-class urban sensibilities and his past from history and enters into the physical and emotional reality of an ancient, oppressed woman. The ability of verse to assume multiple characters produces a level of authenticity in Batalvi's poem that goes beyond a very simple representation of literature.

Shiv Kumar Batalvi's contribution to World Romanticism and modern Indian poetry can be laid down in his masterful realization in an indigenous cultural matrix of Negative Capability. Rather than a poet of self-pitying loneliness, Batalvi was able to employ a high level of artistic skill and to inhabit emotionally ambiguous and even existential questioning and acute suffering without resorting to simplistic morals or logic. In both of his enactments, Batalvi cast doubt on centuries of dogma and ideological prescriptivism, absorbing the marginalization of a theological stepping-stone to *Birha* and a radical empathy for this marginality in *Loona*. But, Batalvi (like Keats) showed that the essence of poetry is not to announce philosophical edicts or moral judgments. Instead, it lies in the artist's capacity to become completely open to the tragic beauty of human existence and feel so intensely that beauty and truth merge and create a legacy that will echo through time, culture and language.

Batalvi introduces itself not as a rigid shaped entity, but as water taken off from the river and created from a tear. He is a portrait of a poet whose life is lived in an entirely questioning way, one who reconciles unanswered trauma with spiritual truth – in the shape of Keats. Anguish is cast not as an enemy, but as the sacred womb from which the universe generates growth and change. Batalvi notes that without *birha*, a heart is merely an empty graveyard of clay. Both poets face the grueling brutalities of human life. However, the two are comforted differently; for Batalvi, suffering both physical and emotional in this world is his preferred companion and for Keats, the nightingale's song elevates him above the world. Now, Batalvi sees humans as ships and his personal pride goes away.

Literary Scholarship indicates the manner in which John Keats and Shiv Kumar Batalvi are not didactic at all, but have completely sublimed the 'ego' into their aesthetics. Both poets are engaged in a gesture of what is called 'Negative Capability'—that is, eliding generally accepted moral considerations, and relaying their poems to the reader by way of the shadows of uncertainty.

‘Acceptance’ is a ‘forgiveness which forgives not only men but life itself’, not ‘passive tolerance’ but ‘an ultimate act’ in the words of the famous Keatsian scholar Walter Jackson Bate, in which

one surrenders to half knowledge, to intense reality, without asking for definite logical proof. Likewise, critics of Punjabi literature point out that Batalvi makes “emotional sufferings” a principle of universe with the expression that the “birha is the very cause of the creation of world” and “the self is no more, selflessness is everywhere”.

Where Batalvi has succeeded is in turning sorrow into an art and an imaginative way of grasping the concept of life. There are no simple answers to suffering in his poetry, only the inviting reader into an experience that is complex. His work extends man's ability to incorporate Negative Capability as a tool for all in an intercultural and inter-literary world, revealing how uncertainty, empathy, and suffering not yet resolved can be sources of poetic truth everywhere.

Both poets treat terminal sorrow and early death as natural, beautiful destinations rather than tragedies to be dreaded. Batalvi's out-and-out surrender to birha equals Keats's famous yearning "to cease upon midnight with no pain." By refusing to impose neat rationalities, both writers leave their audiences suspended in a state of profound, unresolved wonder—echoing Keats's concluding uncertainty: "Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music: — Do I wake or sleep?" Through *Loona*, *Alvida*, *Peeran Da Paraga*, and his wider poetic expression of Birha, Batalvi demonstrates a distinctly Punjabi realization of an aesthetic principle closely associated with Keats.

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