Folklore as Metaphor in Subhas Mukhopadhyay's Poetry

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Abstract- 'Padatik kobi'Subhas Mukhopadhyay (1919-2003) contributed greatly to enriching the literary wealth of contemporary Indian literature by introducing various progressive ideologies, sketching the social condition at the conjuncture of modernity and portraying the typical oral tradition in his modernistic poems. For generations, different varieties of rhetorical figures, i.e. figurative language in the form of a single word or phrase, have been used in order to reach the pinnacle of excellence in the field of literature. The stemming poets of the first half of the twentieth century trace the effect of socio-political turbulences that resulted in the establishment of a new genre of poetry writing and in enhancing a true economic picture of the text's place of incident. This paper aims to analyze and discuss Subhash Mukhopadhay's metaphorical use of folklore and oral tradition in his drab modernist style in order to depict the perturbation in nature that pursues its impingement on the modern literary technique. Mukhopadhay's skilful use of folk tradition and creative use of myth preserves the typical Indian heritage in the domain of his progressive ideologies and in the shifting paradigm of modern literature. The inclusion of these types of elementary rhetorical devices makes his writing perspicuous to the local people in general and the pragmatic class in particular. It also adds an indigenous legacy to his writing. These simultaneously upgraded Indian typical oral tradition, which deeply prevented his poetry from being a monotonous slogan composed for political benefit. His poetic imagination, mixed with his use of folklore, differentiates his identity from a political slogan composer and uplifts his imaginative whole thereby establishing him as a dominating Indian poet in the realm of modern Indian literature.

"Writing was a political art, and poetry was a cultural weapon"(1)

-Linton Kwesi Johnson

By analyzing this line and taking it into consideration, it can be presumed that political poets made their poetry a 'cultural weapon' to fight against the criminality, unscrupulousness and corruption of political as well as social turmoils. Subhas Mukhopadhyay, born on February 12, 1919, in Krishnanagar, Nadia, West Bengal, is best known for his poems of protest, resistance and empowerment that are rather morally right than politically correct. His non-romantic, straight forward approach in the domain of Indian Literature heralded a new era along with many poets following his footprints. This paper aims to discuss Mukhopadhyay's metaphorical use of folklore, myths and fairy tales in his political and other modernist poems, thereby making it perspicuous to the local people in general and the pragmatic class in particular. It, too, helps to uplift the typical Indian heritage and attaches an indigenous legacy to his writing. His creative use of folk tradition, combined with his poetic imagination and various progressive ideologies, offers a telling description of social and political conditions at the conjuncture of modernity.

Mukhopadhyay's birth witnessed the troublesome period of the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy (1919) in Bengal and the aftermath of the First World War (1914-1918) and the Russian Revolution (1917). Born and brought up in social unrest, he developed solid political beliefs at an early age. He delved deep into the cause of social justice and was an active participant in left-wing student politics throughout his college years. Whereas, since childhood, he was heavily influenced by different political leaders among whom Subhas Chandra Bose was quite prominent. He even entertained a meeting at Alipore Central jail with Ramdulal Basu's elder brother, who himself was a "satyagrahe' at that time. Thus, he was too much attracted to politics in his later childhood. His wife, Gita Bandopadhyay, commented, "While still in school, we joined demonstrations under the leadership of communist students"(2). After completing graduation, he formally joined the communist party of India. He thereby came to be known among people as one of a handful of

literary practitioners with first-hand experience as a party worker and activist (3) His association with the labour class during his working days at Khidirpur harbor and his collection of a handbook on Marxism from poet Samar Sen marked the very beginning of his growing interest towards communism. However, later on, his direct attachments with political life resulted in the formation of stark, explicit, unambiguous modernist poems out of his political ideologies and sloganistic assertions.

The 1940s were marked by different types of socio-political turbulences as the world war, famine, Partitions, communal riots and mass emigration in Bengal. Subhas's writings broke away from the traditional moorings of the establishment poets and instead portrayed the despair and disillusion felt by the common people. However, in contrast to the social and political upheavals, the period marks the 'spring' of Mukhopadhyay's career as a poet with the publication of poetry 'podatik' (The Foot Soldier), which is regarded as a milestone in the development of modern Indian literature. His non-romantic, perspicuous, direct voice, allied with his technical skill and radical world views, welcomes the formation of a new genre of poetry writing in order to depict the perturbation in nature that pursues its impingement on the modern literary technique. In 1964, he acquired The Sahitya Academy Award for his composition 'joto dure jai' for which he was quite young. His wife, Gita Bandopadhyay remarked -"When Subhas got the Academy Award, he was only forty-six. I say 'only' because awards appear for people in their old age like pension"(4)

An eminent critic Buddhadeb Basu remarked on his unpretentious and undemanding construction of poetry by restating the aptness of his style in relation to the irksome phase. He looked upon the poetry in the hands of Bengali poets as a sparkling weapon that threaten social turmoil and not just a mere parody of poetical extravagances.

From the late 1950s onwards, Mukhopadhyay's poetry evolved into something more personal and contemplative. The readers can clearly trace a deep change in his literary form, use of rhetorical devices and creative motive, through which it took a turn towards the narrative and the allegorical.

Mukhopadhyay himself accepted this change by stating that reality and experience change him every time. But in the early wake of the 1960s, he changed his tone completely and defamiliarised his common verse form, though he never lost his technical felicity nor his unique voice. During this phase, his poetry became more idiosyncratic and reflective. Innate beauties of daily life, empathy for the common man, and his faith in mankind created such unforgettable and awe-inspiring line- "whether flowers bloom or not, it's spring today" (5)

Society as an integrated collection of human beings possesses the remarkable property of self-expression.(6)The experiences gained by the community or the society when finding spontaneous expression with some degree of aesthetic and artistic skill is termed folk literature (7). G.W Boswell defines folklore "as the unwritten history of ancient societies preserved in the minds of the people and handed down through ages by the medium of language or practice"(8). Most part of the folk literature is generally being created and passed on by words through mouths. As a result, it possesses more social elements than individual inventive literature. While creative literature owns the experiences of an individual, folk literature documents the entire society; thereby, being the product of the society, it actually gives a vivid description of society and the age itself. Thus, a poem including such traditional manifestations actually provides indigenous inheritance and sketches a true economic picture of the text's place of incidence.

Mukhopadhyay's modernist poems have at their centre the socio-political turbulence effective at that time and the impending destruction of the young generation as an adverse effect. The two major movements that are the Naxalbari movement and the freedom struggle of Bangladesh experienced the most horrific treatment of human corruption and inspired Mukhopadhyay to compose stark modernistic poems out of his robust sensibility and intelligence. To make it understandable and available to the people in general, he took the assistance of different varieties of rhetorical devices, provincial or daily language and proverbs that added an Indian bequest to his writing. The poem 'Chele gachey bone' (1972) bore the signature of the most dreadful and dark

period in the 70s- the Naxalite movement. The poem has its central theme, the Naxalite movement, though the book was dedicated to the freedom fighters of Bangladesh. The use of typical Indian folk tradition is evident in the most repeated lines-

When I reached the age

when I should have left for vanaprastha

Leaving me behind in shackles

My son has gone to exile (9)

The term 'vanaprastha' literally means giving up on worldly life and attachments. It is a concept in Hindu traditions representing the third of four ashrams of human life which a person accepts after his fulfillment of household responsibilities. This phase of life can be characterized as a willful exile from worldly possessions and spending life like a saint. But, here, the term 'vanaprastha' coincides with his son's early age, when he should have been experiencing his most joyous, mirthful, exuberant and vigorous stage of life, which is in turn completely shattered by the cruel forces of society. The mythological history of ancient India is once again repeated at the conjuncture of modernity but with changed circumstances, increased horror and a more universally compelling existential message-

I am not a mistaken murderer by throwing the arrow

listening to the sound of filling water

I am not given curse

By any agonized blind saint(10)

Thus, by analyzing the circumstantial epical manifestations of King Dasharath's agonized state for his son Rama, as a result of malediction brought about by a blind saint whose only son has been murdered mistakenly by the king in place of a deer, he makes a universal appeal on behalf of the afflicted and anguished fathers. Mukhopadhyay creatively chose this allegorical story to illuminate the despondency and anguish of Indian fathers who were blameless of any innocent assassination

but suffered a lot as an adverse effect of it. Here, King Dasharatha acts as a metonymic signifier- a representative figure of all Indian fathers who are not by happenstance cursed by a visually challenged saint out of his son's grief but fall prey to the contemporary socio-political tumult, without performing any harm to mankind. Another poem, 'agnikone' (1948), was composed in a much similar context, portrays a character from the Indian epic 'Ramayana' and by adds the consequences of the Naxalite movement that revolted against the old and primitive forms of the society-"In a blood-stained mirror/ Vashyalochol see his face"(11)

'Vashyalochon' was a character in 'Ramayana' who was blessed by the powerful god 'Brahma', that making eye contact with 'vashyalochon' will incinerate his enemy. But unfortunately, he himself gets inflamed by seeing his own face in the mirror on an idea to ignite his enemy, 'Rama'.Here 'Vashyalochon' symbolizes the imperialists whose impending destruction would be an effect of their own misconceptions, fallacy and delusion.

The poem 'Thakumar Jhuli' (1979) also illustrates his use of fairy tales to convey and uphold the problem of emigration evident in the late 1970s -

"Seven plumeria in seven trees

Sister Parul is staying close

King Dharma sent motor palanquin to Dandak

That's all for my Granny's sack of tales" (12)

Through the use of various folk terms, Mukhopadhyay actually wants to elucidate the ignominious and deplorable condition of the Bangladeshi refugees witnessed by the tumultuous years of the 1970s. The title of the poem portrays the whole narrative as implanted with folk tales or moralistic tales for children, but, at a deeper level, the poem carries an intense political hereditament possessing a drab note of political nuisance which is targeted at enlightening the consciousness of the mature generation. The mention of certain folk elements like the flower 'plumeria', sister

'Parul', king 'Dharma' and the reference to the place 'Dandak' makes it typically Indian and also makes the circumstances of the piece of poetry relatable to past incidents.

Generally, poems incorporated with these types of folklore and fairy tales are dedicated to children but his poems actually contrast with universality with a second-order significance and a deep detailing embedded under typical oral traditions. In another of his perspicacious poems ' Khela' (1983), the grim and desolate reality is characterized by frolic components-

The toys are left

Scattered here and there

Matchboxes joined with one another

to form coaches of rail" (13)

The manifestation of a casual world of child's play actually acts as a foil to the harsh reality that has to be confronted: "When eyes will be closed," along with the commencement of "the journey of truth."

Similarly, the poem 'Jete jete'(1962) ends up with an almost similar epiphanic situation, stating- "Then? What to tell/ That witch ate me up"(14), which to inherit a deep political connection. This portrays his disillusionment and detachment from his political background during his later phase. The term 'witch' at the very last line of the poem lends a contradictory effect against the lady who was at first addressed as a 'princess' and was viewed as an emblematic ideal of love and fulfilment of desire- "Then that princess/Enclosed her fingers into mine"(15)

The juxtaposition of the two metaphors 'princess' and 'witch' first visualizes a faultless, supreme world of the fulfilment of the eros and then gets trapped up into it without leaving behind any way of departure. The enigmatic ideal turns out to be an unavoidable enchanter who provides harm in disguise of an attractive figure while also making a deep contrast between appearance and reality. On understanding and knowing people by their first impression, he upholds the fact in one of his

interviews that imprisonment helped me make me conscious of the facade and pretentiousness of human nature.

Mukhopadhyay's use of metaphorical folklore also aimed at sermonizing and preaching to the common people against any discrimination based on caste, creed, social and religious beliefs. A perfect example to analyze this logic is the poem 'Ghore na baire na' (1989), which, at its very beginning stages-

> One side comprises
>
> Three lakh crore
>
> Of Krishna's army.....
>
> Other side comprises of
>
> Unarmed lonely
>
> War deviated
>
> Krishna himself. (16)

and the poem ends with a universally impelling message of comradeship and brotherhood-

> "....we are all but brothers!
>
> This brotherly combat should be stopped
>
> No one should murder mankind-
>
> Neither at home nor outside"(17)

The poem owns its central theme as the futility and uselessness of various types of riots and massacres, which are being looked upon as 'brotherly combat' that India evidenced in her troublesome years. The traditional epic tale of saint Vyasa's 'Mahabharata' and its central theme of warfare among brothers is chosen by Subhas as a medium to make the common people aware of the result of the warfare which would again take place with 'double toil and trouble' if repeated at the juncture of modernity. The poem contains a ubiquitous message left in its sake to adopt kinship and companionship among the people of the text's place of occurrence. In another of Mukhopadhyay's

reflective poetry, 'Dhormer kol' (1991), we get references to the problem of mass emigration evident during the partition of Bengal and the shabby, abysmal and odious condition of women during that time-

..Lakshman lines are being drawn

For women

And monsters would attack

If kept feet outside the line (18)

The very first line of the poem, 'Time is not fair', strikes the reader's mind, suggesting a pandemonium that is similar to its metaphorical history. The safety line created by saviours remains the same throughout the ages, but the 'monstrous' evil forces of modern society are becoming more brutal, horrific and dreadful day by day. But at a deeper level, 'women' serves as a metaphor for the innocent mass and 'monsters' are associated with the diabolical force.

Thus, Mukhopadhyay's poetry witnessed the hue and cry of the Indian society at the time of various socio-political disruptions as well as gifted a number of intellectual and inventive poetry to the contemporary literary oeuvre. His poetic journey, starting from his 'padatik' phase till his recognition as a successful Indian poet, sketches the transformation of his rudimentary political inheritance to a more mundane realm of metaphorical plotting. His keen sense of humor, along with the use of folk tales in poetry and the historical relevance between the two, differentiated his identity from other conventional political poets of the era. His poems can be universally relatable to any social turmoil and can be referred to as a continuation of Indian extant literature.

Mukhopadhyay's construction can be characterized as much more mythical than political. As a result, his writing can reach people irrespective of age and literacy. His poetic construction is free from the use of rigid words or phrases and includes a transfiguration of colloquialism, thereby excluding the need for a polymath to reflect upon the substance of this writing. He himself

described the commencement of his poetic career in 'kobitar bojhapora' by stating that he wrote his first poem for his school magazine named 'chitrakar' and 'jhoraphul' while he was in seventh standard. He further elucidated that it was a summer noon, and he was trying to compose a poem. Meanwhile, his attention deviated towards the sound of banging clothes on the ground by a washerman, and he suddenly innovated his subject and style of writing. Thus, the origin of his poetry also establishes a sense of mass evolution and something which belonged to the general people and which is related to our quotidian struggle, characterized by upheavals and reversals. He himself commented on his use of words by stating- "I want to make the words stand on their feet"(19) Referring to his use of colloquialism in his poetry, he remarked in an interview that his purpose in writing was to pursue his realistic views and personalized thoughts about life. He does not use a vivid poetic imagination to uphold the problems of life but makes it free to pass through natural outbursts. He neither wants to establish himself as a poet nor wants anyone to call him a poet, but only to walk through the path of humanity and serve the people with his utmost till the last breath of his life.

However, during the last phase of his life, Mukhopadhyay totally turned himself from political bondage and took will-full exile from the Communist party, the reasons for which are not clearly mentioned, though he safeguarded his firm faith in Marxism in a protective corner of his heart. During this phase, he wrote rhymes for children as well as made himself more deeply involved in translations though he continued this translation from his early career. But if we compare his 'podatik' phase with his later phase, we can trace his evolution from a diplomatic person to a more sensible, realistic, logical and responsible poet. His use of uncomplicated language does not stain his poetic creativity but rather reflects his brilliance, simplicity and directness. Mukhopadhyay himself recounted his poetic career, that he stepped into his literary oeuvre through prose writing, and after a great struggle he made himself efficient in poetry. His poetry is sometimes

about simple manifestations of rural life and sometimes the bloody depiction of the revolts, massacres as well and disastrous effects of imperialism though not directly but with the help of different

metaphors. His intention was to change the existing social structure by giving it a breakthrough from its bondage existence and to provoke non-judgemental and unbiased thoughts. He wrote, " Through poetry, I want to make the human hands useful in a way that we can change the world as our hearts wish". He himself mentioned that, without constant walking, he faced difficulties in writing poems, and this brought out his interest in mankind, so he engraved his name as 'podatik kobi' in the domain of Bengali literature. However, he stopped walking on 8th July 2003, giving a break to his immortal creations.

Hence, Subhas Mukhopadhyay's contribution towards modern Indian literature is not only lingual but also the establishment of a poetic weapon which possesses universality, which is not of a particular age but of all ages. His poetic composition is not only for the sake of poetry or to make himself eternal in the field of literature but to open a new sphere of enlightenment which delves deep into socio-political tumult and facilitates a subtle hint of the solution to certain problems. The poet himself declared that there is no separate world for a poet. The normal world, which encompasses men's radical exchange of views and thoughts, is also a poet's main concern. The regular words in the mouth of people, which help us to know our surroundings and gain experiences about the realities of the world become his main preoccupation, and he can never be isolated from it. (20)Thus, his creation is always a reflection of the age itself, besides the expansion of the supreme path of politics that may lead to the desired nation.

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