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Fire and Hunger in the Works of Das and Mahapatra

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Abstract

Indian English poetry is a genre that has been woefully underappreciated by critics, both Indian and foreign. Yet, this genre of poetry is crucial in understanding how Indian identity and society has evolved over time. From the allegedly imitative romantic poetry of pre-independence poets to the individualistic modern and post-modern poetry of postcolonial poets, the transition in themes and styles are indicative of the zeitgeist of contemporary society. This paper will attempt to understand the construction of Indian identity through the use of recurring themes, symbols and imagery in a selection of post-modern Indian English poetry, with a special emphasis on the effect of intertextuality in employing the same. This will be done through a close reading of the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra and Kamala Das.

Keywords: Indian English poetry, Kamla Das, Indian identity, Symbolism, Intertextuality, Mahapatra.

*In a corner of her mind a living green mango
drops softly to earth.*

- *A Summer Poem, Mahapatra.*

Indian English poetry is a genre that has been woefully under appreciated by critics, both Indian and foreign. Yet, this genre of poetry is crucial in understanding how Indian identity and society has evolved over time. From the allegedly imitative romantic poetry of pre-independence poets to the individualistic modern and post-modern poetry of postcolonial poets, the transition in themes and styles are indicative of the zeitgeist of contemporary society. This paper will attempt to understand the construction of Indian identity through the use of recurring themes, symbols and imagery in a selection of post-modern Indian English poetry, with a special emphasis on the effect of intertextuality in employing the same. This will be done through a close reading of the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra and Kamala Das.

Postcolonial Indian poetry is unique in that although it moves away from the nationalistic themes of poetry written between 1910-1930, there still exists a sense of nationhood. Even in its criticisms of India or considerable alienation from her, this poetry can be distinguished from the Progressive movement of the mid-twentieth century that expounded marxist and revolutionary ideology in a manner that can be classified as anti-nationalistic (Dharwadker, 220). In exploring poetry through free verse, Indian English poetry also defies any

linguistic or rhythmic expectations of the English language. This proves an effective escape from Parthasarathy's fear of his "tongue in English chains," and allows the language used to be distinct from the colonial "enemy tongue."

Recurring symbols are important in indicating what this postcolonial Indian identity might be. One such imagery is that of fire, flames and pyres. As a literary symbol, fire has been used in poetry to represent destruction, purification, and rebirth, among other ideas. As a purification process in Eliot's 'The Waste Land', fire is meant to cleanse human beings and society of sins like sexual desire and lechery. The use of fire by Indian English poets like Das and Mahapatra struck as incongruous to Eliot's symbolism, almost opposing the purifying role of fire. Instead, we can see fire being used as a symbol of sexual desire and female liberation in these poems.

This is particularly evident in Das' 'Summer in Calcutta'. Here the narrator describes her summer drinking "fire" that is the "Juice of April suns." The metaphor uses fire and summertime as a representation of passion, strength, and liberation. The "April suns" are reminiscent of the beginning of The Waste Land, "April is the cruelest month of the year." The fire that makes the narrator question her devotion or faith draws parallels the fifth movement of The Waste Land, 'The Fire Sermon', where the loss of faith is echoed by waterless, apocalyptic imagery. This intertextuality then expects the use of fire as a symbol of purification as used in The Waste Land. Yet, in 'Summer in Calcutta' there is a distinctly sensual portrayal of fire as an addictive "venom" that allows the narrator to briefly proclaim her desired independence from her lover, from "Dear". As the narrator is consumed by the

exuberance that accompanies this experience, lust and passion are celebrated rather than seen as sins to be cleansed of. From the eclectic selections of cesuras and enjambments to the euphoric repetition in the decision to “drink, drink and drink”, Das surprises us at every turn of the poem. The defiance of Eliot’s cathartic discovery in the East is one such revelation for the reader.

In Mahapatra’s ‘A Summer Poem’, the image of a deserted or dead fire leaving behind a cold, impotent ash analogises the story of the young girl who has no future, for “the home will never be hers.” It is significant that the impotence of ash is compared to the loss of hope for the young girl in the face of patriarchal norms that deny her inheritance and property rights, condemning her to a future of combing her mother’s hair. The title of the poem and the first line “Under the mango tree” set up the reader for a lighthearted poem about an Indian summer. Contrary to this, the very next image of a cold ash acts as a shocking revelation of the loss of any beauty or positive imagery associated with the mango tree. Similarly, as we move through the poem, the situation of the girl and the pithy declaration “the home will never be hers.” disturbs the audience and is a strong critique of misogyny in Indian society. Thus the deserted fire represents a loss of hope, and possibly a loss of home if we were to interpret fire as representing hearth and home. Fire hence symbolises hope and liberation, an image that is destroyed as succinctly as the yet-unripe mango drops from the tree.

Rather than simply deviating from traditional literary symbols of fire, it is possible that this imagery is a deliberate tool to defy standards imposed in religious systems and in Indian

society, thus exemplifying Indian English poetry's "defiant all-inclusive category" (Kolatkar). This can be hypothesised based on the Hindu deity Agni and other symbols of fire like Christ's Sermon on the Mount or Gautam Buddha's Fire Sermon commonly being used to represent a purification process. Furthermore, while Hindu fire worship is done with the aim of purifying the house or community, other practices such as sati, or widow burning are forms of sacrificial fire that aim to allow for a catharsis by appeasing Gods, while further entrenching sexist norms. Sucheta Pai Jaweli's 'We Are the Domestic Jews'¹ is a gut-wrenching portrayal of female ostracisation resulting from tradition practices:

*There is mine neighbour's house
Here, beaten by her spouse
The fire in her dies out
While fire on her lives
And Roop still cries out
In these voices:
'SATIMATA KI JAI, SATIMATA KI JAI'
The wife is the supreme Goddess
And she shall be treated no less.
The fire is dead
(The fire that begot cold impotent ash)
But the flame burns on.*

The repeated image of a "cold impotent ash" as the only remains of the wife echoes the loss of the young girl's future in 'A Summer Poem', and is a more direct and explicit depiction

¹ I have been unable to track down the source of this poem or verify the poet. Notwithstanding, I found the poem poignant enough to deserve analysis alongside more notable Indian English Poetry.

of patriarchal practices. The conclusion "but the flame burns on" is a reiteration of the persisting nature of female strength and power.

Postcolonial poets, while recognising the significance of religion and God in society, tend to harshly critique blind faith and worship. We see this in Mahapatra's 'Dawn at Puri', which is an ironic commentary on the severity of religion, juxtaposing the grandness of the "Great Temple" to the oppression underlying blind faith, shown through the lost lives of "widowed women" and the persisting poverty in society. Similarly, Kolatkar's 'Jejuri' is a "refusal of the traditional belief in God" (Naik), highlighting similar themes of poverty and oppression. Although not obvious, and perhaps, not even intended, this unique and sensual image of fire is an effective critique of blind faith and religious practices.

The similarity in the titles 'A Summer Poem' and 'Summer in Calcutta' is amusing, but also leads us to an important interpretation of it beyond the shock effect that is produced by contrasting summers with oppressive imagery. The use of 'India' and 'Calcutta' in titles suggest a strongly local geographical or cultural setting, yet unlike many of Mahapatra and Das' poems, the descriptions in these two poems remains fairly universal. While it is true that certain images like those of a mango tree in the former or of a "brides nervous smile" in the latter might be connected to some form of an Indian identity, they are not distinctly so. In contrast to this, poems like Mahapatra's 'Dawn at Puri' or Das' 'The Dance of the Eunuchs' use distinctly Indian images of temples and "Gulmohar trees". Thus the titles and their relation to the poems is important, because while they both set up the

oppression of women in Indian society by establishing the geographical locations, the non-regional words choice also emphasises the considerable universality of problems like sexism. Furthermore, a lack of specificity in naming, particularly in using pronouns and identifiers such as "Dear" in 'Summer in Calcutta' and 'a ten year-old girl' in 'A Summer Poem' instead of names allows for the experience to be connected to women and girls across the nation.

This crucial use of fire to represent the lived experiences of women and their liberation from or systemic discrimination plays into the ability of Indian English poetry to bring "new things and new connections into being" (Chaudhuri, 274). Such imagery shows the expressiveness of the postmodern Indian, one that does not shirk away from the admittance of emotions like lust and desire. As an Indian society, it is one that is yet flawed in its norms and gender roles, but is beginning to take cognisance of these, as well as of the harms of blind religiosity. The identity portrayed by images of fire is best summarised by Das' 'Forest Fire'. The alliterative "forest fire" emphasises Das' all consuming desire that is strong enough to attempt to, at least mentally, break away from the shackles of societal expectations. The jarring imagery of Das spitting out her anger into a baby's pram heightens the anger contained in her fiery rampage. Traditional expectations of love and motherhood are deemed as unfulfilling for Das in this revolutionary confessional, and she destroys them with the power that fire bestows upon her, once again leaving behind Mahapatra's imagery of impotent and unyielding ash. The polysyndeton used in the line "But in me the sights and smells and sounds shall thrive and go on and on and on;"

indicate the everlasting fire that is the spirit of the liberated woman, as seen earlier in 'We are The Domestic Jews'. The ending of the poem borrows images of the eunuchs from her poem 'The Dance of the Eunuchs'. The intertextuality between Indian English poems and those of Das, as well as between Das' own poems indicates a move towards a more unified identity. A glimpse of this is clearly seen in 'Forest Fire', Indian society being encapsulated as an unborn, emerging child from Das' stomach, as if the words she writes and professes are giving birth to an Indian identity. Diverse, inclusive and tolerant, this new identity includes everyone from couples and mothers to "eunuchs" and "cabaret girls". The heavy antithesis obtained by juxtaposing the baby with the old man and the auditory imagery of the "wedding drums" and the "sad songs of love" show the chaotic, yet exhilarating intermingling of the old and new worlds in Das' mind, and thus, in this new Indian society.

Despite this seemingly progressive society, postmodern poets have not forgotten to highlight the vices plaguing individuals and society. Already introduced in 'A Summer Poem', the hunger and poverty of material and mind are important themes in the poems of Mahapatra and Das. Mahapatra's 'Dawn at Puri' and Das' 'The Dance of the Eunuchs' highlight this destitution by juxtaposing it with the indulgences of religion and of human joy respectively.

'Dawn at Puri' shocks the reader at the very start by defying the hopeful image of a new day with the carnivorous imagery of crows and debilitating hunger, exemplified by the transferred epithet "empty country" used to describe the hungry or destitute population. The use of crows echoes 'A

Summer Poem' where a monotonous and unfulfilling life that consumes the young girl is portrayed in the action of combing her mother's hair where "crows of rivalries are quietly nesting." A harbinger of death and ill-omen, the crow is a symbol of destitution. Its use in Das' 'In Love' and 'The Dance of the Eunuchs' in association with harsh and unpleasant sensations. While the "white-clad" widows seem to contrast these black crows, the backdrop of hunger has the effect of emphasising the entrapment of these widows. Enamoured by the temple and religion, their eyes are metaphorically compared to being "caught in a net" that is religion. Their blind faith does not see the leprous, poor people surrounding them. This underlines Mahapatra's harsh critique of religion and devotees who fail the real purpose of religion and humanity, to help the destitute. While in isolation the alliterations like "smoky blaze of a sullen solitary" and "leprous shells leaning" almost add a dreamy languor to the narrative, the interspersions of harsh spondees in "crow noises" and "crouched faces" instead form an urgency of tone that points out flaws in society. In this case then, the alliterations help emphasise important stakeholders in the poem, such as the widows, lepers, and the poet's mother. The idea of the widows and devotees being caught in an inescapable "net" of their religiosity is reminiscent of Mahapatra's 'Hunger', where the fisherman's net catches but worthless froth. In 'Hunger' by selling his daughter's dignity away to the narrator, the net represents oppressions of poverty and a false religiosity that prevent growth and freedom. Underlining the prevalence of poverty by juxtaposing it with the ineffectiveness of corrupt faith is a technique employed by Kolatkar in several poems in 'Jejuri'. Yet, in both 'Jejuri' and poems like 'Hunger' it is evident

that the concept of faith itself is not questioned, but the social construct of it. Unlike metaphysical poetry of the 17th century that centred around the use of conceits to question and then resolve struggles with religion, Indian postcolonial poetry simply makes incisive commentary on the state of religion in society, often in conjunction with other socio-political issues like casteism, sexism, hunger, and poverty.

While Mahapatra uses religion to offset problems of hunger, Das' 'The Dance of the Eunuchs' portrays a realistic representation of the culture and religion of the eunuchs, and passes comments on other issues in the process. Like her other poems, the atmosphere that is set at the start of the poem, one of sweltering, almost oppressive heat, allows for the reader to experience the intensity of emotions felt by the writer and the subjects of the poem. Repetitions like "hot, so hot", and "jingling, jingling, jingling" add to the rhythm of the poem, almost as if it were a beat for the eunuchs to dance to. Beyond establishing rhythm, the reputation once again captivates the reader and in emphasising the atmosphere allows for an all consuming experience. The move from a positive, sensual imagery, to the sight of the true destitution of the eunuchs is heartbreaking in its build-up. Recurring imagery of crows is significant. The silence of the crows, and Das acknowledging the oddity of a crow being silent by starting "Even the crows..." are both indicative of the ill-omen that is the lived reality of these eunuchs and does not need a symbol as a crow to convey it. The songs that the eunuchs sing, of "Lovers dying and or children left unborn," resembles Das' 'Forest Fire' and the losses of women or minorities that are simultaneously melancholic in their alienation and

liberated in their defiance. The idea of hunger here then is both material and human. As human beings, the eunuchs, and other marginalised communities, are rich in their cultures and sentiments, yet deprived from access to basic rights. Their only solace from a life of ostracisation is the ability to express themselves through dance and song, that although may start off exuberantly, inevitably descends into the deplorable conditions that are their reality. Where their little salvation is "a meagre rain," despite a vigorous dance that may symbolise a ritualistic dance praying for rain, we see that society responds to their needs with a similar indifference. Even this insignificant relief is but a "vacant ecstasy," both vacant in the little they gain from it and in that their stomachs remain empty. Explicit images compare their starved, skeletal figures to "half-burnt logs from funeral pyres". This comparison, like the mention of funeral pyres in previously analysed poems, is a strong statement against the much-yearned for salvation that such purification processes bring. By comparing a distinctly negative images to such holy rituals, Das contradicts the existence of organised religion and salvation in a society ridden with devastating hunger and poverty. The hyperbolic association of the eunuchs' starvation to a "drought and rottenness" contained in them allows for the eunuchs to become representative of Indian society as a whole, where problems of destitution are akin to drought, corruption and oppression to rottenness. Once this symbolism is established, it is clear to see how their dance is the dance of India. For all the diversity and vibrance, there exists an overwhelming and pervasive sense of oppression derived from poverty and institutionalised discrimination. It must be considered here that Das as a confessional poet very likely meant this

oppression or emptiness to represent her own experiences. Yet, the universal and hyperbolic imagery and the sexlessness of the eunuchs allow for a more inclusive representation representative of oppressed groups in Indian society. As Arlene R.K. Zide states, "Kamala Das' themes transcend the 'personal' because what she attempts to poetise, is the 'Universal experience' of a woman," (Bhasin et al.) or in this case, of minorities.

Although a narrow selection of poems, the existence of an abundance of intertextuality and allusions between works of the same poets and of different poets crucially allows conclusions to be drawn regarding general sentiments in and of Indian society. This essay has established the importance of fire as a symbol in Indian English poetry, and hunger or poverty as a recurrent theme. These two devices are used generously to underline different characteristics of Indian society, both the positive and the negative. The use of imagery and stylistic devices in commenting on nature of society as growing, yet held back by several institutionalised problems, is essentially a portrayal of the aspects of society that postcolonial poets wished to either nurture or otherwise reject.

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