

Thematic Study of Aju Mukhopadhyay's Poetry

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Abstract

Aju Mukhodhyay is a prominent signature in Indian English literature. He has left indelible impression in each and every genre of writing both in English and Bengali. However, here is an attempt to present his poetry according to different themes; the depth and treatment of ideas and their poetic presentation.

Life and death: Spiritual Connotation

The poem, 'Rowing Still' (21), contrasts the two kinds of living: the one is "rowing towards the ochre gloaming / or in the night with full moon floating" seem things of past, which is illusive. The second one is "rowing in a dinghy / in limpid water blue" that reflects the blue sky with white clouds. It seems real. Here the protagonist can see his face in water. This journey "continues endlessly" amidst "unknown islands" inhabited by "strange faces / sometimes forlorn". In this poem, the protagonist lives in a state of suspense between the state of divine reality and the real existence on this earth that is the tragedy of a modern man.

'Inwardness' (22) reveals a contrast between living and death. The poet opines that with "Fear of the unknown, hope for the future; / Alone yet in company, we live outside." That is how one lives in this world. But "When all cherished guests of life would drop off" that is the rife time, in fact, "impeccable atmosphere serene" and one would think to "be time for going inside." This "going inside" pertains to knowing about oneself or may be the time to revert to the source itself - time appropriate for death.

'Invisible yet Perceptible' (23) anchors on the theme of life and death and quest for uniting with the Almighty – attaining *moksha*. About the life on this earth, the poet thinks: "All the strife and struggle are ephemeral" when one lives on but one's mission remains to realise union with Him and free oneself from the earthly bondages. The poet calls it "a flight eternal" and considers it "a reward for one who believes and relies on grace /of the invisible yet perceptible existence". The Supreme Creator, though invisible, is perceptible in his creation. An individual being a part of the Almighty Himself - *Brahmoasmi*, holds the poet and says: "a spark in the being / is the game of all games". He believes that life and death is "a play between the light and the darkness." Here, the light and the darkness suggest life on this earth and life after death. Thus, it becomes an exposition of life and death.

'Invisibly with Me' (24) is about the air that keeps one alive and which never leaves any person, here the protagonist, at any time. He says: "Flowing in and out of my nostrils / the air as breath" keeps its company with the protagonist and thus "supports me essentially/ to live." Thus, the air that a person breathes in and out keeps one alive.

The air, thus, becomes the life giving energy.

'Do I Walk or I Walk Me?' (25) is about the body and the soul. The protagonist wants to know whether it is the body that moves or there is some other force inside body in a being that makes it capable of performing all bodily activities. The poet believes: "The whole system called I or he or she / is a cosmic reality . . . / unless propelled and guided / by the inner reality?" But this "cosmic reality" cannot "really walk or stalk / unless propelled and guided / by the inner reality". He goes on meditating and wants to know: "Is walking an act of mine / or of the self indwelling?" This poem gives vent to the poet's curiosity to know about the outer and the inner realities that are always with the same person. A living person is a union of the external, manifest self, and the "indwelling self", the indestructible self that inhabits destructible body that impels the body to act. This poem deserves comparison with Sri Aurobindo's poem, 'Is This the End?'

In 'The Inner World' (28), the protagonist thinks that he is an amalgam of the sea, "calm of the forest", "height of the sky", and "The chaos of the city", yet "The bright of the star / Calls me ever / To it". But the "love of the earth and hearth" keeps him attached to them equally . It obliquely suggests that a human being is an amalgam of the five elements - earth, sky, air, water and void - but while living here the individual, forgetting all these, remains attached to what is near - "the earth and hearth".

The protagonist, in 'The Channels of Life' (30), broods over the youth, which was considered "vitally vigorous" already past, his thoughts make him morose about present life. But now is the time that "changes the flow of life" and thinks it wise to flow with the time - "to ride the horse / trotting towards the source" - this "source" is none other than "the vast sea" - The Creator of life. The poet has used sea as a metaphor to connote the unknown life after death to which everyone has to go. As the *Gita* states: **जातस्य हि ध्रुवो मृत्युः ...** (II 27). But before death "if you agree / in sweet harmony" to strive for ending this cycle of birth and death "life becomes secured" in the Ultimate Source having secured *moksha* by one's spiritual deeds in this life ; for this is the life where one can act towards salvation or for His eternal company.

In the poem, 'Act like a Sage' (31), the poet advises the elders not to complain about their geriatric problems: "You were not born as you had wished / so here is nothing to lament about it," live life as it comes. He also exhorts the elderly people to "seek the one you have not sought so far / either the absolute or the details of the matter." The best advice comes when he alludes to Swami Vivekananda: "Better wear out than rust out". Instead of sitting idle and wasting one's life, one should pursue some objective - spiritual or material - and try to realize it with absolute concentration.

In 'Cultivating the Human Being' (36), the poet alludes to Ramprasad, the Kali worshipper, to cultivate "the inner being / shedding all disharmonies". According to him, by doing so "we could become the

life's king." This is how one can raise one's life above the common one. "Flesh trade" has always been the practice, but one, instead of caring for it care for the growth of soul, which he calls "cultivating the inner being". Physical desires push one down the ditch, spiritual aspirations take one to face "the absolute" (31); the choice lies with the individual. 'Deaths before Death' (87) is about the tactfulness of modern man and such a man dies "many times before his [actual] death". Obliquely, the insinuation is for living an upright life.

Woman as a Saviour: An Example of Courage and Sacrifice

The poem, 'A Woman Saviour of Mankind' (13), is about an incident that occurred on April 16, 2014, when a South Korean boat, with 476 passengers on board, was sinking and the crew had also deserted it. In this fatal hour, a 22 year old young woman, Park Ji-young, who worked in a cafe, showed the presence of her mind in such crucial moments of life. She supplied life-jackets to children and "half-dead sea farers", passengers utterly afraid of the impending death. Her motive was to save the lives from the sinking boat. She did not care for her own life. Thus, by helping the deserted in the boat, she saved many lives; she sacrificed her life for them. She met with a watery grave and became the "Igniter of the sacrificial fire / with the fire glowing within her" – a spirit for selfless service. Despite her physical death in this incident of valour that puts many a man to shame, she immortalized herself by performing this sacrifice: "She lives in man's heart for her selfless sacrifice" – and immortalized

herself in the annals of selfless sacrifices ever made by human beings.

Poems on Individuals

The poem/sonnet, entitled 'Sri Aurobindo' (41), begins with Sri Aurobindo's words from his monumental work – *Savitri* – that divinity takes birth "while the wise men talk and sleep" and men only know about this appearance at the appointed hour. In his life, Sri Aurobindo heard "The voice of truth". The poet calls him, "Supramental light", who through his display of the knowledge of truth touched the sky, yet his "foot on earth fixed". The poet uses the simile of "golden swan / Touching the sky" to illustrate Sri Aurobindo's visionary achievements as a seer-poet. He, in his life, remained "peaceful, unhurried and calm with perseverance". He was a true incarnation of God and "his face revealed the eternity / Out of intense love" for mankind. He was, like the *rishis* of yore, an embodiment of great knowledge about truth. The poem 'A Complete Human Being' (44) is another poem about Sri Aurobindo. The poet says: "He was not poet-turned-politician-turned-yogi". He began his life as a revolutionary poet: "a poet, rising up in him was the revolutionary". It was at this stage, "yoga touched him secretly". In his life, "He was poet revolutionary yogi journalist writer and thinker / one rolled into the other inseparably forever", which makes him, according to the poet, a complete human being and he becomes one with the history of time for all times to come. He also wrote on Nelson Mandela and Lord Buddha.

Poems on Nature

'The days pass by' (37) is about the movement of life: "With the quivering Sun on the leaves" and "With many a domestic tale". The poet gives a very original metaphor to "the sun" - "soft footfall"-distancing the insipid routine daily life and time passing silently. It also implies that life is to be lived as it comes without ruminating and bewailing its hurdles and failures. It sings the silence flux of time, very smoothly, but visibly, like one can see in "the ripe golden paddies / And the undulating grass." One can silently, without any movement, stand and observe this movement and be happy and enjoy the Nature's bliss like Wordsworth's 'The Daffodils'.

Poems on Ecology

In 'The Days have passed by' (38), the poet laments the time lived in the past after adopting a positive attitude to life. He makes a jibe at the modern technology thus: "modern hydras are growing up / out of the pristine nature." The poet here compares the modern sky-scrapers developing in the beautiful nature to "Hydra" - a monster from Greek myth. By doing so, he hints at the disastrous development of endless ecological problems. Solution to one problem creates other problems like the cutting of hydra's one head was replaced by two more and which was ultimately slain by Hercules; so, in order to get rid of present ecological problems, the contemporary age also needs someone like Hercules. Here the poet obliquely touches today's indispensable problem of eco-criticism.

In 'Morning' (49), the poet dwells on its freshness, hope, colour and smell - in the

form of beautiful flowers and their aroma. The poet says that "Nothing can be compared to its purity / vibrating with serendipity". Thus morning presents a beautiful picture of the event in reality and its virtues in the poet's imagination. Morning is, indeed, a blessing of freshness compounded with suggestive "life's new phase" that is ever "Resonant, loving, forever beginning." It urges sustainability in hope and anticipation.

Poem about Endless Struggle

The poet details, in 'The Day is Lost in the Shimmering Twilight' (50-51), the evening turning into twilight and then sinking into the night. See, how beautifully the poet describes the fall of night: "the hieroglyphs / of the evening sky in obscure light / pulling the day into its hold aright" and the day is "kept at bay / to be lost forever into the unknown fold". He, then, utters the universal truth: "night and day / are born for a while to pass away" as is human life. Here again the poet introduces Greek myth and alludes to Sisyphus, a king who offended the Greek god Zeus. The God punished Sisyphus to roll a heavy boulder to the top of a hill. In doing so when the boulder would be nearing the top, it would slip down to the bottom and Sisyphus had to try again. It refers to the day ending in evening and again dawning as day and this cycle goes on endlessly like the struggle of Sisyphus.

Platonic Love

'A Fragrance of dried Rose Petals' (39-40) connotes platonic love. The protagonist begins by recalling his love: "You used to come often in the pretext / of doing something or the other" and while sitting

together “lengthening the thread of relationship”, they silently love each other. As they grew in age: “Me in the prime of my youth, you in your teens;” their actions became irrelevant, and the childhood relationship was forgotten in the haze of material involvement: “vanished into the vast world of business!” However, “After long many years”, the protagonist finds her suddenly “coming out of the heaps of oblivion, quite vivid.” Her memory appears to him out of the blue and he feels as if they are once again sitting together as they used to in their childhood. This makes him take in that she has “a permanent place / in my [his] heart’s recess;” despite being distanced by time and space. This memory of childhood love makes him feel like the “fragrance of dried rose petals” and makes him conscious “of the past making an upsurge” - rekindling the fire of love in his heart. There is not even an iota of physical love or carnality in the poem. It becomes a monument of platonic love cherished in one’s heart.

Poems about History

‘Silent Witnesses of the Bygone Ages’ (53-54) dwells on the monuments that remind one of the past histories. The reader, here, comes across Lotus Mahal, “abode of feminine beauties”, Vijaya Vithala temple where “musical chime fills the air”, when struck with 56 pillars of the temple. The Lakshminarasimha temple reminds one of “the story of Ramayana.” Vijayanagara dynasty, which ruled Vijayanagara from 1336 to 1556 C.E. and was later destroyed by the Deccan Sultanate. Lord Virupaksha temple and the ruins at Hampi besides Anjanadri hill, the birth place of Hanuman and the temple devoted to Kodanda Rama,

where Sugriva was crowned after defeating Bali. The poet, nostalgically, laments : “Relics of nothing made by men, of the mythical age, remains” like the line, “Nothing beside remains”, one reads in P.B. Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’, about the mortality of human constructions. The poem concludes with the memorable lines: “The dry and rocky region, with ancient memories is replete / Makes us pine for what is not, makes us nostalgic.” In this poem the poet takes the reader to visit all these places besides telling the myths related to them.

Poems about Exploitation and Misery

The poems – ‘Structural Violence’ (59-60), ‘The Uncivilised’ (61), and ‘The Adivasi’ (62-66) record human misery and exploitation. The first one is about the “Ten proud faces .../ in the slave media” who “exclusively exploit the market”. Here, shall we “Beg on behalf of the poor for their [personal] munificence?” The poet asks with a heavy heart: “Does the whole structure not require / overhauling or demolition with fire / to rebuild a new structure for all?” it expresses a desire for destroying the old worn out social structure and carve a new one conducive to compassionate human life. ‘The Uncivilised’ is about “Uighur, a nomadic pastoral tribe”, in Xinjiang, China. The tribe is being exploited by the “Han Chinese”. They killed its “culture, depopulate, destabilise / the peaceful Tibetan Buddhist race” in China. The killing of Jarawas in Andaman Island decimates the aboriginals. Man has become so greedy that “Wherever minerals, oil or woodland treasures are found / men run to acquire the wealth profound”, which not only leads to the extinction of flora and fauna, but also of

“indigenous people” and nature alike. In this poem, the poet remarks: “civilized people are the most uncivilised.” The third is a long poem running into five pages. In this poem the poet alludes to history how the European voyagers destroyed and exploited the natives in Caribbean Islands, Americas, Australia, and India. In Africa, they branded the aboriginals as slaves with “red-hot iron” on their bare breasts. Now they are being exploited and driven out from their habitats around the world in the name of globalisation. The poet warns such exploiters of men and nature: “Be aware man, awake; Honour Nature / To be honoured by it, to live better.” But will the greedy and amoral man listen to such warnings and mend his ways of exploitation and torture?

On Terrorism and Nuclear Power

‘Terrorism’ (73) puts forth that it “is never rationally fed” - it is always absurd. It is the result of “converted idealism / In murderous passion of a few”. It has neither any relation “to the quest of God” nor any religion. In ‘Nuclear the Evil Force’ (84), the poet, by referring to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Nibakusha, Chernobyl and Fukushima, tries to prove that nuclear power carries “the poison of human weakness” – of showing the user’s power over those who don’t have it and the desire to assert one’s supremacy.

Poems about Varied Themes

‘Krodha’ (85) results from hatred and “is an elementary weakness of man”. The saint/poet advises “to overcome its onslaught” to save oneself from its disastrous effects, because it ultimately leads

to the person’s complete destruction. The scriptures teach:

*krodhadbhavtisammohah
sammohatsmritivibhramah,
smritibhramshadbudhinasho
budhinashatpranashyati.* [Gita II: 63]

Therefore, it is advised that one should keep one’s anger/*krodha* under control. In the poem, ‘Either a Saint or a Ganja Khor’ (86), he makes a dig at the present *Babas* and *shadhus* that one, who does not act according to his “inner call” despite living in the Himalayan caves, is only a “ganja khor / or a culprit, or an escapist.” These *sadhus* are, in fact *swadus* in Kabir’s words:

Sadhu bhukha bhava ka, dhan ka
bhukha nahin;
Dhan ka bhukha jo phire, so to sadhu
nahin. (66)
Righteous man is hungry of feeling,
Hungry of riches he is not;
Hungry of riches one who roams,
Righteous man at all he is not. (Trans.
Karki)

‘The Paper Boat’ (114), is symbolic in tone. The objective that the protagonist had set before him in his childhood by setting his paper boat adrift on the “flooded road” of his life has ultimately reached his doorstep asking him to ride it – to fulfill his childhood promises in elderly life. And, ‘Flower of Future’ (115) aims at blissful future life “In harmony with Nature”. It is a divine purpose on this earth; while mysticism, being of uncertain nature, cannot be construed leading one to a blessed state here. A life lived in harmony with nature on this earth may fulfill the divine purpose.

About Peace

Under such an ambience, the poet, in 'Peace' (76), opines that "Peace is a state of mind, state of being sound". A peaceful environment soothes all human wounds. And, in 'What Peace is Like' (77-78), he reveals: "Peace is love, Peace is smile" and exhorts humanity to "Let the true Peace spread" without any trouble in the world. Peace is the dire need of the day. If the world has to blossom into a flower, conducive to all life on the earth, the denizens of this world have to strive for world peace.

Mystic Experience

His poem, 'The Burning Lamp' (10), is about some mystic experience in which he tells his readers that a lamp was burning steadily to light his dark room, then suddenly "Flowers bloomed of a mystic hue / Radiating my obscure chamber". It all happened so silently that none other could notice it. He beautifully captures the moments of his poetic trance.

'A Presence' (17) is about "a spark of the supreme presence"- *ozāks·fLe Brahmoasmi* - in every human heart. This presence is responsible for saving the world from any catastrophic disaster. This guiding spirit saves "the earth from threats diurnal" – from perpetual threats of complete destruction. It shows that the Eternal Creator controls this cosmos.

The poem, 'The Being' (18), is about "that absolute" which is "the essence of all / beyond any question of rise or fall." It is the One whom the protagonist worships; it is "Vast and limitless". His faith, in this

Supreme Being, is so staunch that he avers to adore "It" till "the last puff of breath" – the last breath – in him. The protagonist tries his best to reach "It" but isn't sure whether he will be able to reach Him or not. He is of the view that if ever he reaches Him – "a Being / overwhelming / beyond all cognition" – it will be his greatest pleasure and that way, he'll be "completing a full circuit." This poem is about the quest of attaining *moksha*. Human soul being a part of the Greater Soul, whom we, the lesser souls worship and pray for attaining salvation from this birth-death-rebirth cycle. It becomes complete when the same soul merges with the Source Soul that is why human soul is often called *Brahmoasmi* – I am *Brahman* by the *jnani*.

In 'Time Whispers in My Ears' (11-12), the protagonist experiences soft rustling sound "over the vast undulating grass", "volcanic eruption at unknown site", "rains and rains in the rain forest", "sibilation of nature's shifting phase;" "while consciousness keeps its progress in everything". Time murmurs in his ears that time past always leaves behind its impact for making living better and it can't be altered according to the wishes of the people. That macro world can be visualized in a micro grain of sand "but the flow of sand is constant", as time flows without any pause. He, like all other seers, realizes that time is ever in flux and "everything passes on for ever." What is present, it'll turn into past the next moment – it is the universal truth and one cannot meddle with it, for it enshrines both beauty and truth (cf. Keats) in it.

Mystifying poem

The last poem, ‘What is Impending?’ (116), the shortest one of the book, is mystic and mysterious in its tone. It has two questions in four lines. The poem reads:

Is it the shadow of a growing dark
cloud
over the pond in a moonless night?
Is it the voiceless echo of a sound
flashed in the dark announcing the
flight?

It is full of contradictions. Does it hint at the impending disaster for humanity or its salvation? One vainly strives to know and

one may remain groping for light “over the pond in a moonless night” or listening to “the voiceless echo of a sound / flashed in the dark announcing a flight”, but to where? It remains a mystery to be decoded.

Conclusion

Mukhopadhyay’s poetry takes into its expanse a wide variety of themes as shown in the study and, thus, offers a pleasant read and makes one enjoy it from one end to the other wondering, pleasing, gazing, and above all learning lessons by taking a dip in his vast learning. There are many other themes that await critics’ attention to explore them in the near future.

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