

Sitakant Mahapatra: Art as a Mudra Negating Darkness

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Abstract

Sitakant Mahapatra, Padma Vibhushan, Jnanpith and Sahitya Academy Awardee, a literary giant from Orissa, India, is deeply concerned about the dehumanization of life in our times and addresses the urgent need for revitalization of thought and the life of here and now. He advocates a return to the roots as Tradition is a song, a winged-word linking past to the present and would provide succour from scientific aridity as well as provide stability to individual psyche and social structure. Art derives spiritual energy from the mythopoeic embedded in tradition, especially of Indian culture. The creative artist must reveal his commitment to universal values which emphasize instinct, imagination and community togetherness. 'Brahman' in the marketplace, the celebration of being in the world in all its hues is Mahapatra's mantra.

Keywords: Tradition, Sacral, Mudra, Communitas, Philosophical aesthetics

Introduction

Beyond The Word: The Multiple Gestures of Tradition, by Sitakant Mahapatra, is concerned with the "commitment to creative experience in literature and art" as the very condition of the survival of art and human civilization (p148, BTW). It examines the value and validity of tradition in providing the channels of a creative dialogue between the artist and society in the context of the 'modern and the 'postmodern'. Tradition, he writes, is "the memory of what has gone before", it is also the Eliotian pastness of the past and its presence; "it speaks through myriad gestures and in different forms " be it literature, painting, music, dance, ideology, the oral traditions, myths or archetypes (p vi, BTW).

Discussion

The author is not so concerned with 'isms' in art; rather he proposes a philosophical aesthetics: "it is basically a question of imagination and the visions of inner space which have inspired all great art at all times"(p.7, BTW). Art is both dream and communication, employing verbal and non-verbal gestures for evoking corresponding perceptions and empathy on the part of the audience. Art and spirituality share an affinity. Spirituality is not restricted to religions but is "the essence of our humanness, of our being human here and now" and "the essence of spirituality in our times is a reverence for life". Art's "spiritual quest is to kindle the imagination" and express our essential humanness. In Indian classical art and folk traditions "art was created for life and its fulfilment. Art was integral to life. It offered wisdom", it celebrated life, was empathetic and exhibited participative togetherness. Since religion has a chequered history, the author posits whether it is "too much to expect that art, in emphasizing the urgency of human renewal, creates a new vision where ethics is transmitted into aesthetics?" (p.29-33, BTW).

As a scholar of social anthropology and an authority on the oral poetry of Indian tribes, he speaks of the social origins of art and its aesthetic dimensions. The "communitarian togetherness" is the hallmark of oral or pre-literate cultural tradition as both the speaker and the listener participate and are knit in a dynamic relationship (p.48, BTW). Whereas writing and printing isolate, the primitive poem- songs of the tribals of Orissa, for instance, are the embodiment of "a total communal activity which is not true of modern poetry" (p.59, BTW). These poem-songs reflect the ethos and values of the tribe and the mythical universe is alive in them. They reveal the intimacy and harmony that exists between man and nature. For instance, the following poem-song tells of the village girl being given away in marriage leaving her village desolate:

"The mahul tree Full of branches and leaves How it made the paddy field look lovely! They are cutting away the mahul tree. You five brothers, save it, save it!" (p.68, BTW)

The tribals revere Mother Earth. They conceive themselves as her integral part and "the Earth itself is celebrated in living"(p.88, BTW). Despite the intense hardship, drudgery and tragedy of their existence, tribal poetry yet reflects a complex sensibility and cultural excellence. The same zest for living is reflected in their carvings on doors, windows, tobacco pouches, paintings on walls, etchings on combs and personal adornments. Thus "art is created as one lives and performs different activities within the community"(p.20, BTW). The tribal or primitive art is participative and integral to the business of living and dying, and gives the individual a sense of belonging and self-fulfilment as a member of their own community. Art and life were not alienated in primitive societies as it is today. Hence the author advocates that "a genuine awareness and growing interest in tribal culture will sustain our commitments to universal values which emphasize community instinct and imagination" and the same can broaden our very conception of art. Words in oral tradition are like gestures conveying meaning with a potent immediacy and a more sensual apprehension of life. Therein lies their continued relevance. The creative artist can draw inspiration and confidence from the primitive sacral world-view, the quest for beauty and holiness.

Since art cannot be isolated from the community it must combine tradition with the contemporary, innovatively. The author states that if modern poetry is to create 'suggestive magic', it must send its roots down to the living warmth of myths and archetypes. Indian poetry, Mahapatra writes, can acquire its authentic voice if it dipped itself in the complex world-view of its traditional and cultural milieu. Since myths and archetypes of the Puranas and the Mahabharata are the living tradition in modern Indian consciousness, the poetry could use this tradition to solve the problem of communication with the audience. These myths and archetypes could be used to give a resonant voice to the present, its metaphysical anguish and the search for meaning. This is amply demonstrated in the poetry of Sitakant Mahapatra, in volumes like *Death of Krishna and Other Poems*, *A Morning of Rain and Other Poems* and *Ashtapadi*. Eliot too used myths and archetypes in *The Waste Land* but they are "more of intellectual decorations than intuitively felt experience" because that traditional milieu was no longer alive (p.94, BTW). But the author is confident that the artist in the poor down-trodden third world will be able to marry city and jungle, to balance dream and reality because he "knows and values the presentness of the past. He knows where the roots are in the dark soils of culture" and call us back to the eternal values of life (p.139, BTW).

The essays in this anthology, *Beyond The Word*, have philosophic underpinning and offer a lot to contemplate on. They foreground the idea of the immense potential of the myriad gestures of tradition in providing the psychological background to the making of suggestive magic in contemporary art and

literature. They are of signal value as they take up the urgent question of the artist's meaningful dialogue with society. The author is in sympathy with Van Gogh's statement which he quotes: 'when you want to grow you must plunge into the earth'.

In the two anthologies, *Death of Krishna and Other Poems* and *A Morning of Rain and Other Poems* the poetic sensibility of Sitakant Mahapatra reveals a reverent openness before life. It is alive to every variety of experience, be it a raucous cockfight, or the enveloping gloom of a morning in the rains. This remarkable range of moods brings with it subtle perceptions into the nature of life. In the simplest of words he has the ability to convey profound truths as in *Autumn Leaf* where he states that the journey of life holds poignant experiences and "colours too are a kind of grief".

Each poem by Sitakant Mahapatra reflects a sense of expanding awareness in its movement towards discovery as the poet attempts to abstract meaning from the concrete details of an experience. Between "the coming and going" of life which might seem like "only an equation in chemistry", there is a search for meaning, a time for poetry, "for the blood to blossom in tumultuous colours" (*Autumn Leaf*). The poems are a series of meditations on the mystery of existence, expressed in imaginative patterns of language with sensory-intellectual complexity:

"At this hour of the clouds dreams float in as lost butterflies; you start up as if from a trance driven by unknown thoughts, iron my clothes, and arrange them on the neat skeleton of a hanger for my next birth."
(*A Morning in the Rains*)

A lingering sense of sadness, of poignance of unfulfilled aspirations, of unrealized dreams prevails in these poems. These poems express a sense of waste, despair, disintegration and alienation of modern life:

"A quarry of lost thoughts and images the island is the dungheap of the age of dead gods and broken idols the unstable still centre of a fading scene that spinning mad reminds us of our 'could have been'." (*Island in the River*)

This "weariness and gloom/of a brief, accursed life" is dramatically presented in *The Ballad of the Beggar Boy* and in *The Song of Jara*. The idea of the incomprehensibility of life, "a purposeless passing dream" ending in death, is again taken up in *The Other View: Yashoda's Soliloquy*:

"I ask: who am I? What are these? What game is it? I cannot comprehend what these things signify."

The idea of death is ever present in the poet's consciousness. What lies beyond death is a dark mystery; perhaps it is the darkness of the soul, the darkness of ignorance. Yet this "agonizing thirst for ceaseless springs" (*A Prayer*) does not lead the poet to transcendental heights. Perhaps it is enough like humble Jara to desire of Krishna that in every age Jara's arrow should deliver the Lord from his own deceit. Though this would cause Jara great agony, yet it would establish a relationship with the Divine.

Although the poet broods on life's sorrow, he is not overwhelmed by the emotion. Grief indeed becomes the creative mainspring. In the poem *For My Little Son, Munu* he exhorts his child to cherish the royal treasures of sorrow. He prefers the "slush, mud, darkness" of human existence rather than become a "sage or god". He further exhorts his son not to scoop out the ground soil of pain and suffering:

"For then, the glorious, the unforgettable Lotus of Sorrow Will never flower again."

The impulse to create is strong, as is evidenced in poems like *The Poet in Silence*, *Words*, *Saura Icon* where disparate even contradictory experiences are wrought into life's complex fabric.

The traditional and the modern coexist in the poet's consciousness to give us what T.S. Eliot calls "a sense of the timeless as well as the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together" in poems which deal with Indian mythology, legend and belief, for example, *The Song of Jara*, *The Other View: Yashoda's Soliloquy*, *The Song of Kubja*, *Driftwood*. In *Death of Krishna*, he draws material from mythology to comment on modern consciousness. The elaborate "ancient rituals" of mourning on the death of Krishna are in stark contrast to the modern indifferent, matter-of-fact attitude to death when a hurriedly convened condolence meeting and declaration of another public holiday seem sufficient expression of grief. In poems like *East*, *Grandmother*, *Father*, the poet presents vignettes of rural life steeped in traditional richness. These have a native earthiness which makes his poetry rich and evocative.

The poems in these two volumes are testimony to Sitakant Mahapatra's power of sensitive cognition and concentration and are marked by a sincerity and quiet dignity that underscore the act of the mind in creative contemplation.

Conclusion

In the prevailing scenario of war, chaos and self-destructive energies loosed upon the world, together with market forces which dictate the production of Art there is a loss of authentic response to life. The artist must baptize himself in the sacred spring, the elemental force, the spiritual that tells us again and again that we are human beings. The creative artist must continue to dream and to sing till the song is "immaculate with eternity" as Mahapatra writes in *The Mist*, and it engenders "the red wheat-ear of resurrection.... and recover/ the spring that tells us we are men" (BTW16:Paz p.29).

Sitakant Mahapatra avers that Art is the "mudra or gesture" of "saying no to the darkness of today" (p.3, BTW).

References:

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