

Facets of River in the Select Indian English Poetry

Disha Chhatbar

Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies, Saurashtra University

Abstract— River is represented in different ways by the poets. In Eastern religions, it is seen with high regards; it is worshiped and admired by the poets in their religious verses which can be understood by the hymns written on the rivers like Ganga and Yamuna in Sanskrit. They are sung by the priest of the temples at the time of evening. They are often the songs of praise which show human inclination towards these rivers that they consider as their ‘mother’. In the modern time too, poets writing in English in India have paid attention to this life giving element and have written poems on rivers. In this paper, the poems written on the rivers of North India, South India, and North East India by the poets like A.K. Ramanujan, A.K. Mehrotra, Mamang Dai and Alka Tyagi belonging to these regions are taken into consideration to understand the ways poets perceive rivers in India and the way they represent the picture of Indian rivers and human connection with them. They bring into attention the religious, political, cultural, aesthetic and spiritual aspect connected with the river in Indian society. Their poems show the importance of rivers in any civilization, culture while showing their state in the current time as well.

Index Terms— Indian Poetry, Realism, Religion, River, Spirituality

I. INTRODUCTION

Human affinities with the rivers have a long history. Civilization has developed at the banks of rivers and it sustains on them too. In India the river is called ‘mother’ which shows the bond Indians share with them. Rivers have myths about their origin and they are personified as well. They are seen as holy beings, have religious and mythological aspects associated with them and people worship them in India. These cultural and religious ideas connected with the rivers have led to the making of tourist places at the banks of rivers which has led to their pollution. While writing on the rivers, Indian poets bring into attention the human bond with it, their acts of destruction of their ‘mother’, the power of river to create and to destroy the world and human indebtedness to the rivers. In this paper, the poems by modern Indian poets are taken

into consideration in order to understand the ways in which rivers are represented. For this purpose, the poems by A.K. Ramanujan, Mamang Dai, Alka Tyagi and A.K. Mehrotra are taken into consideration.

II. REPRESENTATION OF RIVERS IN THE SELECT INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY

Nature is represented in the poetry in different ways by the poets that may include romantic way of dealing with nature, philosophizing on nature, musing over it and representing the real picture of it. Indian poets have presented rivers with the spiritual, ecological, religious, realistic and philosophical insights in their poetry.

One of these ways to present the river in the poem is to talk about it in the context of human life and in the context of civilization that has developed at its banks. It is seen in the poem by Mamang Dai. She is a poetess from Arunachal Pradesh and her poems reveal nature at her hometown, modernization there and myths of her culture. In the poem ‘Small Towns and the River’, Mamang Dai brings into attention the idea of immortality associated with the river and the development of small towns at the bank of it. As she points out in an interview, the poem has a backdrop of the death of her aunt. About the beginning of the poem where she associates small towns with the death, she says, “The place is my hometown, Pasighat. My mother’s younger sister had passed away in a clinic in New Delhi and her body was being brought home. It was a sad gathering, deeply mourned, because my aunt was beautiful and loved, and she died young.” (Sarangi 3)

While she associates the small towns, where things are static in every season, she says, “The river has a soul” (Dai). River is seen as a living being in the town, having soul in it in the poem where the poet says, “Small towns always remind me of death” (Dai). The association of death with the town and soul with the river can be seen in as representing the eternity that the

river or nature as a whole for which it stands can have and the mortality that the town or any manmade object has. The death here is a symbolic death because of the sameness that the town has. It should be noted that the change in the town is generally slower than the cities which might be the reason that the poetess associates the sameness with the town. With this symbolic death, the Mamang Dai also talks about the real death of a person and the grief of the people on it. After mentioning of the deaths, the poet brings the idea of river which has soul in it. The changeless thing is associated with death in the poem and the changing nature of river can stand for the liveliness in it. The poet represents river as a knowing being.

She ends the poem with the mention of the development of the small towns at the river banks which has happened from the beginning of the civilization and the spiritual or religious mindset of the people living in such towns is also revealed at the end of the poem by stating, "In small towns by the river/ we all want to walk with the gods." (Dai) Thus, the poet philosophizes on the life and death; the liveliness and the deadliness by the use of river in the poem.

While in this poem, in this poem the river is used as a tool to talk about mortality and immortality and natural and manmade, the poem by A.K. Mehrotra makes the river speaker of the poem to convey the powers it can have. The poet makes Ganga the speaker of the poem. The river talks about itself in the poem titled, 'Songs of Ganga'. Ganga is considered a holy river in India and it is said to have the power to purify human beings by erasing the sins they have committed in their life. In the poem by A.K. Mehrotra, Ganga speaks about what it is and what it can do or what it does. The poem is divided into four parts and the poet brings into attention constructive and destructive aspects connected with the river, particularly Ganga in this poem.

In the first part the poem it says, "I am Ganga" (Mehrotra 16) and talks about its journey from the mountain where it is in the form of snow to the land where it has created the forms like plain. The river identifies itself with everything that contains water as an element in the making of it like "the plains" (Mehrotra 16) and the "foothills" (Mehrotra 16) The river is also a "bridge"(Mehrotra 16) which shows how the river connects two civilizations. It claims itself to be "the fort and the archer/ Taking aim" (Mehrotra 16) mention of which suggests the

destructive power of the Ganga after which the poet writes that it can "give life and take it back" (Mehrotra 16)

It is said to be "the nations, cities and people" (Mehrotra 17) indicating their identity created by the Ganga. It is "an unbound book". It is made up of the several streams like the book created by several pages but unlike book, it is not bounded.

The river says, "I reflect all movements" (Mehrotra 16) which may signify the reflections found in the river and which may also show how the impact of every activity is found on the river. The power of it is unchallengeable which can be understood by the line, "I made two lines in the sand/ And say they are unbreakable walls". (Mehrotra 18)

The fourth part is about the learning of river from other natural elements where the poet mentions about learning from the sea which is related to the "unprejudiced" view and learning from the smoke to disappear which may indicate the flowing characteristic of the river where it is not the same at anytime and it disappears from that place as soon as it reaches there. The poem ends with the lines,

I am a beggar

I am a clown

And I am shadowless (Mehrotra 19)

Though these lines are obscure in the comparison it does, it can be said that by such comparisons poet tries to convey the equal treatment that Ganga does to everyone. Thus, it shows what the river is and what it does where the poet has employed metaphors to show the omnipresence of the Ganga. The poet focuses on both the destructive and constructive aspects of it which are declared by the Ganga itself.

The culture and the civilization developed at the bank of Ganga are taken as a subject matter by Alka Tyagi in her poem 'Whispers at the Ganga Ghat' in which she portrays the people at Ganga Ghat. In the beginning of the poem, the poetess says that there is silence at Ganga Ghat and there is presence of sadhu who is reading "Four chapters on Freedom". The poetess writes, "World passes by/ Ganga moves/ I breathe" (Tyagi 51). The Ganga helps the people to earn their bread for which the poet mentions the boat and its owner who "earns his daily bread" from the river. The waves of the river are seen as having virtues in it and the poetess says that they are "Soaked in Satoguna" (Tyagi 51) which, as the footnotes to this poem says, is "the virtue as well as the state of being balanced".

The cobbler working at the banks of river is also mentioned and he is singing the lines, "Hare Rama Hare Rama/ Rama Rama Hare Hare" (Tyagi 51) which creates a religious background in the poem. The poet also attacks the people who have polluted the river. She says,

My own brothers and sisters

Suffocate my mother

They throw plastic into Ganga Ma (Tyagi 52)

Thus, Alka Tyagi shows the awareness of the pollution of river by human beings. She also mentions the taking of bath by the women in the river where she calls them as "Mothers- Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati" (Tyagi 52)

A similar scene is witnessed by Mary Oliver which she describes in her poem 'Varanasi' but she witnesses it with her "Western mind" (Oliver 77) and portrays the scene objectively while simultaneously considering the religious aspect of the Ganga in her poem. She does not get attached with it and looks at the women in Ganga with a disenchanted view. Her poem too reveals the religious connotations attached with Ganga such as its being the river of Shiva and the act of taking the holy water from the river to their homes.

While these poems show the river with the imaginative touch, connecting it with the spiritual, cultural aspect of it, A.K.Ramanujan points out the situation of the river with the realistic aspect given to it. In the poem 'A River' he talks about rivers in Madurai in the time of summer when the river is dry and it reveals the waste poured into it by the people which blocks the flow of the river. The poet also mentions the situation of the river bridge which is repaired many times. In the time of summer, the buffaloes rest in the river and the wet stones are also visible. As the poet indicates, such situation of the river is ignored by the poets and they only talk about the flood in it. He criticizes the poet who was there only to witness the flood in the village when people talked about the rising level of the water and the destruction made by the flood in the village and with the mention of a pregnant woman carried away by the water, the poet criticizes the way the sympathy is gained by such writings. The poet also says that this tendency is carried forward by the poets of the next generation to talk about the flood in the river and the poets have not moved further yet which can be inferred by the mention of the lady who might have a twins to give a birth to and who was carried off by the flood which is not mentioned by the poets of new generation. The poet points out the reality of the

river by mentioning that this poet thinks that "the river has water enough/to be poetic/about only once a year" (Ramanujan) and then it brings disaster to the land it flows on. The poet mentions of the houses, the cows and a pregnant woman carried away by the flood thrice in the poem in which he adds only in the aspect of a pregnant woman where at last he mentions that the twins were identical and the other two things are mentioned as it is three times which shows the lack of things to be talked about by the poets even in the context of the flood, the aspect which the poets deal with frequently ignoring the other side of it, the situation of the river in summer.

III. CONCLUSION

Thus, from 20th century many poets from India have written about rivers in different ways which show impact of their locale, their occupation and culture in their perspective to look at the river, i.e. Alka Tyagi being connected with practice of Yoga and teaching of Upanishads conveys the image of river with those insights, A.K. Ramanujan and Mamang Dai talks of rivers and people of their region. Indian poets while considering the mesmerizing power that rivers have also take into consideration the destructive power it has as can be seen in the select poems of A.K. Ramanujan and A.K. Mehrotra which also reminds one of the poems by Keats who also present the destructive power of nature in his poetry. The Indian poets also show the awareness about the human destruction of the rivers that they consider as their 'mother' and also show how religious aspects associated with the natural thing harms the environment which can be seen in the poems by Alka Tyagi. A.K. Ramanujan attacks poets for ignoring this reality and mentions the damage done to the rivers in the modern time. Thus, the religious, cultural, spiritual and realistic aspects connected with the river is presented by the select poems in which river works as a way to convey philosophy of human life, as a refuge from the sorrows of the world, as a preserver and a destroyer of the world and as it really is in the modern time of technological development.

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