

Humanitarian Perspectives in the Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra, Kamla Das and Nissim Ezekiel

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Abstract

Indian English poetry is an attempt to give an expression to humanitarian perspective inherent in Indian culture and tradition, may it be early poetry, post independence poetry or modern poetry. Most of the poets, being Indian in origin and under the long sustained impact of British rule and slavery, do emphatically reveal their humanitarian approach and their poetry becomes a vehicle of propagating their perspectives. Some of the poems of Jayanta Mahapatra, Kamala Das and Nissim Ezekiel stand separately. Their creative urge finds expression in their practice, thought and imagery. Jayanta Mahapatra like a conscious observer of society, of tradition, and of changing human world of fragmentation with a humanitarian approach. Nissim Ezekiel depicts urban landscape employing irony and wit to expose the various ugly aspects of city life with its squalid surroundings, slums, loneliness, neurosis and frustration and Kamala Das is a feminist of Indian brand and is concerned with identity of women. She deals with issues of women in Indian society and their stereotype condition. As a true humanitarian her heart and mind go for the welfare of women.

This paper aims at exploring the humanitarian perspectives in the poems of the select poets.

KEYWORDS: Humanitarian, stereotype, fragmentation, globalization, consumerism, hypocrisy and pretensions etc.

Indian English poetry is an attempt to give an expression to humanitarian perspective inherent in Indian culture and tradition, may it be early poetry, post independence poetry or modern poetry. Most of the poets, being Indian in origin and under the long sustained impact of British rule and slavery, do emphatically reveal their humanitarian approach and their poetry become a vehicle of propagating their perspectives. The poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra, Kamala Das and Nissim Ezekiel stand separately. Their creative urge finds expression in their practice, thought and imagery. Prof. Shrinivas Iyengar rightly pointed out that Indian writing in English is a novel experiment in creative transformation when he said, 'To be Indian in thought and feelings and emotion and experience, yet also to court the graces and submit to the discipline of English for expression' is something that the present writers aim at. The post Independence Indian English verse has gained in both strength and variety an appreciable position. It has been said that it is Indian in sensibility and context and Indian English, if we choose to call it so, in language. It is rooted in and stems out from the India.

As for as humanitarianism is concerned it is an active belief in the value of human life, whereby humans practice benevolent treatment and provide assistance to other humans, in order to better humanity for moral, altruistic and logical reasons. It is the philosophical belief in movement toward the improvement of the human race in a variety of areas, used to describe a wide number of activities relating specifically to human welfare. Many of the Indian poets have been humanitarian. Jayanta

Mahapatra's poem 'Hunger' could be taken as one of the best examples of this approach along with several poems of Nissim Ezekiel and Kamala Das.

To begin with, Jayanta Mahapatra (1928) needs no specific introduction today; he is undoubtedly the torchbearer of modern Indian English poetry. He has provided a quite matured connotation of modern Indian 'life' through his poems and thus made a legacy. Jayanta Mahapatra is a conscious observer of society, of tradition, and of changing human behavior in a fragmented world. He projects the consequences of globalization, consumerism, western science and philosophy on social construct and value system of India. Apart from the western influences, Indian political system and caste as well as class discrimination have laid a crucial impact on the social construct initiating a search for identity. In his poems, there is a prevailing note of irony and melancholy which reminds us of metaphysical deviation from our existential root. Mahapatra portrays the facts related to sacred soil of Orissa, the reality that he perceives around society. But his observation does not confine to or represent only Orissa; his poetry represents the changing perspectives of modern Indian society. His poetry provides a precise concept of the psychology of modern man who emphasizes more on the westernization than on traditional values of their own. He juxtaposes tradition and modernity and thereby demonstrates a contrasting picture of sordid civilization. This particularly reveals his concern for human welfare and compels us to look for the humanitarian perspective. His poem, 'Hunger' is most representative of his poems. Here he wants to improve the human condition from penury of the girl and her father, who are ready to sell her 'body' in order to feed them. He paints a very striking picture of human condition which demands welfare and humanitarian change. One is ready to sell herself to satisfy basic need of food and another wants to satisfy his sexual hunger. The fisherman then reveals that his daughter has just turned fifteen and the readers realize that the girl he was talking about is his daughter. He asks the poet to 'feel' her. Here 'feel' refers to the fulfillment of his sexual desires. The poet is shocked with the truth and sees through the fisherman's wife. He is a father who is using his daughter's body to earn money for food. The poet looks at the young girl, who is 'long and lean', her age can be easily judged by her cold rubber-like skin and she looked malnourished. When she opened her 'wormy' thin legs wide, as if ready to serve as a sexual slave, the poet felt the hunger, the hunger for food which drove this father-daughter into this business.

"I heard him say: My daughter,
She's just turned fifteen...
Feel her. I'll be back soon,
Your bus leaves at nine.
The sky fell on me, and a father's exhausted wife.
Long and lean, her years were cold as rubber.
She opened her wormy legs wide.
I felt the hunger there,
The other one, the fish slithering, turning inside

It is a poem of 1979. It was a time when there the socio-economic condition of India was fully undergone of the British. Although they had gone but the India then still not fully independent as well. After 200 years of dependent India was suffering from lack of stability –economically politically and socially. The poet's heart aches for those who are in utter poverty.

Nissim Ezekiel is another humanitarian and one of the most popular and eminent Indian poets of the Post-Independence Era. Unlike the earlier poets, he is a poet of

urban landscape employing irony and wit to expose the various ugly aspects of city life with its squalid surroundings, slums, loneliness, neurosis and frustration. The city is “**a living hell**” and “**Like a passion burns.**” Unlike Baudelaire’s dry self-lacerating despair, Ezekiel is sympathetic but scrutinizing. He loves the city despite its ugliness and thus adopts a paradoxical approach bringing together contrary attitudes and harmonizing them.

In the poem “**Island**” he frankly confesses though Bombay is a pleasure island of “slums and skyscrapers”.

*“I cannot leave the island
I was born here and belong
Even now a host of miracles
Hurries me to daily business——”*

As a typical Indian Poet, he vividly portrays the sufferings and problems of the common people. In “**India**” and “**Entertainment**” the poverty of people is movingly pictures.

As a poet of human relations Ezekiel raises or sublimates the common place and ordinary lives and incidents to the level of highest poetry. In “**Night of the Scorpion**” he juxtaposes in an effective way the various responses of typical Indian villagers restricted by their superstitions and belief in destiny. In “**Boss**” the mechanical life of a big official is described in terms of mechanical objects. In “**The Truth about Dhanya**” a typical Indian Beggar is portrayed.

*“His old skin/is like the ground
on which he sleeps/
So, also his rags.”*

The great human agony, the official indifference and apathy for the victims of the flood are highlighted with a touch of satire in “**The Truth about the Floods**”. Ezekiel’s most famous volume of poems. “**The Unfinished Man**” reveals him as a great poet of human relations and humanitarian perspectives. In “A poem of Dedication”, which may be regarded as the poet’s manifesto, he expresses his modest objectives without aspiring for God-Like super human powers.

*“I do not want the Yogi’s concentration
I do not want the perfect charity
Of saints or the tyrant’s endless power
I want a human balance humanly
Acquired fruitfully.”*

The poet expresses his aversion for hypocrisy and pretensions in every field including religion and poetry. In “**Rural Site**” the exploitation of superstitious villagers is depicted. The hypocrisy of Indian gurus and Saints is revealed in “**Guru**”. In “**The Visitor**” the poet ridicules the Indian Superstition about the cawing of the crow and drives home the truth that miracles do not take place in real word. His disgust for dull and stupid conversation of the so-called polite society without genuine feeling is clearly brought out in poems like “**Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.**” He denounces mass civilization and regrets for the loss of minority and folk cultures with their unique and distinct features.

Kamala Das is a feminist of Indian brand and is concerned with identity of women. She deals with issues of women in Indian society and their stereotype condition. As a true humanitarian her heart and mind go for the welfare of women. Her poetry presents the view that both man and woman are complementary to each other. She does not hate man as such but she hates the manmade system as well as

exploitation, subjugation in the name of social harmony. Her poetry may be labeled as the poetry of protest. But it is true that under the very cover of her being feminist lays her humanitarianism. Her humanism is for the welfare of women, important strata of society.

Her protest is against the injustice to which woman in India has been subjected. She has attracted international attention by virtue of her bold and uninhibited articulation of feminine urge along with other women poets like – Gauri Deshpande, Mamta Kalia etc. She has written some books of poems, i.e. ‘Summer in Calcutta’. Her poetry is a protest against male-dominated society, patriarchal system, discrimination, and exploitation. Her poetry is replete with pain and protest. Her protest against the way she is treated by her husband and other sexual partners are strong arguments in support of the rights of women. Her feminine sensibility is the governing and motivating force in her poetry.

Srinivas Iyengar writes –

“Kamala Das is a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an intensive, largely, man-made world.”

Mrs. Das presents a feminist movement through her poetry. She discovers the male supremacy from the inner core of her feminine consciousness. Mrs. Das personality has its irreparable anchors in sexual love and when it is refused, she feels her life meaningless, barren and waste land, she bursts out in the poem “The Suicide”:

*“O Sea, I am fed up,
I want to be simple,
I want to be loved.
If love is not to be had,
I want to be dead.”*

In the poems, which express Das’ strong dissatisfaction with her married life, she has protested against passivity and timidity of the Indian women and against her subservience to her husband. In her poem ‘Glass’ she complains that a man wanting to perform the sex form act with her had drawn her towards himself rudely.

One significant part of the strength of Das’ exploration of the life of a woman is that it articulates the dilemmas faced by the feminine consciousness. In ‘**An introduction**’, she is concerned with the question of human identity.

She protests against the general expectation that she should play a socially determined stereotyped role.

*“Be any or be Kamala, or better
still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to choose a name, a role
Don’t play pretending games”.*

In “my Grandmother’s House”, she presents the plight of female. She is expected to play certain conventional roles and her own wishes and desires are not taken account. She determines that her condition is like “**a brooding dog**” sitting near the bed of his master. She has become a servant and beggar in her own house.

My way and beg now at stranger’s door to receive love, at least in small changes?

In her poem “**The stone Age**”, she laments the loss of her identity through marriage. In the freaks, she says that although she and her husband lived together for a long time, but they failed in love as a result her heart has become an empty place. She says:

“Who can help us who have lived long so and have failed in love? The heart, An empty listen, waiting through long hours, fills itself with willing snakes of silence”.

In the freaks, she says that although she and her husband lived together for a long time, but they failed in love and as a result her heart has become an empty eastern. She is bound to lead a double life in order to show that she is normal.

So, her marriage proved as a failure because her husband treated her merely as a means of providing him with sexual qualification. There was no real love between them. Her husband could not think beyond flesh.

In her poem “**The Looking Glass**”, she describes her situation as under:

*‘Beneath your monstrous age, I ate the magic loaf
And become a dwarf- I lost my will and reason’.*

Kamala Das is a forceful and vehement feminist. She is a spokesman of the rights of woman. At the time, Kamala wrote her poetry, the Indian woman was subservient to her parents or her husband; and at that time, the question of having extra-marital relationship did not arise at all she was among the foremost woman to claim such freedom. She was one of the very few who attained this freedom and exercised it to the fullest possible extent.

Her feminism is of new kind. She refers her theory of Oedipus complex and Psychoanalytical History of Freud. She confesses that she was deprived of paternal love. In her poem “**Next to Indian Gandhi**”, She says to her father.

*“I ask you without fear
Did you want me
Did you ever want a daughter?”*

Therefore, Kamala Das is the real voice of true feminism and a real feminist of Indian sense. So she is undoubtedly a feminist voice articulating the hopes and oppressions, the concerns and tensions of womankind. Her poetic voice imbued with a feminine cum feminist sensibility is typically her own and it can't be confused with that of anyone else.

To sum up, the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra and his treatment of poor people and their sensibility Nissim Ezekiel's typical delineation of urban people, superstition, traditions and the and Kamala Das's feminist sensibility show all the typical features of humanitarian perspective in thematic variety, use of symbolism, awareness of social and human problems, depiction of common people, portrayal of colorful and varied cultures, religions and professions, sense of alienation and search for identity along with satirical and witty remarks on drawbacks in society with sincere presentation of problems and views on human relationships and interests with a sympathetic and harmonizing outlook. But, like a typical Indian Poet with a universal vision, they all sincerely pray for doing good to human beings.

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