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Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Manohar Shetty's Animal Poems: A Critical Study

Shahaji Mastud

In the present research paper an attempt is made to explore the animal world depicted in the poems of Manohar Shetty's three collections : *A Guarded Space*, *Borrowed Time* and *Domestic Creatures*. This critical appraisal of his poems will unfold the deeper meaning of the animal world steeped in Shetty's psyche. Poetry from the perspective of Manohar Shetty is the art of telling details coiled around a central core of memory and emotion. This poet does not take refuge in huge, all meaning ambiguity and rhetoric. His art is exact. Creatures, from the spider to the king cobra to a peacock startlingly observed in Shetty's poetic world. The following interpretations of his selected animal poems rightly reveals the animal world.

The poem "Scarecrow" opens with scarecrow's tragic predicament. The poem being an interior monologue reveals the inner movement of consciousness in the mind of character that resides in his private world. The opening line makes scarecrow's pathetic situation picturesquely.

"All the creatures great and small make
Hay in the sunshine of my straw hair"

Though the scarecrow is made to create fear for animal in the field, the animals great and small make hay in his hair of straw, without any fear. Bandicoot nibbled at his bamboo feet where the other stray animal lifts their hind leg. The panther's eyes are full of envy. Yet scarecrow is in the field at his master's behest for protection of his master's field.

The field is full of cane and paddy, which bend with the wind's wish but scarecrow standstill without any fear. Though the moon beams his shadow as a cross and his arms of stick and sackcloth hung over the battle scared fields. The second stanza presented the various animal in the field.

"The owl sways past with a white mouse.
The bandicoot rakes through a quill.
The panther swivels from the cane,
Ignition of the hunt in its eye."

The owl sways with a white mouse in his mouth. The bandicoot swings freely on the pole. Panther wandered through cane field, with ignited eyes in search of hunt. On the other hand, the fox's teeth glisten with saliva in his mouth. In the distant grass he can hear, the hunger of the mongoose. The fur of the mongoose erect as quills. In his frenzied shadow the king cobra open its mouth like an explosion. The horror is heightened when we look at these images.

In last stanza, the scarecrow reveals his mental condition. His external is made of bamboo, straw, stick and sackcloth but his inner self is presented through series of images. The poem consists of a series of images, presenting the animal environment of which scarecrow is a part and other revealing his degenerated character.

"Dawn brings the prattle of sparrows,
Tame fowl and Calf in the yard,
The hollow ring from the temple,
But the long night is never over."

This overwhelming question is one of commitment. The question is far from articulated "But the long night is never over". Though dawn bring the prattle of sparrows, the tame fowl and calf playing in the yard. He can hear the hollow ring from the temple but the long night is never over. In this way, the scorpion buried himself in the scorched earth and unfolds a heraldic emblem at his master's foot. That is the sign of new dawn unfolded under the master's foot.

Scarecrow is a image of human being made to make fear to animal but unfortunately the scarecrow himself became very coward among the animals. First time, Shetty has explained horror and tension in his poem. This is poem of vivid metaphor extending into the real world, mirroring through unique angles the violence and tension in our everyday lives.

"Peacock" is one of the animal poems in Manohar Shetty's third collection of poems, *Domestic Creatures*. The poem is startling observation of the peacock. The poet observes both male and femaleness qualities in peacock. It is fine example of his picturesque quality of poem. It creates the glimps of both male and female side of peacock. He describes the peacock as:

"Its flaming fan fail of monocled
Monogrammes out sparkled
Rose, marigold, zinnia, its perfect
Extravagance of poise and color
Invoking back a subverted anima"

In second stanza, poet explains another side of peacock. It takes a fixing of vision to look beyond sheer sight. The rainbows of his wings are display of grace and shade in the palace grounds. He makes a strange gawky cockle and its beak was a full grown krait. Its claw and beak poked very deliciously. The plumed crown tossed like curls. It plucked out its eyes and triumphantly it stared towards poet with both defense and pride. In final lines poet shows clear picture of peacock as :

"This and rogyous bird of prey sprayed by jets of sunlight claws like
stiletto heels at rest on its conquest."

"Fireflies", is poem about childhood memories of trapping and caging fireflies. This introduces several of Shetty's main themes, including the problem of growing up and the contrast between the attractiveness of the outside world and its reality when seen closely and the way that routines of adult life kill their spontaneity. Memories of past experience are brought into the present to become the subject for reflection. The child's cruelty towards the firefly is innocent as the child is only aware of a desired attractiveness. The adult, knowing that caged into a routine made necessary by the economics of survival, no longer is innocent and less himself in the trapped insects;

"I felt nothing then,
Only a small pang for the loss
Of a schoolboy's ornament.
But now, traveling my daily groove
In the hunt for food and habitat
I remember their trapped blank lights.

"Shetty's fireflies are the nightingales of disillusioned experience, observed closely they are found disappointing insects that soon die".¹ But they represent the active, attractive, free, natural world of childhood. With the shift from child to adulthood the hunt changes from youthful illusions of 'emerald embers', to learning the reality that attracted is merely an

insect and life will not consist of a deadening routine. Fireflies is unusual in that the child, though innocent, is a hunter and the child's hunt un-necessarily kills what is attractive. Youth in Shetty's poem is not joyful.

The poem "Wounds" describes a wounded bird (torn wing) that had made in the poet's house its home for a year. The poet curiously observed that each night the scattered grains had gone. The effect of this co-living of the poet and the bird is positive, soon the bird became a friend and its murmuring is found rhythmic by the poet.

"Its dribbling descents intruded on my
Avian dreams : birds perched
On my shoulders, birds feeding out of my hand,
And skirring about in a cold."

However, this harmonious living did not last for long time. Soon, the bird died of uncertain reason. The death of the bird heralded the disappearance of the creative energy and harmony. The poet is left with empty mind---

"Now several nights, have passed,
And I have no dreams at all."

The poet perhaps wants to suggest the harmonious co-existence between human and non-human being is beneficial to both. It is congenial to creativity. Shetty's descriptive power ascends to the top of his art. The poems present a new perspective on these creatures. They are thumbnail drawings of these creatures. Shetty skillfully manages to lift them to unbearably beautiful level of expressiveness. What is particularly remarkable is the humility of the poet's vision.

The similarity between the human world and the animal world is the subject of "Bread and Fishes". Here, however, the closed space is not 'glass bottle' but the well. The poet shows an awareness of killing competition in life, as he did it in fireflies (hunt for food and habitat). As soon as lumps of bread are thrown into the water, 'Glum-faced fish' snaps the 'sinking prey' and 're-enters fray.'

The poet divides these fishes in the well into three categories - similar to that are found in human beings - the younger, who are taking training and have not yet entered into the competition, the middle-sized, who are real runners and the fat fishes, the settled for whom no competition exists. It is, however, only the middle-sized who compete. Since they hold the capacity to fight and win. The poet's attitude to life is of that a distant observer. He looks at it with a smile on his face. The analogy to real life becomes explicit in the last stanza,

"The younger ones revel
In a little school by themselves
The fat old fish slumber at the side
Like elderly men in armchairs or satisfied businessmen."

The tone is formal. The poet tells harsh reality of life without anguish. Each stanza of the poem gradually leads to the fact that struggle for existence is inevitable.

The poem "Game" describes 'diamond-faced' praying mantis in posture of preying. The poet comes across it accidentally. He is foraging the lost ball when he sees it 'motionless

double', 'masked against darting tongues'. The game indicates here two types of meaning - the game of prey and the game of baseball (fouls). The poet says :

"Ball under my arm, I thought
Of mud-slinging boots,
Fouls, snarls, heads used
Like walls, the tangled
Race towards a goal."

The race of baseball players and the race of preying mantis both are 'the tangled race'. The goal of the sport and the goal of the prey are allied. The path of both was through chase and fray.

"Forshadows" is a more mature reproduction of his pet theme - the co-mingling of the human and the animal world. In this single stanza poem, We find the poet narrator waiting for his beloved. But during these inactive moments of waiting, the poet-persona uses his hands to create shadow - images of animals on the wall.

"I watch a deep forest rise from my hand
On the green glowing wall
My looped thumb and fingers
Transfer a pensive fawn
Two flat palms part
And a bored crocodile yawns"

Here human world is not seen as one having similarities with the animal world but natural extension of the other. The forest rises from the human hands and is cast artistically on the walls of a dimly lit room are projections of a complex human mind, a mind where the animal and the human can not be severed. This idea of what could go through a bored human mind is tackled in the poem 'Bored' and if one were to connect these two poems then there is amusing implications that there is no difference between a lover waiting for his woman and a person who is 'bored', utterly bored'. The poet writes ,

"My bored mind invites things
I had shut out, the squeal and plop
Of a run over pup, a baby
Sparrow I once stepped upon "

They were devil's workshop in these lines which move from the yet pathetic human images to the hypocritical human society and conclude by bringing the two worlds together.

"My mind opens a drain
For white mice to ferret
Around in sewage."

As the beloved enters, the pinning restlessness of a traditional lover is swept aside by the urgent beastality of a contemporary notion of love which becomes purely an animal act that to be followed. It is suggested by incompleteness of sentence. Yet there is no urgency in this entire ambience. The state of inactiveness is shaded off. Meenakshi Shivram points,

"The mood seems to be one boredom and the masterly use of word 'lope' (instead of say 'leap') emphasizes this lethargic energy at work."²

The poem, "Four Comic Strips", sharply describes a woodpecker. Woodpecker is a common bird. It is often seen in the environs but, as Shetty describes her eyes as 'dripping aureoles', and her back as 'scintillating scissors', that make it uncommon. The poet describes her contentful posture after drilling the hole in the trunk of the tree. The description becomes alive in the following lines :

"She dreams she's funneled
Through the earth;
Her luminous eye stares
From the end of the world."

This is first time that, Shetty goes beyond visual art and attributes a feeling to the woodpecker. She is proud of her work. The act of drilling a hole is dreamed as an act of tunneling the earth. The attitude of self-complacency is shown in her nature. The poem is an exercise in anthropomorphism.

Shetty's animal images not only occur in animal poems but also scattered in other poems which are not on animals. Their subjects are different. The animal images occur in them so naturally that they become inseparable in their context. In fact, thematic concerns of these poems center on them. For example in a poem like "Departures", he employs the image of moth, which is as 'pale as woodshaving', 'a pinned specimen', 'sticking a lonely to one inch of space', for sixteen hours. It is central image in the poem. It contrasts the act of departing from a place and the sticking to it hours together. The poem is about lonely and disorienting bus journey.

The poem that falls in this category is "Mirror". Mirror is mind - clear and truthful. Animals that dirty are symbols of forces that impair the mind,

"A crow flapped and bit
On the summit, a sparrow
Snatched a hanging morsel,
Flies circled dead eyes."

As a result, The reflection would not dwindle.

The poem "Neighbourhood" centers on the weariness in human life. The languid activities of 'dog' and 'cow' scantily try to invigorate the dull afternoon in the neighbourhood.

"A slumped dog its paw
Cycling slowly in the air,
Jaw grinding wide a yawn,
A cow gazing with baleful eyes"

Several examples of this sort can be cited. However many critics, , do not find these poems appreciative. For Daruwalla, they are nothing but straight-to-earth cinematic visuals. He depreciates; "Spider" is replete with flat lines "Never resorting to direct force or outside help". There are also clichés : 'It reigns / supreme in the center'. "Pigeon" fails because in the first two stanzas the rhyme is very obtrusive, and then disappears unaccountably in the second half of the poem."³ Whatever he or other critics say, Shetty is undoubtedly a remarkable visual artist. These poems should be considered for their pictorial quality, not for

their technical accomplishment. They show what a great extent his verification is occupied by the animal imagery. They form his major concerns. These images are not mere external ornaments. They originate from the force of the themes in the poems. They are typical of Shetty's ingenuity. His similes and metaphors also originate in animal world e.g. 'You unfold, like starfish / on a beach' (Gifts), 'ribbed carcass of the terminus' (Epitaph), the 'Malaise' is 'soft as maggots', creepers are 'scaleless snakes' that round the trees (Creepers) etc. In a short, Shetty is master of striking simile and metaphor.

The recurring motif in Shetty's poetic world are animals. These acquire human countenances in his poems. They symbolize human suffering and joys. However, the keynote in Shetty's poems is positive and assuring. Experience helps people to learn and gives them an opportunity to see life with greater profundity and scope. His poems assure us of the process of humanization of the animals. The activities of animals and human are part and parcel of the great movement of nature. His verse reflects concern for the preservation of nature, but also a confidence in its ability to heal itself and recover from damage inflicted by man.

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