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Reading Muktibodh Through The Lens Of Cosmopolitan Theory

Abstract

This paper intends to read Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh's poetry and short stories (particularly his anthology चाँद का मुँह टेड़ा है translated as *Crooked is the face of moon*) in the light of cosmopolitan thought. In the post-1947 Hindi literary scene, Muktibodh, the petit-bourgeois intellectual, can be seen as a cosmopolitan subject who is struggling between the vision of a classless society and his aspiration, as a poet, to be recognized as a part of the upper class whose ideals he has ingested in the form of his education, evident in his poem मैं तुम लोगों से दूर हूँ translated as *So Very Far*. There is recognition in the poet-narrator that he is a privileged individual yet there is a desire to be a part of the "void" characteristic of the "underground wretch". As opposed to Kant's idea of cosmopolitanism which paid a strong emphasis on geography and defined it as "the condition of possibility of all other forms of practical knowledge of the world", Muktibodh's poetry consists of the underbelly of a soon-to-be capitalist society which is geographically isolated yet is the repository of knowledge for him. As a proponent of the *Prayogvad* (experimental) school of poetry and later *Pragativad* (Progressive/Marxist) school, Muktibodh posed a challenge to the

traditional *Chhayavad* (Romantic) school and brought to fore the social realities which had been largely ignored in the wake of the nationalist struggle for independence. Muktibodh's poetry can be read as a counter-discourse to the elite forms of cosmopolitanism which simply believe in travel and tourism. Interestingly, his poems are almost always set in urban spaces where his protagonist is chosen to be a little famished girl or a split-eared worker repairing Chevrolets and Dodges. The city not only becomes a place of inequality, prejudice and injustice but also a place where a vision of solidarity and tolerance among the working classes can be achieved by Muktibodh, and this solidarity depends on the recognition and acceptance of difference. In this sense, the poet/narrator can be called a 'citizen of the world' because his voice resonates with the social and class struggles all over the world.

Keywords: Muktibodh, Cosmopolitan, Prayogvad, Pragativad, Chhayavad, Counter-discourse.

1. Introduction

*Multitudes walk with me in my isolation;
In my loneliness, friendly hands
Of those you despise, but caught
By my troubled soul and held precious there¹. (Kapse 39)*

Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh, a noted Hindi writer and poet from early 1930s till his death in 1964, was the son of a sub-inspector, brought up in a middle-class family, cherished in his boyhood the traditional values of the *Chhayavaad* (Romantic) tradition but later espoused the *Pragativaad* (Progressive) tradition in his poetry. To a society torn apart by Partition, Second World War and later the Indo-China crisis, Muktibodh presents a protagonist who is a reflection of a social group – the lower and middle classes; hence he is never alone. The protagonist can be a slum dweller, a mechanic, a rickshaw driver etc. but his solidarity with the disadvantaged groups can be seen in lines like the aforementioned. The “liberal” upper-class intellectual is

1 Poem *So Very Far* (मैं तुम लोगों से दूर हूँ) Translated by Vishnu Khare and Adil Jussawalla. (Unless specified, all the translations have been done by the author) the arch-enemy in Muktibodh's poetry and the protagonist seeks liberation from such forces in society. The desire in Muktibodh's protagonist to not break away from the people, to ethically engage with difference that is mutually transformative, to take part in the everyday negotiations in a city and still be tolerant of every class and group makes him a cosmopolitan subject.

2. Class consciousness in Muktibodh's works

Muktibodh's poetry is informed by a serious social commitment; he states in *Rachnavali*, "The poet at the present time lives in an uncommon age...society is very seriously ridden with inequality. Exploitation and oppression have reached an all-time high. Swindling, opportunism and corruption are the order of the day...the gap between the oppressing and the oppressed in society has widened more than before...In New Poetry too, one can see the emergence of two opposing groups – one is vitally linked with the upper-class and the other has its roots in the poverty-ridden lower-middle class"² (Jain 196). Muktibodh's form of poetry, the *Nayi Kavita*, was in a dialectical relationship with the society. The poet was not isolated from the society; Muktibodh's works refer to the role of an individual in his society and the importance of collective proletarian consciousness.

In the long narrative poem *In the Dark*, the protagonist is a middle class man who is not ready to join the proletarian revolution symbolized by a bruised and heavily wounded man entreating the protagonist to help him in his cause. However, in the procession in which many illustrious critics, poets, ministers, industrialists and intellectuals have taken part, the protagonist is finally confronted with the brutal realities of the capitalist ruling classes who order a shootout - "Kill that man, finish him". A line in the fourth section – "The country is dead, you still alive!!"

² From "Poetry: A cultural process", *Muktibodh Rachnavali*, volume 5, pp. 196

– is chiefly significant because in a time when some social groups were celebrating India’s independence, its rebirth as a new nation, its renewal, Muktibodh thought that the nation was dead because of the sky-high disparities between the rich and the underprivileged. In a vision in the poem, the speaker sees Gandhi with a child and later Gandhi offers the child to the speaker and asks him to take care of it. The child is the symbol of a new hope, a revolution whose seed has been sown by Gandhi himself. When the speaker is finally ready for the revolution, the child transforms into a rifle. As soon as the vision ends and the speaker comes back to the present, he feels more aligned towards the proletarian consciousness and feels ready to fight the oppressive forces. In the poem, a question lingers – “Will a lover ever be found?”; the speaker recognizes the dearth of cosmopolitan values in his times but the trope of a journey, a search is always present and this journey is to look for fellow sufferers and fellow travellers.

K. Satchidanandan writes, “The tensions bred by colonial education, the loss of faith in every collective ideology including religion, scepticism about the very idea of progress in the background of a half-hearted industrialization that promoted economic inequality, impoverished rural life and gave rise to urban infernos with their faceless crowds, the growing disenchantment with the new polity and the erosion of values...characterize the most sensitive of Indian poets” (Kapse 63, 64). In the poem *Chand ka Muh Tehra Hai (Crooked is the face of Moon)*, the artisan says, “ambition climbing the steps of the staircase enveloped in darkness is blind, all the upper rooms are closed against us, they aren’t meant for us”³.

“For Muktibodh, the mythological world of Rama or Manu no longer suffices. In its place he created the vulnerable, defiled, amputated, bandaged modern poet-citizen. We have no more Manus, only the brahmarakshas” (Kapse 78). The brahmarakshas in the poem *Brahmarakshas* is

³ Translated by Jagdish Sharma and George John

not a demon but an intellectual, a seer, a prophet, envisioning a brighter future, who is aware of the philosophies of “Marx, Engels, Russel, Toynbee, Heidegger, Sartre, even Gandhi”, but the brahmarakshas dies without reaching an optimistic conclusion. The speaker’s desire to be his “breast-fed student” remains unfulfilled. However in the short story *Brahmarakshas ka Shishya* (*Brahmarakshas’ Student*), the brahmarakshas gains salvation by transferring his knowledge to the speaker. In the world of Muktibodh, the bearer of true knowledge will always be a misfit, a pariah who lives an alienated life and dies too in isolation because the social structures are not conducive to the ethic of cosmopolitanism.

In the short story, *Pakshi aur Deemak* (*Bird and Termite*), set in Chhattisgarh, the speaker feels distanced from the meetings and associations of the city intellectuals. The story reflects the intricate processes of corruption involved in receiving a university grant and the speaker admits of being guilty. Even after recognizing that he himself is responsible, to some extent, for the inequalities, the speaker cannot put an end to his obsession with social status and prestige. The story delineates the evolution and transformation of an ordinary individual into a cosmopolitan subject. The motif used in the story is the image of a philistine wearing hand-spun clothes. While the speaker desires to be a part of the upper class and therefore is a part of the corrupt meetings held for ‘general welfare’, the philistine wearing hand-spun clothes brings him back to reality, that is, his stance to show solidarity with the disenfranchised. Muktibodh, here, is at his best in critiquing elite intellectuals who see the lower class individuals as anti-intellectuals and therefore in need of being aware of the arts and aesthetics which have been monopolized by the upper classes. In being a philistine, the speaker can get rid of his exploitative tendencies.

Towards the end, the speaker tells Shyamla (his beloved) a story about a bird and a termite in which a man persuades the bird to barter his feathers for termites.

The bird agrees only to realize very soon that he has lost all his feathers and also his ability to fly. The fact that Muktibodh turned this parable into the title of the story is significant. In a society which thrives on feathers (superficial intellect), the speaker is not able to hold onto his values; he aspires to be of the upper class and hence, initially, decides to give in to the demands of the ministers and other bureaucrats. However, the death of the bird in the story is an epiphanic moment for him. His repeated utterance of “something is still left, I still retain some value” is an expression of his disbelief and disgust at his own self-interest guided actions in the past. He tells Shyamla that he does not want to die the bird’s death, this is an affirmation of his hidden fears about social mobility.

Another recurrent image in the short story is that of a snake. Shyamla’s pronouncement in the end at the sight of a dead snake “Kill all the snakes of society” reminds the speaker of all the unscrupulous people he has worked for. Unlike in the poem *So Very Far* where the speaker feels unable to do “the grimy work”, that of “a scavenger” because “I’m not him”, in the short story the speaker expresses his wish to share a spirit of camaraderie with the lower classes, acknowledging that in order to be able to do that, he may even have to stop his source of income. The story concludes with the firm resolve of the speaker to let go of his glamorous, elite, “intellectual” existence and embrace a “conflictual co-existence” with the poor. The speaker, in order to show his solidarity, very emphatically declares – “Destiny is where my heart lies”.

Sanjay Srivastava writes, “The valorization of the metropolitan milieu in India would seem to coeval with the formation of a ‘national’ consciousness” (Srivastava 404). In Muktibodh’s poetry, it is always the proletarian values of compassion, tolerance and acceptance which are valorized; it can be said that Muktibodh proposes to valorize the cosmopolitan values espoused by the lower and middle classes and not the glamorously exhibitionist city infrastructure which

reeks of the minimalistic living conditions given to the poor in the city and the inequality meted out to them by the law, the state and the upper classes – “*What’s poison for you is food for me*”⁴. Muktibodh’s poetry reflects more of a class consciousness than a national consciousness, and this is interesting to note particularly in a time when all the discourses revolved around the making of the ‘nation’.

During the Indian national movement for Independence in 1940s, a certain type of nation was made to imagine by the ruling classes, so as to connote a rupture within the nation between the “rural backward” and “urban progressive” so as to feed into only an “intuition of freedom that a merely political independence brings for a certain class” (Srivastava 410). Muktibodh is not interested in any struggle for independence, the sentiments of patriotism and nationalism; to him freedom is the emancipation of all the classes from the shackles of capitalism and oppression. According to him, “man means man of the common-middle and lower-middle class, who isn’t even capable of buying sufficient food and sufficient education and sufficient clothing for his own children”⁵. To Muktibodh, the idea of economic progress is a sham because it does not address the needs of those who are marginalized in society. Hence a typical Muktibodhean protagonist is never a postcolonial citizen with a national consciousness but a provincial figure in the city whose values align with those of the working classes and is therefore ‘a citizen of the world’⁶.

4 From *So Very Far* Translated. Khare and Jussawalla

5 The absence of women or the female principle pervades Muktibodh’s works. Many scholars have debated upon the curious omission of women from his poems but no reason can be attributed for the same. Therefore in all his poems and criticism, the ‘man’ refers to a human being and not a male.

6 Diogenes’ formulation in fourth century B.C.E.

The city, which is idealized as the exemplar of nationhood by the ruling authorities, is seen as a place of multiple cosmopolitan encounters by Muktibodh; and this cosmopolitanism characteristic of Muktibodhean space is because of the interdependence and interconnectedness among the lower and middle classes transcending the barriers of religion, ethnicity and culture. Despite being a site of continuing conflicts and prejudice, the city is also a place of “conflictual co-habitation” and interethnic conviviality where difference is encountered, articulated and accepted. This can also be called “Cosmopolitanism from below”.

The rural population in the city, which was seen as “a hindrance in the path of quick progress” (Srivastava 407), is for Muktibodh the site of the acceptance of multiple identities. To Muktibodh, the idea of progress is not a capitalist idea of economic development facilitated by globalization; rather progress in the city can be envisioned as “hundreds of thousands of all classes and all ranks crowding past each other” (Engels 24) without feeling threatened by difference. Globalization and twentieth century capitalist narratives sought to homogenize the population. However Muktibodh’s poetry thrives on heterogeneity in the city. Susan Koshy writes, “Minority Cosmopolitanism is constituted through a paradoxical relation to cross-cultural contact, registering the disruptions and asymmetries of intercultural encounter while sustaining an openness to its transformative possibilities” (Koshy 594). This resonates with Delanty’s formulation of Critical Cosmopolitanism which “captures the normative and critical moment of self-transformation and learning in light of the encounter with the other” (Delanty 385).

Massey’s coinage *throwntogetherness* (Zeng 144) aptly describes the situation in Muktibodh’s poetry of different people made to live together owing to the spatial constriction faced by the poor in cities. Their intersecting identities have to be negotiated if they have to live with diversity while sharing a common space. This is what Amin calls ‘a politics of propinquity’ (Zeng 144).

In such diverse spaces of cohabitation, new identities emerge through the everyday negotiations. The aim is to discover co-travellers in the journey towards revolution and liberation. In the poem *Chand ka Muh Tehra Hai (Crooked is the face of Moon)*, the posters on the street for the workers read: “In response to the call of the suffering man / one who runs to help / is a wonderful man / as you are a man / so I am a man”.

Kant argued that geography defined “the conditions of possibility of all knowledge and that such knowledge was a necessary preparation (a propaedeutic) for everything else”. Hence for Kant, erasing all geographical differences becomes important for a cosmopolitan encounter to take place. However Muktibodh’s concern is precisely the opposite – the consciousness of difference is supremely important; there is no universal code of being cosmopolitan. For Kant, cosmopolitanism could be experienced only in geographically heterotropic spaces. However, a Muktibodhean character has a cosmopolitan encounter not in a brothel or a prison but on the road, a marker of colonial modernity in urban places. The road escapes the compartmentalization offered by Kantian Geography.

Muktibodh’s idea of cosmopolitanism is very different from an elite form of cosmopolitanism which sees travel, displacement, tourism as the only modes to define cosmopolitanism. In James Clifford’s words, “the notion that certain classes of people are cosmopolitan travelers while the rest are local natives appears as the ideology of one very powerful travelling culture” (Clifford 108). This is a challenge to Kant’s very elite formulation of a cosmopolitan subject who travels the world, is aware of the different geographies and is hospitable to the foreigner as long as he does not stay for too long. Muktibodh subverts the Kantian idea of cosmopolitanism. He is hardly concerned about the binary Kant makes between a national subject and a foreigner.

Muktibodh's lower-middle class protagonists may have never travelled beyond the city, are unaware of the larger nationalist struggle and national consciousness; however for Muktibodh, dwelling is travelling and travelling is dwelling. He does not build a binary between 'natives' and 'citizens of the world'; for him 'natives' are themselves cosmopolitan subjects. The openness to strangers and difference, unlike Kant who believed in tolerance but was unable to dissolve the national boundaries in envisioning a cosmopolitan subject, is evident in the poem *Don't Know*: "That sympathy will make you poor / You will experience only poverty / Yet you will be infinite / And happy! / The inner light will always force you to wander / From place to place, / It will lead you somewhere on some shore... / Don't know who will meet, when and where, or on / Which shore"⁷.

Muktibodh's protagonist forms counter-hegemonic discourses in the form of subaltern connectivity and solidarity to fight the unbridled expansion of global capitalism. Nancy Fraser calls it "subaltern counterpublics – how subaltern social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses". The lower and middle classes in Muktibodh's poetry express counter-imaginaries of the concepts of citizenship, democracy, nationalism and independence in an attempt to envisage *asli prajatantra* (real democracy) as opposed to the *rakshasi prajatantra* (demonic democracy) in a world of *talmel* (coordination) rather than self-interest (Mayaram 41).

3. Conclusion

While reading Muktibodh's works as embodying the ethic of cosmopolitanism, it is important to note that it is not just a coexistence of varied cultures that is shown in his poetic world, rather a co-evaluation which has a transformative potential; his poems embody the values of understanding, conviviality and harmony which are neither restrictive nor exclusive, rather ever-expanding.

7 Translated by Chandra Kant Raje

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