



THE FAITH

In these indistinguishable mornings
like pale-yellow hospital linen,
a legless cripple
clutters up the wide temple street,
the quiet early light crouched in his palms.

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What sentence of old
moves him toward the furious wrinkled walls?
The Puri priest standing in indulgent sunshine
Plays a small ridicule across the melting festival,
safe in place above a pile of hard-eyed ancestors.

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Climbing down the stairs into the dark shrine	11
the sudden light overtakes me,	12
my blood drowsy in the mosquito-hum of chanting,	13
and a frail white flower of worship	14
pays for my sins and watches	15

As the definite article in the title indicates the poem does not deal in generalities; it restricts itself to a particular type of faith, faith pertaining to religion, a particular system of belief, worship, behaviour etc. associated with it. The three characters that dominate the temple scene -- the cripple, the Puri priest, and the Speaker -- represent faith in its three modes of identity.

Faith moves the cripple absolutely though it leads him to nowhere better than "the furious wrinkled walls"; Faith inspires the "Puri priest" to play a ridicule across the "melting festival". Faith for the narrator lies in offering a "frail white flower of worship" to pay for his sins. There is built-in irony around each of these characters, since whatsoever each does in the name of faith actually constitutes an act of anti-faith, an act of blind and slavish conformity to dead forms and rituals. Mahapatra's stance seems to be quite as well defined here as in other poems: a stance against the burden of faith, the Oriyas (and Indians at large) are laden with, the faith devoid of any significance. This paper sets out to examine the linguistic and extra-linguistic devices in the poem that foreground the theme significantly.

Syntax

It is clear that the poem is arranged systematically around a central argument or purpose: the burden of faith illustrated by the three characters at the temple scene—the cripple, the Puri priest and the speaker. The "legless cripple" dominates the first stanza of the poem and the beginning two lines of the second stanza; the Puri priest dominates the rest of the 2nd stanza; and the poet-speaker dominates the last stanza. In each case there has been precise delineation of character and situation by modifying clauses and phrases, circumstantial details and comment adjuncts. The adverb phrase of time (L. 1) with which the poem opens describes the "when" of an action before discovering the other details. Similarly the two reduced relative clauses that accompany the Puri-priest add details to his profile, thereby making the portrait more authentic. The ~~progressive~~ participial clause that begins the last stanza throws light on the circumstances in which the narrator attains realization of the hollowness of faith. Similarly the nominative absolute "my blood drowsy in the mosquito hum of chanting" (L. 13) reveals the actual condition of the speaker's mind in the dark-temple. One feels that syntax has been employed in the poem for particularization and amplification of experience with ^{the} least measure of complexity.

Phonology

The poem's musical effects have been in the forefront of attention to be successful. One should mark for instance

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 the repeated use of the short vowel /i/ in the opening line
 of the poem followed by the repeated /l/ in lines 2,3. These
 serve as "phonetic intensives", sounds that support meaning.
 The short /i/ for example suggests the idea of smallness
 already aroused by the adjective "indistinguishable", and
 the simile of hospital ^{linen} ^{clim} linen. The repeated /l/ similarly
 suggests the sense of indisposition, of flabbiness ^{soft & fatty} character-
 izing the morning and the nation at large. The repeated
 plosive sounds -- /k/, /t/, /d/ - in line 4 accord with
 the image of the cripple clattering up the temple street.

Some of the phonological schemes that are less obtru-
 sive in the poem are devices like alliteration,
 assonance and consonance. The terminal /t/ in "quiet",
 "light" and "crouched" (L-5) establishes a consonantal
 bond between these words; so does the /z/ in "pays", "sins",
 "watches" (15). Words like "frail" and "flower", "white"
 and "worship" (14), "Puri" and "Priest" (8) have alliterative
 bonds between them. An example of assonance can be found
 in line 10 (between "safe" and "place") although it might
 be difficult to say how this sound-pattern adds to ^{the} meaning.
 It might be good to remember that these patterns are some-
 times their own justification, that "one does not feel
 cheated" simply because the alliteration of "frail white
 flower" does not seem to have any external significance or
 any imitative effect.

Semantics : Lexis and collocations

According to Riffaterre Poetry is parallelism reflected

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at four different levels: phonetic, phonological, syntactic and semantic. Semantic parallelism is evident at different points of the text. We have noticed such a parallelism at the beginning - that of faith in its three identity modes illustrated by the three characters in the poem. Another instance of semantic parallelism can be pointed out by considering the lexical elements with seams of identical association. Thus "temple", "light", "festival", "shrine", "chanting", "flower", "worship", "pay", "sins" belong to ^{mm}common verbalization of religious experience. The repetition of these related seams offer a possibility of the poem's prima facie unity apart from corroborating the religious thrust which is the subject.

An analysis of the poem's imagery is likely to bring out two very important points: the poem's poetic specific effects, and the poet's attitude.

Some of the images are quite challenging in character because of the high subjective vision. The metaphor of the light "crouched in his palms" (5) is one such example. It is thoroughly a deviant collocation because of the "clash" between "light" and "crouched". Here the abstract is rendered as animate and human. The image of squatting reinforces the picture of the cripple, the hand cup being a recurring image in Mahapatra's poetry. In "furiously wrinkled walls" and "melting festival" inanimate objects acquire human attributes, thereby suggesting ironically the formidable power ritual has come to acquire over man.

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the victim. In the poetic context there is presumably unconscious irony because the poet perceives the crisis surrounding him; the stone walls and man become equivalent, the festival melts rather than ennobles man. A similar anomalous situation can be marked in the poem's climactic collocation ("a frail white flower of worship/pays for my sins and watches") where the verbs, "pay", "watch" and the adjective "frail" predicate the activities and attributes of a living being. Thus the flower in effect gets elevated to the status of human beings like the "stone walls", "festival" and "the sudden light" -- all lending to the tone of irony at variance with Mahapatra's point of view. The meaning of these "anomalies" depends on the ^{unusual} ~~abnormal~~ ^{Pattern that doesn't fit} internal logic of the poem; they are not random and unmotivated.

Conclusion

We have discussed some aspects of syntax, phonology and semantics with regard to "The faith". What strikes us here as precisely poetic is Mahapatra's apt use of imagery some of which violate boldly the rules of selectional restriction. These give life and immediacy to language, make language more concrete and sensuous, add emotional intensity to informative statements and above all say much in little space. Mahapatra's poetic innovation has been manifest in this area, imagery and collocation.