

CHAPTER - III

A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE ANIMAL POEMS OF MANOHAR SHETTY

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The poems under scrutiny are from Shetty's three collections: *A Guarded Space*, *Borrowed Time* and *Domestic Creatures*. 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. His poetry is poetry of vivid metaphor extending into the real world, mirroring through unique angles the violence and tensions in our everyday lives.

Shetty's work has appeared in important anthologies including *The Oxford Indian Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets*. He is appreciated for animal poems and animal imagery by many critics. He projects animal world either as a reflection of or an extension of human world. His animal world illuminates in its own brightness and poems glint like carefully honed edge of a favourite kitchen knife. It reveals Shetty as an accomplished visual artist. For the sake of critical study, I have selected animal poems from the above mentioned collections.

"Scarecrow" is one of the outstanding poem in *Domestic Creatures*. The poem reflects monologue of scarecrow. Generally Shetty dramatizes certain human situations among the animals.

The poem 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 clear.

"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.

"Bandicoots nibble at my bamboo feet where the
Stray lifts its hind leg. The Panther's pupils flash
No envy. Yet here I am at my master's behest."

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 quail.
The panther swivels from the cane,
Ignition of the hunt in its eye.
The fox's fangs glisten with spit.

And in my shadow the hood of the
Hamadryad mushrooms open like an explosion. "

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 put 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 both 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.

The poet wandering in King's estates saw a peacock. He always thought it is female. He used various images to describe femaleness of peacock as vain bale dancer, courtesan or a bashful bride. He also describes as a sky Cinderella. He saw in film the peacock spreading his luminous wings on a gloomy rooftop in snowfall, some where in Europe. It's uniqueness magnified in an exotic landscape. Though he is unique, its femaleness always flaunted itself in those royal gardens. He describes the peacock as:

"Its flaming fan fail of monocled
Monogrammes outsparkled
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 rogynous bird of prey sprayed by jets
Of sunlight claws like stiletto heels at rest on its
Conquest."

The poem "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."

Fireflies is impressive in its art. The contrast between 'Outside', and being caged is conveyed in the language.

"Soon dimming - the insects, worried by coarse
Hands, the walls of glass baffling, their tiny
Wings, wilted to lifeless specks."

"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 or edenic.

The poem "Wounds" describes a wounded bird (torn wing) that had made the window - sill 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."

The bird and its descents housed his mind. They 'generated' creative power in him. However, this harmonious living did not last for long time. Soon, the bird 'fell off the sill', 'drop like a stone' and died of uncertain reason. In effect, 'a livid flash broke through' his mind that uprooted him 'From the tense mooring of sleep'. Immediately his positive dreams turned negative,

"I dreamt, then, of lame dogs
Abattoirs, and pulped frogs."

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 also subject of the poem "Bread and Fishes". Here, however, the closed space is not 'glassbottle' 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.

"I smile when
I observe it is only the middle-sized ones
That scud towards the crumbs
Subsiding into the rippling sun."

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. The poem is small but meaningful. It is true reflection of the world today. Each stanza of the poem gradually leads to the fact that struggle for existence is inevitable. Shetty does not stop here, he goes on finding different sides of this general truth in diverse

situation. He sees this kind of resemblance in the life of many other animals. The poem "Game" is one more instance of this kind. The word 'game' itself implies the central idea of the poem.

The poem 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.

Another important aspect of this poem is the change that is taking place in the poet's mind. After seeing the preying mantis, the circles of thoughts arise in his mind that indicate his growing awareness of contest - whether it is on open space (a playground) or hidden behind bush. This experience sharpens his mind.

We shall now consider another poem from his first anthology. This poem is called "Forshadows" and is a more mature reproduction

of his pet theme - the co-mingling of the human and the animal world. In this single stanza poem, the poet narrator was 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"

Wild cats, pensive fawns, giant butterflies appear on the wall as a whole forest rises. Here human world is not seen as one having similarities with the animal world but natural extension of the other. The poem concentrates its script on concrete physical details. Yet the ultimate focus is on the human mind. 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 has states,

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

His bored mind also conjures up the memory of

"Demure hostess wiping her
Nose and wiping
A sly fingernail on the
Underside of her armrest".

They were devil's workshop is a play in these lines which move from the gruesome 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."

Especially gruesome is the splitting off the line after a body. There is some relief when this is followed by 'sparrow' but this only affords a fleeting sense of comfort.

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 animals produced in the poem are extensions of bored human mind - so the adjectives used to describe them - 'bored' 'pensive' - are human. The forest that arises from his hands is cast artistically on the wall of a dimly lit room. The forest, deep and habited by various animals, is projections of a complex human mind - a mind where the animal and the human cannot be severed, where good thoughts, can change into beastly thoughts at any moment so the focus of the poem is on human mind. The part first of "Three variations" is one more projection of human mind-forest where a deeply rooted thought subsists like a centipede 'gnawing noiseless'. The poet describes,

"It is one hundred flecked feet
Dancing in circles
In his head
It is a whitish thing
Digging the crimson
Mud of his heart."

One may think of it as a dream, however, the poet clearly says, 'it is not a dream'. And it cannot be physically presented, although it exists in the mind.

"It is there in the twitching
Of his hand, the tic
At this lip, the limp
Wormy curling of his thumb."

The poet does not disclose the nature of thought. His focus is on its 'existence'. The use of 'it-sentences' clarifies this point. The image of centipede is crucial. The poet attempts to present an abstract matter (thought) in the form of concrete details (centipede) which is fairly successful attempt on his part.

The "Bat" is a poem of two stanza. The novelty of description immediately catches the readers mind. The image of bats as 'hung umbrella' is impressive. Before, they fly at night, they are 'shut as catatonic', but as darkness enters,

"They swept,
Through moon-gilded windows,
Gliding across the walls,
Like giant bowties"

The kinetic imagery in these lines is unequivocal. See how Shetty creates a mirror-image of "Ants", in the following lines,

"Bodies like puffed rice,
Jaws grinding busily,
The swaying swollen head,
Blistering with dreams"

This is graphic picture of blistering ants. These 'infinitesimal frenzies', carry their prey,

"They have banded into gangs
Mobbling an upturned insect,
Lifting in flanked procession
The palanquin of flesh"

Animal whether small or big, close or remote, under the telescopic gaze of Shetty become lively and vigorous. Here is the stately picture of marching 'elephants', once seen by the poet in the street, the memory of the scene is still fresh in this mind,

"They undulate down the street
On ponderously mincing feet,
Ears flapping like fronds,
Trunks uncoiling for coins,
Tusks beaming"

The elephants are tamed. They carry their ambling majesty into Shetty's solemn lines,

"Face to face, their mouths
Are hot viscid caves
Their beady eyes transfix
Each nervous twitch"

These docile and peace-loving animals create respectful fear in the minds. The fact is registered indirectly by Shetty. The on lookers are -

"Amazed by their vegetarianism,
Alarmed by their gaping memories."

The feeling of respectful fear is intensified by the syntactically parallel lines of almost same length.

"Migratory", juxtaposes the migratory birds and settled birds.
The migratory birds are,

"Flapping like white flags
They teeter on the tree's
Threshold, crests tinged
Between yellow and black"

The alliteration in the lines moves with the buoyancy of the birds. Energetic and active, they camp on the launching pads. They are wary 'of the old-timers', who 'squat and nudge in rows', and 'weave in garrulous circles'. Their sounds are 'infectious crescendos', while the old-timers cries, and even colours, are 'guttural'. He describes,

"While the travelers flutter and life
In electric clouds, dim
Like filaments in the horizon."

Shetty's imagery comes from modern world. The words 'electric', 'filaments', are technical. It shows his modern sensibility.

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 animals wear the beauty of novelty, for each has a unique individuality and comeliness that do not escape Shetty's discerning eyes-fireflies, lizard, pigeons, spider, cockroach, bats, ants, the praying mantis do make lasting impression.

In "Spider", he pictures the spider, as 'Head bobbling on delicate legs', while the net is described as 'meticulous architect', an apt metaphor. Threads of the web are 'sticky walls and ceiling' that ensnare the flying insects. Spider is 'A regal sphinx'. It waits patiently for its prey entrapped and smothered to death, ..

"Before ambling forward
On the clean path
To receive the reward. "

With the same pressing vein, he depicts the 'Pigeon'. It is 'a swaddled silhouette in an aloof multitude', that 'tut-tut strut and fret among friends. Image is lively and auditory. The description of the

flock of pigeon continues to follow in the next alliterative line - 'A proud crowd of jerking jeweled neck'. The slow rhythmic lines match the graceful movements of the pigeon.

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. Shetty's aim is clear. He is creating pen pictures. He doesn't conceal the meanings to be discovered by the reader. Yet, to compensate for these weaknesses, he presents them again in the series entitled *Domestic Creatures* in a quite improved way. The series reveals Shetty's aptitude to pin down almost everything into exact words and his fondness for creating a visually lettered world. The section on the spider reads, -

"Swaddled cosily, he
Settles by the window,
Burping softly;
Eyelids half-closed
Head sinking
In a fluffy
Embroidered pillow."

The metaphor in the last line is excellent. The pigeon's soft body is a 'Fluffy/Embroidered pillow'. In a sentence's space the picture of pigeon comes before us. The best section in the series is on the spider. This female species of the spider is 'swollen - headed'. The lines read,

"Tenuous threads of her tales
Glitter like rays
From the fingertips of a saint."

The striking comparison between spider and a saint is a kind of metaphysical imagery. In a moment she is still, the other moving :

"She weaves on, play along.
Hangs from a hoary strand,
Roll, unrolls : a yoyo,
A jiggling asterisk; a footnote :
Little characters transfixed
In the clutches of her folds. "

The briskness of her action is captured in the most matching words, especially image of jiggling asterisk is unequivocal. These are insignificant domestic creatures, once touched by the poet, their delineation becomes more real than reality itself. It provokes the reader to crosscheck the description with reality. The microscopic precision in the description of "Lizard" instigates me to quote the whole section on her,

"Tense, wizned
Wrinkled neck twisting,
She clears

The air of small
Aberrations
With a snapping tongue,
A long tongue."

Shetty does not haste to tap all physical details or activities of the creatures. His art is exclusive. He prefers to be selective highlighting the central as 'wrinkled neck' and 'snapping tongue' important to clear the air. The third section is on cockroach. It reads,

"Open the lid, he tumbles out
Like a family secret;
Scuttles back into darkness;
Reappears.....
Leaves tell-tale traces"

These lines described pacy movements of a cockroach. The use of verbs in simple present suggests that this is not description of 'a specific cockroach' but it is applicable to all of them. Shetty is master of simile and metaphor. He describes the cockroach's 'feelers like / miniature periscope', 'wings flacky as withered / onion skin.'

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 it 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. 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 people 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.

Shetty's poetic style shows the influence of Ted Hughes. As in the poems of Hughes, there is an abundance of similes and metaphors. The use of alliteration and personification is spontaneous. These qualities, however, do not outshine the issues involved in the poems. His true skill is superb organization of the poems. Almost every poem by him is well-knit, compact and succinct. Greater awareness of poetic form is a general feature of the post-eighties poetry as it is found in Shetty's poems.

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