

CHAPTER - IV

SHETTY'S LOVE POETRY

Major aspects of Shetty's poetry are his animal poems and city-poems. It seems that his love poems have not been received the attention of the critics. No critic has so far explored these poems from their variegated angles. Although there are some occasional remarks made by some readers, they are not sufficient to bring home their beauty. The reason for this negligence could be stressed in the fact that the second collection of his poems, and even the third, do not contain love poems. Moreover, he has not consistently handled love theme, or the related themes i.e. marriage, sex, etc.

His love poems occur in the second part of the collection *A Guarded Space*. The part is separately entitled 'Legacy'. It is attributed to someone 'Gee'. When asked about it, Shetty remained silent. There is no unanimity among critics about the addressee of these poems. The only piece of information available is from Raj Rao's remark that 'Legacy' is about 'an unsuccessful love affair with a classmate at university.'¹ It means that these poems were written before he plunged into journalistic career. However, there remains a slight gap in understanding since he explains in 'Drafting on a High Tide', that the love poem 'Gift' was written when he was a sub-editor in the Sunday Standard, when he was in love with Devika to whom eventually he was married. Yet, it is clear that his love poems are,

about 'a doomed love affair' as 'Legacy' means the relics of love i.e. letters, telephone numbers, places of meetings, gift-objects, addresses that keep on reminding him of her.

I

Before we proceed to analyse critically Shetty's love poems, it would be beneficial to look briefly at the treatment of love theme in Indian English poetry. Love is a conventional theme hauled by many poets in different times with varying degrees of success. We see, since the first utterance of Indian English poetry, it has been treated with constant change. There was a time when love was treated with romantic touch or on spiritual level. Sex was a taboo then and marriage was a bliss.

Proliferation and progression is seen in the modern love poetry. Modern generation of the poets shook itself off from the conservatism of the poets of the preceding age. They took more authentic and realistic stance while approaching love. They began to speak about love and sex without any inhibitions and to treat man and woman as creatures of flesh and blood. They do not treat it as something idealistic, divine, or idyllic, but as a hard physical reality and as an inevitable biological necessity. There is a sensuous appeal in love poetry of the poets like R. Parthasarathy and K. N. Daruwalla. The second section of R. Parthasarathy's *Rough Passage* (1977), entitled 'Trial' is sensuous and romantic. A cluster of poems, 'A Stranger

Called I' records Prithvi Nandy's pains and miseries as a lover. As poets of love and marriage, Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das and Dom Moraes stand out. There is a subtle touch of irony beneath Ezekiel's love poems (e.g. the poem 'Marriage'). As a poet of love, sex and marriage, Kamala Das candidly voices the realities. She is known for her bold confessions (The Old Playhouse). We see, a changing pattern of love from the romantic-idealistic, through the inhabitionists, to the hardcore idealists, as Syed Amanuddin* points out in his scholarly work, *World Poetry in English* (1981).

We see, a new-romantic strain in contemporary poetry. This neo-romantic strain - with the images of despondent lover- is carried to excess by the poets. Traumatized survivors of broken love-affairs, wrecked marriage and unstable relationship fill the poetry of Paranjape, Mohanty, Merchant, Sen, Surenderan and occasionally, of Seth (especially in 'All You Who Sleep Tonight'). Against this background, I progress to analyse his love poetry.

II

Legacy opens with the poem 'A Bluer Sky'. The very first two lines act as a preface to the sequence.

She lives outside locked doors; inside
Fragments of memory dissolve:

* Syed Amanuddin is an Indian English poet. His poetical collections are *The Forbidden Fruit* (1967) and *Lightening and Love* (1973).

Legacy, as Daruwalla remarks, is 'a sequence of love poems that burn with cold fire.'² These lines illustrate the fragmented psyche of the poet lover. The beloved is married and far-away yet her memories are alive in his mind. He ironically notes three-years' togetherness as 'somnolent years', 'a warm hearse'. It is to be preserved in bitter-sweet verse, and to be unlocked...

And now the final decay of memory
When locked doors gently open
To a bluer sky
And half-blinding sunlight...

The poem moves between the past and the present (use of 'then' and 'now'). The blue sky symbolises a canvas whereon these memories are versified.

Memories are in the form of moments, spent together; gifts and letter exchanged and poems written on each other. The memory of candlestine meeting is registered in the poem 'Meeting'. He says,

We snatch one small end of the day
On the edge of the sea-wall,

They are not traditional romantic lovers whom had a lot of time to spend on each other. To meet, they set aside a little time from their tight schedule. So the word 'snatch' is used. And after 'the filial cross-fires', the beloved arrives, then,

Pride, honour, the gamut of values melt.

Yet, there is resonance of departure, noted sharply in the end of the poem.

When again you pale at lengthening shadows -
Looming over each, a face you know.

We see, dramatic contrast in sweet memory of meeting and the present encounter with the beloved who is now a married woman of certain social status. Earlier it had romantic edge, now it is, strangers' meeting described with irony as he says, in the poem 'Fragment'.

And after long separations
Growing longer
Frayed by dreams
We meet like strangers.

Sweet memories of meeting at the seashore for boat ride echo behind. 'The Boat Ride' presents an experience of 'swaying minds'. Dramatic imagery well constitutes the lovers aboard.

You say
There is only one way, we're going away forever
Into the glistening blue, piled layer
Upon folded layer, till it appears solid;

The epithet 'glistening blue' conjures up the image of the sea. The experience of the boat ride is dreamlike. These young lovers' dream convincingly sustains until,

Leaving those streams of forth,
And as the hull rubs the rough wall of the pier
You taste salt on your lips; leaning spent shoulders
We lurch on hard land, weightless.

Shetty uses the word 'forth' carefully. It has double meaning - the stream of foam and stream of pleasant activities. Like foam, these pleasant activities do not last long. The activity of the boat-ride is enjoyable but has no real value. So, both things are left behind at the end of the ride. Yet the effect is still looming (weightless). Here precision of psycho-physical observation, linking boat action and the lovers half-floating, yet grounded, help to render the representation of dillusion more as poetic experience than as abstract idea.

Exchange of gifts is common practice for those who fall in love. They help to make love a concrete experience. This theme is taken in the poem 'Gifts'. However trivial are the gifts, they help in expressing love, as he merrily sings,

Together
We trace a bridge: you pick
A shell translucent as neon
And I, a tribal ear-ring
Reflected in plate-glass.

After reading these lines, one may assume that the lovers are meeting on the sea beach (the word 'shell'). But the poem has surprisingly different location. Shetty wrote this poem when he was in love with Devika whom he eventually married, in that sense it is misfitting to the sequence of doomed love affair. He gives account of how he came to write the poem, especially gift-objects mentioned in it. Both, Shetty and Devika, were working in the Sunday Standard.

The office of the magazine was shifted its office temporarily to a dreary, empty building at Sasson Dock, the hub of the fisheries market of Mumbai. He writes,

“The warehouse below were full of frozen fish but the waste strewn everywhere turned the office into a putrid, piscine hell. The stench of rotting fish seeped into the news-papers, our clothes, the stationary even the tea and the galleys. When the breeze swelled the smell rose to epic, ossuary levels. The roads were littered with comb-like bones and the translucent shells of prawns. In the rains, floating fin clung to our shoes and the ends of our trousers. Escapee crabs scuttled, around and legions of cats hankered after our fin-filmed shoes outside the docks. One of the staff, a vegetarian puked regularly at the end of the day. I tried to rise above the miasma and did what any smitten young man does : write a love poem. I called it ‘Gifts’.”³

Though incidentally originated, the poem is remarkable for its urban scene. The poet lover’s mind is always seething with buildings, roads and vehicles,

I come from the labyrinths :
Traffic lights park in my eyes
Before I cross, highways fork and
Stream like veins in my hand.

You hunger for a blade of grass
In the welter of concrete,

Natural instincts like love has hardly any place among dried minds. There is a draught of love in sky-rocketting building and mirror-like roads. The beloved is waiting for true companionship (hunger for a blade of grass).

Like gifts, letters are also relics of bygone love. In the poems 'Love Letter' and 'Farewell Letter', two opposite tunes are heard. The later poem is itself farewell letter registering his last words after her departure, while in the former, the poet-lover imagines the journey which her letter has made to reach him.

"Your letter milling and rustling among thousands!"

"Your letter throttled to the rattling floor-boards !"

Soiled, crumpled or malhandled, yet it does its effect. It becomes center where minds are mingled, when

I raise the flap up to the light

Project my mind to yours -

I open your folded world - neat, white ...

A personal love-letter's significance is heightened and intensified by immersing it first in a completely depersonalised process before it reaches its intended goal. Before, the poet can pick up the love-letter from his 'door-mat' he thinks about its perilous journey. Once dearly awaited these letters are now unexciting remnants. In 'Farewell Letter', the poet-lover ironically murmurs,

You left me a legacy of letters

Addresses, telephone numbers: relics

Of a network of meetings,

These letters are 'swift frames of flashback'. The occasion of her departure perhaps to her husband's house 'wearing a novel nose-

ring', is told in flash-back. Like strong-willed lovers, he would have forgotten her,

But memory-splinters multiply :

Her memories stay with him and mount but there is no excitement left as he confesses,

I remain bland as a stone;

But think of you, with relief and regret,

'Relief' for freeing himself from disloyal beloved and 'regret' for his freakish obsession. Love is best made concrete by visuals - whether it be the flashback scenes of 'Farewell Letter' or the precision with which the poet imagines the journey which her 'Love Letter' had made.

As sometimes he doubts her loyalty, he also shows distrust in the very concept of love. The poem 'Theatre' traces the masks, the pretences, the unspoken theatre of love. The lover comes to visit the beloved who is ill, but soon realises the vanity of love,

And you sit up and smile,
a wan-smile through pallid, white
lips, and gave me a look that assumes
too much, too much that is untrue
but unsaid, left hanging in the air.

Performances at theatre mirror life, they have no real value, in the same way, courting is unreal. Image of theatre is impressively employed for untrue love. The poem achieves the quality of

suggestiveness. Darius Cooper, although highly appreciates his other love poems, disapproves this poem for its linguistic artifice. He comments,

“It’s difficult to write authentic love poetry and Shetty has the talent to plunge into this difficult intimate field where more often than one gets, especially in Indo-Anglian verse, either hysterical threshings of unnecessary linguistic orgasms or the useless commemorative romance-filled phrases that would have made even the patient Omar Khayyam threw up. There are places where Shetty does commit this sin as in ‘Theatre’.”⁴

He quotes the lines from ‘Theatre’ to convince us of his argument.

I draw back
your hair, streaming on your pale
wet forehead. My hand, releasing
the fever in your brow,
drains your pain.

Unnecessary piling of clauses and phrases as in the above sentences is seen even in other poems. However, they do not mar overall effect of the poems. On the same line runs the poem ‘Love Song’. Tremulous experience of her in dream is presented in the lines,

Your face plays charades in the night
Dabbed by shafts of light as you turn;
Your profile dilates in the waters,
Slithers in my hand and disappears.

Like dream, she is unreal, so she cannot be kept bound forever. The poem is compact. Each stanza consisting of four lines is creating the

wraith-image of the beloved. The poem is one more example of Shetty's craftsmanship. He is an accomplished artist as his craft of presentation is considered. That is why, Bruce King praises his craft, in the following words,

"Careful control is shown in the physical shape of Shetty's poems, which consist mostly of stanzas and lines of regular lengths, so that the printed page offers a feeling of enclosure."⁵

'Desertion' shows a note of discord surfaced during the late-night party in a couple. It becomes more visible, when they leave the party. It is noted with mild irony,

The grave corridor lights and a silence
Follows us moving slowly downstairs
The cold street, the stream of traffic
Mocks our minor despair.

The effect of the discord is seen on inanimate objects, 'the grave corridor', 'the cold street'. The poem is addressed to the beloved. This is a single poem that deals with the theme of love after marriage. The tone of his poems, 'Theatre', 'Love song', 'Farewell Letter', and 'Desertion' is of denunciation. He holds the beloved responsible for their unsuccessful love. In the cluster of poems uttered by the lover, 'Her Grief' and 'Her dilemma' are two poems that are narrated by the beloved. 'Her Grief' depicts her frustration. Dismayed at the disloyalty after two years of courting by the lover 'this unlettered space', she indignantly retorts,

You do not have the right
To offer a paradise
Then burn it before my eyes

The moon, a traditional symbol of affable love, appalls when she
curses,

The moon mirrors my pure face
You too will see it there
And your vein will race with fear.

Structurally the poem is well-organised. The prominent feature is its
dramatic time-dots. Pleasure of yesterday, today's grief and the stasis
of tomorrows are phases of time into which the poems is divided.

In 'Her Dilemma', she is trying to gather the courage (coiling
my will) to tell her parents about the man she loves, while they busy
themselves with plans for an arranged marriage. The girl describes
'the well-meant love and labour' of the parents, who have been
accumulating a bank balance for a grand celebration even buying
cutlery from a trip abroad for her marriage. Like her lover, she is also
haunted by memories. To him, she may appear perfidious. His gifts-
'a ring'-'a single bangle', 'a tied pile of letters' - littered the room.
She describes,

All this grafted on me like a new skin
Without discarding the old layer.

'The old layer' means her role as a dutiful daughter. Not that she is
false, the truth could be otherwise. The stamp of the horoscope,

villain for many a budding romance in India. She is to be married soon, she sits cogitating for several days before getting married. Divided into heart and mind, she describes her dilemma in fitting image of the seagull.

The sea blurs beyond the window and all
That remains is a gull fighting the wind.

There is a faint reference to cosmic irony in these lines. It becomes sharper when she foretells the behaviour of her parents and attitude of her lover.

I sit here counting the days, coiling my will
To face them, their shocked histrionics
The penalty for loving, your strained love,
Reward for the years of obedience.

Last two poems in the sequence show shift in the tone - from denunciation to acceptance of desertion as fate. However, the change is not a defeated or passive acceptance. In the very first line of the poem 'Invocation', the poet-lover declares the destiny of their love.

Our parting was ordained:

He mentions the obstacles of extraterrestrial forces ('celestial odds') and misfortune hinted by 'wide-eyed clairvoyant' (adjective used as noun) and by 'the local palmist'. Yet, he is not ready to be submissive to the forces or to suffer silently. He boldly declares his aim to immortalise their love in new way. The stanza is worth-quoting.

But I will capsule and project
The clear outline of your face,
Our bodies sentient on the hot sand,
To the spectral agenda in space
So that the divorced prophets may understand
The uncharted fractions of our lives,
So that we may not float aeons apart
Like two cold and smouldering planets
Hypnotised by their own loneliness.

It means that the poem is invoked to the 'spectral agenda in space'.

The poem has symmetrical structure. Each stanza consists nine lines. The second begins impressively with the conjunction 'But', breaking the flow of thought that goes against love. It reverses the idea stated in the first stanza.

The lover has found a special way of remembering her. 'Legacy', the last poem in the part, is written in confessional style. He says,

Only with the passing of pain,
Will I remember you as a fine rain's
Highlights in sparse sunlight.

As the title of the poem indicates, he is left with an intimate legacy. The poem is his last word on the role of fate. 'Change', 'Sunset' and 'Recovery' are minor poems in the sequence.

III

It is no doubt that Shetty's love poetry has an autobiographical touch. It is clear that these poems are arranged in three parts corresponding to three discrete ideas. In some poems, Shetty shows the lover moaning the loss of the love. Sweet memories of the beloved are still fresh in his mind, whereas the poems 'Her Grief' and 'Her Dilemma' speak of the beloved's helplessness. There is a note of determinism in the poems 'Farewell Letter', 'Invocation' and 'Legacy'.

There is a vague background of a young man jilted by his girlfriend. He is now wallowing in self-pity and musty memories. Sometimes hold the beloved responsible for failure in love. John Perry writes,

"His love poetry is different from that of contemporary poets who continue their usually boring practice of erotic competition and exploitative sexual explicitness."⁶

Truly, Shetty's love poems do not exhibit sensuality. They seem to exist on a moral plane. In this regard, he is different from the contemporary poets.

The sort of sighing heard in these poems is a harking back to the stances of Romanticism billet-doux and the rest. Unfortunately or otherwise, we are left with few illusions in these days of electronic gadgetary. Nevertheless it is interesting to watch the drama of desertion.

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