

THE THEME OF LANDSCAPE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN SHIV K. KUMAR'S 'ON NATIVE GROUNDS'

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Abstract

Kumar's Trapfalls in the sky is divided into three sections-' On Native Grounds', ' Under the Alien Skies' and 'Genesis'.On Native Grounds takes us Calcutta to call on Mother Teresa in 'Mother Teresa Feeds her Lapersat her Home for the Destitute , Calcutta', to Delhi pavement to meet 'A Tibetan Refugee Woman on a Delhi Pavement',also to 'Dal Lake:Srinagar' and 'Sunset Over Simla Hills. The poet presents the picture of Indian mothers giving tender advice to their daughters in'An India Mothers Advice to her Daughter before Marriage' andpresents pure maternal love in 'A Woman LabourerBreast-feeding her Child during Lunch-break'. In 'Cleansing Ganga' the poet states instead river Ganga cleansingus, we need to clean it. In 'ODelhi', he laments on the vanishing glory of Delhi and 'TisHazariCourts' is an unsparing criticism on the delay in judiciary system.Kumar's poetry presents the views on contemporary situation in India. He gives distincttouch to his Indian sensibilities in this section. The theme of landscape and National identity makesa rewardingstudyIn Kumar's poetry.

KeyWords:*Refugee,Baptism,TisHazari,Dal Lake,Ganga,Eunuchs,Trafalls*

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- Dr. Shrikant B. Sawant

Shiv K. Kumar has been honoured by the Central Sahitya Akademi for his book of verse, *Trapfalls in the Sky* in 1987. The volume contains three sections: 'On Native Grounds', 'Under Alien Skies' and 'Genesis'. Kumar gives a distinct touch to his Indian sensibilities in these sections. The poems in the section 'On Native Ground' describes 'the poet's view on contemporary situation in India. The poet often takes a general theme in the Indian context and suggests its uniqueness through an unobtrusive irony' (Ansani 74). The theme of landscape and national identity makes a rewarding study in Kumar's poetry.

The very first poem in the collection 'Mother Teresa Feeds her Lepers at her Home for the Destitute, Calcutta', celebrates the humanitarian work that 'virgin's bridesmaid' has done in India for about half a century. The poet compares Mother Teresa is like 'a shaft of sunbeam'-

.... A shaft of sunbeam

Falls across the hallway beckoning

the dead to rise. (*Trapfalls in the Sky* 13)

Her soothing gesture of feeding the lepers has been compared with oasis:

...A hands velvet caress

ripples like an oasis

shaded by palm trees (13)

The poem 'An Indian Mother's Advice to her Daughter Before Marriage' is a typical example of how Indian mothers tender advice to their daughters to get on well in married life begins with these lines:

Giving up all your hoardings
before dying
may not be entirely painful
for the first bleeding that splutters
like oil on tire is also a cleanser. (14)

The poet describes here 'the act of sexual consummation and loss of virginity takes place in the form of a ritualistic initiation' (Pandit 133). Mother advises her

Don't ever argue
at the moment of surrender
for the end is ineluctable. So move in
with moonshine on your face and the quick
of the sun between your thighs.(14)

She also warns her daughter that

A man's memory is myopic
like a sparrow's; once filled up
he hardens into a bedrock. (14)

And if she (daughter) often finds herself alone, 'pulling feather' out of her pillow. The mother requests her to keep patience and assures that

If he's gone out fishing down the dark
river, he'll be back

for in spite of his appetite, a man
cannot swallow both ends of the rainbow. (14)

'To a friend Who Died of Cancer, Bequeathing his Body to Research'
depicts the last wish of the friend who died of cancer to bequeath his body to
research to locate the genesis of pain is a humanitarian act. Kumar thus writes

You outdid us all with your last wish.

If the body can also redeem (you said).

After the sours desertion.

Why squander it away as only ashes
to slime the Ganges ? I've saved it for you
(you said) (15)

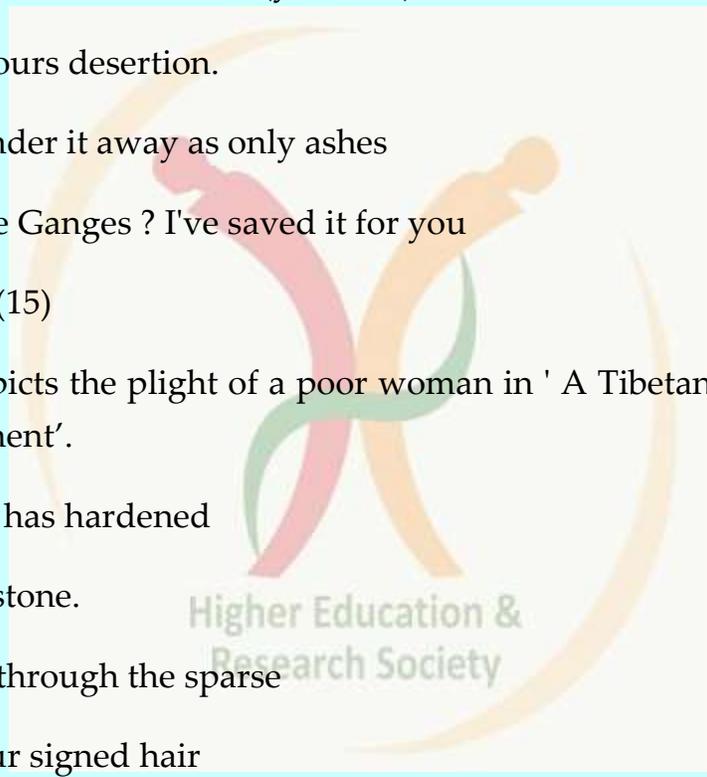
Kumar depicts the plight of a poor woman in ' A Tibetan Refugee Woman
on a Delhi Pavement'.

Your body has hardened
into black stone.
Lice creep through the sparse
crop of your signed hair

looking for terra firma, (16)

Kumar describes the poem 'Adolescence' in an erotic manner.

Your fingers will now break into
many languages — the language of trigger
and guitar — of the contours of your girl's



breasts waiting to be read like braille. (17)

The protagonist in 'At a Whorehouse' asks the prostitute

Can you rock me into forgetting

a women who once promised me

manna in the tulip of her mouth ? (18)

'The mere act of physical gratification can hardly match the blissful experience that mutual love between man and woman affords. Lust can never rise to the ecstatic height of love' (Pandit 133).

The poem 'Divorce' draws a sharp and deep line across the sand where all words and gestures are expended. Kumar in 'A Woman Labourer Breast-feeding her Child, during Lunch-break' speaks of the pure maternal love for a child. He captures the moments of a woman labourer who does her work and suckling her child at noon. The labourer woman becomes a symbol of simplicity and innocence.

Under her head-veil, now dropped

to cover two moons, wee hands

and feet flutter like a culver. (20)

D. C. Chambial observes 'even the pitiless time that nibbles at stone seems to stop and hear the emotional heart-throb of the mother and the child' (199).

Time that never ceases to nibble

at stone. wood or glass

now pricks up its ears to listen

to a heart – throb. (20)

'Baptism of Fire' in the words of M. L. Pandit, 'is a poem of adolescent love, encroached upon by the sacred thread ceremony. The sacrificial fire reminds that young novice of the fire of passion lit by the touch of his girl's (134) 'nascent breasts'.Kumar writes:

This is the fire
that crackles when I touch Sheila's
nascent breasts under the mango tree.

I burn when my mouth holds
her scarlet throat, till she goes
limp in my arms like soufflé
and the earth spins on a bull's horns
for a new gyre. (21)

The protagonist affirms that 'This is the time for me to suck/up all the mangoes in Sheila's back-/yard till every tree cries out'(22). He calls upon the priest to empathise with his 'yearning to swing on rainbow / to the horizon's skirt'. and when the ritual is over, the protagonist rises-

noosed by the sacred thread
to make off to a moon - face
under a mango tree (22)

ManjuJaidka comments on Kumar's poetry:

A recurring symbol in Shiv Kumar's poetry is fire. The symbol seems derived from T. S. Eliot who uses it in a dual sense — the fire that consumes and that which purifies. In Kumar's work the fire which 'purifies' relates only to hypocrisy to a contrived attempt at godliness ('Baptism of Fire, PP 21 -22). The real fire for him is that which engulfs the body - the purely physical. sexual need of a person.

To the poet, these needs are real, and far greater than the so-called spiritual or emotional. And so there is a strong emphasis on physicalities- the body, the breasts, the torso, the womb, the umbilicus (247 -248).

Kumar like Ezekiel is unsparing in his criticism in 'TisHazari Courts, Delhi' on the delay in getting justice and the inherent drawback in our judiciary system. He writes:

From the murky corridors of this labyrinth,

there's no escape. Since time began

I've watched the victim enter from the eastern

gate - and then only the smoke exits

from the other end. (23)

'TisHazari' being a seat of getting justice, since time immemorial-'There's the Kaurava - Pandava land- wrangle/still being argued in some haunted chamber'.

Only the clerk and the crier are wide - awake -

their palms unclawed like the Pandas'

at a shrinecontrolling all entry through the strait gate

to silence.(23)

Kumar like Shakespearean 'Poet, Lover and Lunatic' syndrome, says about the fate of lover, the cancer patient and the petitioner.

It's the long wait that kills

the lover, the cancer - patient

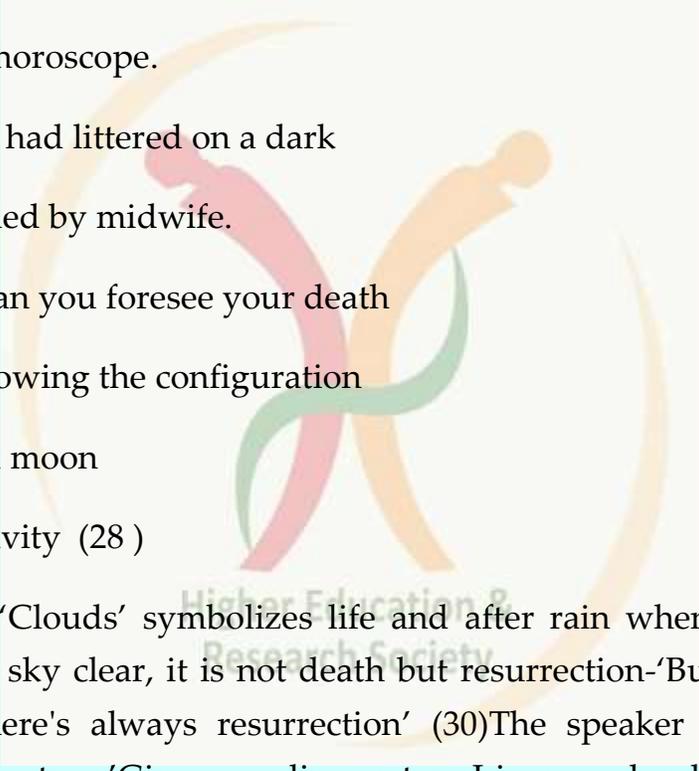
and the petitioner. (23)

Getting justice, these days, is almost a life consuming act. He writes: 'I'm now old and snuffed out, my son -/I'm lost somewhere in these catacombs.'(24)It's an

autobiographical poem as the poet is himself caught up in litigation; and his petition seeking redressal is kept pending in the Tis Hazari Court.

'The Looking Glass' reflects the image of the protagonist who says 'Since I am no Venus, no cherub./will hold a mirror to my face'(25)

In 'Death of a Dog', the poet ironically asks how could one foresee death without knowing the configuration of stars and moon when a speedy car send him home, 'tailing blood along the grave path'. The end of the dog shocks the poet:



He had no horoscope.
His mother had littered on a dark
night unaided by midwife.
And how can you foresee your death
without knowing the configuration
of stars and moon
at your nativity (28)

The poem 'Clouds' symbolizes life and after rain when the clouds fade away leaving the sky clear, it is not death but resurrection-'But to fade away is not to die/for there's always resurrection' (30)The speaker in 'Self-obituary' pleads for a line or two-'Give me a line or two I in some local paper' (31) in an obituary column.

Kumar's 'DalLake: Srinagar' is a good example of how the atmosphere of a place can inspire a poet to excel himself. He approximately captures the mood of a beautiful morning born out the womb of time- 'as though this morning has just been midwifed/out of the womb of time.'

It's daybreak the moment of embrace

between rose and briar dream and reality,
faith and negation. (32)

The poet gives description of Dal Lake in its various shades and moods which enchants the tourist from all over the world:

Time for the tourists-
alien or native to swoop down upon Dal,
like locusts, scrambling for the shikaras,
baptised 'Prince Abdulla', 'Cautious America',
'Pan Am', 'Lady of Nagina'. (33)

The house- boats decked for tourist are named – 'Prince Abdulla'. 'Cautious America', 'Pan Am', and 'Lady of Nagina'.

Post-colonial poet like Ezekiel, Kumar is also against mechanical performances of rituals. He is in favour of the subversion of tradition and ritual and therefore, irony becomes a favourite mode in his poetry. The poem 'Cleansing Ganga' is a biting satire on scientific and rational approach. Instead of river Ganga cleaning us, we need to cleanse it to get rid of water pollution. 'The images of downy chick, littlum calf and undiapered babe-all creatures 'Chaste, like breast-milk' at nativity- hint at the purity of the river at its source' (Pandit 131). The cunning and corrupt priests, Pandits and Pandas who pollute the Ganga by performing rituals to dupe the innocent people. They open their jaws like hungry crocodiles to swallow purity and their innocence prey:

... the noontime sweat oozing from the saffron-
stripped foreheads of the crocodiles
whose yawning jaws chant mantras in some obsolete
tongue. (35)

The poet suggests that the fish will clean the water by swallowing dust particles and water will be so crystal clear that even a bride will be able to see her in it.

The moon will recapture in the river's mirrors
the sharp lineaments of her own face
flushed like a bride's
as she walks into the nuptial chamber(35)

Kumar makes an attempt to come to terms with contemporary reality. The picture of Delhi, the capital city of India is brought alive in 'O Delhi'. The protagonist recalls his harrowing days when he joined ' a caravan of exiles' and landed in Delhi as refugee. He was received with open arms.

.... I felt redeemed
as you threw open your gates - Kashmiri and Ajmeri —
to welcome indoors a fugitive from another land.
I savoured your hospitality. (36)

He talks of the benevolence of Delhi and regarded the city as his Santa Claus who bestows an unexhaustable bounty on him.

You were then my Santa Claus who pulled down
The moon for me, studded with stars in her girdle
and the ghazals of Ghalib and Zaig on her lips. (36)

The ancient beauty is reflected in these lines 'Your streets and alleyways were like the contours/of a virgin's torso-taut and scented' (36)The poet laments on the vanishing glory of Delhi and asks 'what have you done to yourself ? Delhi that he had experienced once is no more now. He felt her beauty has degenerated as 'old matron with sagging udders and plastic dentures' who now wears 'death

mask'. He is deeply distressed by the morning paper which brings him 'haul of crime'.

..... a dog-fight near Jama

Masjid over a piece of meat, beef or pork.

a pet goat, named Shah Bano, slaughtered during broad

daylight for pulling at a king's rope of justice. (37)

The poet is pessimistic about Delhi's future and makes a prophesy-
....you too will fall

like Nineveh and Babylon

and no new Indraprastha will rise

from your barren ashes. (38)

In 'Refugees' the poet describes the tragic condition of the refugees

'Blinkered like yoked bulls./burdened with ancestral memories,' (39)The poet describes 'Sunset Over Simla Hills' is 'Just one dip behind the hilltop / and it's done'.

The plight of the Eunuchs is depicted in a poem called 'Eunuchs'. Eunuchs are considered to be auspicious at the time of child birth and marriage on these occasions.

to a door that has been blessed-

a wedding anniversary,

a son's thread ceremony.

even a cow's first delivery. (42)

It is the irony that the Eunuchs who bring luck to others, remain cursed for ever-
'that brings you blessings from their gods/who themselves died boonless. (42)'

The persona in 'High Fever' feels 'trapped in a paradox' and his 'Eye-balls sizzle like egg-yolk / in a frying pan'. (43)The poet describes a wayside lingam-shaped boulder is sculpt into a god in 'A Wayside Shiva Temple'.

Some ingenious hand has cleansed it
with plantain leaves, bathed it in cow's milk,
ensconced it in brick and mortar,
securing it behind an iron railing (45)

The rock once was 'wind-swept, rain washed-and stripped under the candid sky' is adored as god. Every passerby makes his offering to this Shiva. There is bold irony in the lines-'even the sun can no longer see/its progeny growth into a legend. '(45)

The poem 'The Dead Can Speak' presents the situation a friend's letter arrived after his death. The poet imagines the soul in its flight has just dropped a letter in his mail box. On reading the letter, he said:

Your sentences blur in my eye's moisture
your words metamorphose into riddles.
A face surfaces from the page
like a dead fish - its silver belly bloated
and taut-its eyes frozen in insentience. (46)

The poet intends to see his friend and asks-'I look forward to seeing you soon' - /but where - and how? (46)'

The cow is regarded as holy in Hindu mythology but 'A Stray Cow'-

.... may munch away an obituary column

from a yesterday's newspaper
in a garbage can
and dream of ancestor against whose
haunches Lord Krishna often reclined
and fluted the universe into a swing (48)

The poem 'Rain of Night' presents an assault began under the cover of darkness.

Nobody knew when the assault began -
how many of the king's men fell
in the trenches, defending the city (49)

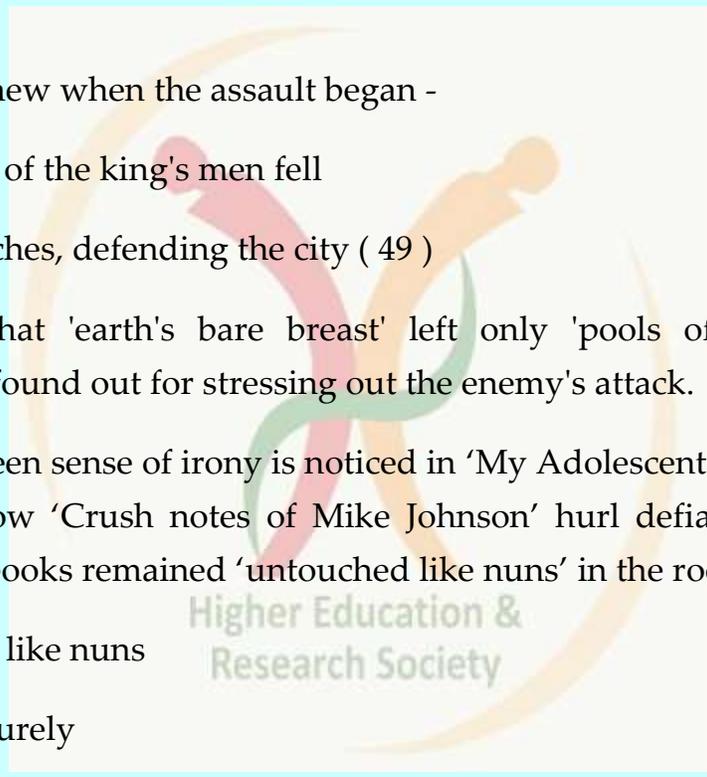
The horror is that 'earth's bare breast' left only 'pools of blood' but 'no fingerprints' are found out for stressing out the enemy's attack.

Kumar's keen sense of irony is noticed in 'My Adolescent Son's Room'. The speaker notes how 'Crush notes of Mike Johnson' hurl defiance at the world there, while the books remained 'untouched like nuns' in the room.

untouched like nuns
perch demurely
waiting for even a side-glance
'Enter ye at your own risk ! (50)

The poem 'Trapfalls in the Sky' after which the book has been named is the last poem of the first section. Kumar captures the essence of declining age through a visual image.

Now that the candle is sinking



on its elephantiasis foot
of sprawling wax, I see in the sky
only trapfalls into which have vanished
all my liquid assets. (51)

The sinking candle in the poem symbolizes the old age.

Shiv K. Kumar is a unique voice of post-colonial Indian English Poetry. His themes are common and uncommon both. His early poetry autobiographical and confessional in irony and gentle humour are the tools which employs in uplifting his poetic style. The theme of Landscape and National Identity makes a rewarding study in his poetry.

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