

# Rereading Shakti Chattapaddhya

"But the man himself went away burning and burning /In fire" — in his 'Epitaph' written more than a decade ago, such was the self-image envisaged by Shakti Chattapaddhya who passed away only recently, on March 23, at Shantiniketan in West Bengal. Unquestionably a leading poet in the Bengali language, Shakti had been writing with a telling impact upon the subsequent generation of young poets who could find in him an inspiring guru ever bent on his vocation as a ceaselessly struggling poet. Shakti exhibits an unusual degree of *sakti*, a remarkable measure of *elan* not only in his treatment of themes, but also in his deft engineering of structures, rhythms, rhetorics, and lexical resources. The Daily Star takes this modest opportunity to pay tribute to Shakti Chattapaddhya through presenting a rereading of his poetry accompanied by translations of some of his major poems written over roughly the past three decades.

While it is fairly difficult to come up with a final and objective estimate of his place in Bengali literature, it has nevertheless become a kind of critical reflex action over the years to recognise the importance of Shakti Chattapaddhya as a poet. Indeed, he is important, on more than one count, for what he sets out to do. Noted for his deft verbal manoeuvres now and then exemplified in his syntactic pleasure-principle that lets leisurely sinewy clauses stretch into connotative oases of shadow and suggestion, and variously known for the supple energy of his line and the unerring grasp of tone, Shakti did not take much time to attract a critical readership which compulsively responded to his first volume of poetry called *O Love O Silence* published thirty-four years ago in 1961. In this volume, Shakti clearly exhibits a poet involved in a stylistic struggle geared towards forging and evolving a language that is dense, suggestive, shadowy, and certainly accommodative of compulsive and self-destructive urges. For example, the variously woven images of returns to nothingness and darkness; the use of the motif of strange, anonymous smell that encourages more dissonance than unity; the images of cremations, graveyards, corpses, ashes, evincing a certain amount of existentialist preoccupation with death and destruction, and a kind of nostalgia sometimes morbid, sometimes melancholy, sometimes epiphanic, *inter alia*, evoke a world that is more shadowy than illumined, more slippery than certain. The light of love to the extent that it sparkles on the other side of darkness is also only tentative in this world. It is with this tentativeness, a sense of carking incertitude, a feeling of *neant* and *nada*, and with this darkness that Shakti begins. And in his beginning, one sees that Shakti fairly represents a brand of high modernism marked by anti-Tagorean thematic concerns, marked by styles that smack partly of Jibanananda, and that are also partly redolent of Baudelaire interestingly wed to his life in Calcutta characterized, to use Shakti's own words, "by a boy's corpse, gazing disease, timid love", and also by "art's urination."

This beginning is certainly not one of much stylistic and textual defamiliarisation, in so far as the continuum of the modernism of the thirties is concerned. But it is interesting, primarily because Shakti's beginning exhibits his uninhibited, candid hospitality to a massive range of lexical resources. For him, every word, wherever it could be fetched and found, matters; he is immune from aesthetic fastidiousness about diction. Apparently obscure, polysyllabic and monosyllabic, rustic, foreign, archaic, sanskritized, Tagorean words — words of almost every kind including slangs, words immune from class-systems and caste-systems, surrealism, existentialist helplessness, wreckage and breakages of the linear continuum of movements and the cause-and-effect relationship, syntactic breaks and jerks accompanied by lineal swirls and disjunctions — all these, if even momentarily taken together, bring to us a world that is imbued with the ethos of modernism on the one hand, and that, on the other, provides us with a feel of post-modernist playfulness. This is a point which has not been carefully taken up in whatever conventional criticisms have hitherto been mounted on Shakti, and I strongly feel that it is time that one looks into the tension between modernism and postmodernism which began to manifest itself quite early in his poetry. Yet another case of such a tension — interesting and powerful — was obviously Jibanananda Das himself.

Now, Shakti has certainly moved away — structurally, linguistically and metrically — from the poem 'That is Not the Moment of Much Happiness', but the tension, indicated above, has not left him. His unremitting penchant for reversals and for playfulness of signifiers has not scaled down with time. In the eighties, when we see Shakti somewhat quiet on his path without feet much staggering, when we find Shakti pronouncing — "I can go, but why should I?" — we still notice a kind of playfulness in his tone, tune and text. This playfulness perhaps lacks its earlier textual violence and explicitness; but then, its implicit presence offers an experience of another kind of intensity, for 'the moon beckons: Oh come, come, come', taking us to a world where life becomes a life-long play with "words, words, words".

Scribbles and sketches by Shakti Chattapaddhya

From the sixties to the eighties, Shakti Chattapaddhya exhibited quite an astonishingly productive phase, though he came to establish his own idiom, boldly charting his path to lexical, structural and metrical freedom which in the seventies and eighties inspired and stimulated a considerable number of younger poets both in West Bengal and Bangladesh. True, as John Crowe Ransom once maintained, "metre is a powerful intellectual determinant marshalling the words, and inevitably, the things". And Shakti, over a long period, remains involved in exploiting and exploring the metrical possibilities in his poetry. True, the employment of mixed metres constitutes one of the major stylistic contours of Shakti's poetry. We have this phenomenal Shaktiesque *intermetrically* exemplified particularly in the seventies; we see Shakti challenging and unsettling the hegemony of *payar* which through Jibanananda Das could achieve powerful flexibilities and structural varieties. What has, undeniably, remained neglected in the process is the possibility of *matrabrittya* which Shakti, more successfully than any of his contemporaries, has exploited with an effect hitherto unsurpassed. It is only after Sudhin Dutta that Shakti does this — tellingly, effectively, though not absolutely singlehandedly. What Shakti further does is that he evolves a metrical chemistry where his *matrabrittya* play comes into an active contact with other metres — not remaining fixed, but interestingly fluid and playful. Indeed, one can say that metrical playfulness accompanied by a ground-breaking focus on *matrabrittya* is one of the stylistic characteristics of Shakti's poetry.

Understandably enough, it is not always safe to generalize stylistic and thematic characteristics of Shakti's poetry; for what, indeed, turns out to be our experience of readings is that Shakti is a form-breaker and form-maker of sorts — who could, for example, capture the resonances of an essentially asemantic, intangible, dark, murky world in lines that are long or longish, or in lines that quiver with haiku-like verbal compression and concentration. He has written some of the finest sonnets; he has also written a good number of longish prose-poems where

lines keep running on, uninhibitedly. We notice that death and damage constitute some of the haunting images and motifs in Shakti's poetry. We also get this impression that love and life and light constitute his aesthetic concerns. In other words, Shakti, perhaps once again more successfully than any of his contemporaries, evokes a constant play of binary oppositions which perpetually invest critical generalizations with irresistible feelings of unease. I would emphasize strongly that in his generation of poets, it is only Shakti — and Shakti only — who could exhibit an unmistakable flair for playfulness to the extent that his modernism is at once brought to the fore, and put under erasure: in Shakti, things are and are not. Yes, he loves to play around with themes, structures, words — nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and with life itself. This is the point which has become increasingly evident in my reading of Shakti's poetry, even in my reading of some of his very early poems. Here, I intend to propose a reading of one of his earlier poems called "That is Not the Moment of Much Happiness".

Entering the verbal world of the poem 'That is Not the Moment of Much Happiness', one immediately seems to abandon one's hope for fixity and direction, or any thematic certainty; for, as the poet says, "everything staggers". "The body from top to toe staggers", indeed, right from the beginning, our reading also begins to stagger from side to side of the road like a man drunk enough at midnight. We have the image of the footpath repeatedly evoked in the poem; but, then, the footpath is defamiliarised, digressed, transferred, and one's reading at this point begins to confront an epistemological vacuum which, itself, tends to put all kinds of certitudes under erasure. One may say that in the poem, we see that a man drunk at midnight tries to return home with his feet tellingly staggering. But, then, one cannot say if he returns at all. The road is not clearly imaged in the poem; it is shadowy, curvaceous, full of other things like walls and homes, and thus, the road itself becomes a play — the road looks like a road, and yet it does not.

and one's return also becomes an endless possibility as also becomes one's journey. The question always remains: "Where are we going?" and the question keeps plaguing our reading.

As we move towards the poem, we notice that realities keep rising within realities; for example, there is a "home within a home", "a foot inside a home", giving one the impression that there is no fixed core of reality as such, and that, at least, surface is not reality. One may notice a certain amount of Hopkinsian preoccupation with *inscapes* and *instresses* of realities: one feels that reality demands endless semantic excavations and reexcavations which, however, cannot guarantee any form of certitude, any truth, any complacency, or any return to a fixed address known as "home"; for the body staggers, and keeps staggering, and the road is immediately transferred. At this point, the poet's pronouncement of "and nothing more" turns out to be an interestingly ironic evocation of "many things more".

Forking and reforking one's ways through a kind of existenti-

al labyrinth and cognitive limbo that the poem tends to create sometimes impressionistically and sometimes surrealistically, one is indeed unavoidably beset with "many more things" — with "a black van within a black van.... nth term"; with "graveyards, windows, doors"; with "skeletons turned upside down" — all of which clearly attest to Shakti's unmistakable flair for playfulness which now and then tends to light up the *Other*. This otherness is no doubt emphasized, but it is not fixed either. One may take a step further and say that while evoking the other and inner sides of realities in terms of viewing "a foot inside a foot" and "the wall against the wall", Shakti deconstructs, and therefore, reverses almost all conventional forms of realities, celebrating a play of signifiers that one particularly notices towards the near-end of the poem "That is Not the Moment of Much Happiness".

In fact, it is these techniques of inversions, reversals, defamiliarisations and ironic indirections which animate a kind of Shaktiesque deconstructionist playfulness in the poem: nostalgia, impression-



### Epitaph

Following a short spell of happiness  
He died what was then a man's death.  
He was a poet, a man who was also  
Utterly indigent. When he died,  
Publishers of the city celebrated, rejoiced;  
For, the man was gone; what a relief!  
No more would he pester them; showing up  
In the evening, clean-shaven and well-dressed,  
Would he say: Give me money! If you don't,  
I'll pull everything down, destroy your damn  
Archives, or I'll set the entire house on fire.

But the man himself went away, burning  
In fire — the poet and the starveling.

Translated by Azfar Hussain

ism, surrealism, existentialist helplessness, wreckage and breakages of the linear continuum of movements and the cause-and-effect relationship, syntactic breaks and jerks accompanied by lineal swirls and disjunctions — all these, if even momentarily taken together, bring to us a world that is imbued with the ethos of modernism on the one hand, and that, on the other, provides us with a feel of post-modernist playfulness. This is a point which has not been carefully taken up in whatever conventional criticisms have hitherto been mounted on Shakti, and I strongly feel that it is time that one looks into the tension between modernism and postmodernism which began to manifest itself quite early in his poetry. Yet another case of such a tension — interesting and powerful — was obviously Jibanananda Das himself.

Given his power and possibilities, Shakti Chattapaddhya as a poet needs continuous rereadings and reappraisals, particularly at a time when younger poets in this part of the world have been increasingly excited about, and disturbed by, the phenomenon of what has come to be known as postmodernism. I do not, of course, mean to say that Shakti is deliberately or avowedly or singularly a postmodernist in the European sense of the term. True, postmodernism as a concept or a style is still nebulous; and therefore, it has many dangers to offer, if one does not properly — and historically and naturally — come to terms with it. But, then, for an answer to the oft-raised question as to whether post-modernism marks a schismatic breakthrough with modernism as such, one can return to Shakti Chattapaddhya, one of our foremost poets, not only for theoretical engagements, but more for "readings, readings, readings" which themselves constitute a world of poetry within poetry — experience-within-experience, death-within-death, life-within-life, representing the other and inner sides of life itself.

## Poems of Shakti Chattapaddhya

Translated by Azfar Hussain

### Providence

There is a strange smell in the garden.  
Come, and let the two of us now return.  
Break, break the chains that bind our hands,  
let the bumble-bee quiver, falling on our body;  
whatever heavy dusts weigh on us, whatever  
cliches and archaisms in the language of the mind,  
let us leave them, and return — let the two of us  
take in mind our two separate ways.

Old age creeps upon us unawares, your door  
endlessly open ... where does the propitious  
moonlight dream-tour in our company?  
No more team your lac-dye with the light  
of your not-much-warm lust: roll up those  
fleeting fringes of the seascape.

Let that hour end, the hour that keeps me  
drowned in your dark, dishevelled hair;  
the blue migrant quips and cranks lie hidden  
in the sparkling wrinkles of your face once so lovely;  
O, my garden, punctuated with a solitary space  
for happiness, why do you in your efforts hide  
sorrow's face, or cover it with scented wild flowers?

O my inexperienced palace, give unto her lap  
a boy's corpse, a gazing disease, timid love.  
Why don't you stage a comeback, elemental, primal,  
and let me just sit on my artificial life:  
art's urination ripens the tumour, when the anus  
grows old.

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### You Came to Mind

I remembered, you I remembered,  
a sudden-whistle at the junction,  
level-crossing — the train was waiting,  
are you now reading Hart Crane?

Leaving a hundred and fifty miles behind  
I went near you, but you said:  
if you do this  
nothing would remain of that tiny income  
you earn from teaching!  
True, the pocket was empty, it had a rat only.

You counselled me at the time,  
while I squarely faced the moon,  
You said: this — keep with you.  
Your photograph is now kept in my trunk.

I remembered, you I remembered,  
a sudden-whistle at the junction,  
level-crossing — the train was waiting  
are you now reading Hart Crane  
unnecessarily?

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### The Moon in the Endless Well-water

Last night the stars smearing their bodies with  
festive lights charred themselves out. Throughout  
the last night, its wings kept falling off, falling off,  
in the spur of the wind, the wing seemed to glisten  
like a fish in the sands sprinkled on the shore,  
perhaps it  
could have been more lustrous with a little light of  
the heart.

The night-long rustle of the feathers falling off  
came to ears; it seemed the entire will of the stars  
from the remote horizon turned upside down in my  
garden.

Now I will take you to a starlight-farm  
on the day of the new-grain festival; all bright  
screens of the world I will carry along with me,  
I will also take *Shefali*-saplings, the sunflower-  
hamlet

would remain a little away from the farmhouse;  
yes, this time, I will take you to a starlight-farm  
on the day of the new-grain festival.

If you ever love under the spell of a green, tender  
leaf  
on earth, if you ever desire to visit window-lights  
inside their houses on your magic tour —  
tell me even that, before we leave, and I will take  
all of them.

Never forget you remain near our courtyard,  
the moon lies fallen in the endless well-water.

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### That is Not the Moment of Much Happiness

The body from top to toe staggers, the wall against  
the wall,  
the cornice against the cornice,  
the footpath is transferred at midnight,  
on the way back home, a home within a home, a foot  
inside a foot,  
a bosom within a bosom

and nothing more — (and much more?) — even  
earlier,  
the body from top to toe staggers, the wall against  
the wall,  
the cornice against the cornice,  
the footpath is transferred at  
midnight  
on the way back home, a home within a home, a foot  
inside a foot,  
a bosom within a bosom,  
and nothing more.

'Hands up' — raise your arms till someone  
picks you up  
in a black van within a black van within yet  
another black van  
windows, doors, graveyards  
arranged in a row —  
skeletons turned upside down, the white weevil  
eating into the skeleton, life within the weevil,  
death inside life — so  
death-within-death  
and nothing more!

'Hands up' — stick'em up till someone  
picks you up,  
and throws you out of the van-window  
but inside another van  
where someone always waits, with a handful of  
plasters flaking off the wall  
or someone waits like a banyan-shoot,  
someone or other waits, you do not know him or her,  
but waits behind the leaves like the strong bud of a  
flower  
with a gossamer-like golden noose in hand —  
or it may be a garland round your neck — at your  
wedding  
midnight when the footpath is transferred, when the  
body  
cap-a-pie staggers, the wall against the wall, the  
cornice  
against the cornice.

Suppose, the railway station is running past the train,  
the starlight sparkles beside the flickering electric  
bulb,  
suppose, your shoes are walking leaving your feet fixed  
—  
everything from heavens to the underworld is turned  
topsy-turvy,  
suppose, a palanquin of corpses placed on children's  
shoulders  
moves towards *Neemtala* —  
the bride-chamber-dance of old  
men and women  
in the next world —

That is not the moment of much happiness, not the  
moment of much delight,  
right then, right there the body from top to toe  
staggers, the wall against the wall,  
the cornice against the cornice,  
the footpath is transferred  
at midnight on the way back home, a home within  
a home, a foot inside a foot,  
a bosom within a bosom  
and nothing more.

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### I Can, but Why Should I?

Well, I think it's good to make a volte-face.  
Much have I stained my two hands with the huge  
black — so long!  
Never have I thought of you, on your own terms.

Standing by a lonely trench at night, I hear  
the moon beckoning: oh, come! come, come.  
Now, standing sleepily on the bank of the Ganges  
I hear the funeral-wood calling: come, come

And I can go,  
I can go along any direction whatever.  
But, why should I?

I will kiss my child holding his face in full.

I will go  
but, not now really.  
When I will go  
I will take you all along with me.  
I will not go alone  
at a time not ripe enough.