CHAPTER II

SENSE OF COMPASSION
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Anna Sujatha Mathai's strong suit is compassion. Her poems are meditations on suffering, slowly leading to illumination through compassion.

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While we think of Mathai's poetry we feel that much of her poetry has been written on human suffering and deep sense of compassion. As a sensitive writer she works more on discovery of pain in the life of human beings. She always attempts to lighten the endless pain of human beings sharing it through humanitarian sympathy and consolation. The evil forces such as poverty, hunger, exploitation and starvation shake the joy of innocent people. Indeed, they are the most significant facet of the life. Being caught in the storm of these evil forces many innocent people fall into the clutches of death. A cry of suffering which hoards in every corner of life compels to find a direction for life. Perhaps she realises that her share of compassion neither changes the fate of human beings affected by the world around them nor saves the innocent people's cry from fall into the clutches of death. Yet she hopes — a ray of hope, love, fellow feeling which can bring solace and comfort
to those who are in jeopardy. And certainly, as she tells it becomes:

"Our highest hope,
our tallest building
our loveliest song".2

This forms the central message of her poetry. It can be studied from various angles and points of view, and its varied nauseous and poignant realities are brought out with intensity and credibility as seen in "Hunger", "Journey", "My World", "On the Beach at Baga", "Ishvari's Voice", "Night and Children of the Slums" and other poems.

For Mathai, like many other emerging poets of today 'Poetry is a way of being honest'. She doesn't respond to every aspect of life for she maintains a sense of duty to poetry. Her intention is to bring out better crop of poetry while brooding over gloomy picture of life. She finds honesty and sincerity in pursuing an inevitable loss of pain in man's life. Human beings have sufficient grief on the earth. Man's dreams, hopes, ideas and aspirations are relentlessly diminished by the perilous realities of life. Death is the common lot of man — 'who should not have died' but she doesn't allow any one to die of hunger or starvation. It is clear when she says:
"There are all kinds of hungers that stalk this earth and the only bread that satisfies is ordinary human compassion".

These lines throw light on her poetic blend of mind which works on humanitarian grounds. The poet is a Christian and knows her Bible well. So, the impact of scripture's knowledge is always on her. She extends her helping hand for those who are in need of help as scriptures preach. She is moved to pity and sorrow on such occasions. It has become a part of her poetry. Thus, the entire collection of poems The Attic of Night is not a record of personal loss but is a collection of service attitude and painful reflection of life. It is evident when she reflects on the existing human sorrow on the earth.

"Hunger screams from every hoarding, nudges while you pray, and seems to slip between each legitimate pleasure; even the film star on the screen probing her own empty childhood, her fears and fantasies, her hunger, and her thirst, becomes co-existent with the child with hungry eyes; women with hungry souls cry their emptiness, their hopelessness,
as women do
who, helpless,
watch their children starve". 4

A close scrutiny of the above lines mark the
agony of existing human suffering. These lines, perhaps
do not mark the higher action, sublime ideas or thoughts.
Every writer is born to find out something. Mathai is
concerned with the people who are the victims of the
circumstances. Her deliberate use of words like 'fears',
hunger', 'thirst', 'hungry eyes', 'hungry souls',
'emptiness', 'hopelessness', and 'helplessness' leave
us with a sense of despair. Man has become puppet in
life's fatal flow. Nevertheless, what the poet needs
is empathy and fellow feeling — a feeling that 'we are
all brethern' as Shelly puts it. The tragic death of an
innocent girl in the cluster of hunger probes the poet's
emotions to be deeply felt for the destruction of flowery
youth and manhood. We can see similar strains in
Sitakant Mahapatra's poem "The Postmortem". Mahapatra's
sense of frustration and hunger mark the extension of
human suffering other than the element of compassion:

"No, please do not rip open his stomach
to look for a trace of half-digested food
and seek an answer to that perverse question". 5
Unlike Mathai, Mahapatra tries to enjoy and understand the meaning of life with pessimistic spirit. The poetry of Mathai and Mahapatra maintains similar strain in reflecting the existing of quality of life. No doubt, both are concerned about the consciousness of poverty and the suffering of the innocent people and of women as victims of male lust in a male dominated society. Their tragic consciousness operates the poetry in larger scale than any other poets of today. They are always in pursuit of a vision of grief, troubling sense of loss, pain, dejection and rejection prevailing in every walk of life. Despite, similar concerns and strains their approach to life is different. Mahapatra's approach to life is something pessimistic. He confines himself to tragic-pessimistic tone instead of wishing for something better to happen. Sometimes, Mahapatra goes to the extent of saying that the fates of human being are worse than the death. His repeated themes and motifs also reveal his pessimistic mood of expression.

A good number of poems of Mathai, especially those written on passion and compassion deal with an event or situation and they, sometimes elaborately, sometimes in brief reveal the repeated vision of themes. They contain the truth of life, the quality of existence —
the colour and flavour of each passing moment of life: things to be felt not described or explained. However, the description of tragic poems mark no progress. We can only see a change — a change which does not rouse the instincts. Indeed, some of these poems though charmingly written and probably spontaneously conceived they suffer from rich poetic texture. As a result, many poems on suffering and human compassion fail to evoke emotions in the minds of the readers. That is why, we fail to sympathise with what she writes, thinks, feels, sees, hears, or perceives. Sometimes, the attitude of single approach — the recurrent sense of hurtful feelings prevent her to have no progress in her poems. She could have done well in other literary forms like the short story, the recite or even the prose parable. Jayanatha Mahapatra another poet, a poet of promise looks similar in this respect. Yet, he maintains richness, variety and progress. For instance, he has number of poems to his credit on the theme of poverty, hunger, starvation, sexual exploitation of women and male lustfulness. "Hunger" is one of the most remarkable poems of Mahapatra. It is characterised by extreme trenchency and brevity of expression. What makes the difference between Mahapatra and Mathai is that he has not exploited the poetic,
tickling opportunity which the theme offered him, and the theme has been handled with stern, unsentimental compassion. He never takes the opportunity of over-straining single idea as Mathai has done off and on. Commenting on the 'overstraining' of the single idea Vepa Rao rightly pointed out, "This sensitive poet (Anna Sujatha Mathai) has a delightful style, her basic problem seems to be in deciding when and how to rest a poem. At times she over­strains the idea — a fault shared by most of us written in English". In "City of Sorrows", in her habitual way, collects the scattered gloomy thoughts from wilderness of the world. The poem is damp—with the wet earth and air describing the common lot of constant sorrow of human beings which springs far from indefinite space — the Sun. The human love has become sterile and has faded into insignificance. In course of the poem we may hear that life is a continual painful dialogue which reminds us of a 'barbaric heritage'. The stream of desperate feelings, gloomy clutches of images, as we see, in many poems of this kind, give sufficient evidence to prove that life is a pathetic cry. In "City of Sorrows", the city is a cruel ghetto — a ghetto typically crowded with poor housing conditions artificially cut off from other people. They have forgotten the change of seasons and their sorrow sparks from the Sun. The mute walls cannot
describe this cruel ghetto. Their dreams are firing in the glowing wood of fire.

"City mourning in ashes, widowed, barren, where will you go now which way will you build? your beautiful children lie charred and dead your dreams smoulder in the last embers".  

The screaming presences remind us of barbaric heritage. The tragic descriptive tone is at its high peak. We are moved to read the poem repeatedly yet we lose interest as she maintains no equilibrium by ending the poem abruptly. As a result, many poems which deal with sympathy and are rooted in sorrow seem to remain insipid and monotonous. A somber awareness of decay, death, suffering and compassion comes as frequent reminder, not just in The Attic of Night (1991), but also in her previous collections — Crucifixions (1970), We the Unreconciled (1972). Many poems of these two collections can be rightly compared to the crisis of the destiny of man — the struggle of good and evil, of the human predicament and of man's estate. She is shocked when she senses that "It is death and desolation, sadness
and sorrow that concerns us to lose all hope; it is the affirmation of life". That is why a sense of duty compels her to write,

"I am committed to
A world beyond despair"

"My eyes search and seek
To penetrate the locust night".

Society has lost its horizons and flowery smell. All living creatures are caught in tragic destiny. A sense of troublesome life haunts innocent people including children. A wounded sense of loss and despair makes them lose their faith in life. They look for the eyes of understanding, comfort, relief and consolation. For them a healthy society is an optical illusion. Therefore, the poet makes honest efforts to bring consolation and reconciliation among people. She may or may not bring change in the society, yet she makes sincere efforts to shut out the unreliable world. She describes her desire in doubtful mood:

"I do not think I can ever shut it out
The sound of flowers struggling
From their painfully dark underground roots
Into earth's warm lap
And the sun's caress."
These delicate things
Accept their brief existence
We like unreconciled
Do Not, cannot ".

Yet, repeatedly, she tries to crystallise the moments of
agony, frustration, despair, nostalgia or ennui in a
crystic style with a mood of self-examination. Her firm
desire to bring forth healthy society remain sometimes
futile. Christ has said to build a house on the rock
for better foundation so that it may not be scattered
at the time of nature's destructive forces — storms
and cyclones. Because, a house which is built on rock
stands for certainty. A house build on the rock is
stronger than a house on the sands. She regrets the
lack of rocks on the land. Mathai, here symbolically
brings out the uncertainty of life though traced back
to the Biblical theme.

"Build your house on rocks,
   He said.
But here, in this sea, there are no rocks.
A vast stretch, only, of cruel seas,
And beyond and before the shifting sands
which draw us down ... down ... down".10

The 'cruel Seas' and 'Shifting sands' stand for uncertainty
of life in a chaotic society.
People in this society simply are thrown into cruel seas to meet their own fate. Henceforth, she describes the nameless horror of the life in casual way. The entire contour of man's misery is summarised in the following lines in an exhausted mood:

"What sort of a gift is this life?
So briefly it shines
like a jewel
Reflecting the colours of the Sun
And the moon's pure light.
But it grows dim so soon.
And is snatched away.
Nothing to hold to
Nothing to keep". 11

The emptiness, nothingness, hopelessness, meaningless of the life is summed up in these simple lines.

"What is this life I ask again.
The Silence does not answer.
Listen listen to the silence". 12
Here, her comments on the happenings in the world hint of the uncertainties and ambiguities of life. In a sense she is not a poet but a singer of the world-happenings towards which humanity is moving onward. She moves forward and onward in her poems to catch the feelings of helplessness and crude conventions of life.

We are living in a world of rapid change in which everything changes except man's life. Even the acquired knowledge of man keeps changing from time to time. A violent gust of wind comes from each direction and hits man with all its fury. As a result, the life boat is tossed to and fro like a helpless ball. Man meets death in every moment of life.

"Death is the blaze of the morning
Death in the afternoon
With violence, with quietness, with sad certainty,
Death comes often here". 13

A close study of the three collection of poems The Attic of Night, Crucifixions and We the Unreconciled certainly leaves the impression that Mathai is the poet of humanity as she deals mostly with human suffering. Perhaps, her personal life also is partially responsible for compassion. A rare reflection of her feelings can be
seen occasionally in some poems. Disqusted with life in the company of his own people especially when she finds the absence of love, and meaninglessness of life, would like to soar into the sky like a bird, into a free, untrammelled sphere, steering clear of the complication of the mechanical life and spectre of deadly sorrow. She senses that love has no space under the sun. It is frozen in freezing weather of troublesome atmosphere. Man has no hope for new aspirations and novelty of life. A troubling sense of tragic life puts man in perfect fidgets. Therefore, man's urge to fly away is inevitable as that of the bird. His impulsive or inevitable pain in society compels him to find better place — a place where he can find solace and deliverance from pain, and his harsh memories may be obliterated. As she describes in "Flight".

"I have been too long in a harsh climate,
Tossed between fierce need
And seasons of tenderness.
Like those birds
whose instinct
Moves them to migrate
To distant Lands
In unfavourable seasons,
And fly blindly, yet unerringly,
With only feeling's radar
To a warmer land
Where harsh memories may be obliterated.  

However, her ambition to fly against the sun is not that of Icarus who ruined himself due to his over ambition. Here, her desire to fly against sun is to find a warmer land — a land of comfort and solace. She does not explain the reason as to how to achieve a warmer place — a place of Novelty.

"Seeking new dreams, hopes, faces
So as to return stronger to that inclement Land".

She considers life a sequence of tragic events occurring on the same plane where man is interrupted in motion of tragic waves. Everything in the world is in a state of flux due to eternal sorrow and pain. What is in store for man except the holocaust of pain and loss. Her genuine observations and utterances on man's unchangeable suffering convinced her mind to peep into the fate of human life. Mathai's poetry seems to be lyrical in its initial impulse, but it is invariably deepened by a strong sense of parallel with other world, in which death shadows life. What does the other world symbolise, seems to be the meditative question for many. In fact, it does not maintain any allegorical meaning or spiritual punch. It simply denotes
the dangerous chasing elements of life. Unfortunately, the impact of darker side of life is more on the life which kills the joy of many innocent people. Human beings are caught in the shadows of tragic life. And, it is her voluntary duty to explore such kind of life in deeply reflective and meditative mood. Constantly involved with human condition, her sense of compassion and justice is arrived at by an intuitive logic. She looks romantic at times but is always moved by human suffering and flutter. That is why her casual observations on human sorrow slowly leads to self-examination and makes us arrive at the core of experience. For instance, her random survey on human suffering "on the Beach at Baga" is a case in point where she mentions the existing fatal elements of cruelty on earth — exploitation, poverty, adultery and so on. She describes the tragic scenes of human beings half-humourously that 'the Sun dips with violence every evening'. Commenting on the helpless and victimised state of all living creatures. She says;

"The people, the living things, that are caught in its crevices and Fissures".16

Mentioning about a woman who was left alone by a lover to her own fate she dwells how life is sharp in causing harm to people. Almost, causing self-pity,
"She describes the scene, "on the Beach at Baga"
a happy woman reels
holding a small golden baby,
dropping him, and gazing out
upon the sea,
remembering lovers that have left,
leaving her only with
the cry of a child,
Lonely eyes, wild and dazed
watch the sunset
and the baby knows again
its mother's altering moods
of warmth and rejection".  

The description of the miserable position of a victimised
woman with an innocent child who is watching at its mother's
moods — moods of warmth and of reflection draws not only
sympathy and pity but also a meaningful social commentary
on life. She gives the impression that the fate of human
beings is decided by his own fellow beings. All creatures
are equal in life and they have every right to survive

"Oh the fish are dying
on the Beach at Baga
the sting-ray sleeps with
the small gentle fish
and all these are equal in death". 

Further, she feels that 'Desire' is the root
cause of all social evils. It leads to many misfortunes
and innumerable pains. Society can’t be cleansed of its evils by mere social reforms. It is only by releasing a flood of enlightened human virtues by which society can be cleansed and men and women made to grew to their human heights.

Many poems on compassion thus show a great moral insight, pity and concern on human beings irrespective of sex. In "Ishvari's Voice", Ishvari is a victim, observer of life like Tiresias in T.S. Eliot's poem The Wasteland. After casual mentioning of Ishvari's story, Mathai puts thought provoking questions which test our rational behaviour.

"Lovely fair babies, Ama,
Boys left to die by the hospital gates',
Unwanted babies, Illicit desires
Is desire ever illicit? Are babies ever illegitimate.
Those lovely 'boy babies', some girls too". 19

Ishvari has touched 'The raw edge of life's jagged surfaces'. She warns everyone to be prudent while touching sharp edges of life — exploitation of sex, submitting ones will power for momentary pleasures which can be named as 'Illicit desire'. Many innocent unnamed children doomed to meet their miserable fate when people exploit sex without considering consequential loss. That is why
she asks "Is desire illicit, or 'babies ever illegitimate?"
In fact, Mathai could not come to terms with the thought
that why they had been abandoned at an orphanage or why
had their biological parents done that? Were they really
an unwanted, illegitimate children? However, the result
of the free sex of Ishvari leads to sexual exploitation
and breaks the normal conditions of the social set up —
chiefly plundering of parent and child relations. Ishvari,
domestic servant has known all about her and things around
her. She is not accused of being lustful nor condemned
for her attitude in life. Mathai, focus her concentra-
tion on Ishvari's reminiscent mood at night which questions
the sinful deeds of wicked people. The very description
of Ishvari's visual imagery reflects her mental picture
which makes her burst into cry 'Abandonment', "To be
abandoned". Though cold and indifferent at night Ishvari
prepares her lamp of mind with phosphorescence to assess
the distressed world. Like cat's eye, she is alert and
watchful at the troublesome world. And it forms the
central cry of Mathai's poetry which is conveyed through
Ishvari's voice:

"The retina of Night is unflickering
Ishvari, domestic servant, has known it all.
Abandonment. To be abandoned
Her eyes — cold and indifferent in the daytime
Become Phosphorescent at night
Like a cat's".20
Finally, Mathai, packs up the brutality of human beings while reducing their actions lower than the level of animal beings like 'cobra's'.

"The cobra lays eggs
Which ensure another generation".21

Though the use of imagery is not apt, here the laying of eggs by cobra suggests continuity of its identity for future generations. But here contrary to it rational people lost their reason and spoil the fair existence of innocent people including children. This pains the poet and she says:

"Sadness, sadness and loss
Haunt me most,
Keeping me from the miracle
of earth's fruitfulness".22

She is most unprolific but always thought provoking and memorable while she narrates harrowing experiences and events casually chosen from every day life. Deeply shocked at the wanton killings of men, women and children. She questions the very rational behind this senseless action. Sometimes, she disapproves of natural objects such as the Moon, Sun, Earth for not sympathising the victims. As a true Indian poet with a grain of cosmic
vision and a sense of universal brotherhood she laments on the innocent children who fall before their blossom.

"Children stand
in streets touched by Sunset
All over the world
they stand, children
Looking out with sad
lost eyes of innocence

...  ...  ...  ...  ...
Children of the waiting world
Celebrating the ritual of life
Repeating the mystery of death".  

Seeing at the horrified world happenings Mathai tries to find a means of escape from the stark facts of actual life. Having found no other way to escape from harsh realities she coldly welcomes death.

"The Child said to the mother
Amma if we go to that other land
You will not cry any more".  

What does the other land signify here? Certainly it can be wish for death in the mouth of an innocent child who advises its mother to put an end to Life.

Having found none to find fault with in 'Barriers' she cries.

"I want to stand naked on the street
and cry, My God, why this Life?"
However, she tries to control her death wish when she has seen — a sign of hope, a token of Love and affection. She understands the inevitable loss of life and accepts it with a cry of joy.

"and ... suddenly ... the city
was no longer a stranger.
This is my world, I said,
turning joyously to you.
... ... ... ... 
And deep in the heart of stone
A flower bloomed.26

However, the basic function of her poetry is to calculate deep sympathy, hospitality, a sense of compassion, Love, Truthfulness and Loyalty towards one another and entire humanity.

No human group can survive without a minimum of altruistic conduct among its members. Charity is one of the best and holiest of virtues. The pleasure we derive from sharing what we have with others is immense and has no bounds. This can only be experienced and not expressed. As she says,

"But the greatest of all these is charity caritas. To give in love".27
It is true because, charity feels no envy, and finds pleasure while showing love to others. Charity is a phrase with the widest sense. It may be transformed into various ways — as hot food and warm clothes, cheerful looks or care for the sick or prayers for the dying. That is why, she condemns and makes fun of a mother who tries to read and practice the external rituals without minding its essence and intention. So, she questions firmly 'What use are the daily rituals and different kinds of worship without knowing the essential elements of charity, love and pity. It is the similar idea expressed in "Anasuya's Kitchen", it is obvious when Anasuya says while throwing all idols of her worship such as — elephant-headed Ganesh, Jesus, Lakshmi and all.

"Later, she agrees her heart is the best temple, for doesn't God live there
When we are kind and Loving?"

In a nutshell, Mathai's poetry forms a small world which has form and colour of its design to convey a special creative impulse, not derived from tradition and fantasy. She keeps exploring disturbing elements from moment to moment which drives one to self-illuminating core of judgement. Since she creates a small milieu of poetic ground, her poetic focuss becomes precise and
clear. She understands the world around her with self-pity and pain and confines herself within the limits of her own experience which adds additional charm to poetry. Extremely sensitive, she is quite intolerant towards any troubling elements and often rebels against those oppressive elements in a convincing manner. For better and meaningful existence of human life she always speaks on passion, compassion, the essential elements of charity, love and sympathy. Indeed, the poets who came to prominence in late '80s and '90s have had no enduring impact in the intricate patterns of shaded grief in a wounded world. Each poet of this age differs from one another either in handling subject matter or in technique. For instance, the poetry of Mathai meets our eyes for the tragic representation of life — a life with full of wounded feelings. As Ms. Shampa Sinka's poem "The Difference" tells, most of the poet's concern was about the quick verbal descriptions and the sense of good battling against evil.

"The new housemaid came today — a tall slender dark-haired girl of twelve who wanders deerlike from room to room."
Untrained as yet
She cannot control her fingers
picks up, touches too much
and stares without shame
as if she had a right to
soon enough
when she is allocated the space
on the floor
in the corner of the kitchen
for her meals
she will learn
that though she may live with us
and travel with us
and clear away our dirt,
there are distances, codes of conduct
which must be observed
at all times
and, as she realizes,
that, because she was born
more hungry than I
her world cannot ever fuse with mine
her eyes will stop
gazing up at me
and asking me why". 29

Even in lighter moments they tend to revolve around
certain stock situations for better social outlook. Their
poetry marks high simplicity in highthinking. Inspite
of simple style, their poetic approach was to establish
better social outlook making the things more lucid and
plain. And certainly Mathai's outlook of life can be praised for this if not for showing of the brighter side of life.
REFERENCES:


3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.


6. Ibid.


8. Anna Sujatha Modayil, "A World Beyond Despair", 'We the Unreconciled', A Writers Workshop: Calcutta, p.11.


12. Ibid., p.23.


17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.


21. Ibid.

22. Anna Sujatha Modayil, "Hour of Darkness", We the Unreconciled, A Writers Workshop : Calcutta, p.20.


