

## USE OF SYMBOLS IN “MAMATA’S LETTER”

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The credits of a poet depend upon the impact of the expressions and the method of communication a poet is able to import into the poem. Hemkanta Barua achieves the most miraculous effects in his immortal poems like “*MorPrem*”, “*Jarar Dinar Sapon*”, “*Ityadi*”, “*Bihur Dinar Gan*”, and “*Mamatar Chithi*”. Since, Barua was heavily influenced by T S Eliot, these are some of the few poems in which the poetic principle of Eliot – that poetry is understood before it is communicated – is amply illustrated. Hemkanta Barua was, to a great extent, also influenced by the technique of speech rhythm, most skillfully and lovingly employed by Devakanta Barua.

Most of Hemkanta’s poems have cadenced involutions, stops, exclamations and interjections of ordinary tea-table talk. Sometimes it is a one-sided conversation of ordinary life put in black and white. And, in such cases, poetry is often an unperceived by-product, like his famous poem entitled *Mamatar Chithi* (Pathak).

Hemkanta’s poem, “*Mamatar Chithi*” or “Mamata’s Letter” is an excellent depiction of this trait and is a great piece of art work. It is great for its masterly execution, great for the sentiment. Its depiction is great for universality of appeal. The poem is written in the form of an “ordinary letter” by Mamata, the unfortunate young widow, to her dead husband while it reveals Hemkanta Barua’s deep insight into the workings of the mind. The poem is a woman’s perspective, written by a man.

The analysis of the thought processes of the young widow is superb and wonderful. The poem brims with a pathetic tenderness that appeals to the reader instantaneously. His “Mamata’s Letter” is a curious mixture of romance and realism, of life and death, of an abstract imagination of the soul’s immortality and transitoriness of matter, of the natural and the supernatural. The poem, with its universality of appeal and finesse of execution, it is a great classic challenging comparison with Ezra Pound’s “River Merchant’s Wife”.

Every word of the poem is intentionally used and important to understand the poem better. The poets of the time during which Hem Barua wrote had themes like poverty, capitalist exploitation and their interest dwelled in the working of the proletariat. The poetry of a handful of poets, Hem Barua included, dealt with new trends in respect to form and content.

Thus a poet of the New Community might be concerned with the things like the subconscious, the embryo, the libido etc., without bothering about poverty or the capitalist exploitation or revolution so frequently met with in the poetry of the progressive school (Katakya 747).

The time of the composition of the letter by Mamata takes time to comprehend, since; it has not been expressed clearly by the poet. Several instances in the poem, however, help one roughly place the period of the composition.

The first two lines of the first stanza, “I’m writing/ To you after a long time.” show that this letter is not her first letter to her husband. Letters may have been written before but due to her being busy in taking care of her child and due to society’s expectations of her being a widow; she is unable to take time out for herself to recollect her thoughts.

Hem Barua’s poem is “built on the recollection of past, invocation of a future, glories of youth and revolution and hundreds of personal sentiments” (Katakya756). The poem displays the non-linearity of time as it constantly sways with the consciousness of the mind of Mamata. Her recollections are subject to change with the memory of the events that she is travelling through in “the sea of our [her] mind”. She begins her letter with the present scenario which has her lighting a candle to write, closing the windows, while she is at it. She takes the recipient of the letter several years before in her memory line where she spends intimate moments with her husband, the recipient of the letter. The recollection of their conjugal bliss makes her remember what her father had said to her seven years ago, after she started living in her new home, only to remember the present time, where her father has passed away a year ago- “Last summer we performed Deuta’s death anniversary”. The letter then strides towards Mamata’s musing of the present and the future when she mentions her child being used to her wearing a white dress (which is a symbol of widowhood in Assam). Their son’s being used to her wearing white “since his birth” indicates her being a widow before the birth of their “Babul” (child). Mamata requests her long-gone husband to inform her when is to return so that she can go beyond to receive him.

The outside breeze symbolises the society that is “lashing at” her inner candle; it is a stimuli has to shut so as to concentrate on her thoughts and emotions. The closing of the window symbolizes her momentary solitary situation that she wishes to put herself into, away from the societal role of a widow, to a young woman who has been quenched of a desire to live a fulfilling married life. The poem’s being written in the night displays Mamata’s busy day-time routine; as the night is the time that her secret desire comes to surface. Her yearn for the “strange intoxication” that “whirled me [her] mad” indicates that the marriage was a happy one that had the qualities of love and lust between the couple. As he makes Mamata recollect the events that led to the consummation of her marriage, the poet uses beautiful metaphors that display the Assamese objects that are common in the daily life. Before the consummation of the marriage, the *Sewali*- common flowers found in Assam, that have a meek, subtle and submissive fragrance mirror Mamata, who was young, and a blooming woman. In contrast to a rose, which is often described to be a symbol of passion and lust, Mamata is described as a *Sewali* which is white in colour which is used as an allusion to purity and virginity. Her husband’s “gaze” at her *Rihama* made her feel like a *Sewali* and made her perceive him as a man from a foreign land. His looked at her with the intention of attaining sexual pleasure makes her feel like a helpless “*Sewali* lying under the tree”. This allusion can be perceived in two ways, one that the male gaze results in a female becoming helpless because she is rendered powerless and the other that results in one partner wholly submitting oneself to the love of the other.

The mentioning of her *Deuta*’s (father’s) letter and associating it with another calamity can be assumed as the position of a letter being the harbinger of the news of tragedy and slow passage of time that made the events that happened seven years ago feel “like the stories of the Puranas”.

Mamata's mentioning their son indicates a wry feeling to the reader because her discussing their son brings her joy but the joy is short-lived as he keeps her busy and he is a constant remembrance of the disappearance of her husband from their lives. The poet's mentioning of Mamata's relationship with her son also seems to indicate her detachment with him and her feeling of loneliness despite having her son around, perhaps because the one she could share his growing up with is no longer with her.

The poet, however, does not finish the poem on a sad note since the last stanza of the poem expresses Mamata's never-dying hope for her uniting her beloved husband. She writes in her letter that she wishes for her husband to let her know before her return as she is willing to go beyond the tributary-Bhogdoi and call him from the Lohit, which is another tributary. The Brahmaputra river's tributaries symbolize her limits that she is willing to cross in order to unite with her husband. This figure of her going beyond the Bhogdoi to meet her long-gone husband mirrors the turmoil that Orpheus had undertaken by travelling across the river Styx-the river of death, into the Underworld, where Hades ruled, and plea to get his dead wife, Eurydice, back into the world of the living (Ovid 102).

The post-script of the poem mentions Mamata's recollecting the lighting up of the community bonfire during the Assamese festival of *MaghBihu* and the birth of two kids of a goat. Her mentioning of the bonfire at a big festival which has a community getting together reflects the bifurcation in her mind between her innate desire and society. The immediate information regarding the birth of the "little ones", after the bonfire lighting up brightly, symbolizes the resurfacing of the hidden sexual desires of the young widow. The kids born with opposite colours, that is white and dappled-grey again resonate the poet's use of two opposite forces to describe the inner storm in Mamata's mind.

Therefore, in his sequences of stanzas, usually one division symbolises one entire emotional strain that occurs in the stream of consciousness of Mamata. Thus, out of a heap of fragmented images, Hemkanta ends up creating a superb atmosphere.

### Works Cited

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