AUTHOR OR THE CHARACTER? DILIP CHITRE AND MUMBAI

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Abstract:

Dilip Chitre, a well-known Indian bilingual poet, lived the prime years of his life in the city of Mumbai. As a young poet, he was deeply influenced by the haunting socio-cultural milieu of this city. Naturally, the throbbing metropolis became a recurring background of many of his poems. With the passage of time the stature of the city increased thereby taking in its fold not only Dilip Chitre's poetry but also his personal life. It became a living character in his poems which kept on moving, speaking, laughing, dancing, changing and even sometimes censuring itself. It seems to be a character full of flesh and blood moving as per its desire all over the poetic canvas of Dilip Chitre.

That is why this paper studies the life and poetry of Dilip Chitre with reference to the presence of the city of Mumbai in them with an intention to find out how Chitre has handled this unavoidable character of the city in his poems and also the extent to which it has influenced the personal as well as the poetic life of Dilip Chitre.

Key Words: *Dilip Chitre, Mumbai in Chitre's poetry.*

Lyrical poetry allows the poet to speak about his personal experiences or sometimes about the experiences of his fellow-beings with a subjective approach. Such a poem is coloured by the poet's personal ideas and attitudes, emotions and feelings and likes and dislikes combined with his ingenious imagination. Such poems help us to find out various

aspects of the personality of the poet which can further throw light on the working of his creative, supple imagination and also the process of poetic creation. While creating his poem, sometimes the poet and his imagination are overtaken by his own creation which compels him to write in a particular way. Keeping in view this aspect of poetry, this paper focuses on the study of the life and poetry of Dilip Chitre with reference to the presence of the city of Mumbai in them. It will help us to see how Chitre has handled this unavoidable character of Mumbai in his poems and also the extent to which it has influenced the personal as well as the poetic life of Dilip Chitre.

Dilip Chitre, a poet, translator, film maker, painter and teacher, was born in Baroda on 17 September 1938. His family migrated to Mumbai in 1951, when he was just a teenager. His early school-days, particularly in Mumbai as well as his aimless wanderings in Mumbai's unending streets had a deep impact on his life. While remembering his teenager years in Mumbai and his brave encounters of its underworld, Dilip Chitre says:

> *"As a youngster, I learnt Bombay on foot. Walking around in*
> *different neighbourhoods was my great pastime. This has*
> *produced continuing resonances in both my poetry and my*
> *fiction…I was a street-smart city boy who … in the company*
> *of his home-grown plebian and pure desi contemporaries,*
> *clandestinely combed forbidden territories."* [1]

During such wanderings in the streets and forbidden territories of Mumbai, as a keen observer of life, Chitre noted various minute details of his surrounding and effectively used them in his poems. This close relationship with Mumbai made it not only physically present in Chitre's poems but also an indispensable aspect of his life as an artist as it provided him an opportunity to know about various aspects of other fine arts too. He has spoken about this early influence of Mumbai on his poetry as well as his life as an artist. He says:

"They (his poems) begin with my experience of my uprooting from my native Baroda. I entered Mumbai when I attained puberty. Simultaneously, Mumbai entered my poetry. Being a precocious reader, my grounding in literature was wider and deeper than my academic upbringing, and often at variance with it. I was passionately interested in music, photography, drawing, and painting since the age of 10. In Mumbai, I had opportunities to mingle with artists, musicians, film technicians and photographers much older than I." [2]

In the later years of his life, his hunger for getting meaningful material for writing his poems took him to various parts of the world thereby enriching his vision of life which widened the horizon of his creative intuition. But even after his world-wide wanderings, Mumbai remained very close to his heart as he had spent the prime years of his life in this city. This bond was so firm that he used to find out some common link between his experiences in Mumbai and experiences in other cities of the world. While acknowledging this fact, he says:

"Mumbai became for me a map and a metaphor for the larger world. It prepared me for all the later big cities in my life: Chicago, New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, London, Paris, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Berlin, Tokyo and Hong Kong, for example. All of them had something of Mumbai in them." [3]

It means the experiences of Mumbai and its throbbing socio-cultural milieu played a crucial role in shaping Chitre's personality and that is why it has a recurring presence in his poems. Hence wherever he goes and whatever he comes across, he finds some common features in

them. That is why Dilip Chitre finds certain similarities amongst a beggarwoman on Tulsi Pipe Road, a streetwalker in Chicago and a naked woman from over the Western Ghats to whom he refers in his poem *Fleshtint.* [4]

But it doesn't mean that Chitre wrote about all the trivial happenings of Mumbai in his poems. On the contrary, like all other great poets, Chitre, too, resorted to the technique of selection and omission which helped him to concentrate only on the most important aspects of Mumbai. He picked up only those aspects which had direct relevance to the emotions which he wanted to express in his poems. While speaking about his creative process and his adopting the principle of selection, he says:

> *"The creative process is a complex phenomenon. Every poem I write is due to a different kind of provocation. Personal experiences, intense emotional episodes, people I meet, landscapes I pass through. Poetry is a telegram, compressing those emotions, leaving out the unnecessary details, a kind of implosion."* [5]

This statement shows that during the course of his poetic creation, he applied the principle of selection effectively and opted for only those experiences of his life in Mumbai which were indispensable for the expression of his emotions.

His poem, *Father Returning Home* is set in Mumbai which shows how the haunting city of Mumbai plays a significant role in the life of a common man. In fact, the city gradually becomes more important than the father himself as it exists there with its all-pervasive presence and makes its inhabitants non-existent. Here Dilip Chitre tells us about a man who after a whole day's work is on his way back to home. Like a true Mumbaite, Chitre gives a very minute description of the man's returning home on a late evening train. We can see the man who gets off the train and

"...hurries across the length of the grey platform,

Crosses the railway line, enters the lane,

His chappals are sticky with mud..." [6]

The poem realistically presents the portrait of any common man in the city of Mumbai who hurries to his home in the evening. This visual image of a person is further developed with the help of these words:

"Home again. I see him drinking weak tea,

hhh Eating a stale chapatti, reading a book.

Hhh He goes into the toilet to contemplate

Man's estrangement from a man-made world." [7]

Here the man in the poem is a microcosm of all those Mumbaites who have been uprooted from their native places and people. We know that Purushottam Chitre, the poet's father, had migrated to Mumbai from Baroda where his ancestors had led a respectable life for many years. Chitre's was an influential and rich family in Baroda with a big house on a hill surrounded by many small houses of the tenants. But he was forced to cut all his roots and migrate to Mumbai:

"Where there are no trees except the one

Which grows and seethes in one's dreams, its aerial roots

Looking for ground to strike." [8]

This sense of rootlessness is deeply ingrained in the mind of Chitre's father. In Mumbai, there is nobody, not even his own children, who have the time 'to share jokes and secrets with him'. Though he lives with his family in Mumbai, he feels lonely and isolated from his near and dear ones. And so he has to go into the toilet 'to contemplate man's estrangement from a man-made world'. Actually, this sense of loneliness is the result of his

feeling of alienation which is the natural consequence of the sheer neglect he receives from his fellow-beings. His existence is quite insignificant to the surrounding world. Dilip Chitre has used a very beautiful image of 'a word being dropped from a long sentence' to describe an old man dropping off from the train. He is no longer relevant to the train or the remaining passengers. He is just a trivial word in the syntax of life which is very inconsequential to the overall meaning of the sentence. Such a sense of nonexistence that Mumbai creates in its inmates, it seems, pervades the lives of both the poet as well as his father. It becomes clear when Chitre says:

> *"Mumbai figures in my early Marathi and English poetry in different ways and at several levels. I perceived the metropolis in juxtaposition with primordial nature as perceived in my childhood. There was a discord. There was a sense of manmade alienation that haunted me."* [9]

This sense of meaninglessness of his life chases him even to his bed and does not allow the sleep to come to him easily. And when he falls asleep he (and also the poet) dreams

> *Of his ancestors and grandchildren, thinking*
>
> *Of nomads entering a subcontinent through a narrow pass."* [10]

The surprising aspect of the influence of Mumbai on Dilip Chitre is that it has not only entered into his poetry through his self but it has also made him change the way of his writing. During the initial years of his poetic career he used to write metrical poetry in a standard stylized language. But his stay in Mumbai made him shift towards free verse and the typical Mumbai language. In this connection he says:

"The big city's polyphony, its cacophony as well, its many human voices and points of view, made me move towards more accommodative, open-ended, cadenced free verse and the rhythms of colloquial speech." [11]

This is an interesting confession of a creator in which he frankly admits that his character (that of Mumbai) compelled him to use free verse (which is the diction of common people) to write his poetry.

In other words the language of Chitre's poetry was affected by Mumbai and its inmates. It is the language used not by the elite class but by the common people who have migrated here from all parts of the country with their peculiar culture and languages. These are the throwaway-type people who neither have access nor bent of mind to any of the elite-practiced arts. But they are very important for the arts of the elites as they influence the arts in one or the other way. The experiences of these common people seem to be very strange and of course inappropriate to the middle-class morality. But they form the very crux of the day-to-day lives of thousands of common people living in the slums and chawls of Mumbai. It is Mumbai that compels these people to go through those experiences. In his poem Dilip Chitre writes:

"At midnight in the bakery at the corner
While bread and butter-biscuits are being baked
The wife of the Pathan next door enters my room
Closes the door and turns her back to me
I tell her, sister, go find someone else [12]

This experience of a young man does not fit in the middle-class concept of morality. But in the slums, it does not seem to be that much shocking and so Chitre uses it in his poem. While commenting on Chitre's diction, Anjali Nerlekar says:

"...the throwaway is also the characteristic of his diction in poetry. Here the throwaway is what the world considers as useless or crude or dirty. (H)e calls Tukaram "bhenchod" for dragging him into the "morass" ...of poetry. His poetry abounds in bodily references that are normally seen as inappropriate for use in poetry...The urge to use such language (he uses words like "cunt" unblinkingly in his work) is part of the larger project of making visible the ordinary, the lowly and also of the anger at the exclusionary vision of much of middle-class propriety." [13]

This language spoken by the people in the streets of Mumbai gives an unusual vigour and colour to Chitre's poetry.

Thus Mumbai is portrayed as a distinct character in the poetry of Dilip Chitre. It can be said that Mumbai does not remain just a passive canvas on which Dilip Chitre draws his portrait of poetry but it becomes a living character - that keeps on moving, speaking, laughing, dancing, changing and even sometimes censuring itself. It seems to be a character full of flesh and blood moving as per its desire all over the poetic canvas of Dilip Chitre.

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