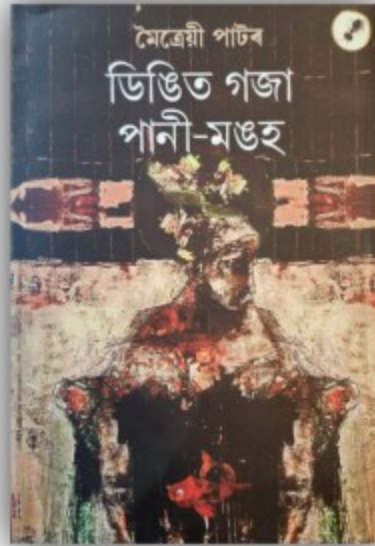


## Death, Uncertainty and Surreal Imagery in Maitrayee Patar's 'Dingit Gaza Pani-Mangah'

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In the Prologue to her collection of poems titled *Dingit Gaza Pani-Mangah* Maitrayee Patar quotes Robert Frost's famous statement on the pain and desire associated with poetic expression. Frost in his letter to Louis Untermeyer said: "A poem begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a love-sickness..." In her Prologue, Patar comments that countless truths lie asleep in the womb of one truth, which means that the exploration of truth is a labyrinthine process. The very title of the collection resonates with Frost's "lump in the throat". The lump gives torment while suppressing the words and emotions that crave for expression. A poem therefore passionately yearns for expressing the repressed emotions through words.



Many of Patar's poems in the collection *Dingit Gaza Pani-Mangah* engage with the nature of poetic expression and the power of words, and also with the nature of truth. In her poem titled "Asashti-Adhyay" (The Chapter of Uneasiness) Patar writes: "A poem is a subtotal of the particles of uneasiness/ It is like the sweat breeding in the palm of hand during winter." The poem refers to the uneasiness, torment and desire involved in the process of creating words. The poet says, "Words breed on words and fly in the wind/ They fall somewhere and become new words." In the poem titled "Kobita" (Poem) it is said that the words are our happiness and sadness. It offers several definitions of a poem: a poem is the green in the field, which is picked

up by the weaver just before the arrival of the Spring. Again, a poem is restored from the belly of the words and it spreads from the infinite to the endless. Moreover, it is stated that a poem lives in our hunger, in our sleep, in our resolutions, in our fate, and in our gods and demons. In “Ei Muhurttot Likhi Thoka Kobitatu” (The Poem I Am Writing at This Moment) the diverse possibilities of poetic expression are mentioned. The poem alludes to Edvard Munch’s painting “The Scream” – in Patar’s poem the scream jumps from the bridge and runs in the water. The poem presents the images of thousand dead suns in the pool of water, the cluster of clouds sucking man’s blood and falling down in the water – these apparently grotesque images create a surreal tone in the poem. The expressions “the demon that chews the illusions is in fact a mouse” and “half-ripe meditation” hint at poetic expression that hinges on layered truths and ambiguities. In the poem “Nirman Bishoyok” (About Construct) there is an attempt at demystification of the poetically glorified objects and entities – the rivers are just rivers, not always some metaphors; the sun too is just the sun. It is stated that the truth behind all construct is another construct. This emphasis on the impossibility of grasping truth or the constructed nature of truth leads to an anti-foundationalist approach to the surroundings and in the perception of reality. The poem “Dingit Gaza Pani-Mangah” (The Water Lump Growing in the Throat) begins with the statement that the words which are not told in the street get twisted and make the nights longer. The poem talks about a water-like lump that grows in the throat and becomes a tree. Moreover, the women who walk in moonlit nights too metamorphose into trees. These are metaphors of creativity and continuity. The image of grass growing in the bones of the great grandmothers too signifies continuity and rebirth. The metaphor of “flowers of blood” means fertile, passionate thoughts craving for expression. Patar’s use of imagery proves that her own poetry conforms to Frost’s opinion, that poetic expression involves torment and uneasiness.

Apart from dealing with the themes of poetic expression and the nature of truth, Patar’s poems also dwell on the themes of death, impermanence, memory and life’s continuity in the midst of uncertainty. In her poem titled “Prasthan” (The Departure) there is a reference to a world beyond life and death – “the evergreen valley of forgetfulness” that exists in the other corner of the noises. There is a metaphor of a stone that constantly falls down, which probably signifies forgetfulness trying to overwhelm memory. There is another metaphor that signifies memory – “the piece of land carved in palm of hand”. The title of the poem refers to a final journey or a departure, with which ends the “helpless melancholy”. The poem uses the metaphors like “fields that gradually become black”, “lips where moss grows” etc. which too imply aridity and death. In the poem titled “Jodi” (If) there is the statement that “to live is a kind of practice”. The poem refers to “memento mori” – the Latin words for an object which reminds us of the inevitability of death. Death consciousness leads to the image of “the face of dead women in dream”, and the necessity of moving on with life is simultaneously stressed on: there is the image of the ever-flowing river that swallows the tormenting time. However, the uncertainty continues to haunt: “If we survive the next winter, what song will you prefer to listen to?” Death consciousness or the reminder of life’s impermanence, “memento mori”, does not erase the desire to live and to listen to the music of life.

In “Astropocer” (Operation) there is an allusion to a famous painting by Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, where a skeleton looks below, to the living lying on a bed, from the canopy of the bed. The poem begins with the statement: “A face is sleeping in Frida’s bed....Two faces are knitting, of that face/The shredding pieces of darkness”. The poem suggests the memory of sudden

violence in the midst of a non-existing possibility: “After that, while cradling an unborn child/A face murmurs/Some days of grammarless bloodshed./Some faces mourn together./In between this choral mourning/In a face dangles/A midday of operation”. The image of the “midday of operation” reminds us of T. S. Eliot’s use of the image of “the patient etherized upon a table” in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”. Like Eliot’s poem, Patar’s poem too conceives the surroundings in terms of futility, hopelessness and uncertainty. The crude present is like a python in Patar’s poem – it is the python that devours “Futuki” – a metaphor of tenderness and innocence. The people who witness it murmur the name of “Champawati”, the fairy-tale woman who married a python. The faces of the poet’s poems search for a “reliable, natural face”. However, the Freudian female ghost says that there is nothing natural in the restlessness of the present.

The poem “Nilikhu Buli Bhabi Thoka Kothabur” (The Words I Did not Intend to Write) points out that the desire to taste life co-exists with the awareness of death – the act of relishing a fried fish makes one recall the dead woman. It is stated that the noon she died hovers like a swollen red balloon, which will explode in the left side of our chest. Like many other poems by Patar, this poem presents grotesque images to indicate the binaries of existence – there is the image of the sky that looks like a huge slice of fish-egg, and the image of “blood rain”.

“Ronga Sulir Sualijoni” (The Red Haired Girl) alludes to a myth of the Khasi village named Kongthong in which a mother creates a whistle after the birth of her child. There is a myth that when one dies the unique tune of that whistle too dies with its possessor. This poem talks about the search of “Buddhatva” – the wisdom of the Buddha to endure the pain of life and death. Like many other poems by Patar this poem dwells on the theme of death, pain and suffering and the possibility of transcending that, following the Buddha’s enlightenment. However, the poem carries an indication that it is also possible to transcend pain by living life passionately – the red haired girl who steals a white flower to decorate her hair is a gesture of celebrating life. Probably that is the “mantra” of forgetting the sufferings of birth and death. Another poem titled “Mrito Manuhor Mukhbur” (The Faces of the Dead) again refers to death and the quest for Buddhatva. The poem “Lokhaitorat Aimonir Noixobhraman” (Aimoni’s Night Journey in Lokhaitora) too deals with the themes of death, impermanence, fate and uncertainty. There is the image of the girl’s two ears standing in the bridge, which reminds us of the famous expressionist painting titled “The Scream” by Edvard Munch. In the poem the evening falls in the river and the sun gradually drops down – these images of the end of a day also indicate the end of life. Fate passes the whole night dozing and the boy ties up the tales in the plum tree. Patar’s imagery takes the readers to a surreal world that wavers between the world of reality and dream, the tangible and the intangible. The poem “Samay” (Time) talks about the draft of the last day – it is said that everyday carries the seed of the last day, and we swim in the ends to reach the final end. The metaphor of the child who creates sand houses in the beach and waits for the waves to wash them away too points out uncertainty of life and the inevitability of death. In “Sandhyolipi” (The Document of the Evening) memory is defined as a carefully kept cot. However, the present moment escapes history. This poem too refers to the transient moments of life and man’s desire to preserve those in memory.

Although majority of Patar’s poems in *Dingit Gaza Pani-Mangah* deal with the themes of death, impermanence and uncertainty, there are poems which emphasize the necessity of moving on. “O

Phoolbur” (O Flowers) states that all graves metamorphose into flowers. The flowers bloom, being oblivious of everything. Probably this is the way of life, because the earth forgets its disease even in intense pain. Probably the flowers teach us to move on and to think of better days. The images of continuity can be found in some other poems in the collection too. In the poem titled “Umswai” (The Name of a Valley) a bird flies, creating a canopy over the hills – in its beak it carries the bones of our forefathers. In “Khadangshar Xadhu” (The Tales of the Green) the children listen to the tales of the green and they ask for green buds from the old men, to rehearse life. In “Roi Asu” (We are Waiting) there is a waiting for a song – the song for which the birds sacrificed their lives, the sun got tired while turning the bosoms of the stones red, the forest wore a white dress and the hill postponed its death.

Patar’s poems present rich imagery, taken from the everyday world and the world of nature. In “Kotha Bokul” (Story of Bokul) the tales come down to earth, leaning on the river. It is said that in silence lies the eternity of words. “Nirobotar Abohoman Xuti” (The Flowing Stream of Silence) there is a reference to words that remain beyond expression. They sit on the poet’s everyday. There is happiness even in the absence of expression and in silence. It is compared with the dew drops hanging miserably in the smile of flowers. “Ei Je Kotha Pati Goi Thakilu” (The Way We Went on Talking) presents play of words. In the poem there are references to “non-existing fields”, undying girl”, “unburnt story of unlit fire”. The poet says that meaningless words let us live. The references of the lost songs, unseen stars, and the thousand undying men who were not dear to anyone indicate a world of enigma, mystery and in-betweenness. “Badami Hanhibur Aru Eta Gundhor Tantbati” (The Brown Laughter and a Persistent Smell) presents the image of brown laughter floating in burning blood. The women come out of the closet – a world of claustrophobia. The women who laugh know the magic. The laughing women are like old, irrelevant document – but they are passionate and dangerous. The poem refers to two black women whose lips are coloured with sunshine. “Desh” (Nation) presents a bleak picture of the present and of the future. There is a reference to the mourning of “progeria-suffered future”. The poem points out a crippled present and a future that lacks possibility. On the other hand, “Tothapiu Roudrakamona” (Yet There is the Burning Desire) presents a lust for life, even if the voice of the dear bird gets lost beyond the clouds. Maitrayee Patar’s *DingitGaza Pani-Mangah* creates a poetic idiom that freely draws its imagery from everyday life and the world of nature. The familiar objects of everyday life and nature wear an unfamiliar, surreal, and at times grotesque colour in Patar’s poems. It can definitely be said that Patar is one of the most talented poets of the new generation of Assamese poets. However, it can also be expected that she addresses subjects in her poems in future which will be of more varied and eclectic nature, like her imagery which is so varied and rich in texture.

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