

Classic Poetry Series

Subhash Mukhopadhyay
- poems -

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Subhash Mukhopadhyay(12 February 1919 - 8 July 2003)

Subhash Mukhopadhyay (Shubhash Mukhopaddhae) was one of the foremost Bengali poets of the 20th century.

Biography

He was born in Krishnanagar, a town in Nadia district in the province of West Bengal. An excellent student, he studied philosophy at the Scottish Church College in Calcutta, graduating with honors in 1941. Subhash married Gita Bandyopadhyay, also a well-known writer, in 1951.

Political Life

Like his contemporary Sukanta Bhattacharya, Mukhopadhyay developed strong political beliefs at an early age. He was deeply committed to the cause of social justice, and was active in left-wing student politics through his college years. Following graduation, he formally joined the Communist Party of India. He thus became one of a handful of literary practitioners with first-hand experience as a party worker and activist.

Literary Life

In 1940, while still a student, he published his first volume of poetry Padatik (The Foot-Soldier). Many critics regard this book as a milestone in the development of modern Bengali poetry. It represented a clear departure from the

earlier Kallol generation of poets; and Subhash's distinctive, direct voice, allied with his technical skill and radical world-view, gained him great popularity. In his poetry, Subhash grappled with the massive upheavals of that era which ruptured Bengali society from top to bottom.

The 1940s were marked by world war, famine, partition, communal riots and mass emigration in Bengal. Subhash's writings broke away from the traditional moorings of the establishment poets, and instead addressed the despair and disillusion felt by the common people. He remained throughout his life an advocate of the indivisibility of the Bengali people and Bengali culture. From the late 1950s onwards, Subhash's poetry evolved into something more personal and introspective. The lyricism of Phul phutuk na phutuk, aaj Boshonto, one of

his most famous poems, was a result of this period.

Later in the 1970s, Subhash's poetry took a turn toward the narrative and the allegorical. But he never lost his technical facility nor his unique voice. Besides verse, Subhash also wrote works of prose including novels, essays and travelogues. He was active in journalism too, having served on the editorial staff of daily and weekly newspapers. He was an editor of the leading Bengali literary journal Parichay. He was also an accomplished and popular writer for children. He edited the Bengali children's periodical Sandesh jointly with Satyajit Ray for a few years in the early sixties.

Awards and Honors

Mukhopadhyay received numerous awards and honors in his lifetime, including the two highest literary prizes in India: the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1964 (for Joto Dureii Jai), and the Jnanpith Award in 1991. Other awards are:

Afro-Asian Lotus Prize, 1977
Kumaran Asan Award, 1982
Mirzo Tursunzoda Prize (USSR), 1982
Ananda Puraskar, 1991
Soviet Land Nehru Award.

Final Years

According to those close to him, Subhash Mukhopadhyay had become disillusioned with politics in his final years. He suffered from severe heart and kidney ailments, and died in Kolkata in July 2003. He was 84. He was then survived by his wife and their three adopted daughters.

At Day's End

Flooding the western sky
with a pool of blood,
like a highwayman
glaring at passersby,
to his own camp retreated
the Sun.

Long after,
for an investigation on the spot
to twist day into night,
as in a black police-van,
stampeded
the evening.

And as soon as light was switched on
from window,
jumped out
the darkness.
No sooner had I drawn the curtain aside
than, like a frightened deer,
embraced me suddenly
the wind.

[Translated by Shibdas Bannerji]

Subhash Mukhopadhyay

Let Me Never See

Under the sky's cataract-blinded eyes
where ancient darkness stoops
its head sagging to its knees
a walking stick in its hand

All through the night
and through the day
where only drip drop
drip drop
leaves fall on the ground

Like a steam-boat's rating
where memory all the time
sounds with a line
life's water's depth

I know
the icy winds of winter
will one day
push me over there

Earth, let me never
see the face
of that day

Before that happens
please tie my eyes
to my two feet
like a pair of anklets

Subhash Mukhopadhyay

Pupé

My daughter Pupé
whenever on the terrace
wants the big blue sky
in her tiny little hands
and if she's denied,
just grabs it
As Pupé grows up
she'll want other stuff
at fairs she'll make a fuss
for a comb and looking-glass
However lazy I may be,
I know she won't stay on with me
Then to put on sindoor one day
She may open her silver box
And suddenly she just may
Think, what is it that she's lost?
So at that moment it may be
That she opens her clenched fist to see
And finds the big blue sky in there
Has vanished into thin air
That's when she's all grown up
My daughter Pupé

[Translated from the Bengali poem 'Pupé' by Antara Dev Sen]

Subhash Mukhopadhyay

The Stride

Standing on one leg, arms reaching up
hair piled high in unkempt yogi knots
a tree peers down
and the more he sees the more he is amazed.

The woman who goes door to door
baby on her hip
washing dishes
and at night
sleeps on a mat under a tree
the woman discarded by her husband
disdained even by death.

Oh how shameful!
She's pregnant again.

At the water tap
to cover up that shame
he toddles up carefully
to hand his mother the tattered sari
a tiny life crowned by shame
why, just the other day
he used to crawl on the pavement!

Which means
On this earth
one more pair of eyes
one more head held high
arms like the wings of a bird
swinging on either side
will stride through
feet firmly on the ground
Standing on one leg
forever in the same spot
the tree
with arms outstretched and hair in
yogi knots
peers down
and the more he sees the more he is amazed

[Translated by Antara Dev Sen]

Subhash Mukhopadhyay

Whether Flowers Bloom Or Not

Whether flowers
bloom or not
it's spring today

On the paved footpath
with feet dipped in stone
a rather wooden tree
laughs out loud
chest bursting with fresh green leaves
Whether flowers bloom or not
it's spring today.

The days of masking the sun
and then unmasking it
of laying people down in the lap of death
of picking them up again
those days that have passed this way
let them not return
That lad of many voices
who for a coin or two
would chirp like a koel down the street
in the ceremonial yellow of twilight?
those days have taken him away

With the sky like a red and yellow wedding invitation
on her head
clasping the railing to her breast
a dark and ugly unwed girl down this alley
played with such idle thoughts
Right then
there fluttered in, shamelessly, right onto her body,
oh damnation! A stupid, awful, foolish butterfly!
Then the sound of a door slamming shut.
Hiding his face in the dark
that sinewy tree
was still laughing.

[Translated by Antara Dev Sen]

Subhash Mukhopadhyay