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RESEARCH ARTICLE

**A JOURNEY INTO THE INSCAPE: A STUDY OF A. K. MEHROTRA'S
POETRY**

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Abstract: A study of any specific poet and her/his poetry leads us to a very curious poetic journey of the poet. It is a phenomenal journey with a twofold nature. At one level, it reveals the journey of a person as a poet and at another level, it brings out the journey of his/her poetry as a form of art. In a way then the poetic work makes a cartographic representation of the poet's journey. The road that leads to such a journey carries several signposts and milestones. It also includes sometimes the alleys and lanes that deceive and take the readers to the deceptive turns or the dead ends. But travelling toward a poet through the poems brings a fruitful reward for a reader. The process of travelling enriches the reader and consequently makes her/his journey more curious. Hence, in the present research article, the attempt is made to trace a poetic journey of a well-known Indian English poet, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, in whom the image of a 'traveler' forms the very genesis of his poetry.

Keywords: Mehrotra, Journey motif, Indian English poetry, inscape

A journey in itself implies a process of transformation. A journey of any person or an object is nothing else but a shift from one place and time to another place and time. Naturally, the process of the journey cannot be considered devoid of the concepts of space and time. In this sense then the journey of a person or a thing inevitably reveals a flow or movement from one location to the other. The process of a journey is also in another way, a distancing from a particular space and time towards the other specific location and time. In the process are then hidden the possibilities of getting something new, of getting something added in its new form and meaning. If we view the process of 'journey' about the aspect of time and space, then perhaps every moment that one lives is a part of the eternal journey of which each one of us is a traveller. The process of such a journey then begins with the very moment of our existence. In this light



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then every moment is a moment of travel and we find ourselves engulfed in the continuous process of transformation and transition. As T.S. Eliot states in his play, *The Cocktail Party*,

We die to each other daily. What we know of other people is only our memory of the moments during which we knew them. And they have changed since then. To pretend that they and we are the same is a useful and convenient social convention that must sometimes be broken. We must also remember that at every meeting we are meeting a stranger. (Act I: Scene3)

The process of a journey in this direction marks a continuous restructuring and renewal of the earlier entity into a new being. Of course, the word 'journey' implies a 'multifaceted' nature and can be viewed from several perspectives. One way to define and trace the process of the journey is also to explore the poetic journey of any poet. A study of any specific poet and her/his poetry leads us to a very curious poetic journey of the poet. It is a phenomenal journey with a twofold nature. At one level, it reveals the journey of a person as a poet and at another level, it brings out the journey of his/her poetry as a form of art. In a way then the poetic work makes a cartographic representation of the poet's journey. The road that leads to such a journey carries several signposts and milestones. It also includes sometimes the alleys and lanes that deceive and take the readers to the deceptive turns or the dead ends. But traveling toward a poet through the poems brings a fruitful reward for a reader. The process of traveling enriches the reader and consequently makes her/his journey more curious. Hence, in the present research article, the attempt is made to trace a poetic journey of a well-known, Indian English poet, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra whose image of a 'traveler' forms the very genesis of his poetry.

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (b.1947) is one of the significant Indian English poets. He is also known as the translator and the anthologist. He began his poetic journey in the decades of the 1960s. To date, he has published four collections of poetry, *Nine Enclosures* (1976), *The Distance in Statute Miles* (1982), *Middle Earth* (1984), and *The Transfiguring Places: Poems* (1998). The recent work *Arvind Krishna Mehrotra: Collected Poems 1969-2014* is a collection of the poems published in the earlier mentioned collections and certain new poems along with his translations of various Hindi saint poets. His translation of *Gatha Saptashathi* under the title *The Absent Traveller Traveler* and that of Kabir entitled *Songs of Kabir* are remarkable works exemplifying his innovative ways of translation. As a conscious artist, Mehrotra's poetic art manifests his consistent engagement with the poems on which he works and reworks continuously. His poetry is an example of a 'meta-poetic narrative' that illustrates the very poetic process of the poet.



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The poems published in the different moments of time and space take us to different paths that Mehrotra explores with different intentions. His journey at one level takes him back to six million years ago to the genesis of the human race where he tries to relate himself to the species of, "Ramapithecus" who are assumed to be the first direct ancestors of modern humans. In the poem "Ramapithecus and I" he states:

The young swamp he came to
Six million years ago,
His unfazed mother beside him,
His father recently dead,
...
Making his home
Where his implements took him,
He waited for the rains to break.
Cutting my finger, it's his blood I taste. (*Collected Poems*154)

The geographic entity and the anthropological roots are tried to be traced and the blood relation is established in a single act of "the cutting off his finger" that bridges millions of years in a single moment. If the continuity of time and space is tried to be discerned at one level to the genesis of the human race at another level the attempts are also made to connect to his family lineage. Memories of the parents, objects like 'stone house' or 'a tree under which he spent his childhood days, and the 'surrounding world of his past life that constantly opens the stitches of his memory' form a road through which Mehrotra leads towards the past of his ancestors. By relating himself through the image of his father, to his family members, he figures out his self that connects the time past and the time present.

Like others before you, you came here
To die under trees
Which as a boy you'd climbed. Where
The litchi stood, east of the court,
Is now a ditch, some
A kind man has covered it with a wild rose.

...

What he inherits now is:

... sunset, the light
Of the polestar; to save me from summer

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You left me the north, a strip of land
In that sad direction
To which I'm always returning. (*Collected Poems* 161-62)

Of course, it is a journey of a person who leaves behind his home but tries to relate himself and to his family in many ways. The poems such as "Summer Notes", "Old Survey Road", "The Inheritance" "The House", "Locking Up", "The Photograph" and "The Fracture" reveal a recurrent journey of the poet to his ancestry.

However, the more profound journey Mehrotra's poetry reveals is his exploration of the self as a poet and the mysterious act of poetry's 'coming into being'. Several poems in his works stand as the signpost leading the readers toward the poetic self of Mehrotra.

One of the landmarks one gets in the beginning phase of Mehrotra's poetic career is his poem "Declines" which was published in the collection *Distance in Statute Miles*. It reveals the change that Mehrotra wishes to bring in himself as an artist. It is a journey from that point of time in his life when the poetry as Mehrotra explains, came to him as "something given, something received. . . . emptying the contents of a bottomless pitcher" (*Last Bungalow* 252) to the moments where he intends conscious craftsmanship. The poem "Declines" is an invocation to a migratory bird. He compares himself with the bird by stating that

I must speak with you,
Compare your wings
With my counterfeiting fingers.

The poet attempts to get a clear picture of himself from 'the dark pools of sound'. The image of "a migratory bird" with its calico-colored wings, its journey with the instinct of creation, and its planned, systematic yet; natural ways of connecting the two different lands of his life into one like a fine woven cloth are seen against 'these counterfeiting fingers' 'The image 'The dark pools of sound', stands in contrast to the 'bird's frame of clear glass', 'calico-colored, unhurried wings' that spread and rise in firmness, and fly through the air, in all its natural poise. The poem illustrates Mehrotra's urge to achieve the act of creativity like a weaver-bird which brings unity and continuity through the distinct threads. The act of weaver manifests the conscious yet natural craftsmanship that Mehrotra earnestly intends to achieve in his poetic art.

Another poem "Index of First Lines" which appears in two different versions in two different collections marks the changing perception of Mehrotra as a poet at the different junctures of time.



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When published in 1976, in *Nine Enclosures* "The Index of First Lines" depicted two major images; one that of 'an old woman' and another "the poet-speaker". In this version of the poem the image of "an old woman" is presented as a mysterious unknown with several forms of appearances. She is like a 'snake' that appears and disappears in moments or like a 'wind' whose presence can be experienced but is invisible, or a 'leaf' that is delicate and undergoes a transformation at every stage of life. Her arrival, her presence is 'awe-inspiring' that creates a state of panic-stricken ecstasy in him. Under her spell, he can't explore the fear in him. Against her awe-inspiring personality, the poet sees himself as a 'panic man' who runs like 'a retarded child'. The inside of his mouth is shaped like a cobbler's anvil. He feels that;

Old woman, I'm slowly becoming
You; I prepare to enter your country
Where the land and sea
Are equally fragile,

...

I open the mousetrap
And my words nibble at your expert hands.

His 'mouth with cobbler's anvil' and 'his nibbling words' at her expert hands may be seen as his immature art of writing poetry. His mouse-like existence in contrast to her transformative power manifests the poet's efforts of recognizing his stature as a poet. In the new version of the same poem, however, we find a change in the imagery that reflects the poet's changed perception of himself as an artist.

In the new version of "Index of First Lines" published in the collection *Middle Earth*, the poet brings out the altered relationship between 'he' and 'she'. She is in both cases, mysterious. Perhaps, she is perceptible in creativity. In the early period, her arrival in his life in those mysterious forms is a sign of a new acquaintance that gives him a new identity as a poet. He knows that writing under her spell is an act of rebellion against the existing tradition that is 'fixed like milestones in the earth'. But his urge to be a poet and her arrival in his life are both beyond his control. She is a goblin and at the same time behaves like a mother that gives milk and nurtures the child. But now he has become habitual to her startling arrivals. He expresses:

Old woman how can I be

Astonished by sunlight when it breaks

So evenly? (Collected Poems76)