



Musings of the Captive : Comparing two Poems by Gopabandhu Das and William Cowper

Dr. Bibhudutt Dash

This paper compares Utkalmani Gopabandhu Das' poem "Bandira Swadesh Chinta" and William Cowper's "The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk" to demonstrate the similarities and differences in the musings of two captives: Das himself and Selkirk. The poems, occasioned by their incarceration and banishment, register the notes of desolation in the speakers where the degree of sangfroid in Das contrasts with Selkirk's desperation. In both we see a fervid wish to associate with humanity from which they are away, but what is an anathema to both is solitude. Selkirk's fancied sovereignty as a 'monarch' in the island where he is in soon makes him realize the horrors of loneliness. He understands the absurdity of this unrestrained freedom. Similarly, in "Bandira Swadesh Chinta," Das' passionate entreaties to the vernal wind to deliver him good tidings of his homeland displays in him unmistakable strains of loneliness, but conceals the poet's patriotism and love of his people.



Das implores the zephyr of spring to give comfort to his troubled heart by telling him the news of his home, and he is agog with excitement to hear this:

Mora priyasthali kete niuchhali
 Karithibe taba asiba bate,
Deithibe para kete ki barat
Suna-a mana mo achhi uchchate (5-8).

The poet is eager to hear the news of the possible places to be traversed by the wind. It seems, the poet has fixed its itinerary, starting from the southern parts of the land and moving toward Puri and the places around it. The spatial dimension seems to be consequential for the poet because he is interested, in particular, about his own land and people. The arboreal picture provided in the poem and the description of the fruits available in summer fill the atmosphere with a sylvan touch, but it reveals the poet's perceived improbability to taste these. He asks the wind about river



Rusikulya and the melodious songs of the people around it. He thinks of the enthralling beauty of Chilika and is in the transports of delight, but he regrets that he cannot see this. He wishes to derive selfsame joy by hearing from the wind the sensuous descriptions of Chilika who must have intensely waited like a lovesick damsel for the kiss of the wind:

Alingan ase taba pathapase
Chilika abege thiba anai
Mukta nilakesi shyamsovarasi—
Giri sirisfita baksh melai (25-28).

The poet sings a paean to its beauty, and revels in luxuriating in its seductions. The descriptions, vivid and erotic, are reinforced by expressions of passionate ecstasy :

Chanchal hillole charu gandasthale
Chumbithiba jebe gadhe samira,
Sundari sarbange uthithiba range
Apurva ullas kampai nira (29-32).

The poet, then, asks the wind to deliver him the news of Puri. He thinks the wind more fortunate than him since it has freedom, which he is deprived of now. He asks it about the place, the sea, the temple, the *tulsi*, the Neelachakra, and the soothing shade of the trees. Further, he wishes to know the messages the people of Puri have sent for him. The pangs of desolation are felt in the poet's tone, which is poignant. The poem contains many lines that describe Puri. What is interesting to see is that this sad song of the poet takes the reader from place to place while he reads the poem. It is as though the reader is in a state of constant travel that goes along with his participating in the poet's loneliness. But what Das is particularly interested to know from the wind is whether *swarajya* occupies the people or not:

“Sadharan sant sevak mahant / pakanti ki kebe swarajya katha?” (67-68). Gopabandhu's concern for *swarajya* is expressly stated in his poem “Misu mora deha e desha matire,” a poem that demonstrates his ardent patriotism and selfless service to the nation:

Misu mora deha e desha matire,
Desabasi chali jaantu pithire.
desara swarajya-pathe jete gada,
puru padi tahin mora mansa hada (23-26).

The poet imagines that the wind, after its sojourn at Puri, must have blown toward Satyabadi, famous for the Sakhigopal temple. Satyabadi, a place with verdant foliage, is a scenic spot, and because of its sylvan setting, one could always hear the sweet songs of the birds. The poet's birthplace, Suando is near Satyabadi and is equally rich in its picturesque details. When Gopabandhu describes Satyabadi, he is in rapture. He describes the SakhiGopal temple and the *jugala murati* of Sri Krishna and Radha inside it. He imagines how beautiful it must have looked when the *mayurachula* of the Lord must have swayed as a result of the wind passing through it. The poet says that, a place where Krishna, the 'Baraj bihari,' 'Gopi Manohari' lives is simply beyond description. Finally, he asks the wind about his home over which it must have blown: “Debadatta dham mo priya ashram / padichhi ki taba nayanapathe?” (95-96). As we see, the poem mentions a few places such as Ganjam, Puri and Satyabadi and his own home, as well as Chilika about which he is interested. All these places are near to each other, and not very far from the home of the poet. Since he is away from his home and knows those places and their beauties, he wishes to derive pleasure by hearing from the wind the descriptions of these



places. But it does not seem that the poet is very desperate about his confinement or loneliness. He graphically visualizes all these places with their charm and splendour, but his primary thought pertains to *swarajya* and the people's passion for it.

In Cowper's poem, Selkirk's imaginary joy of being the undisputed monarch is frustrated by the impact of solitude. Like Gopabandhu, Selkirk too yearns for his home and people and entreats the wind to "Convey to this desolate shore / Some cordial endearing report / Of a land I shall visit no more" (26-28). Both think of their "own native land," or *swadesh*, but what distinguishes Selkirk from Gopabandhu lies in the former's yearnings for *swadesh*, contrasted with Das' concern for *swarajya*. However, the array of variegated experiences of Selkirk on the island conjures up a feral picture contrasted with the arboreal, vernal spectacle in Das' poem.

Selkirk strikes at the notion of pleasantness associated with solitude, which may be consequential for a sage or recluse, but it is painful for one who is "out of humanity's reach" (9). What exacerbates his mental state is the perceived impossibility of redemption from "this horrible place" where he can "Never hear the sweet music of speech," and "a friend I am never to see." The recurrent use of 'never' underscores the desperation of a 'monarch,' bedevilled by a foregone unlikelihood of release. A striking similarity in the somber reflections of Das and Selkirk pertains to the latter's categorical insistence, as in Das', albeit suggested, on three critically important things for man:

Society, friendship and love
Divinely bestow'd upon man,

O had I the wings of a dove
How soon would I taste you again! (17-20).

The deprivation faced by Selkirk is more or less similar to Das', but his anguish is more intense. However, Selkirk's longing is not mere homesickness since he wants to go beyond the confines of home to "religion and truth," "the wisdom of age," and the "sallies of youth." Like Das, he too wishes to hear from the winds the messages of his friends: "My friends, do they now and then send / A wish or a thought after me?", but the nagging despair in him leads him to conclude in the negative.

An interesting fact as to the loneliness of Selkirk relates to his reflection on the extraordinary power of the mind and the incredible pace of imagination. This seems, in part, to underplay Selkirk's intensity of loneliness, in that the voluntary imaginative flight to his native land, whenever he wants, momentarily lessens his anguish, but in no time he comes back to the truth that faces him :

How fleet is a glance of the mind !
Compared with the speed of its flight,
The tempest itself lags behind,
And the swift-winged arrows of light.
When I think of my own native land
In a moment I seem to be there;
But, alas! recollection at hand
Soon hurries me back to despair (33-40).

Moving between the imaginary and the real, Selkirk relapses into sporadic bouts of despair, but he is sanguine about freedom: "There is mercy in every place." In any case, the 'monarch' is chastened to realize that despite his hope, the inalienable despair impinges on the necessity of reconciling oneself to one's destiny:



“And reconciles man to his lot.” This is Selkirk’s placid acceptance of the reality that cannot be obfuscated by basking in fantasies. No doubt, Selkirk’s banishment is more painful than that of Das’ imprisonment insofar as the setting is concerned. The picture of desolation and absolute wildness in Cowper’s poem is a counterpoint to the descriptions in Das’ poem. While reading these poems, we are transported to their locale, but understanding a captive’s anguish exacts empathy.

In both poems, winds are the carriers of the messages and they function as personified entities engaged in the significant act of communication. It is like P.B. Shelley’s impassioned address to the West Wind: “Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud! / I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!” (53-54).

A comparative study of the thoughts of Das and Selkirk as captives highlights a natural anguish or a feeling of loneliness that accompanies banishment. Had this distance from their own homes or people been a decided one, then solitude may have been pleasant for them. Both Das and Selkirk do not seem to enjoy solitude,

but it is important that the fact of being solitary impels in Das a concern for *swarajya*, and in Selkirk the reflections on the ontological necessities in life.

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Dr. Bibhudutt Dash, Plot No.307, Haladipadia, Laxmisagar, Bhubaneswar - 751006.