

Classic Poetry Series

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra
- poems -

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Arvind Krishna Mehrotra(1947)

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra is a noted Indian English poet, anthologist, literary critic and translator. He is well known for incorporating a post-modernist style in modern English poetry.

 Biography

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra a popular name in modern English poetry was born the year 1947 in Lahore. He has published four volumes of poetry. Mehrotra had completed his education from Oxford University. Presently the poet has been nominated for the chair of Professor of Poetry at the University of Oxford in 2009. It is the style of Mehrotra to continually revise a small body of work, polishing, crafting, and aiming at elegance, wit precision and an impersonality which will fix the poem and the personal memories that are its source.

 Poetry

Mehrotra's poetry largely falls into two groups. His earliest work is an immediate reaction to his discovery of various modern, post-modernist and earlier avant-garde style and poetics. On the contrary Mehrotra`s present phase is different as it involves a precise recording of external, a making of art from specifics and details, the notating of what he calls, "location". Often the subject matter comes from memories of childhood or from reading history. The technique which has been used by Mehrotra is generally the surrealistic technique. He likes to juxtapose bits and pieces of sensibility as represented by clichéd language, sentiments and situations.

In the poems there has been abundant use of Allahabad because most of his poems are related to the nostalgic moments and reminiscences of Allahabad where he had spent a major portion of his life. Mehrotra`s increasing pre-occupation with personal and local realities is derived from his imagism and he demands that poetry be made of specifics and also express its locations.

As a poet Mehrotra also has the capacity to create continuities and connections between language and experience. Mehrotra's early poems have several characteristics of post-modernism. The form is highly fragmented and relies on collage and montage with no mythic, formal or symbolic structure to create coherence. As in much post modernist literature it seems to enclose itself with the focus on the text rather than society or history.

The poems of Mehrotra show very little feeling of exhaustion and hopelessness which is noticeable in some of the other post-modernist writers. As far as humour of Mehrotra is concerned it was iconoclastic in nature. Mehrotra`s poetry offers a cool, clever, ironic catalogue of received ideas and ready made speech.

Some of the notable literary works of Mehrotra includes, "The Exquisite Corpse", "The Sale", "The Roys", "The Book of Common Places and a lot more. Hence it can be concluded saying that Arvind Kishore Mehrotra had incorporated a style in his poems which had ample resemblance with post-modern literary works.

Bharati Bhavan Library, Chowk, Allahabad.

A day in 1923.
The reading room is full.
In pin-dropp silence,
Accountants, homoeopaths,
Petty shopkeepers, students, clerks
Turn the pages
Of the morning papers.
At the issuing desk,
Some are borrowing books:
A detective novel in Urdu
In two volumes;
A free translation
Of a poem by Goldsmith
Printed in Etawah,
Titled Yogi Arthur.

The books
Are still on the shelves,
Their pages brittle
And spines missing.
New readers occupy the chairs,
Turning the pages
Of the morning papers.
Turning pages too,
But of dusty records
In a back room,
Is a researcher from Cambridge, England.
It's her second visit,
And everyone here knows her.
She's looking at Indian reading habits
In the colonial period.

Outside,
On the pavement,
Is a thriving vegetable market.
Amidst the stalls,
A knife-grinder sets up
His portable establishment
And opens for business.

[From: Both Sides of the Sky (anthology ed. by Eunice de Souza)]

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra

Canticle For My Son

The dog barks and the cat mews,
The moon comes out in the sky,
The birds are mostly settled.
I envy your twelve hours
Of uninterrupted dreaming.

I take your small palms in mine
And don't know what
To do with them. Beware, my son,
Of those old clear-headed women

Who never miss a funeral.

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra

Continuities

I

This is about the green miraculous trees,
And old clocks on stone towers,
And playgrounds full of light
And dark blue uniforms.
At eight I'm a Boy Scout and make a tent
By stretching a bedsheet over parallel bars
And a fire by burning rose bushes,
I know half a dozen knots and drink
Tea from enamel mugs.
I wear khaki drill shorts, note down
The number-plates of cars,
Make a perfect about-turn for the first time.
In September I collect my cousins' books
And find out the dates of the six Mughals
To secretly write the history of India.
I see Napoleon crossing the Alps
On a white horse.

II

My first watch is a fat and silver Omega
Grandfather won in a race fifty-nine years ago;
It never works and I've to
Push its hands every few minutes
To get a clearer picture of time.
Somewhere I've kept my autograph book,
The tincture of iodine in homeopathy bottles,
Bright postcards he sent from
Bad Ems, Germany.
At seven-thirty we are sent home
From the Cosmopolitan Club,
My father says, 'No-bid,'
My mother forgets her hand
In a deck of cards.
I sit reading on the railing till midnight,
Above a worn sign
That advertises a dentist.

III

I go to sleep after I hear him
Snore like the school bell:
I'm standing alone in a back alley
And a face I can never recollect is removing
The hubcaps from our dull brown Ford.
The first words I mumble are the names of roads,
Thornhill, Hastings, Lytton;
We live in a small cottage,
I grow up on a guava tree
Wondering where the servants vanish
After dinner, at the magic of the bearded tailor
Who can change the shape of my ancestors.
I bend down from the swaying bridge
And pick up the river
Which once tried to hide me:
The dance of torn skin

Is for much later.

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra

Genealogy

I

I recognize my father's wooden skin
The sun in the west lights up his bald bones
I see his face and then his broken pair of shoes
His voice comes through, an empty sleeve.
Birds merge with the blue like thin strokes.
Each man is an unfinished fiction
And I'm the last survivor of what was a family;
They left in a caravan, none saw them
Slip through the two hands.
The dial spreads on the roof
Alarms put alarms to sleep
Led by invisible mules I take a path across
The mountains, my alchemies trailing behind
Like leather-bound nightmares;
There isn't a lost city in sight, the map I had
Preserved drifts apart like the continents it showed.

II

My shadow falls on the sun and the sun
Cannot reach my shadow; near the central home
Of nomad and lean horse I pick up
A wheel, a migratory arrow, a numeral.
The seed is still firm. Dreams
Pitch their tents along the rim.
I climb Sugar Mountain
My mother is walking into the horizon
Fire breaks out in the nests
Trees laden with the remnants of squirrels
Turn into scarecrows
The seed sends down another merciless root;
My alembic distills these fairytales
Acids, riddles, the danger in flowers
I must never touch pollen or look
Into a watchmaker's shop at twilight.

III

My journey has been this anchor
The off-white cliff a sail
Fowl and dragons play near the shores
My sea-wrecked ancestors left.
I call out to the raven, "My harem, my black rose
The clock's slave, keeper of no man's land between us"
And the raven, a tear hung above his massive pupil,
Covers my long hair with petals.
Only once did I twist the monotonous pendulum
To enter the rituals at the bottom of twelve seas
Unghostlike voices curdled my blood, the colour
Of my scorpion changed from scarlet
To scarlet; I didn't mean to threaten you
Or disturb your peace I know nothing of
But you - living in these fables, branches
And somehow icebergs - tell me, whose seed I carry.

[From: Nine Enclosures]

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra

Inscription

Last night a line appeared, Unbidden, unsigned;
It had eight memorable
Syllables. I'll keep you,

I said, falling asleep.
It's gone now,
And I write this to requite it,
And to mark its passage.

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra

Mirza Ghalib In Old Age

His eyesight failed him,
But in his soldier's hands,
Still held like a sword,
Was the mirror of couplets.

By every post came
Friends' verses to correct,
But his rosary-chain
Was a string of debts.

[From: Both Sides of the Sky] (anthology ed. by Eunice de Souza)

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra

On The Death Of A Sunday Painter

He smoked a cherry-wood pipe, knew all about cannas,
And deplored our lack of a genuine fast bowler.
My uncle called his wife Soft Hands.
Once in 1936 he sat in his Holland Hall drawing-room
Reading Ulysses when a student walked in.
Years later I read him an essay on D.H. Lawrence
And the Imagists; he listened,
Then spoke of Lord Clive, the travels of Charles M. Doughty,
"My dear young fellow . . . "
I followed the truck on my bicycle
And left early; his friends sat all afternoon
In the portico of a nearby house.

[From: Distance in Statute Miles]

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra

To An Unborn Daughter

If writing a poem could bring you
Into existence, I'd write one now,
Filling the stanzas with more
Skin and tissue than a body needs,
Filling the lines with speech.
I'd even give you your mother's

Close-bitten nails and light-brown eyes,
For I think she had them. I saw her
Only once, through a train window,
In a yellow field. She was wearing
A pale-coloured dress. It was cold.
I think she wanted to say something.

[From: The Transfiguring Places]

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra

Two Lakes

Lakes do not happen
Only in geography.
I know one with a Japanese garden
And a limited zoo; it is surrounded
By a red road and is completely
Artificial. Among its reflections
Are isolated trucks, fragrant locomotives, and a giant
Steel works.

The second lake lies
At the foot of a hill and is clean
To the point of invisibility. On one side
Is the club where dead Englishmen sit
Down on tigers and play bridge; little
Balls of air drift through their moustached faces.
In the billiard-room the table is still
Intact, while the stained kitchen-knife
Has appeared in the region's
Folklore.

[From: Distance in Statute Miles]

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra

Where Will The Next One Come From

The next one will come from the air
It will be an overripe pumpkin
It will be the missing shoe

The next one will climb down
From the tree
When I'm asleep

The next one I will have to sow
For the next one I will have
To walk in the rain

The next one I shall not write
It will rise like bread

It will be the curse coming home

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