

Celebration as a Mode of Creation in the Poetry of Katherine Gallagher

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Abstract:

Katherine Gallagher celebrates even commonplace and ordinary aspects of life in her poetry with great enthusiasm. She celebrates the resilience of the human spirit, beauty of nature and power of love. She asserts here Australian identity and her sense of belonging by expressing its flora and fauna and its people and places.

Key-words: Commonplace, Celebration, Human, Nature, Identity, Belonging.

Gallagher has got such a great enthusiasm for life where she seems to be celebrating even commonplace and ordinary aspects of life. Gallagher's art is elevated with her sense of celebration of things of life and nature just like one of her heroes Les Murray. Murray has confessed that as a child most of his friends were dogs, cows and horses, mountains and creeks and rivers.¹ Murray himself says about the notion of celebration in poetry in his article "A folk Inferno" included in *Blocks and Tackles* :

Two features of the celebratory mode in poetry which occur to me are refusal of alienation and a species of humility. Unlike poetries of formula and definition the celebratory doesn't presume to understand the world, at least never reductively, and so leaves it open and expansive with unforced potentials or so I've mostly obscure celebration is very much a spirit and a tone, and are trying to write, at least as much as out of the particular poem we are writing.²

It is this sense of belonging and taking pride in the world around her, that makes the poet Gallagher celebrate and love places and people she comes across. She has not only adopted the new lands, rather she has assimilated the hues and ways of living there. As a well-travelled Aussie ex-pat who has lived in Paris and London, Katherine Gallagher has a lifetime's experiences to draw on. The opening poem of *Acres of Light* "Elan" transports the readers to Holland Park in Kensington, London on an April day where nature is at its fullest form in a halcyon afternoon and the whole of the nature seem to be celebrating this festival of nature in Wordsworthian way of saying :

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A peacock, tail-fanned, struts, dazzles
among daisies, daffodils. Children's voices
split the air.

Under such fun and frolic, among the rising crescendo, the poet creates magic through the words and seems to pull her readers completely into the moment and rinses them clean. One feels delighted and ready to embark on a voyage through words that will take him from sun dappled English countryside to the spare, harsh landscape of rural Australia. One can travel with Gallagher from oceans to suburbs, from small moments of gladness to harrowing global realities. Gallagher's enormous love for the world around her is reflected in splendid random lists of unlikely things in poem like "Credo", "Quotidian" and "The Spell of Fireflies." These poems bear a metaphysical vein. They express her philosophy of living zestfully and loving every aspect of the universe real or imaginary. The quirky and fantastical, the exquisite and comical are slung together in a glorious grab bag of objects and instances which make up an ordinary life :

I like mirrors, miracles and handouts,
being in love, telling people I care
and sometimes talking to myself. I tend to think there's,
mostly a way out, and that one can count on surprises
such as unicorns and fireflies.

In Gallagher's world vitamin pills and Arctic skies are given the same weight. Nothing is insignificant and everything has its place. Commenting about the poem "The Spell of Fireflies " Gallagher says :

About what I believe in, what I like, more or
less a philosophy of life, the bigger picture, how there
are winners and losers on their dizzying slopes.³

The poem titled "Credo" seems to be a continuous elaboration of her sense of seeing extraordinary in ordinary things. With a refrain of "I believe in..." and rhyming of second and fourth lines like moons - macaroons, goons - dunes, prunes - tunes, noons - brooms gives it an intricacy of expression and is suggestive of her belief in oneness of the universe and an eternal joy that lies in its creations.

Gallagher continues her celebratory strain in the poems like "Quotidian" and her innovative Indian poetic form ghazal in "Ghazal : The Fire." These poems written even in autumn of her life, she seems to defy her age and the burdens of life. After a line "We love life whenever we can" by Mahmoud Darwish, a Palestinian poet and author who was regarded as Palestine's national poet, she

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took the line as a refrain to give utterance to her convictions for ways of living a life full of vigour and zeal. She feels enthralled to listen the beautiful tune of the bird robin and considers that the life of the robin is as lovable as that of ours :

We love life whenever we can.
We like to hear the robin getting started.
We stop and listen, entranced by how
we love life, and the life of the robin.

The retreat and recreation in nature brings realisation of one's existence and shows him the ways to advance. As in the stanza here below :

We love when children gallop to school
clutching their frisbees, satchels, racing the day.

"Ghazal : The Fire" is an acknowledgement of the fire kindling in one's inner self and she seems to be guiding the ways through which one can perceive that fire in him. Seeing Gallagher's journey of life at close quarters it can be drawn that she had always had some sort of recognition of her inner fire, that has led her towards achieving her goals of life. It filled her with a sort of self confidence when she left her homeland to chase her career overseas :

When your heart grips and won't let go it's fire
don't fear it. Hear it, say it could be fire.
Though your dream has not been easy, you think it's true;
grab the chance, this dance. Embrace the fire.
Don't hesitate and bait the silence, there's no recipe
for those who wait for love : trust the fire.
When a voice inside you flicks the switch
and a million sparks ignite, you think it's fire.

"The Riverboat" is a celebration of the journey of married life. As Gallagher found her companion for life on a foreign shore in Bernard, she seems to look back on their conjugal relations which has come so far in good humour despite the differences of land and language, Being in union, they have kept their separate identities with helping each other in their respective vocations through all weathers whether fair or foul. It was all possible through their bond of trust in each other. The journey on the riverboat on river Thames is a micro ed macro for the couple's voyage of conjugal life.

The tone of the poem becomes reflective and the poet seems to assert that love is essential

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for everyone :

They are counting on chances,
gathering depths in the mystery of elements,
their biggest gamble of the day,
whirlpools, undertow -
the margins they've yet to reach,
voyaging them on beyond themselves.

Speaking about the journey theme and importance of love in life Gallagher quotes :

“... Love changes people, but everyone wants it, needs it,
waits for it. It changes the world. Again the journey.”⁴

This essentiality of love is again given expression in the poem “Before the Storm” where Sven Richard Bergh's painting Nordic Summer Evening has been interpreted. Here she uses a longer line in a version of William Carlos Williams' step down foot. This poem and the ghazal show that Gallagher can give careful consideration to appropriate form without resorting to outmodel ones. Gallagher discusses relationship between the lover and his beloved who are in an estranged relationship. Both are reluctant to communicate to each other. Their coldness suggests a kind of insecurity they feel. The feeling of alienation and distances between them can be seen in the disorderly lines used by the poet :

What keeps them so enclosed within themselves?

Arms clasped behind her, she's braced for

any outcomes.

Casually, he gazes over the lake.

Such distance between them,

are they homed by silences?

They have all the time

of figures on a frieze.

“Beatles Poem” is a celebration of the success of the English rock band The Beatles. It is a kind of dedication to Elvis Presley, the American singer and actor. Presley was known as the ‘King of Rock and Roll’, he is regarded as one of the most significant cultural figures of the 20th century.

Though she has claimed superiority of Presley's art over to that of The Beatles, she agrees in that that their true art cannot fade or be broken by the changes of time and cruel murder of the artist. Art is somewhat permanent and immortal and is a unifying force. Even after John Lennon was

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shot dead, he lives in his songs :

Even when the Beatles broke up, their songs held them together
 Even when John Lennon was shot, and we mourned him,
 no one could shoot down the songs.

Speaking about the art of The Beatles and of Elvis, she emphasises the importance of movement in our life :

... there's a recognition that the Beatles evoke a different frisson
 from Elvis Presley but that is part of the cycle. Life itself is about
 movement and our moving on into what awaits us.⁵

The haikus added in *Acres of Light* exemplifies Shakespeare's Character Old Polonius' proverbial statement "Brevity is the soul of wit." Gallagher's description of nature is visual when she portrays the stillness on the hillside and the stillness of sheep. She might be suggesting the eternal bond between the hills and the sheep :

evening stillness
 on the hillside
 the stillness of sheep

The illustration of autumn morning is indicative of transition and profusion in nature. The whole of the nature seems to be preparing itself for the coming winter :

autumn morning -
 a rain soaked rose
 sways in the breeze

The serenity and calmness of the evening is added some sort of sanctity by robin's unadulterated and joyous song :

inside the robin's
 pure song -
 evening walk

The next haiku presents us with symbolic interpretation where the closing of a short winter day spreads darkness against church bells which might suggest that the mere religiosity is not able to avert the coldness of relationships and ignorance of people, which are the main hurdles in the way of peace and happiness of the world :

winter solstice -

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the darkness closes in
against the church bells

Gallagher offers svelte branches of lemon gums, and is all praise of the grandeur and beauty of lemon gums in the poem "Lemon Gums." They are a species of tall tree that is endemic to north-eastern Australia. Lemon gums are as identical of Australia as the koalas are, which feed on them. Gallagher has vividly portrayed the tree in a celebratory mode. The tree has smooth white to pink bark, narrow lance-shaped to curved adult leaves, and stands tall with stoic silence exuding fragrance in the atmosphere :

Indeed, miraculous that no one
felt the need to blemish such skin,
but allowed it to crinkle with years,
ageing at its own pace, the svelte branches
reaching into shades of sky.
On both sides of the road, these sentinels,
in perfumed silence over long summers,
settle into being admired as works of art :
even graffitists stand back,
pocket their knives.

"Bees" seems to be an extended metaphor for Gallagher's hard work and patience to establish herself in literary field. Just like the pollen-laden bee, Gallagher made great efforts bravely and re-invented herself in the land of her adoption despite all odds. The journey of her poetic career has been an adventurous one, a dream come true. She weaves this journey into words like :

A pollen-laden bee is weaving about,
circling the flowers as a spider waits, traps it
in its web.
Desperate, the intrepid prisoner
re-invents itself as warrior; wings dipping,
legs lashing the silky bars.
and the outcome of her persistent efforts :
Slowly the web changes to a golden net

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as the bee unloads its pollen.

The subjective 'I' appears just to find surprising fruitful results :

Unable to interfere, I tear myself away,

returning an hour later

to find a circle of golden spokes -

but to her utter surprise again, the performer behind this 'Karma' has left after doing the job selflessly. The process described here allegorically pertains to the Indian philosophy of 'Nishkam Karma.'

Gallagher has been a lover of art, especially painting. She has tried to illustrate and decipher the paintings of Wassily Kandinsky. In these ekphrastic poems she tries to explore various nuances of life in the colours and patterns of Kandinsky's paintings. Gallagher titled each of these ekphrastic poems with the year the painting was done in Bahaus Art Centre. The poem "Kandinsky Journey" serves as a prologue for the further action characterised by colours and sketches arousing imaginations and triggering interpretations for the readers :

follow the curves

let them take you

over the skyline

when you arrive

at a state of shock

the paradox of colour

will balance you

It is for finding this balance between things in one's life, that one strives. Gallagher seems to say that true balancing lies only in the contrasts and varieties of experiences in life. She explores beauty in colours to achieve eternal truths hidden among them. The celebration of identity and landscape remains incomplete without the eye of imagination as Gallagher speaks about the necessity of colour, movement and rhythm in the endless expedition of life :

The Celebratory Mode - Identity and Landscape requires the imagination to set up a virtual reality - quite filmic, that allows colour, movement and rhythm to spark off, unpack suggestions to the eye which holds the picture together... The link is mostly through shape and colour responses...⁶

Gallagher, like Murray, has celebrated Australian landscape, flora and fauna, with vivid

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imagery and emotional resonance in her poems, she skillfully weaves words to depict moments of joy, triumph, and the essence of celebration. Through her poems, she explores various themes, from nature's beauty in the pieces like "The Spell of Fireflies," "Elan," "A Measure of Stillness" to human connection in the poems like "Photograph – Mekong Delta, South Vietnam, 1965," "Refugees at the Aid Centre, Deghabur, Ethiopia," and "Ireland 1972." Her poems of nostalgia are uniquely coupled with a sense of celebration of people and places. In the poems like "Eastville Sonata," "Retrospect," "Going Back to the Farm," "Your Story," and "The Presence of the Trees," she presents the beauty of the land and her emotional connection with her family members by remembering her past memories there in Australia. Her experiences of travel and emotions of "arriving past distances" are depicted in the poems like "The Brief of Travelling," "Ode to the Boeing 747," and "Coming into Zurich." Gallagher's celebratory mode is marked by a keen observation of the world around her. She brings to life the vibrancy of celebrations, whether they be cultural festivities or personal victories. Her poems often resonate with a universal human experience, celebrating shared emotions that connect readers to the essence of the celebration depicted.

In conclusion, Katherine Gallagher's celebratory mode in her poems is characterized by a masterful use of language, keen observation, and a deep exploration of diverse themes. Through her verses, she invites readers to share in the joyous moments she depicts, creating a poetic celebration that transcends time and cultural boundaries.

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