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**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)

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A change in images from 'jammed door' to 'closing door', 'sheaf of white hair' to 'a ring of white hair' and the omission of the image of a 'room where he runs down panicky as a fingerprint' and where the directions run like 'retarded children indicate that the awe of her presence is now lost. The change has also come in the perception of himself as the poet. Now, he sees in himself a 'farrier's anvil' which indicates that his hammering out of his art has turned into skillful craftsmanship. He now wishes to know "where adamant is found." He expresses:

Old woman, tell me about the death  
Of mercury. Tonight I'll enter  
Your mutable country  
Where the land doesn't tighten  
Overwater like a shoe and the moon  
Spills all its light  
In the sky. I touch my words

And they rise to be near your empty hands. (Collected Poems78)

Now, he is not merely interested in knowing himself as the poet, rather, he is keen now to know from her, the place where 'the adamant' is found' and about 'the death of mercury'. This is something that points out the changing perception of Mehrotra as a poet. Somewhere he seeks to achieve that alchemist power of the art, which will help him transform the world around him. The death of mercury', as Mehrotra defines it in the 'Notes' to *Middle Earth*, is the state of *Chittavrttinirodha*. "In KubjikaTantra, Shiva speaks of mercury as his generating principle and lauds its efficiency when it has been 'fixed' (i.e. dead) six times. ... In alchemical terms, to 'fix' or to 'kill' mercury is tantamount to attaining to the 'chittavrttinirodha' (suppression of conscious states), which is the ultimate aim of yoga."(54) It is then, a Yogic state where through suffering and knowledge one arrives at this stage that transcends the sensory world. In another way, the death of mercury is an impossible kind of state. As we know, mercury does not undergo any kind of transformation and even if fragmented, every part of it consists of its essence. It reflects reality as it is. It is not easy to destroy that reality. Only when one goes beyond the perception of its physical reality, there is the possibility of the death of mercury. Only 'The old woman', (an image of creativity) has this art of transcending this physical reality. Mehrotra's prayer to seek this knowledge of "*Chittavrttinirodha*" from her shows a significant change in his aesthetics. It is the knowledge, that art is alchemy and the words that create this art has the potential of 'mantra', a kind of power that brings the mutation of the existing world. The old woman lives in such a mutable country and now instead of nibbling at her expert hands he touches his words, "and they rise to be near your [her] empty hands". Rising of his words at her empty hands implies the nearness of their relationship. After nibbling at her expert hand for years, now he wants nothing from her. It is a wish to be near her. It is an attempt to perceive moments of emptiness that do not cause feelings of loss. It is a real state of *chittavrttinirodha*. His desire to achieve

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*chittavrittinirodha* through poetry brings a new dimension to his poetry. The alchemist's power of the art that helps to create '*pratisrishiti*', the potential of the words as '*mantra*' that brings the mutation in the existing world are the revelations Mehrotra achieves through the art of poetry. Poetic art in such cases does not remain mere means to achieve something external, it becomes a part of personality; a kind of life force.

The collection that followed *Middle Earth* has been titled *The Transfiguring Places: Poems* (1998). As the title of the collection indicates the poet depicts here the altered vision of the self as a poet. It is an altogether different perception about himself that gets reflected in the poems collected in this collection. The poems in their 'meta-poetic narrative' put forth the changing perception of Mehrotra as the poet. He recollects his poetic ability through the image of a cartographer. In the poem "The Cartographer" he marks:

He could draw  
Anything once:  
...  
Not any more.  
Now he draws less,  
...  
Pit heads  
And coal-veins:  
Tributaries that fall short of rivers  
That fall short of the sea;(Ibid 191).  
There is a confessing note when he says;  
Once the hum stops there's nothing you can do  
Your best lines are those that didn't come through.(Ibid 151)

The artist who realizes an inevitable loss of creativity has been depicted through these lines. In one of the poems called "Borges", the poet delineates his journey from a creator to creation. He appeals to Borges:

Before the knife rusts, the dream loses  
Its crescent shape, ...  
... Borges, I must  
Write the poem. Insomnia brings lucidity,  
And a borrowed voice sets the true one  
Free: lead me who am no more than De Quincy's  
Malay, a speechless shadow in a world

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Of sound, to the labyrinth of the earthly  
Library, perfect me in your work. (Ibid 149)

From the dream of achieving the alchemist's power that helps to identify oneself as the creator, the poet comes to perceive himself as a 'speechless shadow'. It is a journey of a person from the creator to the creation. Mehrotra hints at his assumption of the self as a mere 'word' to be perfected in other's (Borges, for instance) work. In the world of literature, he assumes himself as a letter of the alphabet or rather, that word that has its perpetual distinct message but is merged in the world's library. It is in one way, an act of the submission of the self that was hinted at in the wish of the knowledge of "the death of mercury". A poetic journey brings the poet to the realization that "The nights are spent/ In the middle of a borderless page"( Collected poems:172) and the line that appears at night and promises him "I'll keep you" is gone and what remains is a 'requite to mark its passage'(Collected Poems: 150) The sense of loss of creativity, the realization that somehow the enigmatic, alchemist power of poetry is slipping through hands and art of poetry has perhaps become a requisite to the true rhyme, continuously reflects in the lines of *The Transfiguring Places: Poems*. Mehrotra's oeuvre, thus, designates one circular journey of the poet who began by assuming the role of creator and who has arrived at the place where he achieves the knowledge that he is the creation in another's hand. *The Transfiguring Places: Poems*, reveals Mehrotra's poetic journey where revisiting the self in the same places brings out his changed perception of that place. His revisiting is a sign of transformation through which the poet now sees the world. Mehrotra's image of himself as 'the speechless shadow' should be understood in this background. His search for common speech, his loneliness expressed in the image of sitting on the 'borderless page' bring out the alienation of the poet as an artist who at one level had experienced the state of almost freedom of individuality and at another level has come to the realization that like river he needs to submit himself. In this state the fear of the loss of creative power doesn't matter because he has learned over the period:

Art is long who doesn't know that.  
Keep pedaling my friend, though the tire's flat. (Ibid 151)

At this juncture, it is necessary to note that the poems that depict the poet's altered vision and his feelings of loss of creativity are the best poems that the poet has written. As has been pointed out earlier his meta-poetic narrative reveals his brilliance in handling the poem as a form of art. Hence the poetry of Mehrotra stands as a 'site' that helps to bring in its concrete form the poetic journey of the poet and his art of poetry. Thus the probe into Mehrotra's poetic journey through his poems makes a notable expression that writing a poem is a continuous journey. Each new poem in this sense then



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is a part of the earlier poem and a poem yet to be written and the poet goes on exploring those never said lines in the form of each new poem that turns a poet into an age-long traveler.

**Appendix:**

<b>Index of First Lines</b> (Published in <i>Nine Enclosures</i> (1976))	<b>Index of First Lines</b> (Published in <i>Middle Earth</i> (1984))
I	I
She is a snake, she is wind, she is	She is the snake, she is wind, she is
Leaf, she will cry as if a hand	Leaf, her cry is a knock
Were knocking and I'll let her enter.	On the door and I let her enter.
Her tears turn into nails	Her face is like paper
The door is jammed.	On which something has been written
She will sit in that armchair	And erased many times. The door closes.
Open her purse, her mouth	She sits in an armchair, leans
And pull out a sheaf of white hair	Forward, and gives me a ring of white hair.
She will insist on my keeping it for her	She wants me to keep it
Till she knocks again.	Till she calls again.
I run down the streets of my room	It's half-past four in the morning
Panicky as a fingerprint	And I'm still awake. The wedding music
The directions flee like retarded children.	Stops for a while. Whiteness
Old woman, I don't mind falling	Returns to the walls.
From thirty thousand feet so long I can	Old woman, how can I be
Hold on to something more	Astonished by sunlight when it breaks

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Than sunlight. A condemned building Cannot lean on its shadow.  II She enters through a door In the kitchen I pretend I'm asleep. She sits at the foot of my bed I notice her breasts Resemble her father's. It is eleven. The sun has risen despite the rain The bird's debate Whether to get up or locate their Nests; soon it will be dark. The inside of my mouth Is shaped like a cobbler's Anvil. Old woman, today I cannot Explore my fear; the milestones Are fixed in the earth like teeth And I've sold my compass For a clay ornament.	So evenly? A condemned building Cannot lean on its shadow.  II She enters through a door In the kitchen, I pretend I'm asleep. She sits at the foot of my bed, And I notice her hands Resemble her father's. It's past eleven. The sun has risen despite the rain. The birds get up But stay close to their Nests. Soon it will be dark. Inside my mouth I see a farrier's anvil. Old woman, tell me Where adamant is found. The birds' feet are tied, They have chipped voices, And I've sold my compass For a clay medallion.
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III

She is an elf, she is a wand, she is  
A goblin, she comes whenever she pleases.  
She no longer taps like the rain  
I stumble upon her  
As I do upon remnants of a habit.  
On Sundays  
She sits at the head of the table.  
And serves hot milk to those  
Who visits her.  
She knows each one by name.  
Old woman, I'm slowly becoming  
You; I prepare to enter your country  
Where the land and sea  
Are equally fragile, the moon  
Corroded, the sky  
Left to its own devices.  
I open the mousetrap  
And my words nibble at your expert  
hands.

III

She is an elf, she is a wand, she is  
A goblin. She comes as she pleases.  
She no longer taps like the rain,  
She stands in the window  
Like sunset.  
On Sundays, she opens  
A book of charts  
And turns a page. I watch  
The edges of a continent run  
Into the colors of the sea.  
Old woman, tell me about the death  
Of mercury. Tonight I'll enter  
Your mutable country  
Where the land doesn't tighten  
Overwater like a shoe and the moon  
Spills all its light  
In the sky. I touch my words  
And they rise to be near your empty hands.

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