

**Reflection of New Dimensions of Poetic Creed in O. P. Bhatnagar's Poetry**

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**Abstract**

*O. P. Bhatnagar suggests new premises for Indian poetry in English. Poetry expresses truth of probability rather than the truth of facts. He keenly realises that Indian poetry in English deplorably lacks in social and human concerns. Bhatnagar praises Indian poetry in English for its variety and progressive nature. He stresses that it must voice its protest against all the decadent traditions. It must integrate politics with aesthetics to emphasize human values. Creative writing for Bhatnagar is as natural as the flow of chemical fluids inside the organisms without any conscious effort going into it. Bhatnagar's first poem "Desires on Death" came this way. Other poems also embody the same principal. Bhatnagar disapproves of the theory of transport in literature for according to him, it keeps man away from the realities of life and his problems. The paper presents that the mood of Bhatnagar's poetry and aesthetics is one of rebellion against the present frame of things. His is a theory and creed of composure and balance amidst contemporary intellectual confusion and chaos. Poetry to Bhatnagar is neither an outburst of emotion nor the product of metaphysics. "It is a projection of the poet's deeply felt experience. His poems are the product of a very deliberate purpose, which aims at building confident individuals by purifying their perception of the reality of life.*

**Key Words:** Poetry, Creative Writing, Theory, Creed, Realities of Life, Aesthetics

## **I**

### **Introduction**

O.P Bhatnagar has emerged as a major Indo-English poet of our era. His is a powerful voice trying to mould the conscience of man for a better world order. His poetry is not bogged down in dreamy romanticism. He has made it stand on the firm ground of existential realism. Bhatnagar is a multi-faceted genius. He is the poet critic and an anthologist though he started writing poetry rather late in life, in a short period of sixteen years of creative activity Bhatnagar has published seven volumes of poetry: *Thought Poems* (1976), *Feeling Fossils* (1977), *Angles of Retreat* (1979), *Oeniric Visions* (1980), *Shadows in Floodlights* (1984), and *The Audible Landscape* (1986), *Cooling Flames of Darkness* (2001). Besides these, he has also edited three anthologies of poetry: *Inter Continental Poetry* (1978), *New Dimensions in Modern English Poetry* (1980) and *Rising Columns : Some Indian Poets in English* (1980). His thought provoking works on criticism comprise: *Perspectives on Indian Poetry in English* (1986), *Studies in Indian Drama in English* (1987), and *Indian Literature in English* (1990). Bhatnagar has enriched the indo English poetry with about eighteen critical article and many interviews and letters.

He also participated on the forth World Congress of Poets at Seoul, Korea in 1979. In his presidential address, he dwelt on the role and functions of the poet in present day world and his views evoked great interest.

Although Bhatnagar has not extensively expounded his theory of poetry, his concept and preferences can be gleamed from his essays, introductions and interviews. He has stressed the necessity of redefining the role and purpose of poetry today. In his critical essay 'The Rising Columns' he states that if there is to be any tradition in Indian poetry in English, it has to be of thinking on poetry, especially by the poets themselves and that "the course of poetry may well gathered its currants from his tradition without enslaving individuality" 1. Bhatnagar assigns great importance to theme of poetry and perfecting his ideas about poetry and poetic creed.

According to Bhatnagar, a meaningful aesthetics making the truth of life intelligible is the very basis of a good poetry, and any attempt on developing a deliberate aesthetics will be false and misleading. When Bhatnagar insists so much on true aesthetics, it will not be improper to define and discuss aesthetics.

Aesthetics comprises reflections on the experiences of the beautiful in all forms. To Bhatnagar, aesthetics has a comprehensive meaning. It is according to him "not abstract of abstractive but a realized value of the mind. In other words aesthetics is the sum and the substance of one's way of conceiving the world, the values one attaches to the material and non-material existence and the manner in which one inter-relates the phenomenon of the

creative to the living”. 2

In an interview given to Srivastava, Bhatnagar defines aesthetics as “man’s nature and desire to go beyond everything. It is material made immaterial, formal made informal and conventional made novel. It is not of any philosophical or ethical category but an expression of one’s innocent love of beyond. The right aestheticism of an art lies in the poignancy of its human concern. Thus the aesthetics in poetry can only be its humanizing urgency and influence.” 3. Aesthetics for Bhatnagar, is a revelation of his deep concern for human predicament. Only that aesthetics is useful which sustains human culture. He rightly remarks: “There can be no other aesthetics for any poetry than the values that sustain human culture in any age or clime. Any cultivated isolated aesthetics will be the aesthetics of conceit or exile for poetry must share and consist of the human needs and value of time.” 4

Bhatnagar believes that each individual poet should create his own norms without going back to tradition. He opposes tradition because he believes that “One who goes back to tradition loses his/her individual talent and surrenders some part of truth, integrity, vision and creativity. Man’s space is between the contraries. And the experience establishing relationship between the self and the non-self underlies poetic creation”. He adds, poetry has always been an unalienable part of man’s attempt to locate him in the matrix of existence. It has helped man to interpret the subtle inter-relationships of the within with the without, of outs innings and innings outing.” 5

## II

The poetry of the sixties according of Bhatnagar, “has been more a poetry of shifting sand dunes than a moving inwards towards the roots of intensive and expansive personal experience. Even inward turning needs a centre to concentrate on. No still centre can be traced in the poetry of sixties.” 6 But in the seventies, a number of new poets such as O.P. Bhatnagar, Keshav Malik, Margaret Chatterjee, Ajit Khullar, and Manohar Bandopadhyay tried to give a new turn to Indian English poetry by including human, social and political issues. They made it an effective tool of social criticism and reformation.

Among the poets of the seventies, Bhatnagar has given a new dimension to Indo-English poetry. He is not a romantic lyricist. His poetry is the poetry of protest. He refutes T. S. Eliot by remarking that “poetry is not extinction but awakening of personality to the realities of the present, a space that imagination gives to reality in concrete.” 12 Poetry to Bhatnagar is neither an outburst of emotion nor the product of metaphysics. “It is a projection of the poet’s deeply felt experience. His poems are the product of a very deliberate purpose, which aims at building confident individuals by purifying their perception of the reality of life. They are the

poems of spontaneous inspiration.” 7 In his poem “Bonds of country care” included in this his collection of *Thought Poems* he writes:

Dialectics cannot be a way of blurring reality  
Nor philosophy a way of doing away  
With vampires  
Santa Claus is not our image  
We need men who can clay their feet  
In mud. (*Thought Poems*, p.25)

Bhatnagar seeks to awaken his people from the infernal abyss of corruption, inhumanity and injustice:

To shake the universe  
With the thunder from my throat  
And use the last breath of mine  
To keep my countryman awake.  
(*Feeling Fossils*, p.12)

Laying emphasis on thought, Bhatnagar tells us about his method of composing poems: “I write in two ways. Sometimes a thought or an idea spurs me on to writing a poem, other times a scene or an image. I have a tendency to counter images with thoughts and ideas.” 8 His first poem, “Desire of Death” included in *Thought Poems*, is composed according to this theory. Bhatnagar explains the genesis of this poem thus:

“The first poem I wrote was “Desires on Death. As I sat on the front verandah of my house, further down the sparse population, one evening. I found a row of sparrow perched in sculptured silence on naked electric wires. The scene was so arresting that I fell in tune with the image and experience of it in a meaningful urge to find form and expression appropriate to it. This was an extension and opening out of a new dimension that is stirring the self to a state of arrest, a state of creative arrest. From this time onward, it became easy for me to get in tune with the life and spirit and meaning of scenes, situations, emotional turmoils and intellectual rumination and turn them into poetic compositions of a finished poem and meaning.” 9

Bhatnagar insists on hard labour on the part of a poet to give shape to his thoughts. He observes, “Sweating makes poetry more organic and less abstract and obtuse, for labours is the poetry of existence and its concretion its aesthetics.” 10

His early poem “Round and Round” embodies this theory:

We may go round and round an idea  
Yet never be round thought  
Poetry is meaning  
Like a deity enshrined  
Words upon words the edifice built. (*Thought Poems*, p.5)

### III

‘Poetry’ for Bhatnagar is a “medium between his self and his surroundings, a dialogue of the within with the without.”<sup>11</sup> Hence the Indian poet in English should aim at making a collective rather than an individual appeal. Elucidating his concept of a poet’s role, Bhatnagar observes that a poet should write of truth and beauty, raise his voice against injustice and cruelty and advocate equality and brother hood. In his poem “New Scale” he lays down the characteristics of a poet:

A simple honest man  
In a worn out mode  
May still he find?  
Measuring life in value spoons  
Bravery corruption and forgery  
For him a bitter poison be  
But the clever in it  
A meaty situation sees  
Dispensing poison like a doctor  
Normalizing a disturbed balance. (*Thought Poems*, p.15)

### IV

Bhatnagar believes in realism. His poetry is invested with everyday Indian reality. According to him, “the essence of any power permeating the universe is reason.”<sup>12</sup> Bhatnagar probes the existential reality of the modern man. He considers the existential philosophy to be most suited to Indian conditions today. He has firm belief in life and evinces it in his poem “In live and Die for”:

Life grows to beauty

In discovering not  
What men die by  
What they live by  
A bit (*Oeniric Vision*, p.26)

V

Bhatnagar considers that the relation of poetry is essentially aesthetical. He strongly pleads for participation of poetry in politics. As poetry is the most refined form of human awareness. He observes “I also see poetry as a form of resistance and protest against injustices man, tyranny and cruelty perpetrated on man. If poetry can participate in religions, mysticism, philosophy and ethics why can poetry not participate in politics? Politics too is another form at human through and imagination.” 13

No area of human life today is free of politics. It has become the keynote of Indian life. Politics covers the whole range of public events. The essence of this kind of poetry is that it deals with the events which concern a large number of people and can be grasped as immediate personal experience. All ills that beset our national life including the loss of moral value due to the present-day degenerate politics, and poetry is the most powerful weapon to expose and launch a crusade against it. Bhatnagar therefore exhorts the poet writing in English in India to raise his “voice against a kind of politics that forces the virtuous to the back ground and ennoble the crafts and the corrupt to the public esteem”.<sup>14</sup> He wants the poet to unmask “the degeneration and corruption corroding our national life”.<sup>15</sup> Thoroughly conscious of the havoc politics has caused to our national life today and keenly aware to the resultant miserable life of the people, Bhatnagar voices his angry protest in one recent poems entitled ‘The fate of the Victims’:

We live on the island of terror  
With blood lashing the shores of life

In expressing his discontent and anger against the injustices inflicted on man by politics, Bhatnagar may rank with such great writer as Anand and Nirad C. Chaudhari. In one of his poems entitled “A Woe of Wonder” he expresses his anger thus:

Our's is a multi-headed country  
Looking in no particular direction  
Trimurti is an all-inclusive vision

From here to eternity risen  
Telling the tale of frivolity. (*Thought Poems*, p. 24)

Bhatnagar firmly believes that glorification of the past which he terms “digging dead skeletons from our graves of the past” cannot offer us any respite. He calls the uninvolved poetry as “armchair poetry”. He compares the voice of the poets writing about India from abroad to the Mullah who offers “Azan” which is voice lost in the void. Thus for Bhatnagar, commitment to life is more important than commitment to literature.

## VI

The purpose of poetry, according to Bhatnagar is to train people into sensitive understanding of life and its reality in the present through intellectual reflection. The function of poetry is not to offer doctrines but “to move and stir and not still the mind of the people.” 16 Bhatnagar does not want “poets garbing roles of prophets, philosophers, or literary tantrists”. He deplores “messiahism” as an anti-poetry syndrome born of self-enacted indulgence. 17 Poetry, he further says, “must not try to transform the world nor redeem the people of its sufferings but only make people feel, see and think more fully and openly by instilling in them an analytical and critical attitude to events and experience.” 18 He would like poetry as a means “to keep my countrymen awake”.

For Bhatnagar, poetry is an integral part of man’s life. It cannot live as a separate entity. “Pure poetry”, he observes “is a misnomer like sound in painting and colours in music. Poetry has to have human content, context and relevance. Poetry without these aspects is embellishment of wasteful kind, a lifeless curio in an antique shop.” 19 He is also against esoteric function of poetry. Art for art’s sake, the much-publicised slogan has become irrelevant in the present circumstance. “If poetry is to survive”, he says, “it must give up its elitist mode”. 20 It may be of interest to know that in this respect, Bhatnagar holds a different view from that of Bradley’s. Bradley advocates a severance between poetry and life with all its socio-political dilemmas, conflicts, and challenges. Bhatnagar, on the contrary holds that for any dynamic poetry any material or object can have aesthetic function.

Poetry for Bhatnagar, can never be a means of escape from life. Poetry must reveal the widespread present day degeneration, conflicts and frustrations of life. In his poem “not to die of life” Bhatnagar spells out:

In order not to die of life  
We have art. (Thought Poems, p. 21)

In another poem, “All Beautiful Things in the World are Chinars” Bhatnagar shows the relationship between art and life:

To reach the splendor  
Of a flame  
One must be wood first.  
(Angles of Retreat, p.p. 10-11)

When we are talking of life we cannot avoid referring to death. For Bhatnagar, life and death are integral entity. Where there is life, there is death. Our holy scripture the Geeta also confirms this undeniable truth:

jaatasya hi dhruvo mrutyuh, dhruvam janma mrutasya cha  
tasmaat aparihaaryerthe na tvam shochitum arhasi  
(One who is born is sure to die. One who is dead is sure to be reborn)

Bhatnagar may dispute the second line, but truth remains unchangeable irrespective of one's acceptance or denial.

## VII

Although religion has played a major role in bestowing greatness to such poets as Tagore and Aurobindo, Bhatnagar disapproves of its intrusion into the domain of poetry. According to him, poetry is founded on reality, whereas religion is founded on mere beliefs and assumption he holds that “Religions hardly ever seek solution : they only seek diffusion. Their targets are otherworldly than living. They love suffering than relief, acquiescence than protest.”<sup>21</sup> He further asserts that “the days of old loyalties to God are over; the new loyalties are towards our nation which give meaning and identity to ourselves.”<sup>22</sup> Bhatnagar regrets that “the writers in India, specially the writers in English, continue to be dominated by religion--- they concentrate themselves more on vulnerable than the valuable themes.”<sup>23</sup> According to him, God, if He exists, is inimical to man. Bhatnagar does not praise religion, he rather satirists it. For instance the poem “The God Game” ridicules the idea of creation:



Bored of loneliness  
Some created the word  
In a thoughtless jiffy  
Saying let there be---. (*Angles of Retreat*, p.38)

### VIII

Bhatnagar holds that the time is now ripe for Indian poetry in English to turn to satire for vitality. His employment of satire is neither invention nor obscene. It is different from Swifts' or Pope's. His main aim is to expose the depravity and inhumanity of man. His poem "Look Homeward Angel" is the best example of his subtle satire where pathos has the undercurrent of powerful satire:

Even birds that are forced out of home  
At the turn of every season  
Return to their land  
Traversing incredible distances  
Flapping dreams with weary wings (*Angles of Retreat*, p.34)

Bhatnagar thus views irony as refinement of vision and a participation in human predicament. He does not believe in the aesthetic end of poetry but in the semantic.

### IX

Bhatnagar's treatment of the contraries of life is superb. In all his seven collections of poetry there is hardly any poem, which is devoid of this literary device. Let us study some of his poems in his first volume: Thought Poems. In "Of Court and Cancer Ward" the two extremities of death are brought out and the pensioner who is sentenced to death is begging for life; on the contrary a cancer patient is longing for death to get rid of his sufferings and pain. But ironically both of them are denied what they have been seeking. The contrary in the "Tragic Hero" is more subtle. The poet calls a lover of value a diseased man. He has no place in this world. His life is like writing his own epitaph. Bhatnagar's second collection Feeling Fossils has many poems such as "I have Promises to Keep", "Crossing the Bar" etc. dealing with contraries. In the former, promises are contradicted with futile words and the latter; the thick forest is juxtaposed with light. Bringing out the selfish loyalties of the politicians or the people's representatives, the poet says:

Morals as dense  
As thick forests  
Let no light in ---(*Oeniric Vision*, p.15)

In the third volume, 'Angles of Retreat' the poems "All Beautiful Things in the World are Chinar", "Kashmir Autumn Scene" and "Tree in Autumn" express the contrast of nature. In "All Beautiful Things in the World are Chinar" the poet brings out the contrast of colours in a beautiful way:

The Kashmir chinars  
Come of green age  
In spring  
Go red in autumn  
Flushed with the feeling on there  
Watery marriage  
With snow. (*Angles of Retreat*, p.10)

In the "Kashmir Autumn Scene" the contrast is presented by a beautiful simile. The shedding of leaves is compared to a trekker's dislodging of his belongings. In "Tree in Autumn" the contrast of nature is presented by an unusual simile:

Trees in autumn go bereft of leaves  
As if by a grand strategy of retreat  
To defeat the Napoleonic designs of show. (*Angles of Retreat*, p. 22)

The poem "look homeward angel" divulges the contraries of the life of the Indian emigrant living in England, America and other countries. They bear all sorts of humiliations for their greed of the gold. They don't even care for "Waltzing national pride". The poet touchingly tells us that they

Present an impoverished image  
Of their feeling made dull by dollars  
And ideas impounded by pound.

What segregation and humiliation they suffer  
To disown their citizenship

And acquire one, which fits  
So loose on their hybrid identity. (*Angles of Retreat*, p. 38)

“Beggars can be choosers” is another poem which expresses the contradiction of our popular notions about beggars and their own highly exalted ideals:

We are no shallow careerists  
Daredevil smugglers cruel adulterators  
Or cheating black marketers (*Angles of Retreat*, p.43)

Picture of such beautiful and meaningful contraries are rare in Indo-English poetry. This device helps the poet to divulge the dissimilarities of life and lash them with his powerful weapon of irony so as to prick the conscience of man for his better future.

## X

To most of modern poets, writing in English, form is very important, but to Bhatnagar it is not form but sensibility which is more significant. Bhatnagar says that a poet's personal response to a fact governs the form of a poem. To Bhatnagar a poem is a “State of arrest” and is like a framed sand dune. Consider the following lines from the poem “A framed Sand Dune”

A poem is a vision  
Which one can make  
And unmake it  
Till it is lost  
To find it  
One must go to the desert  
With wide-eyed wonder  
Looking for shaped:  
For a poem is  
A framed sand dune. (*Oeniric Vision*, p.15)

Bhatnagar does not want an Indian poet writing in English to be tied to particular metrical form. He mentions that “it is not meter or rhyme which provides form but through emotions and vision which determine the form”.<sup>24</sup> In his interview with Baghmar, Bhatnagar tells us about his technique: “I feel that the technique is implicit in the poem and hence one need not

cultivate a technique to be poetic. Technique is natural. It cannot be deliberately cultivated. The ease with which you can contemplate makes for the technique. If you have the involvement, technique takes care of itself".<sup>25</sup>

Words in poetry have connotative meanings. Hence, right choice of right words adds luster to poetic creations. Highlighting the importance of words in poetry Bhatnagar remarks: The poet has a great affinity with words and he mothers them with tenderness and gives them personality unique enough to be engaging. The tenderness is the strength of poetry. Whenever poetry fails, it is due to ineffectual use of words. <sup>26</sup> George Lucas and T. S. Eliot also advocate simplicity or return to common speech. The use of images, similes, metaphors and symbols adds depth to the meaning of poetry. Bhatnagar condemns any artificial use of these devices when ordinary language serves the purpose. He is of the opinion that use of symbols is a "clever way of evading real issues of life and truth, and isolating poetry from life". <sup>27</sup> About excessive use of myths to which Dom Moraes usually resorts, Bhatnagar observes that myths are a function of religion and not of poetry. Indian poetry must create its own myths, independent of mythology. Most of Indian poets in English Nissim Ezekiel, Krishna Srinivas, and Shiv.K.Kumar--- use a stereotyped metrical form.

Bhatnagar disfavours such a use and asserts that verse-liber should be adopted. He says "that if Indian poetry in English is to crystallize itself, it must choose free verse as its major medium of expression" <sup>28</sup>

## XI

Bhatnagar suggests new premises for Indian poetry in English. He does not favour its attitude adopted by the contemporary Indian poets in English. Being conscious of the unfathomable miseries, oppressions, injustice and inequalities of the people, Bhatnagar emphasizes that Indian poetry in English must have social concern which it is deplorably lacking. He also feels that it suffers from inhibitions of applying language to situations, emotional, cultural, political and religious crises and does not conform to movement and changes in art and philosophy.

Notwithstanding all the shortcomings of Indian poetry in English enumerated above Bhatnagar praises it saying that it has an enviable variety and is progressive. Suggesting means for its further improvement, he stresses that it must voice its protest against the decayed and degenerated political and social situation. It must cease to be personal and become social to stir thought and free emotions. It must integrate politics with aesthetics to emphasize human values.

## XII

### Conclusion

Bhatnagar's poetry is not just social but human. His poetic creed and theory of poetry described in this paper clearly reveals that the true goal of poetry is to build better homes on this earth than castles in heaven. Literature cannot be indifferent to human concerns. Man, today is struggling hard against his own tragic predicament for his survival literature alone has the power to rectify that imbalance by objectively revealing to man the passion and the nerve of the day. It is not necessary that every writer should begin writing on political, moral and social themes and doctrines, but a writer must project what he feels about these burning problems. In this direction, Bhatnagar's endeavours are worthy of praise. Thus, we see that Bhatnagar's clarifications of his poetic creed and the function of the poetry are succinct, logical and frank. According to Pathak: "His is a voice of composure and balance amidst the contemporary intellectual confusion and the chaos. ....The mood of Bhatnagar's poetry and aesthetics is one of rebellion against the present frame of things." 29 His poetry is the poetry of revolt and protest against everything direct and blunt; against self or non-self; daring state; society or God. The result of this open revolt is free verse. For the spirit that powers this manner, the circumstance that compels this spirit makes its maker impatient of the classical form. The control that the classical form imposes would render an emotion that is merely formal, more cultivated than the occasion demands. But of course, such open revolt against social, political and religious themes runs on its own risk i.e. of being over-powered by a situation instead of over powering it and thus, of being quickly exhausted, Bhatnagar has happily averted this risk. His poems are testimony to this fact.

Let us hope that study of Bhatnagar's keen perception and fertile imagination will create something new and of enduring values for us in the new future.

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