

Aesthetic Elegance and Craftsmanship in the Poetry of O.P. Bhatnagar

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Abstract

O. P. Bhatnagar secured a catchy place for himself in contemporary Indian English literature as a spokesman of the conscience of mankind. He is very close to the heart of common men and voices their concerns in his poetry. He believes that the God does not reside in temples, mosques or churches rather He is present in the soul of every human being hence, poetry must appeal to the entire humanity. Man's struggle to survive in this corrupted, deceptive world is a prime concern in Bhatnagar's poetry. The true goal of poetry, according to him, is to build better homes on this earth than castle in heaven. The real beauty of his poetry lies in the expression of poet's concern for the suffering humanity. My paper focuses on the aesthetic appeal of his poetry. It also elucidates his unique technique which adds elegance to his poetic creation.

KEYWORDS: underprivileged, humanity, aesthetic appeal, unique technique

Indian poetry in English emerged with the publication of Henry Derozio's poems in 1828, since then many poets have enriched it with their unusual literary productions. O. P. Bhatnagar is one of those consummate artists, who carved a unique niche for himself in the contemporary Indian English Literature by giving a new height to contemporaneous Indian English poetry. He opines that the role and purpose of poetry need to be redefined in the present day scenario. 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 gather its currents from this tradition, without enslaving individuality"(1982:15).

The word aesthetics is derived from the Greek term 'aestjeta' which means 'one who perceives'. Gradually the term aesthetics has come to signify something which pertains to the criticism of the beautiful or to the theory of taste. An aesthete is one who pursues and is devoted to the beautiful in art, music and literature. The cult of aestheticism originated in the nineteenth century; it presupposes a point of view that art is self-sufficient and need serve no other purpose than its own ends. It should not be didactic, politically committed or propagandist. The exponents of the aesthetic movement are the German writers notably Kant, Schelling, Goethe and Schiller. They insisted that art must be autonomous and the artist must be someone special and apart from others. The same idea was expressed in the fourth World Congress of Poets, at Seol, Korea in 1979. It held that politics and science had failed in promoting good will and peace in the world. It is time for poetry to take up the challenge which Bhatnagar effectively and adequately does. 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 the beyond. The right aestheticity of an art lies in the poignancy of human concern. Thus, the aesthetics in poetry can only be its humanizing urgency and influence" (Vol I, 5-6). Aesthetics, for Bhatnagar, is a revelation of his deep concern for human predicament. Only that aesthetics is useful which sustain human culture.

Aesthetics has different meanings in different contexts. The Western and the Eastern concepts of the term varies according to the socio-political involvements. Bhatnagar has travelled very widely and his experiences of the East and the West in their similarities and contrasts about the aesthetics of life and poetry are expressed in these words:

"What appealed to me most in the far East was for extreme care of craftsmanship in literature, and in the West the passion for the tumult. The far Eastern aesthetics is for conformity: the Western of revolt. What dominates the Western imagination is intellect and that is why it makes for experimentation, change and movement. What I liked about the Western mind and literature was their eagerness to live all the moments and accept challenges of life willingly. The Japanese imagination is, however, fast undergoing orientation towards a new aesthetic of awareness and vision. The English literature, in fact, in which we are groomed is a very poor specimen of the Western mind and imagination. For the best we must go to French, German and Russian" (Vol III, 14).

Bhatnagar is a propounder of a new aesthetics in poetry. He states that a meaningful aesthetics making the truth of life intelligible is the very basis of good poetry, and any attempt on developing a deliberate aesthetics will be false and misleading. It is a reflection of all that is beautiful in life. Bhatnagar looks at aesthetics in a comprehensive sense. It is, according to him, "not abstract or abstractive but a realized value of mind. He compares it to light emanating from the heat of the sun. "Aesthetics", he says, "should be based on the value that sustains human culture and any cultivated or isolated aesthetics will be the aesthetics of conceit. In other words, aesthetics is nothing but one's way of conceiving the world" (Vol I, 2).

Creative writing, for Bhatnagar, is as natural as the flow of chemical fluids inside the organisms without any conscious effort going into it. There can be no creative work without empathy which is broadened in a work of art through the language of persuasion, be it image, metaphor, simile, symbol or vision or other devices like irony, presentation of contraries or allegory and so on. Bhatnagar disapproves of the theory of transport in literature for it keeps man away from the realities of life and his problems. Creativity, he says, acquires meaning only when it addresses itself to the problems of life. Bhatnagar firmly believes that individuality is an essential conviction of poetic creation. Returning to tradition impairs one's individual talent. He, therefore affirms ".....one who goes back to tradition loses his/her individual talents and surrenders some part of truth, integrity, vision and creativity" (1981:12). Like T. S. Eliot, Bhatnagar also applies theory of tradition and individual talent, but in altogether a different framework. By 'tradition and individual talent' Eliot means that an individual discovers his or her true talent only submerging it in tradition. Bhatnagar holds that individual talent shines only when it is separated from tradition. He says that the poets, instead of relying on the wisdom of the past, should seek reality as it exists at present.

To Bhatnagar, poetry is an expression of intellectual vision. He vehemently opposes emotionality in poetry as he thinks it “deteriorates into searching channels of expression and shaping in dull outward images, similes, metaphors and other devices of poetic window dressing”(Vol III, 13). Bhatnagar, in an interview given to the Hitavada explains his process of poetic creation: “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.” His first poem “Desires on Death” included in *Thought Poems* is composed according to this theory. Bhatnagar elucidates this process in the following words:

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 sparrows 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” (Vol III, P 5).

A good poetry can not be produced without profuse sweating. Bhatnagar observes, “sweating makes poetry more organic and less abstract and obtuse, for labour is the poetry of existence and its concretion its aesthetics” (1982:2). His early poem “Round and Round” incorporates 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. (T. P. p.5)

“Poetry”, for Bhatnagar, is a “medium between his self and his surroundings, a dialogue of the within with the without” (1982:3). Hence Indian poets in English should aim at making a collective rather than individual appeal. Elucidating his concept of 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 brotherhood. In his poem “New Scale” he lays down the characteristics of a poet :

A simple honest man
In a worn out mode
May still himself find
Measuring life in value spoons
Bribery, corruption and forgery
For him a bitter poison be
But the clever in it
A meaty situation see
Dispensing poison like a doctor
Normalising a disturbed balance. (T.P. p.15)

Bhatnagar 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 injustice to man, tyranny and cruelty perpetrated on man. If poetry can participate in religion, mysticism, philosophy and ethics why can poetry not participate in politics? Politics, too, is another form of human thought and imagination” (Vol I, 7).

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. Poetry can stimulate and stir the mind of the people. Poetry, he further says, broadens the perception of human mind which enables people to analyse the events and experiences critically. For Bhatnagar, poetry is an integral part of man’s life. It can not live as a separate entity. “Pure Poetry”, he observes, “is a misnomer like sound in painting and colour 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” (1982:110). He is also against the esoteric function of poetry. He views that any material or object can have aesthetic function for any dynamic poetry. Poetry, for him, is not a means of escape from life rather it instills courage to face the hardships of life. In his poem “Not to Die of Life” Bhatnagar words :

In order not to die of life
We have art. (T.P.p.21)

Art and life have been beautifully linked in the poem, “All Beautiful Things in the World are Chinar”:

To reach the splendor
Of a flame
One must be wood first. (A.R. p.p. 10-11)

Bhatnagar does not assign too much importance to form in poetry rather, he says, it is 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. In his poem “A framed Sand Dune” he deciphers:

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 shapes:
For a poem is
A framed sand dune. (O.V. p15)

Directness and simplicity are two major traits of Bhatnagar’s poetry. Bhatnagar, in his interview with Srivastava elucidates this point. He professes: “poetry is a dialogue between man and man and not an attempt to confound man or prove him inferior to his art.....Communication and communicativeness is the basis of all good poetry” (Vol III, p24). Simplicity and naturalness add grace to poetic composition. Bhatnagar asserts that “simplicity is a precise imagery. It is an artistic attitude towards life. Simplicity forms an extraordinary condensed clarity of thought and vision..... A good poem is always

written in a conversational style. Any breakdown of communication due to complexity, obscurity, lack of human content, clarity and simplicity will alienate the reader from poetry” (Vol I, p25)

Thoughts, ideas, feelings and emotions are conveyed through words. In poetry, proper choice and arrangement of words contribute in the making of technique. He remarks:

“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 involvement, technique takes care of itself” (Vol III 40).

Bhatnagar’s poetry is lucid, calm and forceful. He dismisses particular metrical form and the use of poetic devices in poetry when ordinary language serves the purpose. He opines that they are merely ornamental and true poetry cannot be fettered to these devices. According to him poetry should evolve naturally. He, therefore, disapproves of the set patterns of poetic compositions in favour of free verse or verse libre. He is of the view that poetry, instead of borrowing rhythm and metre from other sources, should create its own. Like Auden, Bhatnagar appeals to the intellect and through wit and irony brings forth the hidden realities on the surface. He is not in favour of excessive use of symbols and myths in poetry. Myths, he says, are a function of religion and not of poetry. Indian poetry must create its own myths independent of mythology. Bhatnagar stresses that poetry must voice its protest against the decayed and degenerated political and social situations. It must wage constant war against social evils such as moral degeneration, corruption and hypocrisy which corrode entire social structure. 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.

Every poet tries to concretize his dreams in the beautiful pages of his poetry. Bhatnagar too has created a fragrant bower in his poetry for his readers through his “dreams turned diamonds”. The exploration of human sufferings and conflicts is the real beauty of his poetry. The poetry which is human and “manscoped” and committed to ameliorate the pathetic lot of suffering humanity has an aesthetic appeal, says Bhatnagar. Thus, Bhatnagar has enriched Indian English poetry by giving it a particular meaning and richness. He manifested its new stylistic intentions and defined its aesthetic content and moral qualities magnificently.

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