

## Reflections of O.P. Bhatnagar: Indian Sensibilities and Modernism

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### ABSTRACT

Indian English Poetry has traveled a long road since the times and era of Nissim Ezekiel the torch bearer of Indo- Anglican Poetry. While a lot of attention and applause has been given to poets like A.K. Ramanujan, Jayant Mahapatra, Kamla Das, and Dom Moraes the academic critics and scholars have been rather lukewarm in studying several lesser known and current poets like O.P. Bhatnagar, Mani Rao, P. Raja and scores of others "unpolluted by the public school morals and stances." In this lineage of New Indian Poets in English O.P. Bhatnagar stands as a distinguished literary figure. His assertion that 'Indian Poetry in English has to be Indian' cannot be overlooked if we aspire to promote Indian Literature. Merely copying and coping with the British Literature is insufficient because Indian sensibility is not suffering with the penury of thoughts, emotions and sensibility and because it has its foundation in vitality and voice of potentiality.

### KEYWORDS

Public School Morals; Penury of thoughts; Lineage; Indian Sensibility; Voice of Potentiality.

The Post-Independence Indian English Poetry has drawn the attention of the critics' worldwide from the times when Rabindranath Tagore wrote *Geetanjali* to present times when Dim Mores and A. K. Ramanujan sang the Muses. Up till now Indian Poetry in English always recalled to one's mind of the older generations of Indian poets such as Sarojini Naidu, Nissim Ezekiel, and Toru Dutt. However in recent times a new line of Indian poets are silently seeping into the Indian sensibility. Indian English Literature and especially Indian poetry in English has witnessed multiple social struggles on various levels that inspired a number of poets big and small equally to scribble their pen dipped in the ink of growing India standing at the

thresholds of the next generation. O.P. Bhatnagar represents the face of New Indian English Poetry with its concern for modern India and the pictographic realism with which he presents the metamorphosis of ideological revolution taking its giant strides in the new millennium. He is one of the leading voices of Indian English poetry whose collections *Thought Poems* (1976), *Feeling Fossils* (1977), *Angels of Retreat*, *The Audible Landscape*, *Oneric Visions*, *Shadows in Floodlight* (1984) and *Cooling Flames of Darkness* (2001) bespeak of political consciousness of the poet. Bhatnagar's poetry is strongly embedded in the socio-cultural milieu of India and finds a faithful forum for reflection. The present paper seeks to explore the traces

of Indian ethos in Bhatnagar's poetry and the predominant note of concern on the problems of modern age deeply embedded in religion and caused by the politics of his times.

It has been observed that poets who speak of Indian consciousness and portray the socio-political panorama of Indian subcontinent more often than not start a man to man dialogue. Several Indian poets seldom write under a single formula and the same holds true for O.P Bhatnagar who deals with a number of issues of our society and politics. Themes like social consciousness, political awareness, love, nature, philosophy and Indianness are worked upon to give a concretized picture of Indian society and politics Dr. A. N. Dwivedi remarks:

Bhatnagar's poetry comprehends a great variety of themes, which directly focus on the largeness of his experience and the solemnity of his involvement in the affairs of his life

In the late 80's Bhatnagar acclaimed fame as a poet with apparition, seeking reality, discovering truth, and suggesting new roads. His poems bespeak of the suffering humanity burdened under the pressures of modernism and unable to fight against the tribulations of ever-changing social order. He was always keen to regenerate man and humanity, demolishing fossil values, and looking for a substitute for the illusions of light. The contemporary Indian society with its complex structure, regional bias, and dissatisfaction had perennially been a source of intrigue for him. As a poet he held himself responsible for articulating the miseries, the doubts and the uncertainties of his generation. His creative and critical writings appeared to as a spur to collective action. His is a potential voice among the second generation of Indian Poets of English.

The first collection of Bhatnagar's *Thought Poems* (1976) has good deal of poems of political consciousness. His poem amply finds a manifestation in the poet's desire to justify the quintessence of religion and faith deeply rooted in the Indian way of life. The poems rich in thought content lack in emotion like that of romantic poets but the first poem of the collection finds out the process of poetic creation. Bhatnagar writes:

"Poetry's meaning  
Like a deity enshrined  
Words upon words, the edifice build."

Bhatnagar throws ample light on the question concerning God who cannot be resolved out in going round the temple by the worshipper. God is a meaning and deity enshrined in words of poem, the artist alone can expound and seek Him out. For a lay man the means to attain God cannot be routed by perfunctory approach:

We may go round and round the temple.  
Yet never be around God.  
We may go round and round an idea  
Yet never be around a thought.  
(ibid. 5)

This is a perfect attack on the society of his times that considered blind faith as a passport to salvation. In one of his poems, he predicts the future as gloomy as the present:

The future looks faded  
Like the blossoms of cacti after dawn  
The saints from bars, brothels and night clubs  
Tasting of casinos and underworld  
Turn morals, values and virtues to ice-cream  
Licked by fun loving chillness in cones.

Here the note of pessimism borne out of the evils of modernism is quite evident as the poet goes on to illustrate the pseudo-

religious temperament and the futility pervading the threads of value systems. *He was a witness to the idiosyncrasies and eccentricities of the contemporary life and his poems bear the testimony and tale of such bare realities of life of man and woman.* Besides he also understands the tempo and temperament of his times and accordingly orchestrates his poetry. He was quick to feel the pulse of the nation standing at crossroads of ancient value systems inherited from the forefathers and the necessities of progress, in a society undergoing tumultuous changes.

Bhatnagar's dealing with the theme of politics and society is myriad and real. The various social problems that agitate the conscience of man are the subjects of his poetry and he tries to throw a good deal of light on all of them. The frank analysis of the fact of contemporary life, and the picturesque delineation make his poetry vibrant and appealing. He reflects that most of the vital areas of the life today are governed by the quality of political life. Politics today has replaced our religious mode of life. We are fast becoming concerned with a kind of nationalism that may define our role and responsibilities in the shaping the destiny of our Nation in future." The critics opine that in his poetry we find a guileless psychoanalysis of the facts of contemporary life. He descants upon countless aspects of political life as existing currently. No salient feature escapes his keenly discerning eye. He rips open the bosom of several political riddles to reveal the crude truth

He opined that the Indian poetry in English should primarily concern to the socio-political life of the people of India and make it a source of shared expectations. Articulating the degeneration and corruption corroding identities his poetry spoke of the total loss of moral values, and gloom spreading on the Indian frontage. Issues like election, bribery, corruption, criminalization of politics, rampant bribery among the

leaders degrading character of national leaders, division of society by communalism, castism, linguism, and regionalism etc and the utter loss of values in politics are touched by the poet in a remarkably sensitive and marvelously derisive way. His poetry has a special relevance in the contemporary times when the humanity is calling out to its muses to sing a song of mourning lamenting the trouncing of standards. His assertion that 'Indian Poetry in English has to be Indian' cannot be overlooked if we aspire to promote Indian Literature. Merely copying and coping with the English and English Literature is insufficient because Indian sensibility is not suffering with the penury of thoughts, emotions and sensibility and because it has its foundations in vitality and the voice of potentiality. Dr. R.C. Sharma is right when he says:

The reason why Bhatnagar advocates making Indian Poetry in English is beset with conflicts and concerns; and these conflicts and concerns are basically Indian. Bhatnagar is conscious of the milieu in which the Indian poet in English lives as well as of the duty which the Indian poet in English has to perform.

In the poem '**The New Scale**' Bhatnagar tries to clout equilibrium between one man's meats in another man's poison. The poet finds the cliché worn out in the modern context 'a simple and honest man measures life in value spoons as he finds fraudulence to be the meanest way of life'. The stark reality of life can be seen as:

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 is. (T.P., 12)

Bhatnagar wishes to opine that the one who amass wealth do not have any petite concern for the interest of their fellow beings, nor do they feel any sin in acting

quite contrary to the code of conduct. In another poem 'A Woe of Wonder', Bhatnagar expresses our sentiments and helpless attitude. The poet regrets the diversity, disintegration that our country possesses today. A country that claimed diverse cultural fabric as a testimony to unity is standing at crossroads and once again faced with a shadow of partition looming in the background. The emphasis of the poet is nothing but Nationality, one sentiment and one attitude. This idea is penned by the poet as:

Our is a multithreaded country  
 Looking in no particular direction  
 Trimurti is an all inclusive vision  
 From here to eternity risen  
 Telling the tale of our frivolity. (T.P.,  
 14)

**Feeling Fossils** has few poems of political interest. Bhatnagar despite treating the politics in a circuitous manner hardly fails to pin point very singular phenomena that somehow remain hidden from the eyes of even those who have specialized in the game of politics. 'Crossing The Bar' is a realistic poem that lashes on the modern politicians. His comment on the modern politicians is worth quoting:

"Morals as dense  
 As thick forests  
 Let no light in;  
 The game is weird  
 Hunting loyalties  
 For romance."

The above lines are beset with a critical comment and attack on the modern politicians of the country specially a country that achieved Independence after years of colonial struggle yet which failed to adhere to its standards of traditional values and moral concern.

Another significant collection **Angles of Retreat** has several thought provoking poems in which the poet explores the meaning of time as is evaluated from the events germinating

from the seeds of covetousness conjugated to hypocrisy. The tone of the poet in this collection is satiric and ironical. In the poem 'History is A Sorry go Round' the poet wishes to propound that the historians often ignore the importance of the people at large and they tend to magnify the deeds of a few privileged men. It is the unsung heroes who many a times have shaped the annals of history. The political sycophants have no other way of reaching the pages of History. The historians think that their labor in recording titles and tortures serve the cause of National unity and security and they are helped by political sycophants:

Political sycophants are their aides  
 On whose beguiling prediction  
 They fire eat and perform  
 The Japanese fire-walk  
 To dazzle the already dazed. (A.R,  
 40)

However political leaders and sycophants forget that the tyrants and blood suckers have to face a fall:

Too much suppression and much  
 politicking  
 Ferments its own defeat  
 Forcing the masses to forge  
 In the smithy of their conscience  
 The invisible weapons of their  
 conscience  
 The invisible weapons of their fall  
 Crowning shame on the foreheads  
 of tyrants  
 And nailing bitter truths  
 On the crossroads times

The sixth collection of poems, **The Audible Landscape** has plenty of political consciousness which vocalizes the poet and reflects the current scenario of the nation and its people. For example, the first poem reflects the slavish mentality of people who are willing to suffer, without a sigh. The nation was cowardly and the disease is beyond treatment. The poet expresses with helplessness the approach of his countrymen to whom freedom is no more than to animate a Marx or a Gandhi.

He feels sorry for us who have fewer revolutions up their sleeves and can do nothing fruitful without a leader or two to lead them. Slavery is indented in their system.

In his last collection of poems, **Cooling Flames of Darkness** (2001) we find a kind of pessimism, unusually negative, dejected, and hopeless; perhaps, over-possessed by "fossilized summing up of life." Yet, he sounded true when he opined: "We have a history and many are the knots/Before an Indian poet in English/Like an Eskimo trapped in desert" (**Cooling Flames**, p.61). Some of these knots he had earlier reflected in essays like 'East-West Encounter in Indian Poetry in English', 'New Indian English Poetry Today', and 'Death and the Poetry of Sarojini Naidu.'

The poet in O. P. Bhatnagar has been imbued with a sheer sense of awareness of modern realities and human predicaments. He voices the anguish of modern man coming to terms with the changing socio-cultural mores and moralities. He especially concerns himself with the woes of the common man who is reluctant to transgress moral taboos:

Rich in stagnant expectations  
The common man rehearses  
nothing but frustrations  
Uttered in defeating silence of caves  
Deserted for long.

In his unwavering thirst to unravel the dilemma of average Indian caught between the race of intensification and the entwining social fabric of the country that poses an impediment to the emergence of New India with a dynamic vision Bhatnagar achieves his purpose. A study of

his poetry becomes all the more relevant in the present scenario where corruption has been interwoven in the socio political system in such a way that the voice of the average Indian is but a far cry.

Bhatnagar was genuinely concerned with the strength and future of Indian English poetry and was indeed its critic with a big heart, whose literary vision, focused on many a new poet, fictioneer and dramatist with promise, accorded authenticity and power to post-Ezekiel Indian English writing. In his vision to see poetry as an unvarying quest and symbolizing for a better socio-political life, Bhatnagar left no stone unturned. Poetry for him is a self-conscious craft shaped and reshaped by constant practice-refined and retouched by way of the vision. Like life itself, it is the work of a gardener who after removing all weeds cultivates it to final growth and flowering. As such there is no influence of any particular school of thought on his poetry. It is entirely his own- a personal experiment inspired by surroundings, ages, times and above all by human predicament.

Thus we find that O. P. Bhatnagar consciously or unconsciously cemented the ground for the new generation of Indian English Poetry by showing the torch lights on the sensibilities pervading the Indian canvas and at the same time being candid in verbally penalizing the system with its putrefied modernism. His poetry gives a crude expression to the tale of the contemporary Indian Diaspora waiting for a piper to sing its tale of woe and yet promising a way out. Bhatnagar's Poetry is a humble synthesis of this glaring verity.

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