



Research Paper

O. P. Bhatnagar's Vision of Indian Social Psychology in Indian Linguistic Context

Dr. Ananta Geetey Uppal

Associate Professor, School of Humanities & Social Sciences, Galgotias University, Greater Noida, India,

ABSTRACT: Language, in the form of poetry, is capable of evoking highest emotions of patriotism, religion, love, and beauties of nature and of representing social psychology. Language is, thus, imperative for every creativity. O. P. Bhatnagar aptly remarks that all sense perceptions and experience are first realized as concepts, then expressed in language. All writers try to bring language as close to the expression of these concepts as possible. Bhatnagar has tried to use the language of Indian common man. Bhatnagar is not quiet when he sees moral and human values thrown to the winds, injustices, inequalities and corruptions gnawing our very existence. Being a poet of social commitment, the mode of expression of his anger is irony. The paper presents that with an ironic approach to the problems of our modern life, how Bhatnagar has concretised the texture of the wide range of contradictions permeating our life, character and Indian social psychology.

KEY WORDS: Language, Poetry, Indian, Society, Psychology, Irony

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I. INTRODUCTION

Since language forms the basis of most of expressions of one's mind, it will not be out of place to reflect upon the status, role and function of language and the modern trends about it. All the sense perceptions and experiences are first realized as concepts and then expressed in language. Language assumes the role of metaphor inducing states of emotions. Language plays an important role in making man realise his kinship with the world outside and at the same time gives shape to his inner feelings. For instance, many lovers of nature do not feel that they are truly in touch with nature until they have mastered the names of a great many flowers and trees, and unless they have mastered the terminology which somehow magically expresses it. Emphasizing the significance of language as vehicle of expression of one's thought O. P. Bhatnagar aptly remarks.:

"All sense perceptions and experience are first realized as concepts, then expressed in language. All writers try to bring language as close to the expression of these concepts as possible. It is in this approximation that there lies the excellence of literature." 1

Language thus takes up the role of metaphor inducing states of emotion. Language, in the form of poetry, is capable of evoking highest emotions of patriotism, religion, love, and beauties of nature. Metaphors originate from language and they also take the form of symbols expressing figurative meaning which on the extensive use become what Wegner calls "faded metaphor" which all languages abound in. Bhatnagar defines it as "an abstractive seeing". 2 Language in literature is a piece of discursive symbolism functioning in the usual communicative way. Bhatnagar holds that "the function of criticism, therefore, must be to determine the serviceability of language in literary expressions and the way it helps crystallize the experiential matter into literary forms". 3 We can therefore infer that the failure of language indicates the failure of creativity. But there are some critics like Morgan Stern, Herman Broch, who condemn the language as incompetent to express a writer's feelings. Against this view, Bhatnagar, asserts that "a poem goes to the root of language itself to the unique communicatory and responsive dialectic of human identity. Words, therefore, do not fail, they are failed by the incompetents and insensitiveness. They are also failed by the political dictators in their attempt to deprive words of their freedom to operate in connotations of novelty". Language is, thus, imperative for every creativity. Bhatnagar condemns the advocates of "silence as the most vocal and meaningful alternative to language as a dogma derived from the muddled speculations of the empty and incomplete minds that fails to feel the power of the word". 4

He believes that language has gone into disrepute because of the rise of the disciplines like Algebra, Geometry and Mathematics. The horrors and the ravages of the two World Wars and the tyranny of politics have further deteriorated the high status of language as a medium of expression.

As experience is important without the tool of expression. Bhatnagar says that the very act of expression illumines, clarifies and crystallizes experience into a metaphor, inner imagery or form. And as such there is nothing which cannot be expressed (not fitted in the scientific moulds) through the available resources of language including the most frightful fact of the twentieth century-life-death. 5 That which is expressible does not concern literature or literary expression. It is only when some emotion or feeling struggles to come out, language is used. It is not language but artistes, who fail to rise to the occasion and take to silence or rhetoric. Language is therefore indispensable for any literature. Even physicists like Niels Bhor and the father of Cybernetics (the study of communication and control mechanics) Norbert Wiener pay tribute to art form as man's unique product of imaginative intellect.

Bhatnagar also emphasizes use of simple language in poetry. Whereas Wordsworth insists on selection of language used by men in a state of vivid sensation, Bhatnagar does not lay down any such condition. It is the poet's imagination that makes his own choice. Simplicity according to me is an artistic attitude towards reality. Life and reality, revealed through traditional literary confectionary, has poor creative perspectives. Poetry, therefore, must develop instincts for extraordinary simplicity thus adding to the clarity of poetic thought and vision and harmony of form and content. There is no poetic truth which can be told easily. 6

Bhatnagar's Language

Bhatnagar has repeatedly pleaded for simple style in poetry because poetry is the revelation of truth and all truths are plain and simple. But abundant use of irony and imagery makes his poetry difficult to understand. Bhatnagar explains the implication of what plain means to him: Irony in itself is a kind of truth one arrives at from perceptions made and experiences shared in human predicament in respect of the personal, the collective, and the universal thus see no antagonism between the use of imagery and truth unless by abundant you mean excessive and inappropriate.

Bhatnagar insists that a modern Indo-English poet should create his own myth independent of mythology. He does not agree with Baghmar's contention that "creating new myths will cut us off, our traditional moorings and we shall be lost in the labyrinth of confusion."7 The poet emphatically says:

"Our myths are mostly religious rather than secular. Now they are cut off from the atmosphere that nourished them. We have travelled so far that these myths have become inoperative and thus are not able to meet the new challenges. Therefore new Indian poetry in English must develop new myths. Any significant and peculiar incident in our national life may be used as a myth."8

Bhatnagar also denies that metre and rhyme are necessary for poetic composition. It is the content and the metre which is significant in poetry. He observes:

"Metre is a device of regulating certain group of syllables for creating a rhythm, tempo or pace of motion in the poem. But this device is not poetry. Poetry is in the idea of which image is an expression. When the effort is at music and singing, there is less of imaging of an idea. These devices serve best when subordinated to content. Let the content make its own metre and ideas find natural rhythm is controlled, he becomes a soldier. Poetry is not soldiering."9 It is through this medium that he makes use of irony, satire, imagery, myths, and symbolism in his poetry.

Ironical Reflection of Psychology of Indian Society

Poem after poem of very high standards and values keep on flowing from Bhatnagar's untiring pen. They reveal his imaginative potentialities and craftsmanship. As an ironist, he is close to neoclassical poets like Dryden and Pope, and the moderns like T. S. Eliot and W.H.Auden and the Indo-English poets like Keki N. Daruwalla, Shiv K. Kumar and Nissim Ezekiel. Like the poetry of Auden, Bhatnagar's poetry appeals to the intellect, and through wit and irony brings forth on the surface hidden realities and incongruities of life. Srivastava divulging the poet's capacity for wit and irony aptly remarks:

"Through the powers of wit and irony, the poet in Bhatnagar manages not only to suggest the hidden meanings but also to save poetry from degrading into mere versified argument."10

Before proceeding to define irony, it is necessary to throw some light on such terms as humour, wit, satire, sarcasm and irony. By analogy, they come under the same category but have different connotations. Humour is a mental quality, which apprehends and delights in the ludicrous and mirthful, whereas wit is a mental faculty of combining ideas with a pointed verbal effect arising out of a sense of surprise. Satire is essentially a criticism of folly with an objective to amend it. Sarcasm is a satirical remark in scorn or contempt with an aim to inflict pain. Irony, on the other hand, is a form of utterance that postulates a double audience consisting of one party that hearing shall hear and shall not understand, and another party that when more is meant that meets the eyes or ears.

Bhatnagar defines irony as “the rarest of the states of mind because it is most inclusive and exposes the state of existence rather than conceals or contradicts it; the whole mind has been active in arriving at it, both creation and criticism”. 11 Irony to Bhatnagar is a source of refinement of vision.

It is generally seen that irony in Indian poetry in English is a sly humour akin to sarcasm. Socio-political dilemmas, conflicts and challenges do not much affect or attract it. But Bhatnagar is a poet who can hardly afford to be quiet when he sees moral and human values thrown to the winds, injustices, inequalities and corruptions gnawing our very existence. As examples of the former please mark the following two extracts one from Keki N. Daruwalla and another from Shiv K. Kumar :

In the street of the lord The sepia teeth of pandas
In the street of virginity The raucous laughter of whores.
(Crossing of River) And For my son will ferment the same yeast as my father's father and what you offer me
now was also my mother's gift to a stranger. (To a Prostitute)

When we compare the above passages with Bhatnagar's the latter's stand out distinguishingly emitting anger, fire and revolt:

Their visions have been blurred By night clubs and Swingers
Blondes and ball-rooms, their ethics Performing
cultural striptease. (Look Home Ward Angel)

Or

The saint from bars, brothels and night clubs Tasting of casinos and underworld
Turn morals, values and virtues to ice-creams. (Nailing by the Wall)

These poems evince Bhatnagar's intense concern for every kind of pain and convulsion of our people and country.

The genesis of all art forms can be traced to the states of mind, which determine their texture and structure. Much of Indian poetry in English lacks this essential quality. It is so because Indian poetry in English lacks the power to participate in incongruities of modern life and expose them boldly. It is concerned only with those aspects which are personal and peripheral. Bhatnagar elaborately describes the thematic obsessions of Indian poetry in English. He is unhappy about the poet's involvement in their private and personal world and lack of participation in the socio-political concerns.

“It is occupied with nothing more than objects and scenes, framed In their stillness like birds, insects, a fat man, a two roomed flat, a beggar, a rickshaw, trees and rains, streams, rivers, floods, a whore house, a circus and narayal purnima, and the intellect of an Indian poet in English fails to proceed beyond the routine relationships and significances of a father, a mother, a grandfather, a lover, a beloved, a grandchild, and a wife. The metaphoric and symbolic extensions of meaning do not extend beyond the worn out concepts of heaven, hell, salvation, duty, rebirth and peace. There is no stirring of emotions or thoughts. And that is because of the poverty of intellectual content in Indian poetry in English which, in its turn, results from its obsession with the private and personal world of the poet and lack of participation in the socio-political concerns of society and time. Thus, lack of involvement produces no new directions, attitudes, or perspectives --- there is no intensity or depth of vision of dimension to add power and charm to its poetry. No refinement of sensibilities follows, nor is any state of existence revealed. All this because of the poverty of intellect and the state of mind unengaged in a simultaneity of creation and criticism”. 12

The post-independent Indian poetry in English is concerned with painting Indian scenes without any reflection. The irony in Nissim Ezekiel dissolves into indifference and in Keki N. Daruwalla becomes merely a sly humour. Their portrait of the real predicament of Indian life and scene is very hazy.

Bhatnagar questions the authenticity of Indian poetry in English as it is bogged down by self-imposed exile of romantic unrealities and personal concerns. In such a state the Indian poetry in English cannot be an expression of Indian ethos for “one is writing as Jew another from an end of Dravidic together and yet many wore from the Eiffel Tower, the Empire State Building or the Thames”. 13 This is a pungent satire on the Indian poets writing in English from abroad or within their own country.

The Indian life and mind are passing through a crucial phase which calls for irony to depict the contraries of our expectations, historical developments and circumstances. The real occasion for irony arises when we review the situations prevailing during the struggle for freedom and after it. Bhatnagar indignantly remarks:

“The ethos that prevailed in our life before independence and the pathos that trailed the aftermath in itself present an irony that calls for creating artefacts of social and national intensity. 14 There was a tremendous upsurge and reawakening of consciousness due to the efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekanand, Lokmanya Tilak, Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi, Subhas Chandra Bose and Jawahar Lal Nehru. How ardently we had hoped that sacrifices and ideals of these great men would make India a land of freedom and prosperity. But what has followed in the wake of independence is a tragic collapse of these ideals, giving rise to disillusionment. Bhatnagar views the present situation as not merely tragic but also ironic.

The tragedy is not that the ideals that once were of value have run into insignificance, but the way they are being mocked at openly as incongruous and misplaced by persons of dubious characters. There is no walk of life where bribery is not a respectable value, where adulteration hoarding, black marketing, the ransom in marriages and many other evils such as regionalism, red-tapism, atrocities on women and children and down-trodden, orthodoxy, religious conservatism are not corroding our socio-economic and political life of our country. Bhatnagar envisions "an invisible torture in the soul of the nation at this misdirection of events. The tremendous volte-face of history jeers at the quick-sands of dreams that have disappeared before they could shape an image portending of future. A frivolous attitude to the serious concern of life sneers at sanctities of loyalty and devotion. But who other than a poet can vocalize the dialectic of this predicament and point out irony implicit in the situation."15

Bhatnagar believes that "an ironic approach to Indian situation is necessary for this alone can refine perception and make us believe that we are not things". 16

He further asserts: "The kind of irony we need is not metaphysical cosmic or irony of fate, verbal or self irony but active irony which may stir people to indignation and move them to resist exploitation and secure their rights and justice in the pursuit of freedom. What we need today is a conscious rejection of our predicament in poetry." 17

Being a poet of social commitment, the mode of expression of his anger is irony. Without an ironic approach to the problems of our modern life, he cannot concretize the texture of the wide range of contradictions permeating our life and character. He says:

To see the whole truth I must loosen my eyelids
And bring my visions to a close. (Oeniric Vision, p.13)

If in Shiv K. Kumar, irony is an intellectual mask, and in Ezekiel it is simple and comic, in Bhatnagar it is an exposure of politics in poetry. However, he shows genuine sympathy for the suffering humanity. Here is an example:

It was the grit of only a few to defy Zeus
Who, in a rare display of white courage
Throwing elegies in purple graves
Brought fire from heaven
For the selfless good of humanity
The rest only flaunting in mock rage.
(Oeniric Vision. p.20)

Bhatnagar looks at the incongruities of life with open eyes and depicts them in his poetry. In some of his poems, he presents the universal human situation and in some of the context of Indian life and society, he employs subtle irony revealing the contradictions of truths and experience and also the contradictions between appearance and reality of ordinary experiences and situations. He presents a picture of tragic irony by way of social criticism, which assumes a satirical tone. But there is always a deep sincerity of feeling in it. The poet is therefore always present, hidden in between the lines. An ironist often confronts the clash between the barbaric reality and idealistic desirability, which engenders in him an awareness of contradictions. These contradictions enable him to see the sublime in the trivial and vice versa. He reviews the entire situation with detachment and coolness. D.C. Muecke seems to hint this point in the following remarks:

"In irony emotions clash...it is both emotional and intellectual - in its literary manifestations, at any rate. To perceive it one must be detached and cool; to feel it one must be pained for a person or an ideal gone amiss. Laughter arises but is withered on the lips. Someone or something is cruelly made game of; we see the joke but are hurt by it." 18 Bhatnagar breathes the spirit of this statement in his ironic treatment of Indian situations today. He is pained to see that our freedom has become a misnomer. He sees a great ideal, gone amiss :

Our freedom now is like freedom Freed of responsibility; morals of values
And mind of thought. Our loyalties flutter
Only like drooping flags. (Risen or Fallen, The Quest, p.78)

This is one of the universal situations that the poet has brought forth before us.

Irony of Universal Nature

In most of his poems, Bhatnagar deals with irony implicit in the universal or general situations. Prominent amongst such poems are: "Of Beauty and Truth", "Moon Olympics", "Fish Pond", "Adam and Eve", "Risen or Fallen", "Voice of the Victims" and "The Fate of the Victims".

In "Of Truth and Beauty" the poet expresses the tragic irony implicit in the structure of the beautiful Taj. Bhatnagar's penetrating vision reveals the irony thus:

The presumptuous ego of Shah Jahan

In creating the Taj for his love

Was not a genuine as marble

It only assuaged his sorrow

That had bent him to his woes

In the Red Fort

The poet ironically adds:

The beauty of the marbled sorrow
Was not all truth
Nor the truth of it all beauty
For the sculptors had defined both
.....
What remains is the white flame
Of their sweat carved in marble
Not the entombed vanity
Of a royal romance. (Thought Poems, p.13)

The poet seems to hold that the Taj was built by Shah Jahan not to immortalize his love for Mumtaz but to satisfy his ego. Truth lies neither in the emperor's love nor in the beauty of the Taj but in the skill and the sweat of the unknown sculptors whom now nobody remembers. This ironic situation has not been noticed by any other Indian poet writing in English. Another example of subtle satire on modern technological progress is shown in his poem "Moon Olympics" where the poet speaks of Aldrin who was always first

In everything all his life
It look him the moon
To be second in life
And he turned an atheist
Like Callisto of the Jovian Moons.
The poet adds:
Collins, who circles the moon
Like Amalthea watching with pride
The achievements of science
Yet wondered at the enchanting vastness
And the defeating grandeur of space
Quietly turned a theist
Walking round his soul. (Oeniric Vision, p.32)

Man rejoices over the conquest of space but its influences on man's mind are different. One becomes a staunch atheist as in the case of Aldrin, who denied the opportunity to be called a moon hero. It is Collins, who turns a theist on seeing the wonders of a God's creation, the moon. "Fish Pond", among Bhatnagar's other poems also ironically deals with universal human situation through the idiom of "fish out of water". The poem reveals the contradiction between the condition of fish and man. The poet says:

Wise fish deep for the pearl
And fools shallow catch at the liquid moon
Say then, if, in any idiomatic barter
You still feel like a fish out of water ?
(Thought Poems, p.8)

Bhatnagar strikes a strong note of irony in "Adam and Eve". The poet weaves an objective correlative for our dream desires of frolicking with women even in dreams. The image of a young girl chased by a bull and a hissing snake are all strung together in a parable. The irony of the situation lies in the protagonist's honest desire to save a girl from danger but the people around him view the entire situation sensuously. Our age is such that even a simple honest deed is considered sinful by those who have jaundiced eyes. The poet hits at our degraded sense of morality:

Some one had plucked the distant apple
With roots feeding on human slime
And I wondered the way that man
Was still carrying the burden all the way.
I had unloaded in a far off lane
Exposing sensuous negatives to mythical prints. (Angles of Retreat, pp.20-21)

Irony of human situation is brought about by the use of paradox of life and death in "Dying a Century". The irony is implicit in the pathetic utterance of the protagonist:

What use is dying a century
When I have not lived a day ?
(Feeling Fossils, p.8)

Similarly the poet contrasts the narrow view of sex with the liberal view of not sticking to "one brand"; It is a dig at the modern view of women's lib. In the poem "Sex is not a Baby Food", the says:

That sex is not a baby food
To stick to only one brand
Lest it may cause indigestion
To one's delicate system of growth.
(Angles of Retreat, p.25)

In one's young age, man segregates himself from his brethren to foster his ego, but old age demolishes all the false pride of youth. The paradoxical situation of youth and age is brought out in a very superb manner in "Boundaries" :

When he was young
He set up boundaries
To define what he possessed
Now that he is old
With gout down his knees
He dreams demolishes divisions
.....
To share his miseries with the neighbour
In his fields. (Feeling Fossils, p.10)

We boast of our glorious past and our rich heritage but we do not look towards our present degraded status. The poet cannot assimilate such an ideal and ironically asks:

When was it when we were great?
When Aryans came or before they came
When was it when we were great
When the Aryans came or before they came?
Or after they divided and took routes?
Riding radiant ways of this land?
When did we fall ?
After Alexander invaded?
Or Huns or Moguls struck
From the dim light of the West?

The poet himself answers:

We perhaps fell of the multiplicity
Of our gods; our strength to die;
The cellular nature of society and rule;
Or the immortality of our soul;
(‘Risen or Fallen’, The Quest, p.77)

Another poem "Woe of Wonder", whose title itself is profoundly ironical tells the tale of our frivolity. The poetic diction, the texture and the mocking tone of the poem tell us the tale of our sterility:

Ours is a multi-headed country
Looking in no particular direction
Trimurti is an all inclusive vision
Telling the tale of our frivolity.
(Thought Poems, p.24)

Through a series of questions and answers the poet traces the period when we were great and when and why we fell. The entire extract is an example of the poet's subtle irony. The line "Our strength to die" has a pungent sarcastic tone indicating our forbearance for every atrocity. Bhatnagar has denounced the time-tested values of rich heritage as unrealistic and emphasized the necessity of bringing to light the multi-faceted corruption, dishonesty, hypocrisy, and immorality, and oppression. Bhatnagar holds that it is the duty of every Indo-English poet to articulate the miseries of the common man through the powerful tool of language and to bring about his regeneration like the mythical Phoenix.

The function of poetry is not to offer doctrines but to move and stir and not to still the mind of the people. According to Bhatnagar, it is the pious duty of the poet, wielding a sensitive medium like poetry, to "explore the tensions and displacements that are agitating the soul of a nation" and to spell out the contradictions that are besetting the progress of the people." 19

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