

O.P. BHATNAGAR'S ELECTION AND EXPRESSION OF IMAGES FROM DIFFERENT WALKS OF LIFE

Dr. Ananta Geetey Uppal

Associate Professor, Humanities & Social Sciences,
Galgotia's University, Greater Noida, UP, India

Abstract

Bhatnagar is among the few Indian poets writing in English today who is gifted with a unique imaginative power and oneiric visions of life. He has a fine sense of form in poetry. Bhatnagar's In his opinion, it is a design of an idea or an experience which struggles in the poet's mind to find expression. Language is an essential mode of this expression. Bhatnagar's poetry is a struggle between the ideal and the real. It is an attempt to transmute the inward and the ineffable into something concrete and visible. To Bhatnagar, the intricacies of English language pose no problems and he wields it quite deftly. Bhatnagar has enriched his poetry with captivating images taken from his wide experience, erudite learning, and keen observation. To Bhatnagar, creation of image is like imitating painting. He follows this principle in most of his poems. This paper justifies how his sensitive brain is always watchful to pick up images from different walks of life.

Keywords: Images, life, form, language, visions

Bhatnagar has a fine sense of form in poetry. It is a design of an idea or an experience which struggles in the poet's mind to find expression. Language is an essential mode of this expression. To Bhatnagar, the intricacies of English language pose no problems and he wields it quite deftly. He is in favour of "naturalism, syntax, imagery, metre and rhythm to Indian ethos and sensibility". (Bhatnagar, 7) Bhatnagar's poetry is a struggle between the ideal and the real. It is an attempt to transmute the inward and the ineffable into something concrete and visible.

For Bhatnagar, imagery forms the central core of his poetic language. Let us discuss briefly how critics define imagery. Fogle defines imagery as "the sensuous element in poetry". (Fogle, 363) To C. Day Lewis "it is a picture made out of words". (Lewis, 18) According to Caroline Spurgeon it "covers every kind of simile as well as every kind of what is really compressed simile-metaphor". (Caroline, 5) Creating images depends upon individual's

capacities, temperaments and responses to the external stimuli. The poet's mind is a kind of laboratory where these elements interact and give shape to his ideas. The poet resorts to the use of images as Brown aptly remarks not merely for "clearness of logical statement" but also for the sake of their vigour, intensity and also that they will "bear some resemblance and proportion to the inner frame of mind". (Stephen Brown, 56) Imagery in poetry serves as a structural device and renders clarity and vividness to what the poet wants to convey.

Enumerating the salient features of Bhatnagar's language, Pathak says: "Bhatnagar's language is characterized by simplicity and freshness. His is an unpretentious poetry, simple, relevant and communicative" (Pathak, 6) To Bhatnagar, an image is a fusion of intellectual and emotional contents. The poet condemns the use of deliberately obscure images. He told one of his interviewers that "any deliberate search for images would ambiguate communication, and an image should be condemned if it is out of place in the poem and hampers poem's enjoyment." (Srivastava, 91) He further opines that images may very often appear when words fail to be poetic or serve the poetic function. With the aid of imagery, a poet can find appropriate expression to every thought and feeling. Bhatnagar clearly holds that "as a matter of fact, experience does not create a natural insight of its own unless followed by a desire for expression. The very act of expression illumines, clarifies and crystallizes experiences into metaphor, inner imagery or form". (Srivastava, 92)

To Bhatnagar creation of image is like imitating painting. He follows this principle in most of his poems. His sensitive brain is always watchful to pick up images from different walks of life. But most of his impressive imagery is drawn from nature. His childhood was spent in the picturesque lap of the Himalayah Almora. Mrs Bhatnagar says that he turned to nature to escape the tyranny of the strained relationship of his parents. (Parvati, 9) While discussing Bhatnagar's imagery which means figurative illustration, we cannot separate other figures of speech such as similes and metaphors as they are part and parcel of the same literary device.

To the charge levelled by Baghmar about his images being alien to our culture, Bhatnagar replies as under: "I admit that some of my poems abound in what one may call unfamiliar images and the reason is not far to seek. My reading of English literature and the exposure which the travel provides are all responsible for it. To condemn them as alien is not fair. Why condemn them when the same situation prevails in India? There are many languages in India and the image of one language is quite alien to the other language. When a group of people comes in contact with another group, this intermingling affects each group culturally. In the process language is also affected. However what you label as alien image comes naturally to me." (Bhatnagar, 24)

Ezra Pound holds that image presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. He also holds that the presentation of such a complex instantaneously gives that sense

of sudden liberation from time and space limits. On being enquired by Baghmar whether he agreed to the above view of Ezra Pound, Bhatnagar replies as under: "I do not agree that image presents an intellectual and emotional complex. To me it is a fusion of the intellectual and emotional content and it merges only when there is the union of the intellect and the emotion. Complex denotes confusion, but to my mind image is a fusion and not confusion. In the process of poetic conception, the intellectual and the emotional states and levels are set functioning and images are born out of that harmony." He further says, "I agree that an image is limited in time there is nothing sudden or momentary about it. To think that poetic process is sudden or limited to an instant of time, smacks of a division in the poetic process. I do not think that poetic process is clinical. It may be condemned if it is out of place. (Bhatnagar, 26) What Bhatnagar means to say is that images accentuate the poetic effect.

The use of imagery in the twentieth century Indo Anglian poetry has been the result of the impact of T.S.Eliot. His imagery maintains intensity and complexity and fullness, characteristic of T.S.Eliot's images. In many cases there is complete similarity between Eliot's and Bhatnagar's imagery in respect of intensity, complexity and fullness. He seems to last at the possible impact of T.S.Eliot on Bhatnagar. Bhatnagar denies having been influenced by T.S.Eliot. has developed his own imagery and remains uninfluenced by any British or American poets.

In "The Tragic Hero" the poet has given a number of images:

A lover of values these days

Is a diseased man

Put away in isolation ward

Consuming himself ideal by ideal

Writing in helpless pity

His own epitaph. (Thought Poems, p.18)

Here we have the images of a "diseased man" and "isolation ward". The lover of values is called a diseased man and is put away in isolation ward. Just as a man infected with some contagious disease is put away in isolation ward lest he infects others. Similarly a lover of value these days is a condemned man, left to perish by himself. Vices do not let him live in this world. "Epitaph" presents a powerful word picture. In a society where values have been eroded, a value-conscious man can only think of his epitaph .

Similarly, in another poem "Of Court and Cancer Ward", Bhatnagar presents the image of "galloping cancer" which reminds one of fast advancement of the disease like the gallop of a horse. Bhatnagar's imagery is not descriptive, it is functional. It denotes an action as is seen in the example quoted above. The disease is here given the attribute of a horse.

Imagery in Bhatnagar's poetry consists of both metaphors and similes. Metaphor does not allow comparison where as simile does. Simile propounds that something is like another. Metaphor says that one thing is another. Both the figures of speech mingle together to form an image. For instance in "Memory Frescos" the poet brings out this mingling of simile and metaphor :

He carries his heavy soul

Like a dead body gaining weight.

(Angles of Retreat, p.34)

"Like a dead body" in the second sentence is a simile and the last word "heavy soul" in the first sentence is a myth used a metaphor. In Bhatnagar's poetry, Homeric similes (long-tailed similes) are rare, he employs only short similes. Simile is a comparison between two dissimilar object as in "To Discover Truth"

Like dying stars

Men pursue truth. (Angles of Retreat, p.12)

Man's pursuing truth and the dying of a shooting star are two different phenomena but they are tugged together. Just as dying star cannot be caught, truth is also fugitive in this world.

Bhatnagar views life as a tragic phenomenon and majority of his poems deal with the theme of death and suffering as elaborately discussed in earlier chapters. "Dying a Century" deserves special mention because it strikes the key note of Bhatnagar's tragic awareness, which he conveys to the reader through various images. The poet writes :

My mother

Became a widow at twenty five

With a son and daughter

Playing in the sunshine

Unaware of dark

The daughter died of cancer

Deep in innocence

Not knowing a river

From a sea

Mother has since lived

In a smiling sneer of loneliness

Wrapped in the moss of time

I who has watched

The slow drying of a pool

In the desert

Feel broken and older than her

When she says

What use is dying a century

When I have not lived a day.

(Feeling Fossils, p.8)

The very first line of the poem strikes a note of intimacy by evoking the image of mother and associated tragedy of her becoming a widow in the prime of her youth. Children are usually forgetful of sorrow when they start taking pleasure in play. The image of sun shine stands for pleasure free from sorrow and dark is contrary. The image of innocence is contrasted with the terrible image of death due to cancer. River stands for beneficence whereas sea for dreadfulness. River in the poem represents life, and sea is symbolic of death. The innocent children are unaware of the lurking danger in the sunshine of their lives. The anguish and loneliness of widowhood is felt only by the mother. "Moss of time" symbolizes the weary length of time and the monotony associated with it. Thus in the above poem every kind of sensation has a corresponding image. Although an image is different from simile in structure, it involves an analogy with simile. Once we take "desert" as an image, it becomes the vehicle of ideas which includes the subject revealed or implied. The sensation such an image creates can only be understood by the mind. "The slow drying of a pool" is another image which suggests the approaching death of many lives. The poet remains a watcher of the many

cruelties of fate. But can he remain indifferent? Probably no because in that case such a pathetic poem would not have emerged from his heart. The poet universalizes the sufferings of a widow and the poem becomes very significant as dirge of humanity.

"Drying in the Memory Jar" is a picture of the heart-rending menace of the partition. Parents remember their children

....butchered

In the frenzy of newly won freedom

With their limbs severed from their bodies

Like trunks from their roots.

(Thought Poems, p.26)

The image of butchered body, trunks and roots figure prominently in this poem. Simile used here is also very expressive. The butchered bodies are compared to the trunks, which are severed from their roots. The total impression conveyed through the images is that of ghastly massacre of the innocents during the partition.

An excellent poem "Indian Widows" describes the pathetic condition of Indian widows:

They are like strangers

Not feeling at home

Forever peeping out of the window

In an indistinct anxiety to go;

Their feelings grow like caterpillars

They are

... like bats hung upside down

To see the world in right perspective

Making endless flights in the room

In a confused hurry missing all windows.

(Thought Poems, p.16)

The poet, through the images of caterpillars, butterflies and bats, presents a pathetic picture of the Indian widows. He probes deep into their feelings of helplessness, restlessness, uncertainties of future and inability to move out of the rooms like bats making endless flights. Future for them is like the fading horizon at dusk. They are strangers in their own homes. The happy days of the past are shut from the present. These similes convey the actual condition of the Indian widows.

A series of original images which appear in the poem "A Poem for the Pantheists" presents the picture of flood-stricken people of the Andhra Pradesh. The devastation caused by the cyclonic waves leaves the lush paddy fields littered with corpses. The poet has employed a number of images like "splattered by an angry infant" and coconut trees fallen like "matchsticks". And dwellings like "house of cards" :

Like fishes drawn into net

Thrown by desperate fisherman

To lay his last luck chance.

(Thought Poems, p.25)

The poet, here, paints a graphic picture of the foaming waves, coconut trees made brittle like match sticks, solid houses destroyed like cards, corpses like numberless dead fish lying on the shore. It is the miracle of the images that has painted so vivid a picture of death caused by a natural calamity.

As a lover of nature, Bhatnagar indelibly depicts some of the unforgettable phenomena of nature. In autumn most of the trees shed their clothes of leaves one by one. The poet compares their shedding of leaves to the Rajput maiden's performing "sati" that is immolating themselves in the burning pyre to protect their modesty. The poet paints a vivid picture of this brave deed in the following lines through arresting images:

Trees in Autumn go bereft of leaves

As if by a spell of self annihilation

Cast in a rare show of fervent heat

Like proud Rajput maidens

Plunging down the flames of fire

To escape an out rage on their modesty

Perform Sati leaf by leaf.

In the same poem the poet likens the trees going bereft of leaves in Autumn to a grand strategy adopted by them to defeat the Napoleonic designs of Snow. The poet writes:

*Trees in Autumn go bereft of leaves
As if by a grand strategy of retreat
To defeat the Napoleonic designs of snow
They lure the marauder away to jeering desolation.*

And then again in the same poem, the poet compares the trees to a Sanyasi who renounces all attachments to the world and comes to a sudden awakening of his real self; similarly the trees also cut off all their attachments in the form of leaves. The poet's use of imagery is worthy of note:

*Trees in autumn go bereft of leaves
Of a Sanyasi come to sparkling wisdom
As if by a sudden awakening
Renounce all the snares elusive Maya weaves
To enter a trance of blissful Samadhi ...
(Angles of Retreat., p.22)*

Another poem "Kashmir Autumn Scene" tells us how

*The quite trees shed
All their belongings
Like
a
tree
like
a
tree
through
the snows.*

(Angles of Retreat, p.13)

By such an arrangement of words the poet enhances the effect of imagery.

In the poetic treasury of Bhatnagar there is no dearth of gems of similes. In "To discover Truth" the poet describes, the human ambition of pursuing truth:

Nagging life on earth

Like fireflies lighting up

Only in the dark. (Audible Landscape, p.12)

The poet here compares truth to the fireflies, which twinkle only In the dark. Truth is as elusive as the fireflies.

The poet harbours certain dreams of a bright future, which make different from the common men. In his poem "I can Question only My Dreams" he feels

Like trees growing different

In different lands. (Oeniric Visions, p.13)

In the above lines the poet through the image of a tree distinguishes himself from the rest of the people.

In another poem "The Territory and the Road" on being insulted and kicked by white men the captive native

Groaning like fired volcanoes

Colour rose in the eyes of the mulatto

And he lept like a panther

Clawing and mauling the tyrant

To a choke. (Oeniric Visions, p.30)

Here again through distinct images of volcanoes and panther attributed to the captive, the poet leaves a lasting impression on our minds.

In the foregoing analysis, we have seen both what man has made of man and what nature has made of man and the poet achieves his aim through arresting images. Now we have to reflect on what man has done to himself. How has he killed his conscience to satisfy his unnatural desires and carnal temptations? The chief reason is his lust for pelf and power. The

more he accumulates money the more he commits socio-economic offences. What our great leaders have done today is the burning example of man's lust for gold and power. If the judiciary had not been active and watchful all their crimes would have been veiled under their image of patrons and well-wishers of the have-nots. In the poem "Pyramids" we find the death of man's conscience for his lust for gold.

Stoned in our lust for gold

We all are pyramids

Like unseemly boils risen

On the delicate flesh of sand

And again the craving for gold has so much blinded him that he cannot see the day-light of common weal:

His yellow illusions Formed like mirages

Must have blinded his vision

To see things visible

Like an owl's unseeing eye

In the daylight's tangible. (Angles of Retreat, p.16)

Bhatnagar tries to indicate man's craving for the yellow bits by physical ailments boil and yellow fever, pyramids and owl.

The owl being a nocturnal and ominous bird represents both a blurred vision of death. The dazzle blinds the owl so the glitter of gold be nights the greedy man. As gold is deceptive, he fails to see clearly and neatly in the day, becomes an equivalent to owl who has eyes but cannot see, who has mind but cannot distinguish between good and bad.

In "The Bond of Country Care" materialism revolts against patriotism. The bonds of love for the country are debased as bonds of love for temptation wealth and jeopardizing country's security. The poet tells us of those settled abroad who visit their motherland.

To choose a bride like a prince

Or buy of one's country a jewel of land

(Thought Poems, p.25)

The poem depicts the commercialized relationship of the immigrants to their motherland. The image of stone, hard earth and paper money stand for the human nature and money-mindedness of the immigrants.

The poet depicts the Indian emigrants who stay abroad in lure of money in “Look Homeward Angle”. They desert their motherland for a foster motherland in search of glossy life suppressing the voice of their conscience:

*But their fancy forbids them
To look beyond glamour and gold
And sunbathe their quixotic dreams
For a sophisticated fear of tanning
Dazzling their eyes with rays of conceit.*

(Angles of Retreat, p.39)

The image of sun employed here is very appropriate. To these conceited people the sun which is a giver of life merely gives them heat as they only know the light of nightclubs and the glitter of gold. They are dazzled into blindness by the rays of their conceits. Their own parents, who are proud of them, are banshees. Their own lust of money is the cause of their decadence. They have betrayed their parents who had anchored their aged hopes in them.

We come across another beautiful image in this poem and that is of migratory birds who return to their motherland traversing vast distances. The poet gives an appealing description below:

*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.39)

But these emigrants are even worse than the birds who never cut themselves off their motherlands, how so far away they may be.

In "Pleasure in Happiness" there is an attack on the mercenary attitude of man. The poet advises him to

learn to take pleasure in happiness

Not in money. (Angles of Retreat, p.32)

Money is used here as a metaphor. Although it is essential for livelihood, yet too much hankering after it is the cause of debasement of human nature.

Through "Beggars can be Choosers" the poet wants to convey the idea that a man with a starved conscience is a greater beggar than one with a begging bowl and happy conscience. The poet expresses this idea in the following lines:

We are the sons of elements

We do not fight for our food

We are no shallow careerists

Daredevil smugglers, cruel adulterators

Or cheating blackmarketeers of today.

(Angles of Retreat, p.43)

Through the images of "sons of elements", "shallow careerists", "daredevil smugglers", "cruel adulterators" and "cheating blackmarketeers" the poet contrasts the beggars with the debased men of the day.

"The Peacock" stands for a patriot turned politician:

Like one from Arabian Nights

But the integrity of a patriot

Is an old vintage now

Memory tasting of selfdenial

And nostalgic sacrifice. (Oeniric Visions, p.42)

Through the images of "Arabian Nights", "Patriot", "Old vintage", and "nostalgic sacrifice", the poet very effectively contrasts the nature of a patriot from what he was and what he has become.

"Crossing the Bar" is another poem which is an attack on betrayal and defection of the so-called patriots turned politicians. They weaken the country and endanger the freedom by revealing the secrets to the enemies. Their morals are so clouded that the light of truth cannot penetrate them, The poet writes:

Morals as dense

As thick forests Let no light in.

(Feeling Fossils, p.13)

The poet here compares the loose morals of the politicians and the soldiers to the thick forest which do not allow the sun light of devotion to one's country and duty.

The image of road very frequently appears in Bhatnagar's poetry. It appears as ways, directions, sign-posts routes and bridges. In "The Territory and the Road" the poet condemns the lust of the imperialists for winning or grabbing others' territories without building roads to link them in common bond.

Ten thousand Persian immortals

May grace the Apadana of Persepolis

But which Darius can ever build

A territory for these mortals

Walking the wayward roads.

(Oeniric Visions, p.31)

Life is a road in the discovery of the self and a means to reach the desired destination. Road terminates somewhere but life is endless, Like Ulysses, one ought to make the most of one's life by pursuing some noble end. The poet says in "Ulysses" :

All roads have their dead ends

But a living soul

Walks out of the body

As white as a crane

Flying off the arresting water

Laying skyways of new hopes.

Dead ends can never ever dream

Of having new roads (Oeniric Visions, p.11)

One must leave the worldly attachments like a crane to "fly skyways".

The poem "Scaling Heights" is based on the image of journey. It is the story of Dr. William Unsoeld's daughter Nanda Devi who while scaling the heights of the peak of the same name perished on Sept. 8, 1976. The poet pays tribute to her undaunted spirit and reveals the ambition of her father who had deep love for mountaineering and thus loved high roads. He was busy discovering something new for humanity. The poet writes about the American pilgrim's dream of

Founding high roads

And scaling new heights for humanity.

(Feeling Fossils, p.17)

In the above poem, the sky often appears as an image denoting infinite hopes and ambitions of man. In another poem "Who is afraid of Fear" his concern for the humanity is depicted. Rama the ideal king and the Buddha the princely monk, Argos and Janus serve as foils to lax rulers and sluggish people. A man having a kindled conscience alone has the grit to save "freedom walls from the mock Trojan horses".

Fire, light and galaxy are other images employed by the poet. "History is a Sorry Go-Round" delineates the sad end of the rulers and resurrection of the crushed people through the images of light. The rulers are radiant with their power and authority whereas the common people are gloomy but under inspiration of revolt. They :

Burn like camphor cubes

In the flames fanned by the sights

In the trail of the new quest

Like Phoenix risen from the Ashes

The crucified that have kept

The candle of conscience alight

(Angles of Retreat, p.41)

In the above poem, the rulers are approximated to the sun but they emit no light for the common good of the people. The poet says:

The charioteers of history

In the wanton quest of their power and authority

Clinch light and go to the sun

Spoon measuring infinity

In the opacity of their conscience

(Angles of Retreat, p.40)

"Like Phoenix Risen From the Ashes" describes a "Koreahs" high ambition:

Never would loose ambition or

hope of one day flying the radiant skys.

(Oeniric Visions, p.44)

"Who is Afraid of Fear" marks the death of conscience of the ruler and the ruled. The poet writes:

Acting blind to conscience will be parricide

.....

Unless we are able to stand on our own

And wipe the layered dust of acquiescence

Our nation for long has known.

(Oeniric Visions, p.21)

Acquiescence signifies submission to the will of the ruler. Our nation stands for the ruled. Its people have lost all courage to protest. There is no spell of revolt in their conscience to tread the path enlightened by the great heroes. The imagery here is derived from the historical and mythical personages like Sphinx and Shikhandi who signify incompleteness of being. They are put up against the great historical and mythical figures like Brutus, Zeus and Abhimanyu. In this poem death is suggested by Orpheus who regained and lost his Euridice. Caesar's assassination and Niobe who turned to a stone while weeping for his slain children and the sun which is a symbol of life are afflicted with gout. In contrast is Zeus who incurred the wrath of Jupiter. In another poem "History is a Sorry-Go-Round" the poet introduces the imagery of galaxy thus:

The feet that tread the galaxy of stars

And crushed to crushing silence

Everything that dare raise a spark

Fail to perform the glamorous trick.

(Angles of Retreat., p.40)

The image of Galaxy which occurs in the above extract symbolizes enlightened people who have enormous love for the oppressed. The poet extending the imagery in another poem "To Hamlets" says:

Stars are always lovely

Against the dark. (Oeniric Visions, p.28)

In the poem "Desires on Death" we encounter very impressive images. Being the first poem of the poet and a creation of his keen observation, it is excellently wrought out in terms of the imagery and thought. The sparrows sitting happily on naked electric wires are unaware of their calamitous situation. The poet writes:

Desires on death

Sit in quite evening arrays

Like amused sparrows

On naked electric wires

Watching with muted wonder

The fading glory of the dying sun.

(Thought Poems ,p.7)

The poem "The Last Supper" is replete with catching images:

I have desires as dense and deep

As dark

.....

In hotel Hilton

Height divides the dialectic

And she looks like cactus

Dreaming of rain

Peering through the high window glasses

I see roads pointed like needles

And light laced like ribbons

On the night gown of Marilyn Manroe.

(Oeniric Visions, p.19)

In this passage we have a number of arresting similes apart from captivating images of dark, window looking like cactus waiting for rain, the roads portrayed as pointed as needles and the lights laced like ribbons on the night gown of Marilyn Manroe.

Thus we see that Bhatnagar has enriched his poetry with captivating images taken from his wide experience, erudite learning, and keen observation. He is among the few Indian poets writing in English today who is gifted with a unique imaginative power and oneiric visions of life.

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