

## WRITING POEMS: A MEANS OF CATHARSIS FOR O.P.BHATNAGAR

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**Dr. Ananta Geetey Uppal**

Associate Professor

Humanities & Social Sciences

Galgotias University, Greater Noida, India

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### Abstract

Poetry or the creative process offers repose and leads one to recognize the element of the constructive in life. O. P. Bhatnagar's art is but a way of overcoming the travails of his life including society, nation, god or man, which form and provide the context of and for life consciousness, through sympathy and tenderness. It is a kind of conduct in which nobility of mind and feelings unite with virtuous action. That is how Bhatnagar was able to overcome his hurts, conflicts and sufferings life had managed to inflict upon him. It was like saying prayers to God. Poetry being the pathos of life leads human sensibilities towards flexibility and sympathy. It teaches man to compose something positive and aesthetic and meaningful out of one's sufferings and crises. That was how Bhatnagar was able to steal some hours of peace and restore dignity to his highly bruised self. Poetry or the creative process offers repose and leads one to recognize the element of the constructive in life. This article is an attempt to justify that Bhatnagar's art is but a catharsis where he finds a way of rising above the ordeals of his life including society, nation, god or man, which form and provide the context of and for life consciousness, through sympathy and tenderness. It is a kind of conduct in which his nobility of mind and feelings unite with virtuous action. That is how Bhatnagar was able to overcome his hurts, conflicts and sufferings life had managed to inflict upon him.

**Keywords:** Poetic process, life, society, feelings, sufferings

It has been an enlightened area of darkness whether the poetic process is influenced by personal life or is independent of it, governed by the laws of its own realm. For Wordsworth, it had been a revelation of personal life, a kind of spiritual biography. But for T.S.Eliot it had been an extinction of personality to the extent of being totally impersonal. The truth lies somewhere in between. One can seem to be totally personal like Meerabai or Kabir to the exclusion of Socio-political or historical events to influence their concerns or one can be entirely impersonal to let the milieu project itself to the exclusion of the person as in the works of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Strindberg, Ibsen, Beckett or Ionesco, and many others. Even while such a division of type may be an acceptable appropriation of creative process no one can afford to be so insulated as not to allow one's sensibilities to carry the impress of the dominant ideas or movements of the times. The Japanese belligerent temper suddenly

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changed into humility and humiliation after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The creative output suggested the change. The entire texture, structure and direction of poetry and other arts changed. Whether one actually took part in the freedom movement in India or not, one's mood, vision and thinking did exhibit the change one way or the other. Change is a phenomenon which is interactive, neither entirely personal nor impersonal. So is the poetic process. Something of the personal goes into the impersonal in moderating the personal into creative expression.

According to Bhatnagar, the difference between autobiography and autobiographical is obvious. While the first represents a conscious interaction with events in the making of the self, the latter with the impact of the personal life in the making of the world view and its expression in a natural way.

It would be better if one talked not in terms of theory or theoretical assumptions but experience. Orphaned by living parents he was gifted with innumerable honours of misfortunes. Although many poets come of extremely adverse backgrounds it however may be wrong to conclude that poetry and poetic vision are a product of disharmony in personal life. They might carry some sharp sensations from the past but poetry by its nature and principle of creativity activates harmony and right perception beyond prejudices and all personal discordances. It helps promote tolerance and accommodation. As words rush in, in the process of creation and vie for supremacy, the experience of it has to be undergone silently and peacefully in a detached way without their repulsions, charms and exclusions or inclusions. The decision making or selecting spirit acts independent of personal choices. A creatively disposed mind refuses to adopt a partisan approach in terms of words and attitudes. Poetry being the pathos of life leads human sensibilities towards flexibility and sympathy. It teaches man to compose something positive and aesthetic and meaningful out of one's sufferings and crises. That was how Bhatnagar was able to steal some hours of peace and restore dignity to his highly bruised self.

Poetry or the creative process offers repose and leads one to recognize the element of the constructive in life. Bhatnagar's art is but a way of overcoming the travails of his life including society, nation, god or man, which form and provide the context of and for life consciousness, through sympathy and tenderness. It is a kind of conduct in which nobility of mind and feelings unite with virtuous action. That is how Bhatnagar was able to overcome his hurts, conflicts and sufferings life had managed to inflict upon him. It was like saying prayers to God. A poem with him would take hours and days to finish, without his suffering pursuing him. Not that he was born a poet but it came to his as a way out of his painful and tense psychic complications of tiresome and exhausting memories and reactive thoughts of childhood become a pattern and prison of pain and sufferings and revel in their temporary suspension from awareness.

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“He is suave and secretive. Wrapped up in his self he gives the impression of a person who is holding some treasure very close to his chest. In personal interaction he rarely raises his voices to stress his point; in public debates he communicates his ideas without any trace of flamboyance. This feature finds ample evidence in his poetic compositions too.” (Parvati, 10)

The creative moments also provided opportunities for regeneration of dull, dead and misdirected energies towards a useful and satisfying purpose. The painful memories seemed to disappear in the image making; the negative feelings, in composition. Thinking of social problems, cultural degeneration and national issues provide disengagement from the self to feel free and independent in the moments and process of creation. This very freedom changes the mode of imagination and the texture of poetic vision. It also enriches sensibilities and enables perception. It, in fact, is a recapturing of the whole man from his roots.

Irony is Bhatnagar's integral vision. It arises out of his contemplation at three levels viz. personal, national, and universal. His interviews with Srivastava and Baghmar amply reveal how he came to develop his ironic perception. He himself says that "the severe incompatibility in the lives of his parents made him intensely aware of irony in their lives, which worked as a catalyst in him and accelerated the process of counterbalancing the contraries of life." (Srivastava, 67). The ill-treatment out to him by his parents during his early childhood made him realize that he was not a human being but an object. He universalizes this suppression of his individuality by his parents, to the suppression of humanity all the world over. He told his interviewers that after a long period of "incubation" he came to develop ironic vision which is the most appropriate medium of expressing his thought and temper.

As he gradually got more frequently engrossed in the act of artistic creation, the hold of rigidity, bitterness and prejudices seemed to relax and level and lead him to be both human and humane. What he aspired for in poetry was secondary but what he gained in the process of creative act was important and rewarding. He accepts he has not written poems with a high finish in the formal sense but he has the satisfaction of “authenticity”. Except for the poems on death the rest are neither confessional nor autobiographical. In his humble opinion, poetry ought not to be tried as a highly finished product at the cost of authenticity, substance and spontaneity. That is why the simple folk poetry and songs are more appealing and relevant than the finished and academic poetry. Even the great Indian epics were written for appeal to the masses. It is all the more necessary in the case of Indian poetry in English, which is already twice removed from reality and the local feel. For the foreignness of medium increases the gap between feelings and expression. In order to give local colour, both, the poets and the novelists, resort to placing their compositions in Indian landscape on a large (which also is true of the Indian diasporic writers) scale but the attitudes and feelings projected are tangential to the landscape, sometimes verging on to the ludicrous and shocking to the native sentiments. It is therefore only right that more Indian poetry in English be written

by the commonly educated Indians than by the specialized academicians or those educated and cultured abroad. The validity of Indian poetry in English lies in its nativity than in its foreign orientation or diasporic writing. He has neither followed any foreign model for his compositions nor pursued any movement poetry. He has taken to subjects, themes and events that have come and struck closest to his dispositions of mind and feelings. He claims that the failures or successes are totally his.

He is aware that some compositions may not have turned out to be as poetically perfect as others. But all of them have been his private efforts in social expression. He has drawn equal solace in writing them. He does not boast of representing anything in his poetry except existence. It has been his private and personal satisfaction; compensation and support to his wearied self-relating experience to expression. The one important thing he learned in the process of creative act was the sense of freedom and the pleasure of being free from the troubling memories of the past and the dreams of future. In the creative act the presence of the present is felt most enduringly. In him, it helped resolve the conflict of polarities. It even smoothed the uneven surface of his being. It also assisted him in facing the realities that lay embedded in him, and also outside him by way of condensing intensity into thoughts whose structural meaning and logic gave poems their forms and expression. The condensing process of intensity does not always succeed so successfully into a clarity or transparency of thoughts which Robert Frost describes to A. E. Housman as “tantalizing vagueness”. (Robert Frost: *The Man and His Work*, 1923) But he, as a common practitioner of poetry, would prefer “meaning” to be the core of composition, which is not available without the clarity of thoughts and their projections in a construct, especially to an Indian poet in English.

In one of his interviews with Dafre, Bhatnagar asserts, “I do not so much believe in the aesthetic ends so much as the semantics ends of poetry. Poetry should mean something by way of enlightenment when a word becomes more than a word, it has meaning. That is why I regard thought content crucial to poetry. Poetry is meaning intensified by emotionated ideas in experience. Drawing out of meaning and fixing significances of things, feeling and experiences through reflection in thoughts is the very essence of poetry. Confounding or meaningless incantation of words, feelings, images or music may turn poetry into an exotic charm but it cannot make it charming. What makes it charming is its dimension of inner sensitiveness, vision, and growth in terms of meaningful significance.” (Dafre, 52)

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)

It was quite relieving to him to make some meaning out of the chaos and crisis of his personal sufferings stored raw in the recesses of his unconscious. But writing in English always made for ambiguities, paradoxes and contradictions and gaps of culture and thoughts in the language. That is why many a times the Indian poets in English become functions of the particular linguistic system and remain half revealed or expressed. A foreign language is a dinosaur which needs sizing, which can be done only by the texts and textures of, our native feels and values. For a foreign language forces its integral forms of thoughts, feeling and conceptions. Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo were the only poets whose creativity and creations were not subject to distortions by the language they were using. Therefore, keeping close to socio-cultural and national concerns alone could enable one to be free of the fetters of the foreign language become part of our usage and expression. A continuous effort at nativization alone can divest and deconstruct the language of its fixed associations. This can be made possible only by addressing and keeping the native readers, and not the foreign readers, in mind. The Indian poets may avoid becoming pets of the English masters and language. Otherwise we would only be producing motherless sons and daughters and making eternal entries in the housewife's daily diaries.

He admits that he has been tempted to use western myths, which may disrupt comprehension of the poem to a common reader. In one of his essays, he accepted "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 for 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 challenge of life willingly. What I term as desire to live, is exposed. 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 very poor specimen of the Western mind and imagination. For the best we must go to the French, German and Russian." (Dafre, 58)

And he says further, "The rational of such a practice lies first, in the fact of their intense integration in literature and secondly, the currency of West in communicating notions of social import, as of Ulysses for adventure. Thirdly, our knowledge of these myths is

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intimate through the courses of our studies in English. Certainly, they will be of disadvantage to a general reader of English. The Indian myths can definitely be integrated in Indian poetry in English more easily the same way. It can also be modelled on Indian poetics through inward introspection, which will require training in the Indian critical tenets. Almost all practitioners of Indian poetry in English have grown and been groomed in western critical canons and poetics. He personally suffers from this disadvantage. It is a long way from coloniality to freedom in arts and culture in our country. Awards and propaganda apart, in his opinion, the Indian Literature in English is no match to the excellent literature being produced in the regional languages of India today.” (Dafre, 59)

As far as reflection of his love for nature is concerned, he agrees that while he deals more in humans cape, he is not without recognition of nature. Whenever the moods of his being are moved by nature its presence and aspects do occupy his compositions as in *Angles of Retreat* and some other poems in other volumes. However much of imagery at times is drawn from nature which may suffice to stand the allegation. Besides, it is not a valid literary criticism to ask Nissim Ezekiel as to why has he not directed his poetry towards nature. It deals with a writer's prerogative unless there is compelling reason for writing particular kind of poetry say religious, romantic, or political poetry, as per exigencies of the time or movement. There is no such calling in our country today.

Further the lack of fine sentiments also can be regarded as one based on the ignorance of appropriacy of various elements where and whenever required in the course of poetic discourse. On the other hand, the use of fine sentiments where and when not required can itself become a drawback by its redundancy. His sentiments are only unconventional which it may be ungenerous to condemn as ugly or wanting in fineness. The word fine is a highly relative term, It is better to be raw than fake.

In this exposition he cannot underrate the therapeutic effects of his engagement with writing poetry. The long silence forced upon him by the rigid repressive measures craved to get free of the cage of the choking silence with the help of quiet words uttered not in speech but in writing. This encouraged conversation with the self and the tortured being. In the process of creation words rolled upon words and flowed in a torrent competing with one another for supremacy in arrangement. Expressions and forms of words vied with one another for selection causing confusion. Each expression and image offered several alternatives making it difficult to complete a poem. The process was neither boring nor bothersome. Instead it was highly engaging and relieving. The endless process of rewriting was engrossing. The completion of a poem was fulfilling and satisfying the personal way. Something harmonious had flowed out the chaotic; pains diluted into pleasant sensations for a while. It was like chipping rocks; a streak of light entering a cave.

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Certain themes or subjects surfaced on their own out of the ocean of the subconscious, like-solitude, death, art of creation, God, the enigma of life, freedom and slavery: others by association, like-religion, heaven, hell, truth, patriotism etc. Some came up through observing life around, like-hunger, floods, injustices, killings, poverty, corruption, moral degeneration, social evils and political upheavals. The strange juxtaposition of opposites and contradictions in life, events and happenings gave rise to wonder of paradoxes and play of irony in life situations presenting themselves in the treatment of themes and envisioning the nature of existence as in poems on idealists, politicians, saints, life attitudes, socio-religious modes and practices. On account of the unfavorable circumstances of his childhood there was a natural inclination and presence of pathos for the discriminated deprived and the dispossessed along with the protest for justice. From the poetry of inner self his consciousness became more centred in the outside world and its concerns. Empathy flowed easy.

This kind of state forced him to skirt the grandeurs of the romantic in life. Consequently, the play and presence of intricate imagery suffered a setback in his compositions. The ideas and thoughts in the rhythm of their meanings took natural hold of his endeavours. He himself thought over it and asked himself the question if by traditional definition and conception he was writing poetry or poetizing his thoughts. Some senior and seasoned poets even condemned it as poetic-jigsaw or pseudo poetry. But he did not want to be untrue to himself and dilute and dissolve the appeal of plainness, directness and simplicity of his compositions inspired by his inner urges and aspirations. He had to say his say. Not beauty but goodness and truth were his concern. Though this discipline he learned to exercise patience; endeavour to arrive at the right word images and meanings; cultivate precision; use of illustrative similes and expanding metaphors; the sense of opening and closure; the culture of repose and restraint of the flow of feelings and rhetoric, and much more. But it also introduced the element of creative restlessness and discontent.

He never felt satisfied with one version of a composition. He always was eager to confirm that the composition was quite or as close to what the creative self intended to convey. Personally, he was of opinion that no poem is ever "perfect". It is only near perfect. He would love to rework on any of his finished poems. He accepts that he may not be a perfect poet himself, which affords this facility to him. He sees a close parallel between the imperfections of life and art. Both try to approximate to the ideal, but always fall a bit short of it.

He explains his belief to why there was no trace of Advait philosophy in his poetry. For him Advait is the opposite of Auto theism. Not that man is divine but has potentials for divinity (that is capable of refinement and evolution) as being part of the primary energy from which he derives his existence and finally merges in the same energy. This is how he takes

Advait to mean. None interferes in the cycle or momentum. Energy is addressing itself to energy.

Regarding disregard for God, well, it is both a sensitive and insensitive issue. Sensitive in the sense of being dogmatic about God as a person and insensitive in the sense of being unagitated about the changing status, form and meaning of God as a symbol or reference for human achievement or aspirations. Disregard is possible in case of a particular God energised by worship or following on a large scale. But refuting or disagreeing with the idea or concept of God cannot be exchanged for or imputed as disregard. Honesty in expressing one's belief is piety and being human is not ungodly. For God exists only in reference and context of man.

Due to his traumatic childhood experiences he became an atheist. He condemns the hypocrisy practiced by so-called God men to exploit the religious people. "The elders in the family spent many hours performing pooja and other rituals which he could see through the darkness of the room he was locked in. The resentment he felt at that time, developed into a mocking attitude not towards the persons performing rituals perform as contrasted to God's indifference to the worshipper." (Parvati, 5)

She also revealed "I am afraid I don't know much about my husband's relationship with his mother. He had lost her while he was in his early teens. After her death he lived with his maternal grandparents at Jabalpur from where he moved out only when he settled with a job in Maharashtra. So, I know as much as he told me. (Uppal, 6)

Yes, he did say very often that his mother was a tyrant and she was very cruel to him. He suffered from a sense of unjust and this continued to obsess his mind till end. His younger sister the only other child of his parents has no bitterness for her mother.

His father who lived with us was a simple man with limited needs. There was hardly any communication between the father and son. There definitely were no clashes. His only complaint against his father was that he remained detached and aloof about his mother's cruelty to him. He admired his father's simplicity.

He said that his maternal grandmother and uncles treated him as if he was an unwanted burden on them. He was very bitter about it. I visited the family of my in-laws often. I found them to be normal human beings with normal human failings. They treated him as they would other members of the family. The younger ones looked up to him with admiration. It appeared as if his childhood responses had got stuck up deep inside. He had not grown.



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He had a varied personality. He was extremely civilized and refined. He was a person with disciplined habits. He was an efficient administrator. He was not permitted by the family to join the services. He joined N. C. C. wing of his college and retired as major. He was a badminton champion and represented Sagar University in tournaments. He was also a good singer. He was very generous and promoted various budding writers. I remember, once I was rather critical of a budding writer. His response was, 'at least he is writing which is better than not writing'. He did not speak much but he was very witty and had a quick sense of repartee. I write this because not many know of these facts.

He was a fine human being with deep rooted human values. But he did not believe in conventional religious practices. Regarding his spirituality and existentialism, I am afraid I cannot say anything. These were the levels I could not raise myself up to." (Parvati Bhatnagar in an interview)

Faith in God for him has always been a tragic irony on man. The essence of any power permeating the universe of man, according to him, is reason. Immanuel Kant, therefore, held great charm for him. Though our Hindu rituals never appealed to him for their disciplined unreason, he held great admiration for the imaginative intellect (different from the intellectual imagination of the Western thinkers) of our thinkers in containing human instincts in a mechanical order. For him, not mere action but reflection was more important which Indians today lack most, leading to surrender and slavery in all walks of life. It is for this reason that we have fear of freedom: we are in fact afraid of fear itself.

The greatest advantage his engagement with the creative process offered him was that it lent him a voice in lieu of his forced silence dumped upon him by the sour repressions during his childhood. Yet the impress of the innocent suffering during the period of innocence was far too deep and intense even for poetry to fathom and represent. "So much still lies buried in the inner layers of the subconscious. However, breaking the rigidities of retreat, withdrawal and isolation through the process of writing did offer partial unburdening of unpleasant memories and pains and identification with the deprivations and sufferings of the people crying for voice, which, in his opinion, involves transference of one personality into another." (Pathak, 13) For without genuine identification there can be no felt and true voice. A poet has to personalise or to make a common cause with issues at one time or the other.

It is infact a process of gradual personalization till the object becomes one with the subject. It, therefore, calls for more of identifications than impersonalization. The conviction of cause brings about a shift of focus of personality from one segment to another. The question of extinction of personality then does not arise. It ultimately comes to igniting the self to a changed and different field of imagination and reality. The creative process gains by the force of what a person or personality is not by what it is not. The distinction between the

man who suffers and the mind which creates is forced and artificial. There can be no separation like this. Infact, both tend to interact with one another in arriving at a unified vision and expression. The creative process is after all not that independence of self or personality as it is made out to be. The two must work in union with one another to lend credence to the creative process. There may be a kind and measure of diffusion of personality to create fusion but not extinction calling for and creating a split personality. Since the creative or poetic process takes place within the bounds that contain, retain and define personality it can hardly be extinct. Something of it must naturally lurk and participate in the process and see for itself its image in the creative artifact symbolizing the aesthetic nature of existence and being.

Such realization and identification lends force and substance to the poet's personality undergoing transformation, which ultimately decides and defines the essential core of awareness of that being which constitutes personality. For instance, the nature of much of the fine Black and Latin American literature was made of resistance which could result only from identification of a personality with a cause whose roots went back not only to the past but also the historical events. The formation of personality is as complex as the formulation of poetic or creative process.

The art of protest, revolt, resistance and retaliation is such that it requires and forces the voluntary surrender even of impersonality. The elements of detachment and impersonalization undergo the required manipulation towards de-impersonalization. This is now has arisen much of the literature and aesthetic of contestation round the world fighting repression; discrimination, exploitation and injustice. For each powerful thought refuses both surrender and harmony with a lower value or thought in any creative process, which is the assertion of law, labour, order find ethics.

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