

Autobiographical Elements in O.P. Bhatnagar's Poems

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Abstract:

O.P.Bhatnagar's early life was a veritable hell due to the severe incompatibility of his parents and his consequent ill treatment. He never experienced what parental affection means to a child. Observing the contraries in the life of his parents, he developed an ironic vision, which he was claimed that he elaborately expresses in his poetry. Bhatnagar as a child had to confront and bear the prejudice, anger, hostility and scorn that went on unabated between his parents. These made him look at life with a critical stance. He could, in his later life, also see the immorality and corruption prevalent in the society and in the politics of the country, the usual butt of his poetry. Due to his traumatic childhood experiences he became an atheist. Critics have noticed that he condemns the hypocrisy practised by so-called God men to exploit the religious people. But he contradicts critics' analysis saying that a poem is a chronicle of poet's ideals and values. According to him, it is an attribute of the "personal and not the autobiographical". This paper is an attempt to prove critics' opinion of his poems and also to justify Bhatnagar's philosophy in this concern.

To some writers, literature is the reflection of their life and personality as in the case of Whitman, but Bhatnagar tries to avoid intrusion of autobiographical elements in his poetry. However, Mrs. Parvati Bhatnagar holds that autobiographical elements are inevitable in the poetry of any sensitive poet. In one of his unpublished article Bhatnagar confirms:

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. 1

Bhatnagar says that in poetry, the autobiographical element operates in terms of poetic persona in general. But poetry cannot be as autobiographical as fiction and drama. If any

autobiographical elements are visible in Bhatnagar's poetry, it is in the sense of political concerns, sensitivity towards the oppressed and the downtrodden, the ironical mode, the perception of the contraries and preoccupation with death and suffering.

Dr. O.P.Bhatnagar was born in the hot month of May (30/05/1932) at Agra but the tropical heat of India has not gone into the making of his personality nor of his poetry. "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." 2

Bhatnagar's early life was a veritable hell due to the severe incompatibility of his parents and his consequent ill treatment. He never experienced what parental affection means to a child. Bhatnagar was a witness to the frequent bickering between his parents which raised a storm of discontent in their family life. As is generally seen, the child becomes the victim of his parents' anger: so was the case with Bhatnagar who was ill-treated, beaten and scorched for no fault of his own. Every attempt was made to crush his individuality. The poet lamented that his father did not think he was his subject: his mother not her portfolio. In their eyes, he was not human but an object. 3 In his poetry he universalizes his personal experience. Observing the contraries in the life of his parents, he developed an ironic vision, which he elaborately expresses in his poetry.

Bhatnagar as a child had to confront and bear the prejudice, anger, hostility and scorn that went on unabated between his parents. These made him look at life with a critical stance. He could, in his later life, also see the immorality and corruption prevalent in the society and in the politics of the country, the usual butt of his poetry. The theme of death is also autobiographical to the poet as he was intensely aware of its presence from early childhood. He has given expressions to his own deep rooted suffering. In his poem "Feeling Fossils", he says:

.....feeling sink to the shadow:

fail to reappear like son


And go fossil

Till there broke open

And salvaged by words

By miracles of thoughts.

In yet another poem "Memories" he says :

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Memories have turned rocks.
Sun, Moon, Wind and Water
Strike their head in despair
Someone may have to dynamite them
To use the toughness of their being
In laying the foundations of

(Feeling Fossils, p.9)

Due to his traumatic childhood experiences he became an atheist. He condemns the hypocrisy practised 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." 4 Although he was influenced the "Advait" philosophy of Adi Shankaracharya, he invested it with a different meaning. To Bhatnagar the all pervading

"Brahma" of "Advait" i.e. the primordial energy which governs and sustains the entire universe. Faith in God for him is the tragic irony on man. There is no power such is God and the only power permeating the universe is reason. He is also aggrieved by the passivity and lack of will power of his countrymen to ameliorate their miserable lot.

Being a voracious reader, Bhatnagar spared no literary works he could lay hands on. He has read all the world literatures in English translations. He has been much influenced by Dryden and Pope, and also by Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. His wide studies enlarged his vision of life. His insistence on man is the result of his belief in the existential philosophy propounded by Goethe, Camus and Sartre.

The poet says:

Noting things with sensitivity cannot be treated as part of the autobiographical. It is characteristic of non-self origin; a means of apprehension with the added sharpness of feeling and perception. A work of art becomes autobiographical when it narrates and recounts and traces the form and content of the thrust and fancy of arts constructs vision, images and characters to personal history and events. Further I make a difference between personal and autobiographical. The norms of ethics and values and ideals or philosophical postulates one pursues and applies to view and evaluate life belong to the realm of the personal. The autobiographical forms a mix of the personal comprising events and forces impinging from outside on the psyche. 5

From the above statement it is obvious that his poems are not the autobiography of his life but of his thoughts. It is also very clear that unless the thrust of a poem, which comprises vision, images and characters, narrates and recounts the personal history and events, it cannot be called autobiographical. A poem is a chronicle of poet's ideals and values. According to him, it is an attribute of the "personal and not the autobiographical". Hence it may be inferred that Bhatnagar's poems are not autobiographical in the strict sense of the term.

References

1. O.P.Bhatnagar : In an unpublished article “Reflections on the Relationship of the Poetic Process and Personal Life”
2. In an Interview with Mrs. O.P.Bhatnagar.
3. Ibid.
4. Mrs. Bhatnagar, Parwati, "Autobiographical Elements in the Poetry of O.P.Bhatnagar", *Judgements*, p.35.
5. O.P.Bhatnagar : In an unpublished article “Reflections on the Relationship of the Poetic Process and Personal Life”

