

Death - A Beggar Orphan: O. P. Bhatnagar's Vision of Death

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Abstract

Bhatnagar's canvas of poetry is embellished with myriad colours. One can feel the aroma of Indian soil in all his seven collections of poems. Bhatnagar's sensitive heart throbs for the suffering humanity –the poor, the destitute, and the downtrodden, who struggle hard to prove their existence in today's profligate society. He writes for the proletarians in their language so that they can feel the warmth and intensity with which he writes. The themes, that he has chosen, are part and parcel of a life of common man. The quest for identity, existential dilemma, loss of human values, the dryness and monotony of modern man, death, immortality, religious hypocrisy, corruption are some of the dominant themes which add colour to his poetic works. Death has been an unresolved puzzle since time immemorial. It has power to conquer life leaving it helpless like an orphan. But Bhatnagar treats it in different light by calling it a beggar orphan. My paper focuses on his unique vision of death as expressed in his poetic collections.

Key Words: Proletarian, dryness and monotony, death, immortality, existential dilemma

Life oscillates between two ends –birth and death. Where there is birth, there is death too. Birth is rejoiced whereas death is mourned. Death has been an unresolved puzzle since time immemorial. All metaphysical speculations are directed towards unveiling the secrets more of death than of life. Even the modern science failed to unearth the secrets of death. Perhaps, because it is beyond its realm. Man is obsessed with his corporeal existence. He is only aware of this existence as he is in the lower plane of consciousness. As his awareness

grows, he begins to realize that there is some invisible power which governs the function of the body, the mind, and the soul. This spiritual knowledge makes him aware of the higher plane of consciousness. He discards body as reality and accepts soul as truth. This realization puts him into awareness of his kinship with every object of nature. It is a state of blessedness. But the eternal questions—what happens after death? Whether there is life beyond death? How does soul leave the body? have been haunting man's mind since ancient times. But he has found no convincingly acceptable answers.

Our body is a cage of flesh into which our soul is imprisoned. Death frees the soul from this imprisonment so that it can mingle with the Paramatma—the supreme reality of Godhead. Real attainment of life lies in liberation from the cycle of birth and death. The Shrimad Bhagwat Geeta assigns great value to human life and clearly states that it is hard to attain human form. Man is the only creature in the entire creation of God capable of praying to Him for salvation. Other creatures fall a prey to the cycle of birth, death and rebirth and take millions of years to evolve as human beings. It is only in the human body that one can perform 'sadhana' to attain self-realization. Man's attempt must be to realize oneness of the soul with the supreme reality. Hinduism also emphasizes that the physical body is perishable and the soul is eternal. Enunciating the true nature of soul, The Shrimad Bhagwat Geeta voices :

व त क्त्वरु; “क”रु; ijk.kk&

u gu; r gu;eku “kj hj AA 20AA

(Purport : This soul is eternal, everlasting and ancient. Even after the death of the body it does not die.)

Expounding the immortality of soul, it further adds :

uu fNnfur “kkL=kf.k] uu ngfr ikod A

u pu dYn;Ur k i k u “kk'k;fr ek#r AA 23AA

(Purport : The soul is imperishable. Weapons do not hurt it, fire does not burn it, water does not drench it and air does not dry it.)

Illustrating the process of death, the Vedanta says that at the time of death the mind enters the “Prana”, which, in its turn, enters the “Jiva” and “Jiva” leaves the body, and traveling from world sphere to solar sphere, reaches the lunar sphere wherefrom it goes to the electric sphere. Here it is received by another soul who is already perfect. It takes the “Jiva” to “Brahma Loka” where it merges with its Creator and eternally lives there. This is the myth about pure souls. The sinful ones, travelling through darkness, reach the under-world where they undergo severe punishments and sufferings for their evil deeds performed during their sojourn on earth.

Paramahans Yoganand, in one of his talks given at Self-Realization Fellowship Temple, Hollywood, California, July 22, 1945 avers “We have passed through death and rebirth so many times, why be afraid of death ? It comes to free us. ... it is our escape from so many troubles, it is a pension after the hard work of life” (276). So, death should not be feared rather it should be embraced as it brings us a reward of new life.

All religions preach that one can free oneself from the cycle of birth and death by righteous deeds and worship of God. Poets, all over the world, have dealt with this enigma of life and death. Metaphysical poets like Tagore and Aurobindo have illumined this theme with the radiance of their thoughts. Among a large number of contemporary poets , O.P. Bhatnagar, Krishna Srinivas, Shiv K. Kumar etc. have manifested the concept of death in their poetry. Krishna Srinivas deciphers that only God can redeem mankind from the bondage through his incarnation. Tagore envisions the presence of God in every atom. Aurobindo visualizes a divine scheme in the birth of Savitri to redeem the world. Krishna Srinivas calls this body a mortal coil from which the soul frees itself after the death of the

body. But O. P. Bhatnagar and Shiv K. Kumar do not acquiesce in the above theory. Both of them believe in the truthfulness of physical experience, and denounce the existence of God as a merciful being. Bhatnagar has his own philosophy of life, death, and immortality. He observes the presence of consciousness in death also. There are death-in-life and life-in death. A life full of suffering and ignoble deeds is death-in-life and a life lived with righteous and noble deeds is life-in-death. Such a man lives even after his death and attains immortality. In “Of Life, Death and immortality” the poet expresses:

That to have died
As if one has never lived
Is death
To have lived
As if one would never die
Is immortality. (S.F. 27)

Bhatnagar personifies death in his poem “Death must belong”. He articulates that like an orphan, it seeks home, a sense of belongingness, compassion, warmth, love, and care. It always looks for someone to adopt it.

Death must belong
To someone
To be meaningful
Begging like an orphan
In the streets
Man must give it an abode
A warmth to feel by
And a loss to mourn about. (T.P. 14)

This is a novel view. None of his predecessors nor contemporaries has ever thought about death in this way. Bhatnagar wants to abolish the fear of death from the minds of people by treating it as a helpless orphan.

Bhatnagar's first poem "Desires on Death" throws light on his own conception of death through concrete and appealing images. The simile of "sparrows on electric wires", images of "evening arrays" and the "dying sun" intensify the effect. The poet inscribes: "Desires on death / Sit in quiet in evening arrays / Like mused sparrows (T. P.7). "Evening arrays" is symbolic of old age advancing towards death. The simile "like mused sparrows / on naked electric wires" refers to the sparrow's lust for life and naked electric wires stand for death. Sparrows are depicted here as oblivious of the fatal potency of electric current passing through the wires. They can be killed any moment if their bodies are earthed. They are sitting on one phase otherwise they would have been immediately electrocuted. The sparrows are unaware of the danger they are going to meet. They sit on the wires "watching with muted wonder / The fading glory of the dying sun" (T. P.7). The sparrow simile suggests that man enjoys life oblivious of the lurking death. While sparrows are unaware of death, man is quite conscious of it, yet he has shut his eyes to this stark reality.

Bhatnagar's vision of death evolves from all such feelings as pain, suffering, despair, humiliation, oppressions, and egoistic tendencies. Death lingers between darkness and dusk. Darkness originates from absence of light which symbolizes truth and reality. Dusk stands for the blurring of vision. Fading reality and blurring of man's vision converts him to a distracted person. He loses the zest for living. R. K. Singh offers a subtle analysis of the poet's vision of death: "In pursuit of truth like dying stars, man nags life on earth without understanding that truth is not only passing from dark to light but also from light to dark. Within his comprehensive view of life and truth, the poet's vision of death, through his typical low-mimetic mode, turns out positive" (27).

Bhatnagar's poetry is a unique search for life which emerges through the maze of death. In a letter to R. K. Singh, the poet explains his conception of death: "My poetry does not exclusively deal with death but does not exclude it. It is intimately juxtaposed with my view and vision of life.

In my poetry unlike the traditional, it is life which defines death and gives meaning to it” (24). Thus, life is the nucleus of all realities existing in this world and in the universe at large.

Death, in Bhatnagar’s view, is hidden in disease, human atrocity, nature’s hostility and old age. In “The New Tragedy” he castigates man for inventing new instruments of death.

People do not die
Of growth these days
Instead struck dead
By deadly disease
Or dreadful atrocities of man. (T. P.11)

In the same poem, he words that such death

Leaves man more naked
Than dead
For unwelcome death
Is not worth dying (T. P.11)

Bhatnagar believes that the awareness of death makes our life more meaningful. It urges us to introspect and come to realize the true purpose of life.

“War Time Wedding” is another poem which deals with the theme of death from a different perspective. It tells about a woman who hurriedly marries her soldier lover to safeguard herself against separation by death. But she is shocked to find her husband a totally changed man on his return from the war front ten years later. Bhatnagar draws a realistic picture of the plight of women whose husbands go to wars. Here the poet seems to suggest that suffering is even more terrible than death.

Death, according to Bhatnagar, can merely cause physical end of the body, but it can not annihilate the spirit. This idea is conveyed through the poem “Nanda Devi”. Nanda Devi, though physically devoured by the treacherous mountains and the forces of nature, still lives

in the memory of thousands of people. Bhatnagar insists on fearlessness of mind to foil death.

The undaunting spirit of Nanda Devi finds expression in the following lines :

In the twilight mood of liquid clarity

One can still see her

On the path which has no turning

And from where

There is no turning back. (F.F. 17)

The intrepidity of Nanda Devi reminds one of the adventurous and “the will never to submit” of Hemingway’s Old Man. Fear and death go hand in hand. The fear of anything in life makes one aware of impending death. When fear creeps into our heart, we begin to envision the approaching physical end. Removal of fear, according to Bhatnagar, is denial of death. Fearlessness always triumphs over the dark, and it can rescue life trapped in death.

Bhatnagar’s views of death are related to life which in turn is related to poetry. In poet’s opinion poetry is a substitute for life and negation of death. In “Not to Die of Life” he expresses this point of life. “In order not to die of life / We have art” (T. P. 21). The poet words that poetry is a strategy to counter death and life’s helplessness. A man continues to live through poetry or art even when he ceases to exist physically. Bhatnagar has coloured the general concept of death with variegated colours. In one of his interviews given to Dr. D.C Chambial, the poet expresses his views about death :

Death has been much maligned for its negative role or admired for its curative potential leading to fear or romance. Death, in fact, is neither the former nor the latter. It is merely a happening in the bigger scheme of existence : a part of the objective movement of life. The emphasis and significance are distorted when it is taken as subjective phenomenon.: the individual ego wrestling with the threat of annihilation. My view has been that our perspectives must be set right and death be assimilated in our consciousness as a part of extension of life. (31)

Bhatnagar has viewed death from various angles. Death in old age is a natural occurrence. It is inevitable and people must reconcile to it. While, death in old age is a mere formality, suicide causes a lot of furore and raises many doubts in the minds of the relatives and the spectators. In his inimitable ironic way, the poet calls suicide a beautician which embellishes death :

Death assembles a few friends
Come on casual leave
Remembering faded virtues
In a hushed moan. (O.V. 36)

While :

Suicide is a many sided beauty
In the boutique of death
Threading and manicuring the image
Of the unfinished man. (O.V. 36)

Suicide is contemptible as it is a sin to take one's life. But Bhatnagar invests it with a rainbow colour of his own. The fact is that it is more sensational than natural death. Death from starvation also stalks the pages of Bhatnagar's poetry. "To Die full" brings out the inevitability of death from hunger. The poet writes:

Not so hungry of life
As for food
Not so afraid of death
Like trees not so bent
Preparing to face the dark
With a cool
He only wanted to die eating :
To die full. (T.P. 12)

In this poem Bhatnagar probes the psychology of a hungry man who is awaiting death. He is not afraid of death as it will put an end to his suffering. But he wants to fulfill his last wish “To die eating / To die full”. Probably he is denied that too.

Death by disease also finds an expression in the poem “Of Court and Cancer Ward”. The cancer patient is so tired of life that he prays the doctor for mercy killing. But medical ethics does not allow it :

There lies on bed ten a man
Suffering from galloping cancer
Without any hope
Of a leap back to life
Longing mercy killing
But the doctors :
Quote medical ethics
For his sufferings
Giving an unsought for hope
To his life. (T.P. 6)

Bhatnagar hints that millions of people are suffering from fatal diseases without any hope of being cured. Death is the only remedy for them which the doctors refuse to administer in the name of medical ethics. Such patients should be allowed the remedy (death) they long for.

Death does not merely show the gloomy picture of life rather it brightens life. Life lived with some noble cause assigns immortality to man. Christ willingly accepted crucifixion so that truth may prevail and mankind may be saved. But an unwilling death is sinful. Bhatnagar, endorsing this fact, deciphers:

Christ died for a cause
Our deaths are causeless
Willing death is martyrdom
Unwilling is sinful. (O.V. 18)

The word “unwilling” also brings into its ambit death due to murder and accidents. Sacrifices have lost value and selfishness, all around, prevails. Owing to rampant corruption, there are now, no good cause left that one should die for. In “To Live and Die For” Bhatnagar suggests that man should not look for some noble cause to die for but must search for a laudable cause to live for :

Life grows to beauty
In discovering not
What men die by but
What they live by
A bit.(O.V. 26)

Through these lines the poet conveys the idea that even dying for a noble cause is inferior to living for it. Life is a struggle and death an end to it. A search for proper utilization of life distinguishes men from animals, for the latter seek no purpose to live and die for. The poet says : “Animals seek no cause / To live or die for / Except what causes them to exist” (O.V. 26).

Bhatnagar does not believe in the existence of the soul. But, he seems to contradict himself in his poem “Ulysses” where he says :

Walks out of the body
As white as a crane
Flying off the arresting water
Laying skyways of new hopes. (O.V. 11)

In the above imagery the crane stands not only for “perfectness and purity of the soul” but also for physical existence of the soul, which could be felt and seen. The image is not only visual but tactile also. In “The Dead live in Memories” the poet expresses that death cannot wipe away the existence of the person who performs righteous deeds. Such a person is always remembered

Even after his death.

Not that he is living
But he has left a presence
In all the things he did
Including living before his death. (O.V. 40)

The same vein of thought runs in another poem: “Man is Lived”

But the man who dies knows
That man, does not live
But is lived
And dies only in thought
In an image. (O. V. 12)

The meaning in these lines is somewhat obscure. Explaining them the poet himself says :

To my mind death has a life as life death. While life is lived in a sustained way death lives itself in bits, catching at the moments dying to cease in consciousness. Death, therefore, must not be afraid of but pitied for its struggle to live and exist. That is why for me man dies only in thoughts, in an image. That is he does not actually die but passes on from one awareness to the other. Man, according to me, lives by his consciousness and consciousness has quality of not dying. (39)

Now the pertinent question is: How can consciousness live without a living soul ? Bhatnagar seems to subscribe to the Vedantic theory that the soul lives eternally with all its consciousness of millions of births.

Thus, Bhanagar’s vision of death is one of its kind. It is not a philosophical interpretation of death rather it has been given a human touch by the poet by treating it as a beggar orphan. While summing up I would like to quote Pathak “His [Bhatnagar’s] concept of death lacks a sound philosophical basis and appears occasionally to be ambivalent. But it evinces a mature wisdom born out of a close awareness and experience of human predicament” (98).

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