

Translation

The Nature of Poetry (*Kavitani Olakh*)

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Dhirendra Mehta: Umashankarbai, the first question I would ask is that it is understandable that the definitions of poetry have kept on changing. And the new definition also seems to reject the prevalent definition; if we talk of our own, at one time it was said that the poetry full of meaning was the best poetry, and afterwards not only meaning was opposed in poetry, but an extreme view that, such poetry is not a poem, was expressed. How far this tendency can be considered fair?

Umashankar Joshi: The evidence of the fact that the poetry has life and hence its definitions keep on changing. Poetry has many dimensions. A diamond has many dimensions. As light shines across it and its various aspects get personified, the same goes with poetry. And therefore in different ages and even in the same age also it is welcomed, if its new definitions come out in immense amount. And whatever it is, it is a proof that poetry is a living entity. Now, as you said, a definition can reject the other definition also.

Dhirendra Mehta: Yes, my question is the same.

Umashankar Joshi: It can happen. Dalpatram wrote nice compositions – ‘*rachya chhe rooda chhand Dalpatrame*’ (Dalpatram has created fine compositions). Now in 1852, when Dalpatram was of 32 years, Dayaram passed away. Dayaram was an accomplished poet; not only did he write fine poems. On the one hand, a man of old time, he was writing interesting poetry, and on the other hand, a new boy Narmad comes following the footsteps of Dalpatram, bounce of sentiment comes again with his poetry. He also sometimes wrote just poetry. Once when he met Dalpatram, Dalpatram presented some lines then he asked, if he called that a good poetry just because it had alliteration? He was not a man to be happy with mere alliteration. So his definition is different from Dalpatram. ... And son of Dalpatram, Nanalal, was a master poet. He himself said that nickname ‘Prembhakti’ he had taken from ‘Kaka’ – meaning, from Narmad. He is dear son of Narmad. Balashankar comes in intermediate. He brought quite a different poetry, and how much more interesting poetry. So the definition of poetry as well as the formation of poetry would be somewhat different from time to time, and sometimes would also come as contradictory; sometime they would be in opposition only because its motivating power, sometimes it happens that, is in opposition. When Wordsworth came in English poetry, he came with poetry that was totally different from the earlier poetry- came with such poetry as if it was totally negating them. It happens. You gave an example that once the poetry full of meaning was considered the best that means the highest kind of poetry. The main word of Balvantray was ‘thought-provoking’. We also came under the influence of Balvantray, but I have never accepted the motto that my writings are also of that time. There are some protests against it as of mine. But we tried to understand Balvantray and we can do it today also. It is also about looking at the context of his time. At that time, poetry was shallow – flickering. It was as if it is fine to write in

the imitation of Nanalal. So he mentioned that in poetry, some intensity – intensity of sentiment is main, but prosperity of thoughts – which has bestowal in the intensity of sentiment, should also be there. And he told that you show me any poetry – best, and I will prove to you that it is thought-provoking. Thus, at first, his definition has emerged from instantaneous resistance of weak efforts, and secondly, he also wanted to mention that he found this an inevitable part of poetry.

Dhirendra Mehta: It is okay that definition emphasizing on different elements of poetry at different time or the definition making them main or subsidiary becomes prevalent but the poetry which is ‘meaning-free’ – totally free of meaning gets glorified. That situation raises the question whether in poetry meaning and beauty are considered contradictory elements?

Umashankar Joshi: sometimes words become a cause for discussion. *Vagarthaviv sampruktau* (intermixed like speech and meaning) – here the word ‘*samprukt*’ (affluent) has been used. Contact of those of sitting together, not of sitting separately, made up of single body – single figure. Our sculptors have presented Parvati and Shiva in the form of *ardhnarineshwar*¹ – composed of single body. In Kalidasa’s words, poetry is that in which speech and meaning are mixed. Our people used the word ‘*Sahitya*’ in this sense. ‘*Sahitya*’ (Literature) means inclusion. Inclusion of what? At the very first step, of speech and meaning. So you cannot abandon the meaning. And word? It is the medium of poet. Remember a description of the beginning of *Geeta – Sa shabdah tumulobhavat*. One meaning – the first meaning of word is sound, but each word has received meaning from symbol. So word cannot shake off its meaning completely. The

¹ *Ardhnarineshwar* is a composite androgynous form of the Hindu deities Shiva and Parvati.

poet erases the meaning, twists it, separates it from the sound, and enters a modification in it. But tree is tree, - used the word 'tree' and if it is used as if it is not related far away with the tree, there is a question, whether poetry remains poetry at all. So the poet – the artist – the poet-artist should understand that, his medium is not as pure as that of the artist of tune, the artist of color and line. It is slightly like using the word 'jal' (water) from time to time, it was the same at the time of *Rigveda*² and we use it even today, thus, from time to time – this word has been coming on human tongue and it is laden – lobbed with the society and the person who used it. The poet's medium of word is such that he cannot achieve disintegration with meaning. But the work of the artist is that he will have to establish the inclusion of both, then poetry will emerge; it will be an art when it will be affluent. If both are 'affluent', if 'inclusion' of both are made then pure poetry emerges. Who derived the meaning of pure poetry that a pure poetry is emerged only if the meaning is removed? Then only sound remains.

Dhirendra Mehta: so, disintegration of meaning in poetry is not entirely possible. ... I have another question like that. Is negation of socialism possible in poetry? Especially can great poetry be understood by prohibiting socialism?

Umashankar Joshi: Let me put your talk – your point – that is your presupposed point like this. Poet-artists have started opposing meaning. Why have they started? While evaluating whatever was written in the name of poetry, good things are said in it and meaning is very good, so you are told to call it good poetry. Then, wise men said that you have put a lot of meaning into in, but it is a burden, it does not reach poesy. It does not match with its sound, rhythm (tune),

² *Rigveda* is an ancient Indian collection of Vedic Sanskrit hymns along with associated commentaries on liturgy, ritual and mystical exegesis.

stature, stature of rhythm (tune). The meaning would be good in itself; it would be enriching, it would be independently palatable, but it encumbers to be poetry. So, while evaluating poetry as art, this protest – to equate the situation when bad specimens were being presented by mentioning the meaning – such protest of meaning started. ... And when it was said that it is beneficial for society so it is good poetry, then these people have raised their objection slowly that then you can write essays, books for the society but this does not make poetry, this does not make a novel – a social document is made, but a novel – an artwork does not come up from it. So there was space for the opposition. But they showed extremity in saying that the artwork is socially absolute – it has nothing to do with the society. As we saw earlier, it was extremity to insist on disintegration with meaning. It was also extremity to ask for disintegration with social context. Word is a medium given by society. Language is a social asset. There is no language if there is no society, and therefore also extreme disintegration of social context cannot be done in art, whether in poetry, drama or novel.

Dhirendra Mehta: So then we can also say that it is not correct to believe that if poetry becomes popular then there are some blemishes in it.

Umashankar Joshi: People are there. Language is received from people only and people only use it. The poet uses it in a special way and he does it for the people after all. ... But it is not proved from it that poetry has to be popular. Poetry is mainly meant to be poetically oriented. Firstly, it has to be poetry, and people who have taste for poetry will enjoy it. And people have taste for poetry; love for beauty us within everyone. There are also no so-called backward people who are not interested in art, but sometimes it is found that they have some classic kind of

interest. Some artworks of the Negro people have proved to be high in the matter beauty that they can be in the row of modern art. We know that the wealth of folksongs as lyrics, as lyric poems is very high. Therefore, art should not be produced with the vow that it is meant to be popular, because art has not emerged due to such or any other intentions. But, if there is production of art, then it will automatically connect with the heart of people. Therefore, it is not correct, if at some time people, who insist on art, say that it is popular, so it is not poetry. There are many excellent poetry that are also popular – that is, they can reach out to people easily, people can take interest in it easily, and is pure poetry. Look at the world’s refined scriptures till today, their integral relation with the heart of people can be seen intact.

Dhirendra Mehta: But the question can be raised here that if the work of poetry is not to inspire human being for upliftment or to preach values, then how much is the significance of the creation of poetry as a human activity? In human society, we accept special place for the poet, then to what extent such greatness can be given to them? Is it enough for poetry to introduce the creativity of his creator?

Umashankar Joshi: here too, due to words, conflicts sometimes arise. What does it mean to uplift a man? Definitions of upliftment keep on changing. When Hitler came, he tried to name, the poetry of good poets, philosophy of good philosophers, on account of his Nazism. The work of poetry, work of art – if we emphasize on its work – is to entertain the roots of human consciousness. The other word you used ‘preaching values’. The concept of values also changes a little bit over time. The contribution of art is always there, a person can enjoy life over all,

speaking roughly, in making him a better person. There is no higher art that has not done this work, but its main work is to do this being an art.

Dhirendra Mehta: It is okay that poetry entertains the roots of human consciousness. ... Will it do this in a global context or by maintaining personalization? How can our poetry remain Gujarati or Indian by being global? Is there a need of Gujarati or Indian quest for poetry?

Umashankar Joshi: In terms of poetry, the moment it is said about any piece that it is poetry; it is world poetry, because any person who knows the language – who cares to know about it, can enjoy it. It is the most common substance. It is mainly linked with human beings, and as it is linked with human beings, it is related with all human beings of the world. Poetry is written in one language, so you can see it in the context of the place-time where and when it is spoken and the touch of the composers who compose poetry. The poet of Gujarat, if writes a poem, writes world poetry only; but as his language is Gujarati, his references, his people, if he brings characters, will be Gujarati; its nature will be of Gujarat – if it gets place inside; but general feeling, conviction or apocalypse – an awareness which occurs at the end of the enjoyment of poetry, would be normally global for each human being, but if he is a man of India then references of India would come in. But it would not be for the purpose of dismantling its artistry, but it must have come within itself, to make the construction an artwork.

Dhirendra Mehta: Can those references be expected to come?

Umashankar Joshi: The main expectation I have from poet is that he gives poetry, then the way the poet can achieve poetry is a blessing for us.

Dhirendra Mehta: I have a question in reference to the poetry of Gujarati language, poet of 1930s-40s had longing for same sensation; has today's poet achieved such a role that he may have this longing?

Umashankar Joshi: It is not that the writers writing after thirties were asking for same sensation only. It can be among one of the common expectations of them. At any time, the fundamental desire of the poet is whether what he is forming reaches to artistry or not. It is not the subject of interest – whether he becomes favorite to other people – readers – appreciators, in the moments while he is writing poetry. Eliot has rightly said that there is interlocution in poetry, expression of his heart – until it is formed; but when it is out after being written, it becomes a subject of communication. If someone writes keeping in mind to reach to others, - if his eyes are up to the prize, to please someone or wants appreciation, while he is constructing, creating poetry – then he will not be able to create an art. When I was once in Russia, a professor teaching to writers said, see our present boys! They say that they do not have to deliver to anyone, they are writing for happiness. Look, these people have become such! I said, what is wrong in that? You tell those friends that poet is a creature who cannot remain in home being happy, that is why he just keeps on singing. But those people walking on road listen whatever they hear and after that they sometime keep on going murmuring those things in their minds, sometime singing openly. ... And once when poet went to the market, the whole public was singing his song. He really felt very happy then. He had sung for his own joy, but as he had sung for his own joy so it became the thing giving joy to all. ... These are fragile variations but emphasis is placed on that is because when poet creates, he creates remaining loyal to creation only.

Dhirendra Mehta: Can nay poet during his lifetime, meaning, in continuation of his activity of creation, get completion? If I put this question the other way, can his talk get accomplished?

Umashankar Joshi: Talk of any man cannot be accomplished. Big incarnations have come, do their talks have been realized? How are the ends of all these incarnations! Look at the end of Ram, see the end of Krishna, see the end of Jesus. Look at Gandhi's end in our era. ... This is the fact of incarnations then. The talk of any human cannot come to an end. And poetry itself cannot get finished in reality. Malherb, a French poet-critic, has said that "Sonnet is never finished, it is abandoned, I cannot work on this anymore, I leave it." Milton wrote 'Paradise Lost' and later 'Paradise Regained', and talked about losing heaven and then of ascendancy. And as the next child is most favorite, he liked the next poetry. But after that he wrote a verse drama named 'Samson Agonistes' – which is not of even two thousand lines. It is something wonderful. Then who can say, when and how poet's talk will be finished? Poetry is a thing of eternal quest – for a person and the nations. But in a sense the signal of completion becomes a meditation. In the epic of a great man or in the poetry of a poet, some of his prominent realizations, prominent tunes can be seen, in the contexts of which his different works can be seen, but seeing that way, the identity becomes brighter.

Dhirendra Mehta: Umashankarbai, in the beginning of the discussion, I made a question about the changing definitions of poetry, I want to come to the similar point at the end of the discussion also, whether there can be any identity of poetry that we can accept at any time? And if there is, what is that?

Umashankar Joshi: It is our good fortune that no one becomes successful in giving the last definition of poetry. It is so attentive – an observant thing that man says certain things about it and some things are left. ... Therefore, you can say that poetry itself is the definition of poetry. If you want to say, you can say that, the best poetry of the world is the definition of poetry. Let me weave the word, said by our *aacharyas*, together in it. Everyone talks about meaning but meaning is not the prose meaning of poetry, but the whole poetry is the meaning. If there was the other meaning beyond poetry, then won't the poet have given it to us, as a different lump, as a different packet, as different lines? The whole poetry is the meaning. And our poetic principals, therefore in response to, what is '*Kavyarth*'³, have said, sentiment, experience of sentiment. That means that is poetry which makes you experience the sentiment. What is the surety that piece is giving you experience of sentiment? There is no surety except, the best of the appreciators, whose heart is clean, nod his head being happy. So it is not appropriate to go back often to the poetry that has been resided at heart to the linguistic society and enjoyed by *sahridayis*⁴, for the definition of poetry.

Dhirendra Mehta: I went and took all of you to the poet for the nature of poetry. And the poet asked to go to poetry for that. Generally, these questions appearing again and again, suggest how much we all are interested in poetry, how much curiosity we have about the content of poetry. I hope that listeners would surely have been interested in this discussion, and they might have received a pretext from it to think about it again, with this expectation, Umashankarbai, I would like to thank you very much.

³ The meaning of poetry

⁴ Those who enjoy by heart