

Subtle Threads: Poetry and Society

Dr. Parneet Jaggi

Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar Government College

Sri Ganganagar (Raj.)

Abstract

Do we need poetry today? Or is it just happening? If we need it, what kind and classification is relevant? Does poetry find approval only because of its content or does it transcend the categories and boundaries?

My paper raises certain questions and also looks at how this art form has been compartmentalized to a few spheres of living. Ask the poet who reluctantly agrees to contribute to a wedding program, a funeral, an elite gathering or a political rally. His assignment pales in comparison to those poems that arise out of his own mysterious and idiosyncratic need. Such poetry comes forth from a comparatively minor yet compulsive desire.

The human race is defined by its great surges of reason, but poetry takes it back to an elemental awe and wonder. The relation of poetry to society has widely been discussed right from Plato to the present times- times when poetry with shades of social and political over-colouring is acceptable to a certain extent, while the real creation falling under no specific category faces a threat.

Keywords: Poetry, poetic experience, relevance, society.

Introduction:

The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name - Shakespeare

Do we need poetry in our lives? Or is it just a courtesy to continue with a tradition that was set long ago? In an age of globalization, liberalization, post-modernism, post-

colonialism, post-almost everything, are we in a post-poetry era? My intention, through this paper, is to dwell on these questions with the kind of seriousness that we give to our lives.

In the words of Tony Hoagland, “At one time, even before writing existed, poetry was a repository of knowledge- not just stories of battle, love and national identity, but of practical things like how to break a horse or how to raise honey-bees.”

Associating it explicitly to the societal needs, Seamus Heaney writes in *The Government of the Tongue*, a volume of critical essays- Poetry, like all art, is a public form, and poetry in particular is a form of public speech. It is not separate from the world; it is made of the world, just as our vision of the world is constituted through language. Not only explicitly political or satiric verse, but also the lyric and the meditative poem are modes of conversing with society (www.poets.org). Every word that is recorded necessarily exists in the public sphere. Our dialogue- or as Yeats would say, our quarrel with ourselves- is what maintains our humanity.

But the contemporary scenario boasts of something else. The proliferation of literary journals and presses over the past fifty years has been a response less to an increased appetite for poetry among the public than to the desperate need of writing teachers for professional validation. Like subsidized farming that grows food no one wants, a poetry industry has been created to serve the interests of the producers and not the consumers. And in the process, the integrity of the art has been betrayed. The cultural credibility of the professional poetry establishment depends on maintaining a polite hypocrisy.

The new poet makes a living not by publishing literary work but by providing specialized educational services. Most likely he or she either works for or aspires to work for a large institution--usually a state-run enterprise, such as a school district, a college, or a university (or lately even a hospital or prison)--teaching others how to write poetry or, on the highest levels, how to teach others how to write poetry. In his last book, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Edward Said writes, “One of the hallmarks of modernity is now at a very deep level, the aesthetic and the social need to be kept, and are often consciously kept, in a state of irreconcilable tension.”

“What is poetry for?” “What is the poetic experience?” are questions with which poets and thinkers have long grappled. Plato’s answer to the second question led him to banish poets from his ideal society; Aristotle was, perhaps, more measured in his analysis of poetry, the content of which still resonates today. Philip Sidney, while accepting Aristotle’s definition of poetry as an essentially mimetic, or imitative art, argues that poetry is the most important and original form of knowing, on which both philosophy and history, poetry’s “chief competitors,” are dependent. Shelley, rather audaciously, argues that poets have been, and remain, the “unacknowledged legislators of the world,” imputing a social importance to poetry, a sentiment that is reflected in the comments of modern luminaries such as Eliot, Robert Frost, and Yeats.

All of these poets and several others have attempted to understand and explain poetry and its significance to the wider community, and many have ventured to elucidate the dynamic of experience that underpins the poetic experience. India has a rich history, where poets have risen up against the social and political oppression, have brought in changes in their societies and have revolutionized the mindsets of their people. Poets including Bhartrihari, Kabir, Meerabai, Tulsidas, Tukaram belong to this long lineage who used their quills to question the established dogmas of their times. Even in the present times, the Indian subcontinent has produced poets who spoke for peace, rights, and revolution in their poetry. Some of these poets even lived by what they preached and took part in the societal changes actively.

Why is it that poets in the present times are not considered an essential part of the public sphere? What transpired in the literary imagination since Percy Bysshe Shelley claimed nearly two centuries ago that poets were the “unacknowledged legislators of the world”? The separation created between the world of political contingency and the world of poetry has its roots in the early nineteenth century, when poetry began moving toward Romanticism and the individualized, subjective lyric. Literary thinkers of the 1830s and 1840s placed the poet above and not among the people- on a far shore well away from the public sphere.

Romanticism may have bequeathed an inheritance of inward-focused lyrics and an emphasis on personal experience, but as Richard Jones points out in *Poetry and Politics*, the

Romantic poets had a strong social consciousness and were concerned with “the abuses of industrialization, the squalor and alienation of urban life, the excitement of the French Revolution and the disillusionment that followed.” This set of concerns was precisely what the next generation held against them; and ultimately, the Romantic legacy would be divorced from its political activity, and instead, the Modernists would retain the notion of poetry as sanctified by its otherworldly nature.

There is a notable exception mid century: While Emerson was envisioning poetry of transcendental truths and Poe was championing “pure poetry,” Walt Whitman advocated a democratic poetics of open, all-embracing forms and a politics of inclusion. “All others have adhered to the principle that the poet and savan form classes by themselves, above the people, and more refined than the people; I show that they are just as great when of the people, partaking of the common idioms, manners, the earth, the rude visage of animals and trees, and what is vulgar,” he wrote. “Imagination and actuality must be united.”

The New Critical movement, which arose during the first decades of the twentieth century, placed emphasis on the text exercised from its historical, social, and biographical context, reinforcing the division between poetry and politics. Poets and critics such as Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, and Allen Tate promulgated a view of poetry as irrevocably isolated from the grime and disarray of everyday life. Robert Scholes calls this positioning an “elite cultural ghetto.”

The twenties were marked by the High Modernist dictates of Eliot, Pound and Langston Hughes. The thirties saw the appearance of *Understanding Poetry*, but it was also a decade that yielded a burgeoning of political poetry and a poetry of conscience, including that of Carl Sandburg, Auden and his generation, and the Objectivists George Oppen, Louis Zukofsky, Charles Reznikoff, and Carl Rakosi.

To a certain extent, always, but in the present times especially, the poet, by the very nature of his art, has been an enemy of society. At times, he has been accepted as the spokesman of the underprivileged and the weak, where such groups were articulate and organized, otherwise he has waged an individual and unaided war. If we look at the status of

the poet in our society, it won't give a glow to our faces. The Elizabethans- Greene, Nashe, Peele, and Marlowe and their friends, starving and roistering, writing plays and lyrics in which a new philosophy of man was emerging, dying obscurely and violently, while the new British ruling class grew fabulously rich. Ben Jonson and Dryden remained hungry in their old age. So was with Blake, Burns and Keats. Baudelaire and Rimbaud, who rejected absolutely the society in which they found themselves, and who were accordingly penalized with the maximum severity that society could muster.

There are several factors which make poetry a seemingly disruptive force, dangerous to ideas and systems which have outlived their usefulness. Firstly, poetry is pre-eminently the art of language. The poet is continuously reorganizing the vast complex web of communication which makes our social life possible. Every great poem and every great poet has left the language different than he found it. The poet is constantly trying to make the language a more efficient instrument for the control and appreciation of experience

“Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting.” – Robert Frost

Secondly, almost all schools of thought have agreed that the final criteria of the arts are in some sense moral. Certainly the arts are concerned with the weighing of values. Thus the poet is occupied not only with the intensification and enlargement of the techniques of experience, but with the evaluation of its contents.

Thirdly, the poet is not only concerned with the immediate relations of the individual to experience, or with judgment, however cognizant of the purpose and significance of the details of nature. Most of the greatest poets of the past have been well aware of the extensive implications of their world. Some have written with definite and clear implications. Dante, Milton, Shelley, Lucretius, Abelard, Aquinas, Rimbaud are a very few examples of conscious philosophic content. Others, probably the majority, have preferred to make such content implicit in the structure of lyric and dramatic interests. Keats and his correspondents claim that he was the most valid exponent of the ideals of the French Revolution in the England of his time. Dante, in his commentary on his own lyric work, shows that he was aware of the function of psychological and even subconscious symbolism.

Poetry engages a fundamental meaning-making process that underpins our understanding of the world more broadly. This meaning-making process is metaphoric; that is, we understand the world through metaphor. Poetry is simultaneously the creation and investigation of meaning. Creation entails something new, never before considered, but investigation entails something that already exists to be investigated. Poetry is not abstract, but grounded in our bodies: the “metaphors we live by” extend from our physical experience with each other and the world around us. The poetic experience is a surrogate of human experience; the same embodied processes that make human experience meaningful make the poetic experience meaningful. Our understanding of the poetic experience, then, bears an important corollary to our understanding of human experience more broadly. The poetic experience has moral and social value; most poets know this, and many have attempted to explain, or justify, the social importance of poetry.

The function of poetry is that it does not have any function beyond its own construction and being-in-the-world. For this reason, poetry makes everything (and, yes, nothing) happen, especially in a consumer society prone to assessing and dispensing value to everything from delivering spiritual sermons to paying salaries to workers. Whether as a form of witness, as a medium which dignifies individual speech and thought, as a repository of our cumulative experiences, or as a space where we “purify” language, poetry, like all imaginative creations, divines the human enterprise. This is poetry's social value.

Human race is defined by its great surges of reason, but I think it high time we return to elemental awe and wonder. “I have never started a poem yet whose end I knew. Writing a poem is discovering.” -Robert Frost. If we look at the magnitude of what can happen during the reading of a poem. The reader self, if the music and strategies of the poem are a success, fades away to assume the speaker's identity, or the poem's psychic position. Once a reader has fully internalized the poem's machinations, he is transformed. This ritual generates empathy and widens our humanity. This has been happening with the chanting of Vedas, mantras, hymns and other poetic creations.

On the other side, just ask the poet who reluctantly agrees to contribute to a wedding program, a funeral, or a political rally: the assignment pales in comparison to those poems that arise out of his own mysterious and idiosyncratic need. Such poems come forth from a comparatively minor—yet compulsive—desire. They may enact, for example, an obsessive

rhythmic movement in the body onto the page, or explore the significance of a gripping image.

Conclusion

If we prescribe a single ethical purpose to poetry, if we write towards a specified ideal, then we stymie the possibility that each poem can address a question raised by particular conditions. Yet if we reject tangled relations to insist on the isolated, fragmented self of modern consciousness, then we remain self-absorbed and self-limiting. We have a galaxy of poets who write poetry that "embraces experience in its full complexity,"

To look at the issue in strictly economic terms, most contemporary poets have been alienated from their original cultural function. One might even say that outside the classroom-where society demands that the two groups interact- the poets and the common reader are no longer on speaking terms. The divorce of poetry from the educated reader has had another, more pernicious result. Seeing so much mediocre verse not only published but praised, slogging through so many dull anthologies and small magazines, most readers now assume that no significant new poetry is being written. According to the Hindi poet Ashok Vajpeyi, "I think poetry is no longer able to cope with the world now dominated by poverty and exploitation or opulence in plentitude, fashion, glamour etc. there is no middle space which is being either discovered by poetry or being addressed by it." He adds that poetry today lacks new architecture, in keeping with the vast mind-boggling changes the world societies, communications, languages are going through. This kind of a public skepticism represents the isolation of verse as an art form in contemporary society. I also agree with H.K.Kaul in that "In today's world, the sensitive poets oscillate between the two extremes of thought and action, and are influenced more by the compulsions of action than by their creative introspections."

"It is never what a poem *says* that matters, but what it *is*" - I.A. Richards.

References:

Ashok Vajpayi, "Failure of Poetry," *The Journal of the Poetry Society (India)*, 2013, vol. 24, p.11.

“Conversing With the World: The Poet in Society,” Web. Accessed on 10 December 2017.
<<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/conversing-world-poet-society>>

Fischer, Hatto. “The Importance of Poets and Poetry in Our Lives.” Web. Accessed on 19 December 2017. <<http://poieinkaiprattein.org/poetry/poetic-sense/articles-about-poetry-artikeln-zur-poesie/essays-about-poets-and-poetry-by-hatto-fischer/>>

H.K.Kaul, “Great poetry will be written: Time and again,” *The Journal of the poetry Society(India)*, 2013, vol. 24, p. 3.

Said, E. *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* . New York : Columbia University Press, 2004.

Tony Hoagland, “Towards a Postmodern Humanism: Information, Layering and the Composite Poem.” *The Journal of the Poetry Society(India)*, 2014, vol. 25, p. 36.

William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act 1, Scene 5, lines 16-18.