

Poetics as resistance: Exploring the selected poetry of Pablo Neruda and Sachidananda Vatsayayan Ajñeya.

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Since ancient times, literature has fulfilled its 'hallowed' task of both mirroring the society of which it has been an undeniable product, as well as critiquing it. As early as 380 B.C, Plato envisaged an ideal society or *The Republic*, from where all poets would be banished and the only songs allowed would be hymns. Plato was, perhaps, reacting against the plays of his time, a reaction that was thoroughly tinged with his concept of "the theory of forms", and also against certain pre-conceived notions regarding justice and the ultimate mission of life. This same reaction found counter-reactions from his own student Aristotle who assigned the genre of tragedy a special status: thus *Poetics* was in many ways a reaction to the literature that his predecessor had formulated.

In this connection, it may be good to take note of the following fact that poetry can always act as a vehicle of protest and change in two ways: either, it can voice the shortcomings and generate alternative trajectories of existence overtly through a subtle engagement of an appropriate tone, or it may bring into limelight themes, techniques and modes of representation that challenge previous modes of signification. Thus, commenting on the role of a writer, Sartre in his *What is Literature?* ("Why Write?") fittingly remarks, "Each has his reasons: for one, art is a flight; for another a means of conquering" (in Leithet *al.* 1336; emphasis added). This resistance in the literary realm may also be discerned in the poems and plays of Amiri Baraka (1934-2014) whose subtle disregard of the rules of grammar, standard idiom and even a theme per se reflects his gradual disenchantment of white models of poetic composition and a subsequent move towards Afro-centricity and the esoteric. In this connection, the words of Henry C. Lacey seem pertinent regarding the writer's growing "militancy" in writing styles and his disregard for the overall society of which he is a part and the consequences of such an engagement:

However, mainstream concern with Baraka as a literary artist *very nearly ceased* in the latter half of the decade. Because of his growing militancy and increasingly energetic participation in the socio-political realm, Baraka's literary output, *reflecting*

his new posture, was largely ignored. When treated at all, he was discussed as a revolutionary black nationalist peripherally concerned with "art". (vii; emphasis added)

It is worthwhile here to note that when Baraka was penning his early poems, that came up in volumes like "Black Dada Nihilismus" and "Sabotage", he was hailed as one of those writers who is the harbinger of the New Black Poetry in the USA. But Baraka became controversial with the publication of his volume of poems *Somebody Blew Up America And Other Poems* (2003) that shows his indictment of the Jews who may have had a role in the bombing up of the twin towers of the World Trade Center in 2001. As a consequence of such a near-militant viewpoint, he was deprived of his second poet-laureateship of New Jersey. But Baraka continued even in the face of such odds.

Whatever be the consequences of such a militant viewpoint, examples are not scarce that writers have time and again called for a radical change in the status quo and a vision for a golden future often in the Shelleyan fashion. However, this paper would like to chart this aspect of poetry or even poetic form as a mode of resistance to the current levels of perception in the selected writings of the Chilean poet and diplomat Pablo Neruda (1904-73) and the postmodernist Hindi writer Sachidananda Herananda Vatsayan 'Ajñeya' (1911-87), often referred as simply 'Ajñeya' (meaning the unknown or what cannot be comprehended). This comparative analysis is relevant keeping in mind that not only both these writers were near-contemporaries, but also because their selected poetry (or entire poetics) emanates from the conditions of their era of which they were an undeniable part. Not only do Neruda's poems resonate with the struggles of the common man in Chile during one of the most intense periods of military dictatorship in the Latin-American world, but in their avoidance of grammar, a 'logical' synchronization of the thought process evidenced in his yoking several images by force in the metaphysical fashion, use of surrealism and the overt use of sexuality we may discern a defiance of the then pressure groups through the adaptation of an appropriate poetic 'creed' in the writer. These "pressure" groups may have consisted of the rightist forces that were at perfect loggerheads with the socialists, the latter that Neruda whole-heartedly supported in Chilean politics at that point of time.

At the other end of the spectrum, Ajñeya was writing at a time when the entire Indian subcontinent was galvanized around issues of independence; he was also active during the height of the Cold war and the war in Vietnam (so was Neruda). Ajñeya was writing in a typical style in Hindi (he is known to have also written in English) known as *prayogvaador* experimental mode that later gets streamlined within the group of poets known as *nayekavior nayikavita* whose English equivalent means "new poets" and "new poetry". This school of poets included such avant-gardists like Muktibodh, Nagarjun, Sarweshwar Dayal Saxena, Dhumi, Kedar Nath Singh and others. This type of poetry relied not only on overt intellectualism, but also believed in the avant-gardist techniques that consisted in writings that were anti-establishment in tone. This also meant that his verses had ample affinities with the Hungry Generation movement ("Bhooki Peedhi") in Bengali literature that also had a similar stance towards

the incumbent government. We may bear in mind the fact that he was active in Calcutta during this time and edited the newspaper *Dinamaan*. Ajñeya was a pioneer in many ways: he laid the foundation of modern Hindi journalism, poetry and edited the *Saptaks*, a literary series. His writings range from the subtle eye for nature that may be seen to be a continuing trend of *rīti*era poetics in Hindi that was christened as *sringaar kaal*, a revolt against the *chaayavaad* era that may roughly be compared to the age of Romanticism in Hindi¹, an unforgiving eye for the dichotomy of the urban society that was slowly moving economically ahead after independence and a leaning towards Buddhist philosophy of renunciation in certain cases. Ajñeya’s poetry is not only a reaction to the overt subjectivity of *chaāyāvāad*, but is also a response to the rapidly changing era in which he lived. A revolutionary during the Indian struggle for independence, imprisoned for the infamous Delhi Conspiracy Case, his disdain of the contradictions in existence probably led to the formation of an oeuvre that included almost anything that needed a thoroughgoing scrutiny from a philosophic and existential perspective. We may have a look at one of his poems entitled “Sâñp”/”The Snake” from his volume of poems *Indradhamuṣh Roinde Huethe/ The Rainbow Was Trampled* published in 1957² to understand the power of condensation that he uses to explicate the evils of the then modern, urban life:

Sâ p
 Tum sabhya to hue nahi
 Nagar me basnâbhī
 Tumhen ahināyā
 Ek baāt punchu (uttar doge?)
 Tab kaise śikhâ daśnâ ?
 Vis Kahâ pâyâ ?³ (Ajñeya, “Sâ p”)

The poet is conscious of the duality of modern urban life and the inherent uselessness of materialist leanings. But the typical dweller in the city is well adept in such ways, hence the poet’s conviction that it is the city life and its mores that is the root of the serpent’s venom. Not only is the poet’s scathing satire evident in the amazing power of verbal condensation, but by invoking the image of the Biblical serpent who deceived Adam and Eve, the poet is, perhaps pointing to the essential ‘fallen’ nature of city life.

The poet’s gradual sense of the erosion of traditional values and the probable rise of a new trajectory of existence finds expression in yet another poem called “Khisak Gaye Dhūp”/ “The Sunbeam is Slanted” in the volume of his poems *Indra Dhanuṣh Ronde Hue The/ The Rainbow was Trampled* wherein he movingly depicts the withering away of the roses that may symbolize innocence and even a pre-lapsarian existence:

Paitane se dhīre dhīre
 Khisak gaye hai dhūp
 Śirhanerakhehai
 Pīle gulāb.
 Kyānahi tumbhī

Dikhainkajūr--

Dard tum me bhī ubhrâ.⁴ (Ajñeya “Khisak Gaye Hai Dhūp”)

In the above poem taken from his volumes of poems written in 1957, the poet bemoans the trampling of the rainbow that symbolically signifies the erosion of religion, finer human sensibilities and even Mother Nature. In the image of “pīle gulāb”/ yellow roses that traditionally signify friendship and finer tunings in human relationships, the poet sees their gradual withering in face of the non-availability of adequate sunshine that is again the sign of the rampant destruction of Nature. Like Wilfred Owen’s “Futility”, the “kind sun” is powerless to bring life into existence and the poetic persona asks readers if they could feel the rose gradually fading into non-existence. Thus, the poet is not only ironically depicting the loss of the erstwhile state of affairs, but is also indicating the advent of destructive forces that would defy the laws of Nature. The only hope that the poet can find is in mankind who may witness this depreciation, feel the same and be an agent of active change.

The poet’s resistance is not only restricted as far as the contradictions in modern life are concerned, but also includes commentaries on the very art of composing a poem using the techniques of the anti-blazon. We shall briefly touch upon this aspect in one of the poems of Neruda shortly. The poem “Kalgi Bājre Kī”/”The Ear of the Corn” that is from his volume of poems *Harī Ghās Par Kṣaiṇī Bhar/A While on the Green Grass* (1949) shows a near-resentment for the excessive use of figures of comparisons that have been used by erstwhile poets of *rīti* and *châyāvād* era. As a rejoinder, the poet has his own style of addressing his lady-love and praising her beauty: her hour glass figure and slim waist line have been compared to the swinging corn cob as well as to the green grass over which the beloved presumably walks. The influence of the poets of *rīti* era is clear but the tone of resistance to traditionally accepted norms of praising beauty is evident:

Harī bichelī ghās
 Dolti Kalgi Charhare Bajre Ki
 Agar Mein Tumko Lalati Sâñjke Naabh Ki Akeli
 Tarika Ab ahi kahta
 Yaśaradke bhūrkinihâr—kuwahihuhi

 Nahikara nkimera hriday uthlayâsunahai
 Yaakimerapyarmeilahi.
 Balkikewalyahi: ye upmânmeile ho gayehai
 Devtâ in pratikonkekargayehai koonch.⁵ (Ajñeya “Kalgi BajreKi”)

Dina Nath Shukla in his *Naye Kavi aurUnki Kritiyân/New Poets and their Poems* summarizes the poetic creed of Ajñeya in the following words :

The role of the *Saptak*tradition is huge when it comes to the development of New Poetry. Ajñeya is the harbinger of this tradition. This endeavor of the poet culminates in a literary revolution. The one that provided new directions, new ways of expression and new human values to the realm of poetry. This tradition has revolted

against preceding tendencies and has shown an inclination towards progressive consciousness.⁶⁽¹⁾

It would not be a digression here to take stock of those circumstances under which the poet was writing his later poems, especially volumes like *Pahle Mein Sannâṭâ Buntâ Hun/Firstly I Weave Loneliness* (1973) and *MahavrikshaKe Niche/Under the Cosmic Tree* (1977) and the existential angst reflected therein with hopes for renewal that is still tempered by his satiric outlook and revolutionary zeal. Firstly, Ajñeya's revolutionary outlook is thoroughly coloured by his experiences of the Indian struggle for independence and his participation in the Second World War. Secondly, his poetic creed incorporates his near-hated of blind individualism and a distrust in the materialist leanings of the current generation. Thus, his poetics is not only an endeavor to refute preceding poetic styles in particular, but also conventional outlook in general. In his later poetry, his faith in the essential nobility of humanity still remains unshaken, but certain incidents like the proclamation of the Emergency in 1975 in India by the then government, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the ongoing Cold War and the rise of dictatorship in several Latin-American nations may have bred in him a mood of despondency. This is seen in his volume of poems *Pahle Mein Sannâṭâ Buntâ Hun* (1973) where in certain poems, the bard bewails the loss of the traditional bond that man had with his surroundings, the loss of faith ensuing from the same and refusal to accept present modes of existence. This last tendency is easily seen in the short poem "Hum Ghūm Āye Śahar"/ "We Visited the City":

Garithaharanekeliye
Jagahchojtechojte
Hum ghūm āye śahar:
Bimekikishtechukâte
Bīt gayeīzindagi
Atīt se katgaye
Chadhâkephūl chandan.⁷ (Ajñeya "Hum Ghūm Āye Śahar")

Neruda has also been a prolific poet, whose writing career spans to a staggering fifty-five years. His poetry seems to have been influenced by the writings of Gabriela Minstral, Octavio Paz and Lorca, not to forget mentioning the subtle influences of Tagore's prose poems that left their indelible mark on the Latin-American world. It is somewhat difficult to enumerate his 'domain' of writing per se, but his abiding interest in matters of love (he married three times and Matilde Urrutia is the Muse of his one of the volumes of poems), the achievements of the Inca civilization of Chile and parts of neighboring Peru, his fierce disdain of authoritarianism and his interest in surrealism are a proof of that rich mosaic of poetics that we distinctively term Nerudian. He also acknowledged the impact of Walt Whitman on his poems, using the Whitmanesque technique of blending subjectivity, nature and history as units of analyses and line as the criterion for metrical analysis. Neruda's poignant expression of the agony of the Spanish people during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) resulted in his *Spain in our Hearts* which is a lament for the defeat of the Republican forces under the fascist

general Franco. On the other hand, his *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* (1924) deals with the theme of love with the explicit use of sexual imagery that invited the censure of many a critic. His use of green ink while penning poems reflects the poet's latent desire for hope and freedom. His experiences in Spain coupled with the execution of Lorca made him into an ardent communist all through his life. In *Alturas de Macchu Picchu/The Heights of Macchu Picchu* (1945), a poem in twelve parts, he lauded the achievements of this magnificent pre-Columbian civilization, but also understood that it was sheer oppression and slavery that made this possible. It is well known that he often went into hiding after being threatened by rightist elements active in Chilean politics. Neruda's admiration of Joseph Stalin and his conviction that it was because of him that Hitler's army could be checked made many opponents of him, but he came to rue his euphoria later. In 1946, after Gabriel Gonzalez Videla's abrupt turn against communist and leftist forces and outlawing the same under "The Law of Permanent Defense of Democracy", Neruda turned even more violent against Videla's policies, especially in the brutal oppression of a communist-lead miner's campaign in Lota in northern Chile. Senator Neruda was removed from his post, he went into hiding for around thirteen months in a friend's house and escaped through the Andes mountains into Argentina, an incident that he would vividly recount in his Nobel prize acceptance speech along with its fiery zeal for hopes of renewal:

Our original guiding stars are struggle and hope. But there is no such thing as a lone struggle, no such thing as a lone hope. In every human being are combined the most distant epochs, passivity, mistakes, sufferings, the pressing urgencies of our own time, the pace of history. (Neruda "Towards the Splendid City")

His journey into India, Sri Lanka and many European nations aided by artists like Pablo Picasso himself culminated in his *Los Versos del Capitan/The Captain's Verses* that Neruda later published in anonymity in 1952 because of the autobiographical nature of the verses and their explicit use of sexuality. By 1952, Videla's policies were a spent force and the leftist Salvador Allende came to power and wanted Neruda to campaign for him. By this time, Neruda had become an internationally renowned poet, but his praise of communism led to the award of the Nobel Prize in 1964 to Jean-Paul Sartre that was due him. During the International PEN conference in New York City in 1966 he was denied entry but the playwright Arthur Miller prevailed on the then government to grant him a visa.

By 1973, a coup d'etat was carried out by Augusto Pinochet's supporters on Allende's government and Neruda's hopes for a Marxist Chile were not fulfilled. He died of prostrate cancer in a nursing home in Santiago, but there is a wide consensus that he was injected a lethal dose at the behest of Pinochet.

It is important to understand the era in which Neruda was writing his poetry, as the period forms a veering between the leftist and rightist forces and the subsequent rise of military dictatorship in Chile and certain other parts of Latin-America. There is no denying the fact the poet was influenced by this general atmosphere of oppression. Also, his opposition of the Vietnam war is well-known. Neruda's volume of poems that

he wrote while he was on exile on the island of Capri in Italy entitled *The Captain's Verses* (1953) may help us 'situate' this rebellious tone silently working as a silent under-text in these poems. The defiance of traditional modes of praising a lady-love is clearly seen in the poem "The Queen" that somewhere has its parallels with Ajñeya's poem "Kalgibajre Ki" :

I have named you queen.
There are taller ones than you, taller.
There are purer ones than you, purer.
There are lovelier ones than you, lovelier.
But you are the queen. (5)

Another poem entitled "El Tigre/The Tiger" shows the near-deliberate avoidance of standardized modes of courting a beloved and is remarkable for the use of sexual violence that veers on murder:

I am the tiger
I lie in wait for you among leaves
broad as ingots
of wet mineral.
The white river grows beneath the fog. You come.
Naked you submerge.
I wait.
Then in a leap
Of fire, blood, teeth
with a claw slash I tear away
your bosom, your hips.(49)

In the poem, "The Mountain and the River", of the same volume, the poet vividly recounts the hardships of a common Chilean under the oppressive forces and his imminent re-involvement in the fervent politics of his time:

... Who are those who suffer?
I do not know, but they are my people.
Come with me.
I do not know, but they call to me
And they say to me: "We suffer."
Come with me.
And they say to me: "Your people,
your luckless people,
between the mountain and the river,
with hunger and grief,
they do not want to struggle alone,
they are waiting for you, friend. (93)

As it has been mentioned before, Neruda lauded the accomplishments of the Inca civilization and was thrilled by its architectural skills, but bemoaned the slavery that went with it. His *Canto General* (1950) is an encyclopedia of sorts of the New

World when analyzed from an American-Hispanic standpoint. "The Heights of Macchu Picchu" comprises the second portion of this long poetic composition that runs to some fifteen thousand lines. Some lines may suffice to pinpoint the extent of oppression that made this civilization possible and the bard's denunciation of the same:

Arise to birth with me, my brother.
Give me your hands out of the depths
sown by your sorrows
You will not return from these stone fastnesses.
You will not return from subterranean time.
Your rasping voice will not come back
nor your pierced eyes rise from their sockets.
.....
Show me your blood and your furrow;
Say to me: here I was scourged
Because a gem was dull or because the earth
failed to give up in time its tithe of corn or stone.
Point out to me the rock on which you stumbled
the wood they used to crucify your body.
.....
I come to speak for your dead mouths. (Neruda "Canto XII" 20)

In conclusion, we may sum up by observing that both these poets adopted a poetics that may be considered a product of their era. A refusal to follow traditional ways of poetic expression, a feel for the suffering humanity, an essential mistrust of authoritarian institutions and hopes of eventual renewal is what links both these two poets otherwise separated across cultures and geographical locations.

Notes

1. *Châyâvâd* or the age of Romanticism in Hindi relied heavily on individualism, the note of melancholy and the description of Nature as did the Romantic movement in English literature. Despite mounting attacks from the Hindi literary community to the feasibility of such a comparison, similarities can well be discerned. For a comprehensive discussion of this era in Hindi literature, consult (Dr.) Nagendra.
2. Though this poem forms a part of the collection that was published in 1957, Ajñeya was much active during post-1965 and his concerns that have an existential aura within them belong to this latter period. His visiting position to The University of California at Berkeley may have given him a chance to know American consumerist culture and urban life that finds expressions in the poems that decry the ills of modern civilization.
3. Translated, it amounts to, "O serpent/ You could not embrace civilization/ Could not acquire the art of dwelling in a city either/ Would I ask a question?/ From whence then came the art to strike?/ whence came the venom then?"
4. Translated, it comes to, "The sunshine slowly and slowly/ recedes from the window sill/ Yellow roses are kept near the bedside/ Could you not see their constitution?/ Did you feel their pain as well?"
5. Translated, it goes like this, "the smooth green grass/your body waves like the corn cob/ like the ear of the corn/ If I no longer compare you to the lonely morning star/it's not

because my heart refuses to respond/ but for the simple fact that these metaphors have lost their lustre/they have been rendered godless.”

6. Translated from Hindi.
7. Translated, it yields, “Looking for a spot to park the car/ we roamed the city/ spent the entire life paying insurance premiums/ the chord to the past is severed/ by offering flowers and sandals.”

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