



Marwadi
education foundation

ISSN 2454-8537



**DEPARTMENT OF
COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

**International Journal of
Humanities In Technical Education**
(A Bi-annual Refereed Journal)

Vol: 4 | Issue: 1 | May, 2020

Niranjan Bhagat's 'Gayatri': the Epitome of High Modernist Gujarati Poetry

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Abstract

Modernism can have different spatio-temporal manifestations in a country like India and worldwide. In the context of Gujarati literature in particular, modernism had already emerged with Dalpatram's reformist writing but a new 'aesthetic modernity' emerged with Umashankar Joshi and Sundaram, and reached its peak in the 1940s and 1950s. During *Rajendra-Niranjan Yug* (1940-60), as in other Indian literatures and English, the modes of writing underwent change as the new poets like Prahlad Parekh, Harishchandra Bhatt, Rajendra Shah and Niranjan Bhagat responded to the socio-political and cultural transformation. Bhagat is one of the foremost poets of this generation who calls himself 'an industrial urban child'.

The major focus of this paper is the poem 'Gayatri' which is a part of Niranjan Bhagat's *Coral Island* (1957). This collection is of specific importance in Bhagat's poetic career and in entire Gujarati poetry because of three reasons: (i) The first and the most productive phase of Bhagat's career spans from 1943 to 1958. Coral Island poems were written right in the middle of this phase i.e. during the ten years from 1946 to 1956 (ii) This is the only poetry collection among all his works which is labelled by the poet himself as 'modernist' (iii) Critics see the sun of high modernism rising in Gujarati literature since the publication of *Coral Island*. If Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) and Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) about are considered the earliest examples of *Nagar Kavya* (urban poetry), Bhagat's *Coral Island* (1957) was written when cities like Mumbai and Ahmedabad were in their infancy of urbanity. The paper tries to study tenets of modernism in the poem *Gayatri*.

Keywords: Modernism, Niranjan Bhagat, *Coral Island*, Gayatri, Mumbai

Niranjan Bhagat's 'Gayatri': the Epitome of High Modernist Gujarati Poetry

Introduction to *Coral Island* (1957)

The text under scrutiny here is the poem 'Gayatri' which is a part of Niranjan Bhagat's *Coral Island*, an English translation of his Gujarati collection *Pravaldiveep* (1957), worked out by two of his colleagues at St Xavier's College, Ahmedabad – Prof. Suguna Ramanathan and Prof. Rita Kothari. It was published by Gujarat Sahitya Academy in the year 2002 with a preface by Shri Bholabhai Patel, the then President of the academy and a scholar on Niranjan Bhagat. The translator's preface says of the author and the work:

Niranjan Bhagat is a poet significant enough to have a period in Gujarati poetry named after him, the *Niranjan-Rajendra Yug*. With the publication of *Pravaldiveep* in particular, a new kind of poetry became possible in Gujarati. For the first time, a Westernized sensibility with its concomitant urban bias and alienated psyche ranges over the scene. (*Coral Island* vii)

Bhagat went to Elphinstone College, Mumbai, for his graduate study in English literature in 1946 and stayed there for two years. Thereafter, he spent all his vacations including the Christmas vacation in Mumbai for about twelve years. During this decade and a half, writes Bhagat:

.... I wandered through the streets of Mumbai at different hours – morning, noon, evening and midnight. During this, solitary or amidst crowds, I stumbled against phrases, lines, images and rhythms of my poems, representing sights, sounds and smells of the streets, reflecting time and place, recreating the mood and mind of the people and revealing the mysteries of a massive metropolis and its myriad multitudes, which came to me suddenly and surprisingly... It is poetry of cityscape, of urban experience in an unreal city. It is social, cerebral, cryptic and colloquial. (*Coral Island* 70)

In those years (1946-1956), Ahmedabad had turned into the city of Gandhian satyagraha. Mumbai was the chief industrial city in India and an epicenter of modern culture as a result of industrial revolution, urbanization, globalization and proliferation of growing technology. Bhagat writes: "Mumbai is a modern city, a city of modernity. Thus, *Pravaldiveep* poems are poems of modernity – modern poetry." (*Svadhyaialok* 8, 106) However, a well-read poet like Bhagat cannot commit the blunder of calling a set of poems 'modern' simply because they were written on a modern city in modern times. He is aware of the fact that modernity is the condition of being modern while modernism is the manifestation of modernity (i.e. newness) in crafting different forms of art – an aesthetic modernity. This becomes clear from a mere glance at the poems of *Pravaldiveep*.

The title *Praval dveep* is symbolic. *Praval* (Coral) are a kind of microorganisms in tropical seas that come together to build shells. One of the most ancient species in the world, corals grow in large numbers and are covered by a narrow limestone cover within which there are hosts of them that live and eventually die. This suggests how infinitesimally small man is before the towering traits of modern culture. In a *Coral Island* like Mumbai, people are born and dead every day but nobody cares. Similarly dreams of people also flourish and shatter, but life goes on. Bhagat comments on the title: “*Praval dveep* means the island of corals. Thus, the title itself contains pathos and sarcasm. Mumbai was once an island of corals and eventually will again become one.” (*Svadhyaalok* 8, 107) The title also echoes R M Ballantyne’s Robinsonade fiction *The Coral Island: A Tale of the Pacific Ocean* (1858) but with a completely different theme.

The anthology contains sixteen poems, as mentioned above, revolving around Mumbai. The poet tries to capture a three-dimensional view of Mumbai through observing and describing its time, space and people. *Coral Island* contains poems on Mumbai as a city and places / locale within the city (viz. Falkland Road, Flora Fountain, Colaba, Churchgate, Apollo Bunder, Zoo, Aquarium, Cafe, etc.), poems on time (viz. ‘*Gayatri*’) and poems on characters (viz. ‘Hornby Road’, ‘*Patro*’). The poet, thus, tries to understand Mumbai and its modernising, alienated subjects / inhabitants very systematically by situating them in their time and space.

‘*Gayatri*’

‘*Gayatri*’ is the pinnacle not only of *Coral Island* but of Gujarati urban poetry per se. The last poem of the work, it is of 200 lines divided into 3 sections, each dedicated to a particular time of the day – *Praatah* (early morning) containing 64 lines, *Madhyahna* (noon) containing 66 lines and *Saayam* (evening) containing 70 lines. The title of the poem evokes the ancient Vedic civilization centred around the Gayatri mantra and like chants from Vedic literature, and juxtaposes it with the conflicting, contradictory reality of the contemporary urban life. It is also suggestive of the spiritual crisis in modern human life. Chandrakant Sheth, in his article “*Gayatri Kavya na Sandarbhe*” writes:

The ancient Gayatri mantra belonged to the hermitic culture of the Vedas , the present Gayatri mantra belongs to urban life governed by technology driven culture. The sun existed as it does today but that sun was *Aaranyaka* , today’s sun is of urban expansion- of a tailless crocodile like *Praval dveep*. (46)

The present poem is composed in *Anushtup* meter which belongs to the Vedic family of meters. This poem contains 100 *Anushtup* couplets spread over three sections, each for a temporal division of the day. As the wheel of time turns, morning changes into evening and vice versa, and thus keeps rotating the life cycle of inhabitants of Mumbai city. Thus the structure of the poem represents their mechanical life.

The poem begins with the first section (i.e. morning) describing the grand image of *Nagardveep Sundri* (a beauty of island city) who is asleep and dreaming on the bed of ocean waves. Such a metaphor - comparing the island city of Mumbai with a beautiful, seductive woman - has been unparalleled in urban poetry. The poet says that she has put on death's mask on her face and song's *surma* (colossal) in her eyes. Her bosom heaves gently with sparkling diamonds as she breathes faintly in silence. Tresses of her dark hair are wet with dew drops of the night. Such is the employment of imagery to describe the silent night of the city.

However, since such an enduring silence is rare to find even at night in a megapolis like Mumbai, the poet has to break the silence soon. The stillness is “crushed by turning wheels of trains and trams”(53) as soon begins the cacophony of vehicles. The use of the verb “crushed” instead of “broken”, which suggests violence, is noteworthy. The imagery is made more striking and intense by stating that there has been an accident noted in the dawn where a death has occurred- death of silence. Bhagat writes:

“The unclaimed corps of peace lies on the roads,

No stink from this; only street lamps shudder...” (53)

The rising of the sun, and otherwise romantically described event in pastoral and nature poetry, has been portrayed with the help of a violent image:

“His head splits open, its blood splits out,

The whole sky blazes then with reddish light.”(53)

Such unconventional, savage and nauseating description of morning is indicative of the deep anguish and torment in the poet's heart. In the same thread, the rays of the sun have been shown piercing the tender little dew-drop like a knife. Satirically, the poet says that it is not possible for even sharp sunrays to pierce through the dampness and the stupor of sleep that prevails over human souls. The gentle sun now “grows angry, burnish copper red” (53) lest sleep should continue to exercise its influence over people. As soon as sleep is broken, the mind is crowded with memories like flocks of birds. This shows the pitiful state of the speaker's subconscious; morning state of mind, which ought to be clear as a blank slate is found to be highly troubled and depressed in the poem. Another catching image is of consciousness replacing sleepiness as soon as a person opens his eyes – the poem compares consciousness with a home-bound scampering mouse that enters into the eyes and starts creating chaos, which is followed by “ghosts of dreams” chasing it with quiet cat-like feet as awareness gradually enters every cell of the body. The process of sleep transmogrifying into awareness is described in these lines:

“Sleep's broken; memories like flocks

Of birds perch on the tree of mind;

And consciousness, a home-bound scampering mouse,

Leaps into open eyes,

Darts to and fro, squeaking, squeaking.

The ghosts of dreams on stealthy cat-like feet

Go quietly out who knows where- And slowly,

Awareness enters every body part.” (53-54)

Unfortunately, such self-awareness does not bring any positive change to the speaker. The morning is same as it was the previous day, same wall, same routine, same pattern, same position and same situation – whistles from the mills, sound of radios, tower bells, clocks showing same time; even the mirror shows the same image as it showed the day before – only the pages of the calendar are turned. The monotony, weariness, aimlessness and mental humdrum is shown in the lines

“Same self, same name; nothing's new.

Smiling at self, one asks: whereto today?” (55)

One can find obvious connection with Bhagat's lines in his earlier work 'Alpaviram':

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એ જ ભેજ

એ જ સેજ

એ જ એ જ

એ જ બે પગા

લગા લગા લગા લગા...(157)

At the end of first section, *Nagardveep Sundari* is shown to be shaking of her limbs' laziness as smoke columns rise from chimneys and rattle of cups and saucer is heard from hotels. However the brutality of imagery is sustained through presenting the dreamland fairy metamorphosing soon into an animal hunting its prey. The song's surma mentioned at the beginning of the section turns into death's *surma* suggesting the predatory nature of capitalist modern urban life:

“Heavenly maiden, dreamland fairy,

Leaves her bed, and turns, how quickly,

Into an animal hunting its prey, wildly dancing.

A song on her lips; death's surma in her eyes.”(57)

The second section of the poem, titled '*Madhyahna*' (midday) presents the picture of shattered Mumbai noon. The poet again takes help of a web of contemporary and unconventional images to draw a realistic portrayal of noon time. As the sun comes overhead, the poet feels that his vision of the city in the morning was attractive and alluring but illusive. The vision of noon is discontinuous, dissociated and more troubled than the morning. This temporal fragmentation, which is a part of metropolitan life, has been described in the lines:

“The link that holds two moments broken down,

And that which seemed as steadfast as the thunder

Is now a bubble, illusory and false.”(57)

Noon time is marked by spread of laziness and slothfulness everywhere as if there were physical-mental delirium and a deadly stupor prevailing all around. The limbs of people become “stiff and paralyzed”. Streets grow broader as the number of passers-by and vehicles reduces, and wind becomes thin due to heat.

Here comes one of the most unconventional metaphors for afternoon in Gujarati literature i.e. the image of a gipsy bewildered and searching for his straw-hat lost in the hot wind. What he sees before him during his quest is what the poet wants to show his readers: streets “empty like a pauper's future long as his life”, “grand grey buildings”, shadow less roads, roads neat like a notebook page, taxis catching their breath because of running too much, brothels strolling and looking for customers, laborers and servicemen immersed in their work (or immersed in sleep) in their offices or factories. The ironical and sarcastic imagery used by the poet to describe Mumbai's sky is remarkable:

“A smooth, blue, as-if-made-of-plastic sky,

Unstrained with birds, plastered, clean and pure,

No wrinkling clouds but ironed out and unbroken,

Yet empty like a heart that has no hope.” (59)

Everybody is engrossed in fighting their own battles. The gipsy is shown to be “shocked and petrified eyes wide with fright” and his limbs start shaking terribly. The poet wonders if he has also, like the poet’s eyes, seeing the future of *Coral Island*, and therefore he decides to move away quickly. The description of this gipsy figure as an omniscient, objective seer who is witness to the happenings of the entire city almost reminds the reader of Eliot’s Tiresias. The traditional occupation of gypsies has been fortune-telling – a fact that concretizes the character more.

The third section of the poem titled ‘*Saayam*’ (Evening) begins with the description of sunset. The opening phrase “Again the sun descends” (61) shows the boredom of the repetitive, daily action of sunset. It also shows the urban-dwellers’ lost ability to observe that nature has something new to offer every day; the setting sun, though the same action, has different shades of color each evening. The spreading darkness and burning funeral pyres magnify the pain of the diseased as they helplessly see their own future. The poet finds weariness, sorrow and signs of decay and the setting sun which corresponds to his own psychological condition. The whole Coral Island seems to be melting “into the universe’s void sublime” (61) as the sun sinks into the sea. However, hardly has the sun sunk when the moon appears to be floating and swimming over the surface of the sea. The metaphor used by Bhagat for moon is a result of the synthesis of imagination and reality:

“A clown whose face is smeared with rice-flour,

And adds his silly laughter to this tragic play.” (61)

The image of moonrise is romantic, comic and tragic at the same time. The life of Mumbai is a tragedy and its inhabitants the tragic heroes, destined to meet their tragic doom. The smile of the moon to hide the pity and fear of this tragic drama seems unbearable to the poet. This is followed by a series of unconventional and terrible images – slim, dark streets of the urban underworld with tall buildings standing as demons and the blazing windows like their fiery eyes, streetlamps like *yogis* witnessing with compassionate heart brothels escorting their customers in as they tidy up themselves. Illicit relationship, a vice and oft-occurring theme throughout many poems of the work, has been portrayed here through a romantic climax soon leading to a realistic anti-climax. The harlot’s activity in the night has been compared with divine dance of Radha, prettified by singing Gandharvas, dancing nymphs and floating fragrance of *parijat and mandar flowers*-all

combining to give the feeling of eternal nocturnal beauty. This fantasy is soon broken by the poet with an anti-climax as he describes the ephemerality of such a relation, not bound to last more than a night:

“Eternity? No, just a vain human dream,

A transient illusion men name Lalna.

....Life's incompleteness,

Its empty loneliness is so assuaged

In woman's lovely form, one thinks it truth.” (63)

The poet, having envisioned this truth, is grieved to see how people, in midst of such hellish existence constantly die while living and consider this death as life. “All those born daily die daily”.(63)

In this section darkness and its various layers have been explored by the poet. Darkness here does not merely refer to external darkness but also the darkness within as a consequence of dissociation of the self. Such self-dissociation has been portrayed by the personification of darkness itself: one shadowy layer of darkness is shown to be separating itself from the total collective quantum of darkness existing within the speaker (presumably the poet himself) and forming “an unclear figure” which is “strange yet familiar”. Here comes the peak of alienation where the real self, drifted apart from the alienated self calls the latter:

“My god! Man, have you forgotten me? Forgetfulness

And self-deception are perfected human arts!” (65)

This real self, existing in its elemental form, can be considered pure, unadulterated human consciousness. Since humans are fundamentally progeny and inheritors of sun, this elemental consciousness prays to the Sun God to shower His blessings on mankind and emancipate the sinned souls imprisoned in the vicious circle of modern urban life. The prayer begins with addressing the sun god as “O tomorrow's Sun!” which is a hope that the following morning will be different from the usual, mundane ones, breaking the usual cycle of morning-noon-evening and which will bring a ray of new hope. The poem ends with the poet's invocation to the sun god to empower entire humanity and grant *ichhamrutyu* (chosen death) as the climax, culmination and fulfillment of life:

“O tomorrow's Sun! you rise in vain.

In vain you'll come to earth with eager joy

Unless you shed your brilliance upon all,

Unless you perfect uncompleted man.

Free these souls and fill them with your power.

Give, if you can, to each a chosen death.” (65)

In many ways, ‘*Gayatri*’ can be considered the representation of cultural modernity to its utmost perfection.

Bhagat comments:

In the modern city, there is derangement, anarchy, chaos and lack of consciousness. Nothing is stable or permanent here. Everything changes time and again, constantly and at a quick pace. It does not have a fixed shape or figure. Things are ragged and shattered, hybrid and weird. It is a wondrous, mysterious, magical and illusive city – ‘Unreal City’...’*fourmillante city*’... Here each man is a passant, passer-by, flâneur... In such a city, the more one tries to experience proximity and oneness, the more one feels lonely, different and disconnected. Amidst such external material changes, internal and spiritual transformation is impossible for man. Therefore, one finds monotony in his life... Modern man is dichotomous, dimorphic, homo duplex. He has duality and doubts. Therefore his personality is deformed, distorted, dissonant and incoherent and contradictory. He believes life to be death and vice versa. (*Svadyaylok* 8, 109)

However, it is not a poem of pessimism as it appears but a prayer for the modern man and modern city. The end of the poem, like Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, is optimistic even amidst the prevailing anarchy, chaos and morbidity of the city-life. The poet believes that Indian civilization is a civilization born of Sun God, and therefore, all Indians, as off-springs of Sun, have a right to ‘*tejas*’ – illumination and rejuvenation.

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