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Reflective and Aesthetic Landscapes: The Poetry of Vihang A. Naik

Dr Sudhir K Arora

Associate Professor, Department of English,
Maharaja Harishchandra P.G. College, Moradabad. UP, India.

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Abstract

Vihang A. Naik is a significant voice by virtue of his poetic idiom that fuses creation and criticism in an innovative way. His skill as a poet lies in offering an aesthetic feast to his readers who feel the pleasures of the senses out of his poems which bubble with melody and cadence. He communes with the landscapes to make them more reflective and aesthetic. Love is natural and human while moksha lies in embracing the body, not in discarding the senses. Poetry becomes an unexpected thing. He talks of poetry, its substance, its techniques, its aesthetic value, its purpose, objectivity, subjectivity, humanism, the reader's reaction and the critic's view point. His short lines attract through images and phrases that speak themselves to the reader.

Keywords: *Aesthetic, landscape, creation, sensual pleasures, reflective, moksha*

Reflective and Aesthetic Landscapes: The Poetry of Vihang A. Naik

Dr. Sudhir K Arora

No one can deny that Indian poetry in English is passing through its worst phase. The dominance of fiction over poetry is responsible to its deplorable state to some extent. But, the way poetry is being penned is to be blamed too. The tag of being a poet magnetizes a man to the extent that he registers his entry in the poetic domain even without having the natural poetic talent. Hence, poets are rare; poetasters everywhere. Lamenting over the present scenario of poetry, Jayanta Mahapatra writes:

In India, in the post-Independence era, innumerable collections of poetry written in English have appeared from various publishing houses. The point is: It is an odd situation, because more bad poetry is being published now than ever before in Indian history. And whereas our fiction has made a decisive impact on literary writing around the world, nothing very significant has been seen in the output of Indian poetry written in English. (*Door of Paper* 127)

Even in such poetic barrenness, some refreshing voices prepare the fertile ground, irrigate it with the water of imaginative faculty, sow the seeds of content and fertilize it with metaphors and images. Vihang A. Naik is one such a poet from Surat (South Gujarat) though he continues his topographical journey via Baroda to Ahmadabad and, then, to Ambaji (North Gujarat). This journey proves to a good asset for his poetic landscapes. He communicates what he feels and experiences. In his three poetry collections, namely, *City Times & Other Poems* (Kolkata: Writers Workshop, 1993) *Making a Poem* (Mumbai: Allied Publishers, 2004) and *Poetry Manifesto: New and Selected Poems* (New Delhi: Indialog Publications, 2010), he is concerned with love and place particularly cities which ultimately lead to creation and criticism of creation. His creation becomes criticism which does not upset the reader but develops an aesthetic sense in him. His intuition overpowers his reasoning faculty and stirs him to the depth of creation. What strikes in his poetry is the way of life that he not only enjoys himself but makes the reader feel it also.

The poet in Vihang Naik cries for love and wishes for its flow smoothly in everyone's heart. In this materialistic age, it is lost somewhere. Hence, he wonders whether it can be programmed or searched for such software. Man possesses everything except love. Mark the lines which reveal his longing for the love in the age of science and technology:

LOVE
Is there a software
for love or a command?
Tell me
can love be
programmed? (11)

As love is missing, man finds himself meaningless though he possesses every kind of material comfort. But, somewhere, his search becomes meaningless and is lost in the crowd. He fails to explore his own Self and, ultimately, finds himself being lost in the glittering light of the materialistic world. Very frankly he admits: "You grapple for meaning / in the traffic of noises." (14) Man comes in this world with birth, grows up and finds himself lost in the game, which, ultimately, takes him to the adult world where he finds his life a game of meaningless search. How philosophically he muses over the meaninglessness of life and its futile search for tracing out the relevance!

After your play
of hide and seek, you
grow up. An adult.
Life becomes now
a game lost in seeking.
A meaningless search. (27)

Life is not as easy as it seems to be. Interpretations after interpretations are offered but none agrees to its final verdict. No one knows the secrets after death. But, one thing is sure that man loses his identity after death and becomes merely a body. The poet, again, in Hamlet-like manner begins to muse over life thus:

After endless
interpretations of that hollow word
called life. Thinking about life after death.
Would it be worth it to be a man once again? (37)

The poet knows this truth. How simply he tells it through the instance of his grandfather's father who used to be a saint when he was alive but now he is simply a photograph!

Grandfather's father
was a saint
now
a photograph
lies untouched in an attic (114)

While talking over man and his relevance, the poet in Vihang Naik begins to reflect like Shakespeare's Hamlet. For him, like Hamlet, man does nothing that may be sensible. What he performs on the stage of life is totally nonsense. He fails to translate into reality what he wishes. Mark the lines which remind the reader Hamlet's "What a piece of work is man!"

You are given
a DESIRE
you CANNOT fulfill
you are given
a WISH
you can act
you CANNOT achieve
a N i M A l
what a piss
of work is man

stuffed with NONSENSSES
 you have EYES
 CANNOT see. (25)

Who is the man? Where has he come from? Why has he come in this world? These are the mysterious questions which always remain mystery. The poet in Vihang Naik also muses over such questions and finds that the platform is the stage where human beings come and reveal their longings and show of belongings. There is some mysterious point from where the train of life comes, and the point where it finally goes is equally faded one. Shakespeare considers this world a stage where man and woman come and play their parts and as soon as their roles are over, they are heard no more. Vihang Naik also illustrates it through the metaphors of platform, train and passengers:

One can only be sure of an uncertain faded point from where trains come and go. The platform turns into a stage of human longing, shuffling and destinations.

Thousand eyes wait.

One line slides over the other. Eyes follow iron rains until the dot blurs in the thin of the sky.

Travellers come and go. People meet and depart: squeezed passengers, beggars, coolies, news hawkers, tea stalls and littered tracks make up the scene.

Thousands stare along the metallic edge. (29)

Vihang Naik is lost in the absurd city which leads him to “city within a city” and these cities lead him nowhere. Hence, he asks Lord to rescue and show “some / purpose / or / meaning” (41) otherwise he feels that the city with its people has gone “whoring / with twisted minds and uncertain ways” (116) that lead to the place where “a cosmetic girl awaits” with the hope of taming “the beast / or the heart / of man” (117) in vain. Man possesses all except feelings. He has become so much dry that his heart cannot be tamed. What he attempts to create is the feeling of love in the heart. In simple though in a casual manner he feels that if the two persons know each other, there must be the feeling of love. “You know me. / I know you. / Love” (40) Though it seems to be useless outwardly, it is the only meaningful thing in life which makes life relevant. As a man is a human being, he is expected to possess human feelings. It is only by virtue of human feelings that he lives in this world. Hence, for him, love is natural and human. “To love is human / You know by now / you live. (71)

The poet in Vihang Naik is aesthetic to the core. He knows that moksha or mukti cannot be achieved through deliverance or by being ascetic and closing the eyes to the physical world. Tagore wishes to light the hundred of the lamp of the physical pleasures first in order to enjoy the spiritual pleasure. This is what the poet Naik feels. For him moksha lies in embracing the body, not in discarding the senses. He knows that even Vishwamitra will admit that “Body is *moha*, desired. *Maya*, admired.” (32) Hence, like Vishwamitra, he will himself search his moksha through the flesh of the body of his beloved. He sees his Menaka and fails to find out words of praise. She seems to be apsara who can be felt only in embrace which becomes the point where heavens and earth meet. Mark the lines with sensuous words which reflect the poet’s high voltage charged aesthetic sense for his Menaka:

Eyes, lips, breast, thighs throbs with sensuous adjectives. You come to point where tongue fails. The nude lotus unfolds to the morning sun. Light licks the bare thirsty flower. Apsara! A sage stretches the arms to touch the line where the heavens and earth meet. A myth erupts. (33)

The poet feels at ease in making the reader visualize the scene of night, and sex-act and the post-sex scenario through the fusion of images and ideas. Mark the lines which reflect night and sex-act through the metaphors of candle.

It is night.
The candle flame burns
melting a body.
After the flickers
and melting wax, a dark
void remains. (35)

While fusing in the sex-act, darkness looks beautiful with its illuminating points which make man see what eyes can see. Man, himself, becomes a part of darkness which makes his animal illumined with love and passion.

The body. Darkness
has a flesh of its own
illumined in the eyes.
An animal. (36)

Then, the woman appears to be an image and the man himself becomes an intrinsic part of the image. Mark the lines which reveal the aesthetic sense on the verge of sexual passions:

The woman the image.
The image and the man.
And in the dark an animal
with a long tongue that salivates. (45)

When he is lost in sexual passion, he forgets the world outside. His world is now confined to the boundaries of flesh. He explores all the nook and corners of this world which shrinks within his hands that feel the heavenly pleasures.

The world
shrinks within
the boundaries
of flesh. (85)

No doubt, he longs for sensual pleasures and wishes to be lost therein. He knows that such pleasures are short-lived until or unless a genuine relationship is developed. He recommends sensual pleasures if they lead to long lasting relationship. Merely physical pleasures lead nowhere. Love based on physical relationship becomes short, as short as haiku and life proves to be a piece of prose instead of poetry. The poet mentions an affair that met the final end in a very brief period thus:

After our affair she discovered life

is a tale of prose. I felt love as short as haiku.
A time to part. Let us kiss and depart. (63)

Love, which is based on sensual pleasures, creates darkness within while love with genuine relationship illumines the heart within and offers a new direction to life. Hence, he talks of looking through the mask behind which there may be darkness reflecting a meaninglessness of life and its existence.

Put off
the mask he wears; open
the door of his heart
where the darkness lies.
A room of mere
nothingness. (94)

Hence, the poet believes in Self, the centre of true pleasure. Very frankly he asks to “wake up / to see (my) / Self” (97). For Vihang Naik poetry is an outcome of spontaneous feelings which do not care for “the why, the how / and the what of poetry” (42). His poetry manifesto which is simple and natural takes poetry not as a forced or meditative attempt, rather, states that poetry “must be / an unexpected thing; perhaps silly. / A nightmare or a dream / A craft, a paper art.” (42) When a poem is written with the pen that slides “making a line over a sheet” (65), it seems to be the uncoiling of a snake. Words become naked and the poet needs the senses of *Vishwamitra* to feel the charm of *Meneka*. A poem is composed because of “the dance of the black ink and little light” (65). It is ink that creates image after image to make a poem that finally “injects life / in the rib of words” (73). The poet wishes to “be alone amid the crowd” with the intention of flowing in the flow in order to “listen to rains or jungle drum beats” that automatically instruct the hand “to move or make a poem” (78) leaving a question whether a poet creates poetry or poetry a poet. Sometimes it happens that the poet wishes to compose a poem because of the strong feelings but as soon as he looks for “a misplaced pen”, the poem takes leave before taking birth on the paper. A poem bewilders a critic or reader with many “wild questions: / why creation, / destruction / *mukti and moksha*” (47) Then, it becomes the field for a critic or a reader who attempts to create “a body out of words” and wishes to “see a poem nude” but it frustrates him by becoming “the endless sari of Draupadi.” (46) A potent poem, Naik believes, reveals not one meaning but “unending meanings seductively.” (46)

The poet possesses the penetrating insight to look within the season. He finds summer “a roasting season” where “the smell lingers / of flesh and blood.” (13) In this season, he finds buffaloes while taking rest on muddy waters and stray dogs while lying on leakage from gutters. What a man thinks of summer, its activities and the way to face its heat is beautifully illustrated thus:

Sumer shadows move
and float upon baked soil.
The wings of a fan persist,
unexhausted. Look out!
Through the iron grills
on the tongue of a dragon
is the boiling sun,

while, locked up, you dream
of rain and thunder. (13)

Waiting almost kills. The poet feels this experience and, so, finds this waiting so tiresome that man continues to hear its knock. Mark the presentation of the landscape of waiting with the words like evening, birds, sky, eyes, shadows and knock:

It is evening
in your gaze. The birds beat
their wings in the thin
sky of your eyes.
Shadows envelop the door.
The echo of a knock hitting against walls. (15)

No one can escape time as it teaches something or the other to everyone. "Time / preaches mortality." (87) Time makes man feel that he is mortal and being mortal he has to go away from this world to the other. It is not time alone, he visualizes the image of memory which appears to be a candle that fills the dark room with light. Mark the lines which create an image of memory through the word candle:

Memory like candle
lights
a darkened room. (87)

He sees a flower, observes it and finds it colourless and scentless. Quickly he finds that it is not flower but it is past. How graphically he offers the image of past through the flower!

the flower
devoid of colour
and scent.
A fossilized past. (89)

He appears to be Keats in disguise. He makes the reader feel what he feels. But, sometimes, he starts behaving like Shakespeare's Hamlet who remains busy in philosophizing everything. He keeps away from the contemporary scenario dotted with the burns and wounds which make the people cry though he attempts to make it up through the poems which highlight the places and things of the region. But, the way he creates a poem and presents the criticism of poetry and its creation makes the reader forget for the time being the burning world as, like the poet, he himself becomes a poet with intuition, imagination and reflection. He loves to go through the short notes on poetry that the poet provides in his poems. He talks of poetry, its substance, its techniques, its aesthetic value, its purpose, objectivity, subjectivity, humanism, the reader's reaction and the critic's view point.

While discussing the technical aspects of Contemporary Indian English Poetry, Rajni Singh writes: "In terms of style, contemporary Indian English poetry exhibits variation in styles, shapes, line lengths, tenses and placing of words. It is a mixture of various social registers and fractured syntax, is short, at times even briefer, and more cerebral, donned with typography or visual devices" (17). The poetry of Vihang A Naik is not its exception. From the technical aspects, he seems to be rich enough to create interest in the reader who enjoys music as well as ponders over the thought expression. His

short lines attract through images and phrases that speak themselves to the reader. Mark the lines for the picturesque imagery:

The sharp sunrise
in your eyes
yawns
to see vultures
mounted high
not too far
from the grab
of your eyes
scanning skies. (103)

One more instance of the visible imagery:

You
think of beauty
breathing
in the desert of waters
and bubbles. (70)

He attempts to indianise his poetic lines by using Indian words, sometimes places like Gujrat, Ahamedabad, Ambaji, Shimla, sometimes Hindi words like *moksha*, *moha*, *mukti* and, sometimes, Hindu names like Vishwamitra, Draupadi etc. Figures like simile and metaphor also add to the poetic beauty. “Memory like candle” (87) and “A fossilized past” (89) are the instances of Simile and Metaphor respectively.

The use of striking phrases makes his verse aesthetic. For instance: “the ball point of desire” (33), “Her odhani stuck to my pen” (61), “the rattle of pain” (72) and “the rain of my thought” (113). But, sometimes, he uses commonplace things which disappoint the reader. Lines like “You know me. / I know you. / Love” (40) tell a different story. Lines like “I am. I am not” three times and then “I . am / am. I /. I am” (24) seem to be a jugglery of words which fail to create philosophic interest that the poet intends. Didacticism from a poet with high voltage of aesthetic sense does not appear sound. Lines like “There is a beast within / everyman. Know thyself” (34) reminds the reader Hamlet. The reader fails to digest such lines from his pen that feels smooth and free in writing the script of aestheticism.

To conclude, going through Vihang Naik’s poetry offers a new experience to the reader who enjoys the aesthetic feast along with some reflections that he reflects over the ideas expressed in short melodic lines. What one misses is the contemporary portrait coloured with materialism. But, the domain in which he has worked out is deep and the reader who makes a tour of his poetry from one corner to the other comes out with satisfaction mixed with poetic pleasure. He is a genuine poet who is serious enough to commune with the landscapes in order to make them more reflective and aesthetic. While appreciating the poetry of Vihang A Naik, Binod Mishra writes:

Vihang Naik as a contemporary Indian English poet adapts himself to the new trend of writing poetry as regards structure and themes. He experiments with technical terminologies in his poetic world yet one can find plenty of irony with a realistic touch in his verses. (xxvii)

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Dr. Sudhir K Arora
drsudhirkarora@gmail.com

