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Vihang Naik's Poetry: Reflection of Love and Urban *Angst*

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Abstract

The present paper examines and highlights the themes that recur into Vihang A. Naik's poetry reflecting his intense anxiety for city life which causes him sometimes to be alien in the familiar world around us. Employing Indian mythology and the topics of quotidian burning issues he ceaselessly whets his conscious mind for the inner consolation of the self. Against the oddities of city life he has to rely on the emotional sensibility of the heart (*herzlekhayt*) celebrating love as an indistinguishable part of human life. As such his poetic oeuvre is not only imbued with brimful of humane subjects but also socio-cultural spectrum in the continuum of spiky existence. Vihang's poetry offers us, at its best, the sanity and significance of modern urban living.

Keywords: *love, urban angst, loss, faith, disillusionment*

Vihang Naik's Poetry: Reflection of Love and Urban *Angst*

Dr Jagdish Janbandhu

Vihang Naik's poetry reflects an urban *angst* that endeavours to eradicate the banal non-poeticity of modern psyche. Craving for heightened moral responsibility and urban sobriety, his emotions appear to have endowed with hackneyed ambits that seek and pop-up with sombre philosophy towards modern tech-man and his stance in the contemporary society. His peculiar style of composition, terse as it is always there, imparts a message of being and becoming a *mentsch* or wise man in a humane way in perhaps inhuman world around us. Nonetheless his distinct mode of writing offers us to feel and experience intense personal anxiety making him readable at both ends. Crisp and cutting, cute as well as communicative, his laconic verses form an amicable covenant with readers. As such his poetry reinforces us to fathom the rhythms of multimodal urban existence. He is born to burn up eccentricities embedded into urban gyres epitomizing the doom, dilemma, deception and eventual disillusionment as a repercussion of ingratitude of man to Mother Nature. Brisk to upload the existing ethos from the nadir of his imaginative thesaurus, he charts the illogic of being a city man as against his rustic counterpart.

Vihang is known to have ensconced his place in poetic cosmos since 1993 when his first anthology (*City Times and Other Poems*) published. It is mainly by virtue of his close affinity with words that always inspire and intoxicate him. Incidentally his eagerness to glean an appropriate word with mystic touch has been gathering him deserving accolade for his verses. He likes to be lost into the humdrums of urban void where his poetic genesis (through Muse) soars up to limn down flickering of exasperated charm only to discover a modicum of wellness in the continuum of crowded cohabitation. A reckless world around us makes him nostalgic for his childhood where the crowded and withered glory of city life has been rusticated forever. In the arena of poetry as in life itself, his emotions drag him to recurring alien elements floating upon modern urban life like a carcass. To relieve himself from such onus of diseased state, he takes recourse to refined sentiments as an outlet only to be beguiled again by perfidy and pollution. Deception, a perennial theme of modern generation appears to wallow all around us. Therefore Vihang's stance remains to eke out an urgent panacea against modern spiritual eccentricity and he desires to whet his emotions by means of apt lexemes. Philosophically his dormant urban *angst* finds a vehement expression in his *alter ego* which bends more to ingratiate with a naive, miniscule mind within and the titanic, uncanny world without. This juxtaposition derives a judgement sometimes inveighed in the form of decent invective. It also points to a kind of *weltsmertz* or world pain which demands to be acknowledged by all sensible souls with a stentorian cry.

Several emotions dovetail his mind. From the mirage of a city life to the meandering maze of momentary pleasure in love and from recondite conduct of men to the rampant deterioration of moral values, his poetry dissects spectral anomalies of the society unabatedly. Vihang is not a *luftmentsch* or just a dreamer. He does not deal

with the ersatz themes nor do his poems rejoice a smut. Quotidian situations bewitch him as he comes up with a coda that pours forth his feelings after a well-wrought poem. Devaluation of a man occurs in his poetry when [man] belies his social and moral bond, amicability, loving-kindness, trust, and honesty.

Often expressed in the form of *bon mots* of modern anxiety and despair, his anthologies (*Poetry Manifesto: New and Selected Poems*, (2010), *Making A Poem*, (2004), *City Times and Other Poems*, (1993)) depict a confluence of his consciousness taking an alien stance in the deceptively familiar world. He remains in stark solitude, commenting, observing, and pondering upon the bursting sensibilities of humbug that can hardly yield any concrete substance of life. Though his curious mind oscillates between the glorious past and unborn future, he posits himself as the representative of modern decay. His speculations on love, betrayal, despair and loss of values finds symbolic expression when he avers: “words hit/me back in anger/that formed from this same ink/themselves/a guilt-point/searching the lost face” (*Wanted*). Live lustre of common things persists in his dreams, too, when he employs several tropes to convey his message in a unique way. We are airy nothing and as such our existence has little value. When he is haunted by a *Disturbed Sleep*, the Shakespearean passage (we are such stuff /as dream is made on ...) comes to our mind: “Dead poets/haunt your dreams/and disturb the sleep. You wake up, /startled/as in a battlefield/fighting/ the airy nothing. Last night, /you remember, /the mosquito fight/you could not win.” A solemn thought grips up nonentity and is grappled with the outcome of academic futility leaving a learned man a mere meek and disdainful dog. No such a whip of vituperation on the mind-set of the present academia has been heard or seen as in *Being Contemporary*:

These days it is wise
to be learned, certified and appointed.
You can be safe
hammering your thought.
Speak or do not. The day enrolls.
Academics, Seminarians,
professional theoreticians,
and a pack of barking dogs. You
become one, quarrelsome
who seldom bites.

It reminds me here an incident of the same sort when Vihang and I shared a common room in Summer Hills, Shimla during 190th Refresher Course in English in 2008. Vihang’s mind was inclined then, too, towards making poetry and he was sometimes so engrossed in the afterthought of becoming a good poet. Our daily lectures in that course on many topics seldom bore fruition. Yet we were querulous. His reflections on the ever swelling incongruities in the society have always been percolated through his scrutiny of sensitive mind and sensible heart. *Verse libre* makes him a vehicle of robust faith that is rooted deep within his heart like the old Bunyan. *The Bunyan City Poem* expresses social ingratitude with a pang banging against the callous side of sophisticated society. “A river turns/into a gutter. /There is humming/ of vehicles.

/The city mumbles. You grapple for meaning/in the traffic of noises. /The old bunyan/is no more./...The roots won't die. / You witness the rebirth/ in the mould of stone." Deterioration and loss of physical beauty of trees and rivers make him yell aloud as he notices the ugly development in the guise of highways or stony sculpture. These are piquant sentiments of the poet that prompts the common, layman for the preservation of our natural heritage.

Modern man has become perfidious; he has more sinned against than sinning. And a sin or crime needs punishment. Though man's progress is measured in the form of roads or highways yet he stands on the steep side of miserable environmental regress. The growth of physical beauty appears to be in ugly contrast with natural and spiritual beauty. A certain kind of vein of Eco-criticism pervades through this poem. Preservation of natural heritage is connoted and meditated with a cry of despair. This urban angst he feels and records with the utmost dissent. With urban settings, he transforms the cherished ideals into postmodern world with which his fellow Indians could empathize. And with the incantation of his versed art, he portrays the particular to represent the universal so that his poetry-lovers could be content to survive with love, dignity, values, and humanity. He provides a vision to speculate over multiple triumphs, anguishes, complexes, hopes and dreams of a layman.

The imaginative world of Vihang Naik is wide and deep. At its epicentre stands compassion, honesty, love and wisdom that survey the broad cross-currents of socio-economic and cultural layers. He insists on to rejoice the sane human existence with disciplined behaviour as against its bestial camaraderie. A similar violation of natural law in human conduct occurs when man is bereaved of amorous feelings of his beloved in love. Seductress like a ghazal, his beloved becomes *femme fatale* to him destroying his entire poetic life only to be enjoyed as a yummy cuisine. *The End of an Affair* recounts the dejected pain of the poet:

She became a *ghazal* in return.
 First silence in poetry than words
 My heart served in a clean plate.
 I never know that the life of a poet
 Could be cut into two with fork and spoon.

His fascination of Indian mythology, particularly Menaka, generates a role model of exquisite, and therefore, divine beauty and love as he devotes two poems to Menaka – *The Song of Menaka* and *The Song for Menaka* respectively. In the first song, he is infatuated by her physical appearance beyond words: "Stop. / Take any angle you like, /look in any way you choose. /the sight you want to embrace, /here the view remains intact./...language ends when body/takes over talking." If the first poem is *moha* "desired" and *maya* "admired" for him, in *The Song for Menaka*, he finds ultimate salvation of his soul where heaven and earth converge into one point. Menaka, the mythical namesake of love itself, thus sprinkles her aroma all around his poetic life. And his intense emotion sings --

A song for Menaka searching words.
 Eyes, lips, breast, thighs throbs with sensuous
 adjectives. You come to a 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

Insects and animals copiously loom large in Vihang's poetry. He draws an apt analogy between the cheating creatures and notorious human conduct. It becomes really very difficult to distinguish between the angel and the devil, the true friend and the artificial, deceitful one. Argha Ghosh, a reviewer of *City Times and Other Poems* truly comments: "...the insects like spider, crab and chameleon are famous for their deceptive nature. Mr. Naik draws a beautiful analogy between these lower grade insects and human character."

Vihang's poems mostly comprise autobiographic adjuncts which emanate from his soul with a subtle philosophical and mystical trait. Most of his poems end with futility, a void, or uncertainty. Nevertheless, he embarks on the sunny sides of several topics under his inspection, churns over it again, shows his favour or distaste, and infers with the bevy of crisp comment or a punch on the vaudevilles of man-made malignity. The glory of city has withered. This loss he commemorates with a grave rupture in his heart. At times, he is filled with the rapture to see a fish swimming into the desert of waters. With a rupture in heart and the rapture in his mind he attests both distinguishing phenomena as a dazzling array of his talent. "A silky silver fish/with oily fins, /shiny scales, /through the glass/of your eyes, /swims. You/think of beauty/breathing/ in the desert of waters/and bubbles." (*Aquarium*). Alliteration and paradox rolls down only to appeal to our best instincts. What causes one sometimes to note of his poetic verve is the sublime possibility of moral and spiritual transcendence.

The creation of a poem, for instance, gallops him evanescently. Word's lovely nakedness and Menaka's charm – the celestial beauty -- is implicit in a sharp contrast to become a terrestrial poet-sage with arduous physical senses. "You come to know/what nakedness is or does. /Menaka's charm works as a/ rule. /A sage needs senses. / ...The sound/of music resonates. /Sheets flap. /The dance of the black ink and/ A little light. A poem is made." (*Making a Poem*). Poetry rather deals more with the art of metrical composition but for Vihang it just *happens* with him. A poet-connoisseur Patricia Prime shrewdly observes: "... his use of words, his techniques and with his native resilience...he smiles as though he has the knowledge of the unknowable." The real creativity thus engenders the imagination begetting offspring of his thoughts with a vision or philosophy of life to be contemplated upon. In an interview with Nabanita Dhar, Vihang ardently professes the genesis of poetry:

...one writes because there is a kind of thoughtless drive seeking an outlet or, may be the creative urge, which would not let you rest until you pick up any medium that you are comfortable with. Or, it is purely human and barbaric behaviour struggling to survive in this materialistic and so-called civilized world. None of the finest of responses here would be of the satisfaction of the intuition you have as a creative writer or a poet. It is not the rhyming scheme that enthral me about poetry but, I think, poetry is life which enthral. A poet or an artist would always go beyond the physical, beyond from that which is seen to express his philosophy or vision.

Many poems in *Poetry Manifesto* are devoted to the creative process of writing. It also manifests the myriad of themes au courant with modern urban living. Intuitive in

nature, the poet derives his interest from social, religious, cultural, political, economic and philosophical personal history. Both subjective and symbolic elements have been dealt in with passionate intensity. Rooted deep into the Indianness, his artistic fusion of persons, places, objects, images or things (*moha, maya, mukti, draupadi, vishwamitra, menaka, Mahabharata, Ramayana, odhni, ghazal, su'arg, n'arg* etc.) seldom obfuscate the reader. Limpid style and lucidity of expression add even more to enjoy most of his poems. The poem *Desire*, for instance, is reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* where memory and desire are stirred and play a vital role. The octopus of desire likewise ruins someone if he is caught by its strong clutches. The Buddha has long before warned us to be greatly aware of this passion. Consequently the desire (*trushna*), as a deadly sin begets nothing but endless sufferings in human life. A close analogy with philosophical touch deserves our attention in *Desire* when the poet avers: "the octopus /of desire/stirs/arteries and veins/tears flesh apart/feeding upon fire/swallowing air." Short but simple as it appears to be, it connotes his best philosophic blend of mind with the subject matter. *The Indian Book Chronicle*, a reputed journal observes: "He does not describe what things are, but what they are stirring to be, in his consciousness."

City Times and Other Poems likewise subsumes six wonderful segments with exquisite form and unique style. *Love Song of a Journeyman, Mirrored Men, the Path of Wisdom, Self Portrait, At the Shore, and City Times* all these compositions impart an intoxicating effect which exhibit the power of cascading thoughts on readers mind after finishing it. The poet employs auto-monologues in *Love Song of a Journeyman* with a tragic force. His internal turmoil thus outbursts in the form of controlled syntax while regaining the human dignity under miffed circumstances. As an artist he likes to go beyond the physical, beyond the bondage of tradition which may express his philosophy or vision of life. His faith in poetry as a 'complex form of communication' demands that much can be minimized to a few as he knows well brevity is the soul of wit. In tandem with this notion, he flashes through evocative images and then he begins with his short journey "to hear wings/in empty spaces. /A song/in the desert/of my heart." A ray of hope to love "dimpled shyness and warmer breath" radiates while embarking on his journey only to vanish during ongoing travel: "The world/shrinks within/the boundaries/of flesh. Drink nectar. /Grasp the luster/of a sculpted beauty/in hands-/one cannot, /for instance, /gather fog/in the fist." Unrequited love makes him infer the futility of the affair. A momentary hope in love leaves him only to "perceive the sides of the coin" when she "went forth/to count the future/ on delicate fingertips." He evokes the concept of sparkling urban beauty is as evanescent as the mist in the fist for any wise and sensitive man. Fleeting relationship and cruel conduct forms the essence of the poem:

You broke petals
from the sunflower.
I heard the cry
of a dying swan
at the sunset
point
among rocks
and city riots.

His pristine feelings and personal naivety find no room for love among city rocks (infertile and passive) or riots (that disturb our peace of mind). Even breaking of delicate petals, a cry of dying swan connotes human cruelty with the Nature. Why does the poet choose swan and not a crow or a sparrow? It is suggestive of his conscious mind making us aware of the beauty, joy, purity and innocence and the delicacy of the soft petals of a flowers when someone commits a dire crime against the nature by shooting a rare bird, swan – God of love in poetry. The wicked human conduct in cities commoves him perceiving, at the same time, the imminent abnormalities of modern mind. He sensibly imparts us an unseen message that “it is not the wicked world without but the sinful soul within that ruins a man.”

The Path of Wisdom, yet another insightful poem, commences on his ponderance of the “I” inside us. Without our own introduction of the self, we cannot know or tread on the true path of knowledge. “You must not ask/ God His name ---/ you may end up,/ you see, in public/religion./...When you do not find/the key/to the door/you want to enter in/wait/patiently/till the doorman/comes and/unlocks.” One of the traditional ways to acquire knowledge remains our patience. The fruit of patience as a noble virtue is always unequivocal. Moreover patience is thought of as the “companion of wisdom” by Saint Augustine (354 AD - 430 AD). Along the line of great masters, the poet makes us cautious against the modern ways of obtaining spiritual treasure instantly. With calm mind he meditates like a sage offering us the precepts of life in a didactic vein which emphasize the throbbing heart is seminal to a mere brainwork.

Do not touch rainbow
with reason. You may miss
the colours
nor should you
divide the atom further ---
you'll end up rhyming
without flavour.

The modern man has been blessed with immense technology. Internet, in particular, has brought up many things to be searched, chewed and digested. Yet in the arena of spiritual and moral progress of man there is a drastic dearth. Scared by the scarcity of mutual trust, his poems serve as an autopsy of human relationship “rebooting for love and life.” Life is journey—long and tiresome— where man always quests for comfort and consolation. Love to him has become a purchasable commodity and kiss an oasis in the emotionally parched world. Vihang attempts to gauge the nexus of this hollowness leading to absurd play.

After having played your parts,
after saying all that you wanted
to say. After all those roles
and the years that you've lived
through the uncertain age, suffered
and felt the pain to perform in an
absurd play. (*The Final Act*)

Vihang's poetic nascence hurricanes his ability to view his *alter ego* in the revealed form. While searching within his self, he is stricken with Aristotelian anagnorisis. A sudden realization of things (epiphany) unknown hitherto brings him up to the ultimate revelation. As an introspecting mystic he announces: "I/Wake up/To see my/Self" that is ingrained with the discovery of his inner faith. This could only be possible to a man who aspires to become better than what he seems to be. The understanding of latent potentials decodes mysteries of human nature and triggers his fervent mind, in turn, to ascend him to the level of a sensible sage. In a diligent *mame-loshen* he utters his conscience though it seems easy to understand but probably difficult (because of several connotations) to define. Soaked in Indian panorama, his ingenious cultural, metaphysical terms, objects, images, animals, and creepy creatures unknot the filial co-relation between genuine and spurious elements of human nature. This human nature on which he erects the dome of philosophic dictums stands before him a colossal canvass as he painfully paints assorted, intimate concerns of man and society. Against wanton violence and destruction, vagaries and vexation, quirks and quandaries he castigates his revived judgement for wise practises in the society. As a result, his prosody does not rely on any puerile innuendo; rather it pelts a direct comment on contemporary urban dwellers exposing his heart's essential landscape.

His belief that human life is worth living with honour and love promulgate his mind in tandem with a miserable sense of relief. In *Prayer* he wants to rescue "at once" from the absurdity of city life: "this/absurd city/city within/ a city/cities leading/you nowhere/rescue us/Lord/at once/show us/some/purpose/or/meaning." And he is prompted to accrue a modicum of sanity to proffer life a real purpose, significance and meaning. Vihang is obsessed with creative process of writing (or making poems) in an ambience of baffling problems of our existing society. Yet he attempts to touch the zenith of bubonic misconceptions and fallacies in a hope that man's callous attitude will change for improved life. Human being is surrounded by the oddities of faith. In modern times, man is drowned deep into the baseless notions of his assumed power and prestige. Incidentally Vihang crops up the real image of human conduct to cope with an e-age of modern millennia. In fact, his poesy prescribes an antidote to disillusionment and urban anxiety of the modern society. On the other hand his poetic oeuvre proscribes the orgy of anti-human conduct surrounding around a huge heap of social, economic, cultural and moral milieu as a whole.

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