CHAPTER V

BHNATNAGAR AS A POET OF DEATH

Bhatnagar has his own philosophy of life, death and immortality. He is disturbed by contradictory forces that play a vital role in man’s life. Probably the most powerful negating force is the fear of death which haunts the mind of the modern man. This kind of attitude of modern man towards death only astonishes the poet:

Death in modern times
Leaves man more naked
Then dead.
(Thought Poem, p.11)

His poems dealing with death, as Bhatnagar himself told in an interview, “are the product of the ‘constant pressure or concentration’ of the human predicament and eagerness to find an adequate expression for his ‘response in forms, dense, deep, precise and pulsating with human concerns’.”

The concept of death is as old as the concept of life itself. During the Christian Middle Ages death was tame, i.e. death was accepted, and it was regarded as an integral part of man’s life. According to the Medieval and Ancient Indian view, death – specially the painful death – is a form of punishment that we get from the Almighty for doing wrong. Death, according to this view, is of two kinds –
peaceful death, for those who engage themselves in wrong doings. The punishment is given on the basis of the deeds of the present as well as of the past lives.

But for Bhatnagar, the concept of the death is different from the one traditionally held. In his poem there is a unique search for life, which he calls — "a large humanity". He writes:

*My poetry does not exclusively deal with death but does not exclude it. It is intimately juxtaposed with my view and vision of life. In my poetry, unlike the tradition, it is life which defines death and gives meaning to it.*

Bhatnagar’s attitude towards death finds an expression in one of his short poems ‘Questioning Life’:

*Thoughts consume life
Like sun evaporating water
It is not enough for me
That I think I was
To vanish away
Like star at day break
Not knowing if it would be
Dark again?*

*(Oneiric Vision, p.24)*
People relate life with death, but to Bhatnagar a life devoid of worthy deeds is death in life. It is the quality of life the person has lived which defines the nature and significance of death. Explaining his viewpoint, Bhatnagar remarks:

*In my opinion death has life and life death. While life is lived in sustained way, death lives itself in bits—a hard life, a tragic life though, for death ... Death must not be afraid of but must be pitied for its struggle to live and exist. It is the only right way in which it can be subjugated to life realistically. For death may undo a being but it cannot destroy life. Specially because creativity is more basic principle of nature than destruction. The whole universe exists as a creative and not as a destructive phenomenon.*

The noble deeds done by a person during his lifetime will make him live even after death. Bhatnagar considers death to be of transcendent nature. He maintains that man “dies only as thought / in an image”. (Oneiric Vision, p.12) “When death comes to man”, say he, “he does not actually die – but passes from one awareness to the other. Man ... lives by his consciousness and consciousness has a quality of not dying”.  

Bhatnagar presents a very new idea by calling death an orphan. For him death has a life of its own and, like an orphan, it is always in a search for someone who could
adopt it. Thus it can never be frightening. He treats death calmly not with awe or pity but with vigour. Without it life’s charm would be incomplete:

Man must give it an abode
A warmth to feel by
And a loss to mourn about
Like breath melting in frost
Long cold.
(Thought Poems, p.14)

In all his six volumes of poems there are many poems which deal with the theme of death. He finds this theme of particularly engaging. He remarks:

I have a substantial number of poems
dealing with death and I find it engaging.
Not many write on birth as on death. To
my mind death has life as life death. 6

Bhatnagar’s very first poem – with which he began his poetic practice – deals with the theme of death. Giving his own account on this poem Bhatnagar writes: "As I sat in the front verandah of my house, further down the sparse population one evening, I found a row of sparrows perched in sculptured silence on naked electric wires. The scene was so arresting that I feel completely in tune with the image and experience of it, in the meaningful urge to find form and expression appropriate to it". The poem goes like this:

Desire on Death
Sit in quiet evening arrays
Like amused sparrows
On naked electric wires
Watching with muted wonder
The fading glory of the dying sun.
(Thought Poem, p.7)

The abstract idea has been concretized by the poet by creating the image of silent sparrows sitting on naked electric wire stands for death. The poet evaluates the scene in human terms. The time selected by the poet is that of the evening and the light of the sun is gradually fading into darkness. The “evening arrays” suggest approaching old age followed by death. The sparrows, who are known for the lust of life and for readiness to mate, are beautifully juxtaposed with the naked electric wires through which the death flows in the form of electric current. The current can kill these birds at any moment. However, these little innocent birds do not seem to bother about the danger. They are, the poet writes:

Watching with muted wonder
The fading glory of the sun.
(Thought Poem, p.7)

Morning, light and heat in the poem are symbols of different aspects of life. Evening, darkness and chill symbolize death. The word ‘fading’ signifies the gradual loss of energy, and life itself. It leads to death.

The similes in the poem suggest that the man, like sparrows, lives with a perpetual inkling of the hanging death on their heads. Though they are not fully
aware of its approach, at every moment they are best with the possibility of death. P.D. Chaturvedi aptly comments:

*The undergone is contained in the arched movement of the poem which suggest that those whose hearts are set on death rejoice and watch with muted wonder the fading panorama of life.*

Bhatnagar further contemplates on the cause of death. He finds that besides natural death at a ripe age there are various other causes of death like disease, human atrocity, natures hostility and so on. The poet tells us that death results not only from old age but also from a “deadly disease or dreadful atrocities of man”. He further proceeds to say that such a death “leaves man more naked / than dead”. It is not a tragedy of the dead but of the survivors, “who suffer death without ennoblement”. (Thought Poems, p.11)

Death by law is a kind of man – made death. Bhatnagar does not approve of this kind of death. His poem ‘Death by Law’ satirizes the penal law which administers death in the name of justice. He presents the ironic picture of a criminal who longs for an instant death but gets a prolonged punishment. He suffers the agony for more than a year, which kills him bit by bit. Bhatnagar depicts his agony in the following lines:

*All this took a year in preparation*

*Giving the prisoner a long rope*

*But he was amused at this mocking ritual*
and like moon – light dreaming of sunshine
He asked if it wouldn’t be easy done
By shooting him with a gun.
(Angles of Retreat, p.14)

The longing for an immediate death by the culprit has been satirized by the poet in the simile “like moon – light dreaming of sunshine”. The irony becomes more intense when the poet writes:

Law is not a murderer
It has its own way of putting people to death.
(Angles of Retreat, p.15)

The poem expresses the poet’s dissatisfaction with the social law that dispenses death instead of protecting and reforming human beings.

Mass killings and communal riots are also instrumental in causing death. A large number of innocent people are slaughtered for no real cause. This pathetic situation is presented by the poet in his poem ‘Mass Killing’:

Oh, I know
How it feels
To see a whole family
Slaughtered.
(Feeling Fossils, p.30)
Indians suffered a great deal during the struggle of freedom. In the ‘Birth of a nation’ the poet describes how a thirteen year old girl was brutally murdered:

She was only thirteen
When she was butchered
On the birth of a nation.
(Feeling Fossils, p.14)

The word ‘butchered’ reveals the poet’s anguish and his repugnance for this brutal action. The poet tries to signify her death, ‘so that she could bless it / from above’, as if the freedom was not possible without her sacrifice. R.S. Pathak feels that “Bhatnagar treatment to death is remarkably free from sentimentality”. He further writes: “Bhatnagar is one of those few poets who have been able to keep themselves unaffected by sentimentalism. He does not see any reason to sentimentalize even usually pathetic incidents like the tragic death of an innocent girl”.

Like other sources, sometimes nature plays an active role in killing innocent people. In ‘Scaling Heights’ the poet describes the tragic death of Nanda Devi, the daughter of Williamsoeld. She was successful in scaling the heights of the Himalayas but ultimately had to accept death. The poet’s depiction of the event evokes pathos:

In the twilight mood of liquid clarity
One can still see her scaling heights
On the path which ahs no turning
And from where
There is no turning back.
(Feeling Fossils, p.30)
Being the poet of man and humanity, Bhatnagar has a strong faith in the indomitable spirit of man. His belief in post - death existence also comes to forefront in this poem. Death cannot kill her indomitable spirit, although she could not come back from the scaling heights of the Himalayas. As Niranjan Mohanty writes:

Her failure to come back alive from the great heights
is not a defeat, but the frutification of her as well as her father's dream. She remains undefeated with the glory of her heroic frenzy of mountaineering.9

The poet elevates her to the height of immortality:

She now lies buried bold
In the bosom of the peak
Smiling at Wordsworth from her grave
Restraining philosophy of tithe and fax
Elbowing Hillary to distant shades.
(Feeling Fossils, p.17)

Bhatnagar's attitude to nature varies from that of Wordsworth who had a profound faith in nature.

Bhatnagar's faith in the immortality of soul may be deciphered from various other poems. But Bhatnagar the poet and Bhatnagar the philosopher seem to think at times at different wavelengths. M.M. Khan notices the 'veil of doubt' in the poetry
of Bhatnagar ‘on a future life parallel to the earthy sensuous life as mooted by literal mindedness in religion’.\textsuperscript{10} He writes:

\begin{quote}
His [Bhatnagar’s] poetry has a simple but enviable gift of seeing oneiric visions, implying not the surrealistic syndrome but a power of expression of the mystery of life and death by the resource of language and potentiality for irony and wit.\textsuperscript{11}
\end{quote}

In his poem ‘Ulysses’ Bhatnagar explicitly talks about the immortality of the soul. He believes that the soul resides in the body till death approaches it. Death can kill the body made up of flesh and blood but as far as soul is concerned it is immortal:

\begin{quote}
The living soul
Walks out of the body
As white as crane
Flying of the arresting water
Laying skyways of new hopes.
\textit{(Oneiric Vision, p.11)}
\end{quote}

Though the optimism of the poet is evident, still the ‘veil of doubt’ cannot be ignored in his comparison to the soul to a white crane’. As Khan comments: “In a rare moment of vision his poetry gleans a galactic vision of a living soul”.\textsuperscript{12}

To Bhatnagar, physical dying is not a death because “the man who dies knows / That man does not live / But is lived / And die only as thoughts / In an image”(Oneiric Vision, p.12). In his poem ‘Of Death and Life’, the poet beautifully
characterizes the life of death and the death of life. He would not approve of man
dying of frustration or crude realities:

We hope
Not to die of frustrations
Dream
Not to die of realities:
To die of truth
We have no heart
In order not to die of life
We have art.
(Thought Poem, p.21)

Being aware of perishable quality of human body he finds another substitute for
making human soul eternal and that is through art. He writes in an excellent article:
"if dying is an art, literature is way of contending it". He finds death to be of a
very short span of time. It can “Last a flicker / Giving a glow / To its dark”,
(Oneiric Vision, p.8) while life is “a long living” in a dream Vision of fictioneers.
But art is the best source that makes mortal man immortal.

Another way through which a person can be immortalized, according to
Bhatnagar, is by preserving him in one’s memories. In his poem ‘The Dead Lives in
Memories’, the poet writes:

The dead
live in memories
As living as birds in the sky.
(Oneiric Vision, p.40)
Though his father is dead, he can still feel his presence:

I still feel him
Walking me up
With a tender touch
To do morning chorus
And himself gone out for a walk.
(Oneiric Vision, p.40)

He believes that nothing – not even death – can change his feelings towards his father. Death can perish his body but he continues to live in his son’s memories. The father will always be dear to his son whether living or dead:

Not that he is living
But he has left a presence
In all the things he did
Including living before his death
What do I care
If he is not living.
And gone past like wind
As long as his memories live
In my body.
(Oneiric Vision, p.40)

Death is not the end of life. It is the quality of living that gives true essence to human life. Worthy deeds done by a person impart immortality to one’s life. In
his poem ‘Of Life, Death, Immortality’, Bhatnagar envisages his doctrine in the following words:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{That to have died} \\
\text{As if one has never lived} \\
\text{Is death} \\
\text{To have lived} \\
\text{As if one would never die} \\
\text{Is immortality.}
\end{align*}\]

(Shadow in Floodlight, p.27)

It is not the time but the quality that dominates life. In Bhatnagar’s own words, “People generally don’t live life; only go through life; that is without intensity, a passage between breaths. Life is neither felt, contemplated or reflected upon. Habits consume all our life. Instead of living, life abates, leaving towards the end a sense of loneliness and hallowness. We consume life and not create it; empty it and not fill it. Therefore the disillusionment, such a spectacle is defeating”\(^{14}\). Even if the person has lived for hundred years, if his life lacks in worthy deeds would be futile, if it is compared to the life of a person who died young doing things worth praising. It is living with intensity that counts. The poem ‘In Dying a Century’ depicts the condition of a lady, widowed at the age of twenty-five. The poet experiences the uselessness of her life that makes it a burden:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{I, who has watched} \\
\text{The slow drying up of pool} \\
\text{In the desert,} \\
\text{Feel broken and older than her.}
\end{align*}\]

(Feeling Fossils, p.8)
Her desolate loneliness and the utter helplessness are conveyed through the last lines of the poem:

"What use is dying a century
When I have not lived a day?
(Feeling Fossils, p.8)

For Bhatnagar life itself is a sufficient cause for living. He writes:

*Animals seek no cause
To live or to die for
Except what causes them
To exist.*

(Oneiric Vision, p.26)

He has unlimited faith in life and believes in living life full:

*It's easy to die
For a cause
But difficult
To live for it ....
Life grows to beauty
What man die by but
What they live by
A bit.*

(Oneiric Vision, p.26)
Death of an old age becomes insignificant as people are aware of its approach, and are ready to accept it. And they are not astonished when it comes. In ‘Of Death and Suicide’ the poet argues that death at an old age is a more formality:

\[
\text{Death assembles a few friends}
\]
\[
\text{Come on casual leave}
\]
\[
\text{Remembering faded virtues}
\]
\[
\text{In a hushed moan.}
\]
\[
(\text{Oneiric Vision, p.36})
\]

But Bhatnagar is pained to find that suicide, which is a sinful act, makes such a great news: suicide, ‘a many sided beauty / in the boutique of death’, makes death more sensational:

\[
\text{Had one gone for suicide}
\]
\[
\text{It would have made news}
\]
\[
\text{And got people in flocks}
\]
\[
\text{Discussing possessed}
\]
\[
\text{Or unpossessed virtues}
\]
\[
\text{That drove him to this end.}
\]
\[
(\text{Oneiric Vision, p.36})
\]

Bhatnagar is convinced that one should die for some cause. When one willingly accepts death it becomes martyrdom. But to die a purposeless death is a sin. He argues:

\[
\text{Christ died for cause}
\]
\[
\text{Our deaths are causeless}
\]
\[
\text{Willing death is martyrdom}
\]
\[
\text{Unwilling is sinful.}
\]
\[
(\text{Oneiric Vision, p.18})
\]
If all ‘unwilling’ deaths are sinful, deaths due to ‘deadly diseases’ and ‘dreadful atrocities’ will also be counted as sin because such deaths are also unwilling. As D.C. Chambial points out, ‘the poet fails to find any good cause for which one should willingly hug death and become martyr.'¹⁵ Still is now difficult to live for a cause than to die for it. Thus instead of searching some noble cause to die for one should search some reasonable cause to live for. To live life in general is also not an easy task as the life of people is full of struggles and pains. But to accept death instead of facing these challenges is an act of cowardice. Bhatnagar maintains that self-immolation is “not flesh feeding fire.../ But presenting a flaming plasticity of death / In the living act of dying” (Oneiric Vision, p.41). The poet feels that one must delight not in ‘life passing’ but in ‘death living’.

Even God, according to Bhatnagar, is not a sufficient cause to live, die or to strive for. He believes that man’s present sad destiny is his own creation and he alone can reform it. No blind faith in religion or in God can save him. He asks pointedly:

Is God a sufficient cause
To fight and die for?
(Oneiric Vision, p.39)

He also observes that religion today, instead of being a source of salvation to the people, has become a cause of communal riots. People are fighting everywhere in the name of God. His disenchantment with religion and his distrust of mysticism and mythology are characteristic feature of his attitude towards life. His philosophy reflects a rational and humanistic approach:

Man will not search God any more
Is God a sufficient cause
To fight and die for?
The unholy war is over
It is now a question of building memorials
To the numberless
Mauled and mutilated by their faith.
(Oneiric Vision, p.38)

Being a rationalist, the poet believes in the present life. It is useless according to him, to bother about the past or future life as both of these are uncertain. No one can say with full confidence about the past and can rely upon it fully as time and circumstances keep on changing and influencing human life in different ways. This is true about future also. No one knows what it carries in its basket for us and it is useless to waste our life thinking about what our destiny will grant us in future. R.S. Pathak’s view that “No amount of nostalgia for past or wishful thinking for future can obviate the modern man’s problems, whose past is beyond recall, present clumsy and future uncertain and devastating”, substantiates this belief. Bhatnagar believes in devoting life to human good rather than to God. In ‘The God Game’ he wonders ‘Whether humanity / Has anything godly or / God anything human and declares, “Man will not search God any more”’(Oneiric Vision, p.38-39). The same idea is contained in the poem ‘Question Life’ in which he argues that the present life is more important and that we should try to concentrate on it:

If I were to wonder
What I was before
And what should I be after
I could also stimulate
What might or would I have been.
(Oneiric Vision, p.24)
Thus it would be useless to think of the past or future and the realisation of the worth of the present life, which comes by developing one's for man, is the only significant thing.

Today the fear of death has become even more pervasive. Man is obsessed with the fear of approaching death. Bhatnagar does not consider this attitude towards death to be a healthy one. About the current phobia of death, he writes: “It will not only be a poor but a futile attempt to project the immense fear of death”. From this very fear of death emerge various other negative forces that start dominating human life and hurdle the progress of man. The poet advises in ‘Who is Afraid of Fear’:

We should not be afraid
To weep into our reflections ...
We must not be afraid
To melt our dense conscience
That lay shockingly insensate
To the plunder of basic human rights
For want of faith and courage.
(Onetrie Vision, p.19)

The fear of death darkens the entire vision of humanity. In his small poem ‘Insomnia’ the poet asks:

What can light reveal
And dark hide
When with fear
The soul is parched?
(Feeling Fossils, p.20)
This fear of death snatches all freedom from man and makes him slave. He becomes, like a circus lion, "Incapable of freedom in emotion":

We are afraid of speaking truth
And resisting whatever is unjust,
Foul and corrupt in our bones.
(Shadow in Floodlight, p.7)

The poet also maintains that unless we give up our fear of death we cannot live in peace:

Fear is a lock
To which there is no key
It must unlock itself
Like life trapped in death.
(Feeling Fossils, p.22)

Bhatnagar, on the contrary, prefers a willing acceptance of death over a frail fear of death. He beautifully presents the two side by side in his poem ‘Of Court and Cancer Ward’. On one hand, there are medical advancements promising elimination of death while, on the other, there is the law that shows no mercy:

Guilty of misdeeds
He stands in the dock
Longing mercy for his life
But the impartial judge
Pronounces death
And break his pen.
(Thought Poems, p.6)
The poet seems to sympathise with the culprit and his views indicate his preference for life over death.

‘Trees in Autumn’ is another poem in which the acceptance of death is presented as over riding fear psychosis. Autumn is the season usually associated with decay and death. Though the poet’s main concern in the poem is death, he recommends facing death in heroic dignified manner. It appears to be the poet as if the leafless trees are ready to immolate themselves like the Rajput ladies who jumped into a burning pyre to keep their chastity intact:

Trees in autumn go, bereft of leaves
As if by a spell of self—annihilation
Cast in a rare show of fervent heat
Like proud Rajput maidens
Plunging down the flame of fire
To escape on outrage in their modesty
Perform Sati leaf by leaf
Till the enemy is frustrated on his beat
Smearing vanity with the ashes of defeat.
(Feeling Fossils, p.28)

The poet uses an appropriate and striking simile when he compares ‘Autumn trees’ to the Rajput ladies who are not ready to submit to their foes. Their desire to preserve their modesty overrides their wish to remain alive. The fear of “an outrage of their modesty” defies the fear of death.
Bhatnagar's positive attitude enables him to both agreeable and disagreeable aspects of life. He would never regard death as negative force. The fear of death, his poem suggest, should make one brave rather than timid. In his poem ‘Wartime Wedding’ the protagonist is ready to go on a war. He and his lover are very well aware of the possibility of death in the battlefield that will separate them for ever. So they decide that before death makes any such attempt they will unite themselves in a wedlock. Weddings, according to the Hindu belief, are made in heaven and when two persons get married they are united not only physically but also spiritually. Nothing not even death – can separate them. Death can cause physical separation but their souls will still remain united. The fear of death led them to solemnize their marriage and also help them to conquer death:

_Fear of separation
By death
_Hurried us to marriage._

(Feeling Fossils, p.28)

R.S. Pathak notices in this poem an attempt on the part of the poet to enshrine “the experience of young woman who hurriedly married to safeguard herself from the ‘fear of separation by death’”. And Chambial observes that in this poem “The fear of death emerges as innovative, vigorous and bright and not as oppressive, emasculate and dark”.

Thus, life to Bhatnagar is a negation and denial of death. The substitute can be in the form of the union of souls through marriage or the perpetuation of life in memory. It can also be found in art or in the achievements of the person while living. When the cancer – stricken husband of a woman in ‘To Die a Whole Man’
dies, it shocks her for a moment, but she soon reconciles to his death. She remembers the genuine love she received from her husband when he was alive – a love that is immortal and will never die. She does not crave for immortality. She is satisfied with the thought that her husband also loved her dearly:

\[ I \text{ didn't want immortality} \]
\[ To \text{ condemn death like a fool} \]
\[ That he too loved me was more \]
\[ Than immortality could last. \]
\[ (Shadows in Floodlight, p.25) \]

The loss or the emptiness caused by the death is substituted by love, sweet memories of the bygone days help her to compensate for the harsh moments of her solitary life.

In his another poem ‘To Die Full’ Bhatnagar presents a starving man for whom hunger and its quenching have a great urgency than life or death. His central concern if food. To him even life has no meaning until his hunger is satisfied:

\[ Not \text{ so hungry of life now} \]
\[ As for food: \]
\[ Not \text{ so afraid of death} \]
\[ Like trees not so bent \]
\[ Preparing to face the dark \]
\[ With a cool \]
\[ He only wanted to die eating: \]
\[ To die full. \]
\[ (Thought Poems, p.12) \]
Hunger here emerges as symptom of life and makes death insignificant. It can surmount death.

Bhatnagar's are original views on death. He looks at death as an orphan. He never gives death a separate entity. In his vision death is contained in life, life is not contained in death. Death has no power to end life. Death is only a medium through which we pass from one awareness to another. When death comes to man, "he does not actually die but passes from one awareness to the other. Man live by his consciousness and consciousness has a quality of not dying." 20 He rejects the theory of rebirth and considers the faith in the past or future existence of the soul to be a mere figment of imagination. He also does not believe in the metaphysical existence of the soul. He writes: "It is no use talking of spirit or spirituality in poetry". 21 He is against "the worn out concept of heaven, hell, salvation, duty, rebirth and peace" – concepts which speak of an approach like "that of a pedlar or a sentimental journey man". 22 For him nothing gives one a real identity except the kind of life one lives while one is alive. One's good deeds would immortalize one after death. Elucidating this point, Bhatnagar remarks:

_In my opinion death has a life as life death. While life is lived in a sustained way, death lives itself in bit – a hard life, a tragic life though, for death ...

Death therefore must not be afraid of but must be pitted for its struggle to live and exist. It is the only right way in which it can be subjugated to life realistically. For death may undo a being but it cannot destroy life. Specially because creativity is more basic principle of nature than destruction. The whole universe exists as a creative and not as destructive phenomenon._ 23
Man’s action should therefore be noble, and he should devote his life for the good of all the human beings. As R.S. Pathak suggests, “Bhatnagar is fully convinced that there is nothing more ennobling than man’s love for man – its warmth and tenderness”.

Fear of death does not fit in Bhatnagar’s philosophy of life. He considers fear as both lock and a key. Ignorance according to him, is the main cause of fear, which is the root cause of all frustrations. Various substitutes to death can help us eliminate the fear of death. Even basic instincts such as love and hunger can subdue death. The poet presents death as a positive aspect of life. He presents his views on death in a new perspective. He reminds us:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The way to see a thing} \\
\text{Is to make it view most seeing} \\
\text{And the more I see it} \\
\text{The more I like it} \\
\text{For intimacy refines perception.} \\
\text{(Angles of Retreat, p.31)}
\end{align*}
\]

His ambitious proclamation is: conquer death and its fears. And his message is: live life to its fullest enjoyment and satisfaction – “die eating / To die full”. He is against a causeless and unwilling or sterile death.
References:


5. Ibid., p.4.


7. Ibid., p.53


11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., p.46.


24. Ibid., p.87.