Muktibodh and the Hour of Modernity in Hindi Poetry

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Abstract

Gajanan Madhav Mukhtibodh is a Hindi poet and literary critic who can be counted as one of the pioneers of literary modernism in India. He began by writing in the experimental or *Prayogvad* style and went on to be associated with the *Nayi Kavita* movement in 1950s. His early poetry appeared in the influential *Tar Saptak* anthologies where he opened new possibilities for Hindi poetry in both style and form. Written as an incisive social critique, his poetical corpus demands scholarly attention to add to the understanding of literary modernism in India. This paper is an attempt to appraise his poetry in order to shed some light on the facets of modernism in Hindi poetry.

Keywords: Modernism, Hindi poetry, Gajanan Madhav Mukhtibodh, *Nayi Kavita*, *Prayogvad*

Every movement in arts has been modern for its time and context. In modernism, the aesthetic sensibility of the audience and artist matters rather than the mode of expression. Modernism as a term is used historically to "locate a distinct stylistic phase which is ceasing or has ceased" (Bradbury and McFarlane 22). It emerged as a radical break from tradition and has different histories in different places. Any attempt to understand this phase in any region must take into consideration the social, political, economic, and cultural changes that fueled the alterations in the aesthetic sensibilities of both the audience and the writer. Therefore, modernism must be studied not as a homogenous entity but as heterogeneous strands of alternative modernities.

Malcom Bradbury and James McFarlane in their study of literary modernism in Europe, entitled *Modernism 1890-1930*, define modernism as "the movement towards sophistication and mannerism, towards introversion, technical display, (and) internal self-skepticism" (Bradbury and McFarlane 26). Modernism is characterized by the desecration of the established conventions of tradition. Writers in the modernist phase in Europe as well as in America not only rebelled against the rigidity of the form but also endorsed the anti-form. This shift in sensibility had to do a lot with the change in the overall lifestyle of the bourgeoisie in Europe that came about with the fin de siècle. The change of century brought in new technologies that altered the way of living, while several new disciplines like anthropology, psychology, and sociology offered new insights into the human mind changing the way humans reacted to their social realities. New media and faster

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modes of communication changed how humans lived, hence ended up modifying the way they reacted to their social circumstances.

The modern phase in any Indian language literatures becomes highly difficult to trace and theorize because there hardly exists any comprehensive account of the history of print journalism during the twentieth century. Without an accurate description of the mainstream periodicals and little magazine, the politics of canonized and non-canonized is difficult to foreground. It has been argued that various journals and little magazines established the idiom of modernism in the mainstream. In these journals and little magazines, Indian writers writing in Indian languages shaped the avant-garde idiom by borrowing freely from the west and contextualizing it with the native tradition to reflect the contemporary social reality, making the modernist stance in Indian languages literatures both a "critique and extension of tradition" (Ramakrishnan 17).

Sisir Kumar Das has pointed out that the early Indian writers who were writing in the age of printing knew at least three languages: mother tongue, English, and a classical language, i.e. Sanskrit or Persian (Das 102). Therefore, any study concerning Indian literatures must take into consideration the three traditions that shaped the sensibilities of Indian writers, i.e. the pan Indian Sanskrit tradition, the regional tradition, and the foreign tradition in urban societies. These three traditions co-existed in regional languages and shaped its literary idiom. Modernity in the regional languages can be mapped by analyzing the "nature of their (the three traditions) combination" in literary production (Ramakrishnan 19). The educated Indian elite, who produced and consumed most of the literature in the post-print public sphere, aspired towards English as their "professional ambitions drove them towards English" (Ahmad 272), however they also remained rooted in their own linguistic communities because of the "cultural pressure of their own lives" (Ahmad 272). This created a dialectic in the literary production in the colonial Indian state where the colonial intelligentsia drew from the vernacular *desi* tradition, the pan-Indian *marga* tradition, and English.

By the end of first three decades of twentieth century, literature became institutionalized: only something that was "written, printed, and published" (Ramakrishnan 25) could be labeled as literature. This institutionalization of literature excluded a large section of society from production and circulation of literature and endowed this monopoly to the elite in the society, which widened the divide between the middle-class bourgeoisie and the masses. Literature in general and poetry in particular, in the hands of the educated bourgeoisie, was "fixed with [the] characteristics for the entire society" (Ramakrishnan 25) as per the ethos of this section of society. The effects of this can be seen in the poets of the Romantic movements all over India, which was also concomitant with the nationalist movement. Poets during this time, like the *chhayavadi* poets in Hindi wrote numerous poems, both long and short, that imagined a new vision of India, like Jayashankar Prasad's *Kamayani*. Legends were invoked to provide fodder for the nationalist movement. Poetry, during this period, tried to create a homogenous identity of society along the interests of the middle

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class with "the increasing Sanskritisation of regional languages and a strong revivalist tendency towards privileging certain types of collectivities" (Ramakrishnan 25). Due to the disparity in literacy in society, a large section of population was denied any participation within this textual tradition of literary production, which created a gulf between these two sections of society and the way they perceived social realities and the nation-state.

While generalizing the characteristics that triggered a modernist shift in the sensibilities of poetry in Indian languages, E.V. Ramakrishnan writes that "the appearance of the modernist sensibility can be interpreted as the dawning of a critical self-awareness which seeks to analyze and reorder the relations between the public and private domains" (Ramakrishnan 22). The immediacy of this "critical self-awareness" arose as the relation between the dominant and the dominated changed radically with the demarcations of civil societies and state between the 1920s and 50s. The nationalist idiom of the 20s and 30s also affected this transition, as it drew heavily from the Brahmanical tradition and allowed little space for "non-esoteric knowledge" (Ramakrishnan 26), which means that it curbed expression from the dispossessed sections of society in the literary sphere and homogenized it along the interest of one section of society. While the poets perceived this domination in the economic and the political sphere, they could only challenge it in the cultural domain, as it was the "autonomous domain where the poet could express himself" (Ramakrishnan 26).

The growing gulf between the writer and the masses, "which meant the segregation of literary language as a distinct unit from non-artistic speech" (Ramakrishnan 26) was envisioned by the progressivist writers in the late 1930s. The poets writing within this movement took poetry away from the idiom of the idealist and essentialist homogenization along the interest of the upper class during the romantic phase. During the progressivist phase, poetry became a vehicle to depict different moods of society and it opened up possibilities for discursive elements from different strata of society to enter the domain of poetry. However, it remained rooted in the framework of the romantic poets and continued to dehistoricize its subject. Though the content of poetry changed, it followed the essentialist and universalist view of life developed by the romanticists. The rigidity of the form hardly opened up possibilities to depict the dismemberment of humans within society, while the diction remained far removed from the contemporary realty of society. The poets of this phase found the "entire past evolution of poetry in Indian languages of no consequences to the present" (Ramakrishnan 26) and failed to "comprehend the problematic nature of the relation between the writer and his audience in modern society" (Ramakrishnan 27). They invoked a view of the self as asocial and solitary and endorsed an idea of an "interior space which is discontinuous with the common world of discursive speech and communal interaction" (Ramakrishnan 30).

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This attitude to social reality was challenged by the poets of the experimental phase. The poets in this phase brought the literary language closer to the common speech and depicted the fragmentation of being in modern society by opening up the form in favor of the anti-form. Sisir Kumar Das informs us that it is not just the form of poetry that was challenged by the writers of this phase. The poets during this phase changed the "total linguistic texture of poetry, causing violence in the accepted grammatical rules and syntactical patterns" (Das 218). He notes that the 'modernist' phase in Indian poetry that aspired towards Eliot and Pound extends from 1930 to 1950, while E.V. Ramakrishnan asserts that the 'avant-garde' phase in Indian poetry have been established by the 1960s and 70s by looking towards models in Latin America and Africa. This avant-garde spirit in Indian poetry "opened up tradition and made it available as a site of conflict" (Ramakrishnan 26). During this truly modern phase of counter narratives in Indian poetry, the poets resorted to self-criticism and moved towards the "discursive and the dramatic to accommodate the multi-vocal quality of a hierarchically divided society" (Ramakrishnan 29).

One of the primary distinctions that have to be made between high-modernism and avant-garde is the latter's attempt at reconfiguring the gulf between high culture and low culture while the former is only preoccupied with high culture. Another important distinction between the two is argued by Peter Bürger in his book *The Theory of Avant-Garde* where he states that modernism can be regarded as a revolt against the traditional techniques of writing while avant-garde is an attack to alter the practice of art as an institutionalized commerce (Bürger xv). In the foreword to Bürger's book, Jochen Schulte-Sasse states that within the development leading to symbolism and aestheticism, "form becomes the preferred content of the work" (Bürger xiii). This removed art from the "praxis of life" and intensified its separation from bourgeoisie society. For Bürger, aesthetic art has no social relevance, or in other words, art is beneficial for society only if it discusses socially relevant norms and values. Art moved towards the avant-garde, according to Bürger, only when it started to question its own institution, i.e. its own social status. In high-modernism, values like "humanity, joy, truth, and solidarity" (Ramakrishnan 70) were preserved in literature, while they were removed from the praxis of life. Avant-garde challenged the preservation of such values in art and defined expression of contemporary reality in art based on the experiences in praxis of life.

During the high-modernist phase of Indian poetry, a pan-Indian vision was evoked through myths that homogenized expereince and dehistoricized the subject by depoliticizing the individual experience. Aesthetic modernism in Indian poetry projected an "abstract concept of man which, in a grand nationalist gesture, swept under the carpet the differences between dialects, classes, regions, and genders" (Ramakrishnan 73).

The avant-garde idiom in Indian poetry rejected the grand mythopoetic vision of the nation in favor of "one's own life story or myths of resistance and revolt" (Ramakrishnan 72) to recreate

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contemporary history in a literary language that didn't look back at the ruins of Sanskrit but was derived from the common speech spoken in the cosmopolitan urban societies. The avant-garde poetry in India challenged the entire tradition of art to "redefine both the practice and function of art" (Ramakrishnan 28). It addressed various hierarchies of domination in the social system and politicized its subject by questioning the status quo.

The proponent of such avant-garde spirit in Hindi poetry is Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh. His poetry is self-reflexive as he sets to critique the very medium in which he is writing. The fragmentation of being that Muktibodh experienced was in excess "of the formal possibilities permitted by the existing forms of Hindi poetry" (Ramakrishnan 85). He not only opened up the poetic form, but also challenged the "essentializing traits of the very tradition which constituted his self and sensibility" (Ramakrishnan 85). In his writings, he rose above his own individuality to realize the multiplicity and plurality of the modern world.

Challenging the vision and ideology of the "elitist, metaphysical strain in the *chhayavaad* poetry" (Ramakrishnan 87) which he saw as an endorsement of the status quo by the ruling elites, Muktibodh moved Hindi poetry away from equating Modernism with Europe and America towards drawing inspiration from the struggle of "emergent societies of Africa, Asia and Latin America where the struggle for social change and reconstruction has brought in a new awakening" (Ramakrishnan 88). His poetry, rich in a tapestry of disjointed fleeting images, presents a "visual language of protest which challenges the rational, ordered ways of representing the world" (Ramakrishnan 90). In order to extend and alter the horizon of expectation of the readers, he not only rebels against the literary tradition in which he is rooted but also the reason and morality of his contemporary society.

Critical of the way that the hegemonic order subsumes discursive elements within itself, Muktibodh goes back to the bhakti poets to show how they identified with the "genuine suffering of the depressed classes" (Ramakrishnan 89), but were only appropriated by the ruling class. He sees the same happening in his contemporary society where the ruling elites had appropriated and tamed the liberating potentialities of romanticism and progressivism to serve their own purpose. He wanted to free art of this institutionalization and to achieve it, he rebelled against the "process of domestication and perversion of creativity" (Ramakrishnan 89).

Conscious of its creation, Muktibodh's poetry is laden with irony and presents a critique of its own formation. He illustrates not only the fragmented nature of human lives, depicting the society and the individual in its most gory form, but also exemplify the "deviousness, disorientation, and degradation" (Ramakrishnan 90) of modern life.

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Richard Sheppard in his essay dealing with Modernism in Europe, 'The Crisis of Language', states that for a writer writing in modern societies language "ceases to be a luminous vehicle for self-expression and turns into something like an oppressive super-ego" (Sheppard 328). Within the oppressive social structures, literary language too becomes limited for the expression of fragmented realities of society, as the bourgeoisie has already manipulated it for their own end. Language is seen as "de-potentiated, de-substantiated, and hollowed-out" and the writer, instead of being a manipulator of language, "attempts to liberate the repressed expressive energies of language," and becomes an "experimenter" who tries to create a redeeming image out of chaos (Sheppard 329).

Talking about this crisis of language faced by a writer writing in Hindi, Namvar Singh quotes Vijaydev Narayan Sahi in an essay entitled 'Kavya-Bhasha aur Srijansheelta' (Poetic Language and Creativity), compiled in the book *Nayi Kavita ke Pratimaan* to point out that a writer can only describe the changing realities of contemporary society in the rhythm of conversational language, and the search for such rhythm is the search for poetic expression (Singh 105).

Muktibodh's anxiety for expression is evident in his poetic diction as he moves away from the two-dimensionality of the *chhayavaadi* poetic idiom, which he feels is manipulated by the elite order, and unfit to express the discontinuities of contemporary society. His poetry emerges from the crisis of language that Muktibodh sees as limiting the expression of banalities of the modern society, as he explains in an essay on Nayi Kavita that the upper-middle class has defined poetic language according to its own aesthetic interest and circumscribed any divergence from this norm. This implies that a language of protest in poetry is deemed unaesthetic, and a direct or indirect censorship is imposed on any expression that is true to the human suffering in contemporary social reality (Singh 87-88).

Muktibodh resorts to surrealist experimentation available to him in the works of writers abroad to achieve a poetic idiom that is faithful to contemporary social realities. The surrealist idiom helps him shock the readers out of their 'horizon of expectation' and re-conceptualize aesthetics in Hindi poetry in the same manner as Surrealism has helped writers elsewhere to invent a "shock tactics by which the mind, conscious of its imprisonment, might in astonishment free itself" (Sheppard 333). By taking up political responsibility to point out the power structures that pervade in society, Muktibodh, within the surrealist framework of fantasy, seeks to demonstrate like other surrealist poets and painters that the "fantastic belies fantasy by being obstinately real" (Short 307). He borrows the idiom of surrealist fantasy but transforms and contextualizes it in the specifics of the Indian tradition by addressing the contemporary reality with the evocation of the lost antiquities and a world of magic and ritual that is concomitant to it.

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Typical of such expression, Muktibodh's poem 'Brahmarakshas' evokes a surreal world where a mythological figure is doomed to live in the abyss of a well with no hope of redemption. The central character of the poem, Brahmarakshas, a demonic figure, is "engaged in a relentless act of cleaning himself" (Ramakrishnan 92), but finds it impossible to free himself of his sense of guilt. Living in his narrow world of the well, he thinks himself superior to everyone in the world, which signifies the narcissistic self-validation of the middle-class:

अति- प्रफुल्लित कंटकित तन-मन वही
करता रहा अनुभव की नभ ने भी
विनत हो मान ली श्रेष्ठता उसकी!! (Muktibodh 122)
Hi ravaged body and mind
Forever believing
that even the heavens beseech him
and acknowledge his superiority (Unkitsch)

Despite his mastery of all recorded knowledge, he cannot see beyond the narrow perspective that the well offers him and believes that the moon and the sun are worshiping him as a guru when their light hits the inner walls of the well. He leads a conflicted life and finally perishes in the darkness of the well. The poem testifies the difficulty that the poet faces to express the contemporary reality. In his faltering attempt to climb out of his nether worldly existence of self-doubts, the Brahmarakshas in the poem, despite all his traditional knowledge, stands as a symbol of utter bafflement for every individual in the modern society who finds it difficult to come to terms with the changing socio-economic realities. Muktibodh's use of the surrealistic framework of fantasy is an attempt to go back to the "pre-colonial sources of Indian experience" (Ramakrishnan 91), a return to native culture to shock the reader of mainstream Indian poetry "from his habits of viewing the world" (Ramakrishnan 34), and forge "a visual language that would confront the contradictions of our modernist legacy" (Ramakrishnan 91).

In Muktibodh's poetry, the world of dream and magic coalesce to weave a narrative of fantasy that critiques the very tradition in which it is rooted. The language he uses in his poetic diction is closer to the common speech but stresses the fragmentation of subterranean self of the common person. One of his longer poems, 'Andhere Mein' (In Darkness) that was written after one of Muktibodh's book accepted by the Government of Madhya Pradesh as textbook at the secondary level was banned on 19th September 1962 (Ramakrishnan 93), comments on the role of the common person in the emerging Indian state and nation building. Free of the formal rigidities of the Hindi poetic tradition and narrated as a dream sequence, the poem reads like a fantasy and begins with a series of images that project the anguish of the unfulfilled self of the writer in the new Indian state. It begins by invoking the image of Manu, who represents one strand in the imagination of the nation-state, as a possibility of this unfulfilled self:

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कोई अनजानी अन-पहचानी आकृति।
कौन वह दिखाई जो देता, पर
नहीं जाना जाता है!!
कौन मनु? (Muktibodh 127)
An unknown unrecognizable apparition
Who is he that can be seen but
Not recognized
Who? Manu?[1]

The image of Manu refers to the order of nation building that aligns with the interest of the ruling elites, but this image soon transits to the image of Tolstoy, representing socialism, to Gandhi, representing a "semi-spiritualized nationalism" (Kumar 35), to the individual who in the words of Muktibodh becomes the "very locus of social emancipation" (Kumar 36). Between these stretches of fantasy, the poet stumbles into figures that address the state of contemporary reality of the nation. At one point he runs into a procession that is made up of "critics, thinkers, luminous poets/ politicians, industrialists, and intellectuals/even city's infamous murderer" (Muktibodh 137)[2] who upon sighting the poet, scream to kill him as he has learned about their mysterious procession in the dark of the night and might tell on them. All these people in the procession who belong to the upper middle class, the poet implies, are complicit in the prevalent degeneration of society. After evading this situation, the poet runs into a madman who lives in a banyan tree that is a sanctuary for the downtrodden and deprived. By giving voice to this madman, the poet reflects upon himself and his readers to show how the middle class is also responsible for the smooth functioning of the status quo. In ironical self-reflexivity, the madman asks the poet, and through him his readers, rather reprehensively:

"अब तक क्या किया,
जीवन क्या जिया,
जयादा लिया, और दिया बहुत-बहुत कम
मर गया देश, जीवीत रह गए तुम!!" (Muktibodh 142)
What have you done till now?
How have you lived?
Took more and gave lesser
The country died but you lived on[3].

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[1] Translation is by the author of this paper.
[2] Translation is by the author of this paper.
[3] Translation is by the author of this paper.

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Muktibodh's poetry remains committed to the crisis in the modern Indian state where the role of the individual is constantly changing within the dynamic power structures that permeate the capitalist society. His legacy lies in the fact that he is able to see the "identity crisis of [the] modern Indian as part of a larger socio-political and epistemological crisis" (Ramakrishnan 93). In his search for the 'absolute expression' (परम अभिव्यक्ति), Muktibodh preferred the longer narrative modes as it allowed him the liberty to accommodate the discursive and the dramatic in his poetry. By giving voice to the downtrodden and disposed in his poetry, Muktibodh brings to the domain of Hindi poetry a sensibility that is critical of the so called "culture of silence" of the dispossessed by the dominant order that keeps them "submerged" in the status quo so that they cannot see the means of their domination (Freire 30-33). His poetry emanates with issues that are pertinent in a post-colonial state where the imperial structures of domination have been replaced by the new order of nation formation. The constant impulse of self-criticism in his poetry is "an attempt to resist the domesticating traits of modernism" (Ramakrishnan 95). He is critical of the authoritarian state that forcibly reconciles heterogeneous issues of society into a unifying whole. His modernity lies in his struggle for the democratization of the poetic space to accommodate multiple views from different sections of society. Muktibodh's status in Hindi poetry is exemplified not only by his contribution to the socially aware *Nayi Kavita* but also for laying the groundwork for the protest poetry of the feminists in the 80s and Dalits in the 90s.

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