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Socially-engaged narrative in contemporary Hindi poetry

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Abstract. The influence of Marxist ideology has played a peculiar role in the formation of Hindi literature. Many writers believed that a literary word, illuminating the problems of inequality and oppression, could awake effective political, social and economic actions that could change an ordinary person's life. In contemporary Hindi poetry there is the rise of young poets' interest in socially-engaged narrative, which they clarify with the concept of "socialist". It is aimed at criticizing the world order surrounding them and the desire to point out the problems of social peace. The authors discuss and translate for the first time the poems of the 21st century – Hindi poets of the left wing Alokadhanva and Avinash Mishra. They, drawing the reader's attention to the fact that the art of the word is given to them from above, raise acute social issues with realistic poems and simple language, hiding their powerlessness behind rhetorical appeals calling for an active struggle. Special attention is paid to the artistic techniques, which are practically not used in this poetry. It is concluded that poets create their own metapoetics focused on revising literature's mission as a way of exposing the modern society's vices.

Keywords: Indian poetry, hindi poems, modernity, engagement, metapoetics of struggle, Alokadhanva, Avinash Mishra

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Особенности современной ангажированной поэзии хинди

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Аннотация. Влияние марксистской идеологии сыграло своеобразную роль в формировании литературы хинди. Многие писатели данного направления считали, что поэтическое слово настолько способно осветить проблемы неравенства и угнетения, что может пробудить в обществе эффективные политические, социальные и экономические действия, которые смогут облегчить жизнь обычного человека. В современной поэзии хинди наблюдается увлеченность молодых поэтов ангажированной эстетикой, которую они уточняют понятием «социалистическая». Направленная на критику окружающего их мироустройства она указывает на проблемы социального мира и неравноправия. В исследовании впервые рассматриваются и переводятся стихотворения хинди XXI в. – поэтов левого крыла Алокадханвы и Авинаша Мишры. Они, заостряя внимание читателя на том, что искусство слова дано им свыше, посредством реалистических стихов и простого языка поднимают острые общественные вопросы, скрывая свое бессилие за риторическими призывами, взывающими к активной борьбе. Особое внимание уделено разбору художественных приемов, которые практически не используются в этой поэзии. Делается вывод о том, что поэты создают собственную метапоэтику, направленную на пересмотр задач литературы как способа обличения пороков современного общества.

Ключевые слова: индийская поэзия, стихотворения хинди, современность, ангажированность, метапоэтика борьбы, Алокадханва, Авинаш Мишра

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Introduction

Socially-engaged narrative in literature appeared within the French left intelligentsia, especially existentialists, after the Second World War, as synthesis of literature and politics. Particularly, Jean-Paul Sartre in his essay “What is literature?” (1947) proclaims the task of this literature as the combination of “formal

freedom of speech” and “material freedom of action.”¹ At the beginning of the 21st century critics noted that in modern world literature there was a need of “socially-engaged narrative and social ideas” (Unilowski, 2009). However, researchers cannot definitively determine the reasons for the interest in socially-biased works.

A new wave of the interest in engaged works also appeared in India. Initially, according to the Indian literary critic Amir Chand Vaishya, an extensive part of Hindi literature was written under the influence of social, political and economic movements during India’s struggle for independence and its acquisition in 1947 (Vaišya, 2013). Writers of that time believed that prose, especially poetic works, could become a sermon of revolutionary ideas. With the help of literature, they could promote new social ideas that were against religious traditionalism. Many poets felt their part in the proclamation of the ideas of Gandhism and Marxism, addressing readers with moral instructions, highlighting acute social problems (Tsvetkov, 2014, p. 100).

The Indian Progressive Writers' Association (IPWA) became the main horn of socially-biased literature in 1936. Belonging to the *pragativād* (*pragativād* – progressivism), the writers did not hide their commitment to Marxism and socialism. Their works’ ideas were limited to the theme of struggle with social inequality that led to excessive didacticism.

Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh (1917–1964), a leading representative of the *New Hindi Poetry* (*Naī kavītā*), can be a vivid example of a poet who adhered to *left-wing* progressive sentiments in his work. His involvement in the fusion of aesthetics, politics and ethics formed a new form of modernist poetry written in Hindi, as poetic genre long poetry (*lambī kavītā*) (Goulding, 2018).

It is worth noting that Indian literary critics exaggerate in this case. Thus, they claim that the ideas of protest and struggle are rooted in Vedic literary tradition: they cite as an example the image of Prahlada, who was the first to speak out against his mentors’ unethical actions, and the medieval Bhakt-poet Kabir whose works in the 20th century are considered as radical rebelling against the disunity of the religions of Hindus and Muslims and the caste system (Anjum, 2012, p. 4).

Modern Hindi writers identify themselves as followers of Marxist aesthetics. Like the poets of the early 20th century, they try “to approach the assessment of their classical heritage in terms of a Marxist philosophy and determine its role in the development of modern literature’s progressive trends” (Grinzer, 1977, p. 31). Moreover, the Hindi poets of the 21st century took as the ground of their work one statement: “literature is a torch that goes ahead of politics, illuminating the truth” (Paṇḍey, 2016, p. 65). It was said by Premchand (1880–1936), a realist writer and IPWA’s founder.

¹ Short Literary Encyclopedia. Retrieved February 15, 2023, from <http://feb-web.ru/feb/kle/KLE-abc/ke9/ke9-0581.htm>

Discussion

Many Indian literary critics, particularly Manajar Pandey who was the head of New Indian Languages Department at J. Nehru University, relying on European research works oppose the principle of studying Hindi literature of the 21st century based on the Marxism methodology. However, his research is filled with the socio-social aspects. Therefore, speaking about modern poetry, M. Pandey believes that “literature plays an integral role in sociology” (Pandey, 2016, p. 3).

The special influence of people movements on Indian poetry development is mentioned in the Kolkata literary journal “Vāgarth” in the article “Hindi Poetry after 1980”. Ekant Srivastav, the chief editor of *Vāgarth*, points that “contemporary poems have become politically and socially oriented again. Indian village people are becoming prototypes” (Kumar, 2005, pp. 17–18). He also emphasizes that poetry should be focused on a common man, his sorrows and humiliation.

Devendra Issar, another Indian critic, notes in his book “The New Century and Literature: Questions, Dreams, Creativity” that “the 20th century gave rise to such a crisis, chaos in thoughts and in cultures, religions, countries that there was a feeling that the ‘source’ of reconciliation of different clashes and misunderstandings has vanished out... the ‘soil’ has turned into a ‘desert’, and it continues to advance. Our task in the 21st century is to overcome this universal crisis, the disintegration of values, and only then we will be able to predict and create the future” (Issar, 2000, pp. 9–10).

Representatives of the “*left poetry*” also speak about this principle of understanding the literature’s tasks. According to the American professor Charles Altieri, in literature after the “end of history” and “the end of literature” chaos has come that it is much easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of misunderstanding (Altieri, 2017). And the main literary task of contemporary poetry is to protest against people who have power, as well as a call for the rejection of deception. Despite the opinion that postmodernism literature brought it out of the sphere of ideology, the ideology of literature undoubtedly exists. A writer and a poet face again the questions: what is literature for? who is it written for? who is the author? Devendra Issar impugns postmodernism’s aims, believing that they consist in belittling a person values, his ability to think and identify himself. Many Indian writers and critics consider that postmodernism literature detracts the mental and spiritual potential of human. Therefore, the study of real problems that concern both the poet himself and the reader becomes a pseudo-study that limits the life of a literary work to its strict frames (Vaišya, 2013, pp. 7–9).

However, despite all the critics' beliefs, it is hasty to say that modern poets writing socially-engaged narrative rejected the ideas of modernism and postmodernism and forgot the classical examples of Indian poetics. Undoubtedly, automated techniques of modernism and postmodernism are often used by Hindi poets

unconsciously, but the analysis of the literary world and the tropes in their works does not find confirmation of this. On the contrary, the left-wing poetry is filled with allegories and references to the previous literary tradition.

Let analyze the poems written by two prominent representatives of socially-engaged Hindi poetry – Alokadhanva and Avinash Mishra. The beginning of their creativity is separated by three decades. This makes it possible to trace the continuity of poetics and analyze the changes that have happened over time.

Alok Dhanwa (b. 1948) being a Hindi poet became a representative of the Association of Progressive Writers, as well as the Association of Folk Writers. His poems have been translated into Indian languages. Moreover the popular American edition “Critical Inquiry” published the translation of Alokadhanva’s poems into English. This Indian poet is currently the head of the Academy of Song and Drama in Bihar. He was the first who gave a new impulse to the development of poetry in the 70s. The movement of Naxalites, armed communist (Maoist) groups in India, claiming that they are fighting against landlords and the poverty, has influenced on Alok Dhanwa’s poetry. His first poem “A Man of the People” (*Jantā kā ādmī*) was published in 1972 in the journal “Left” (*Vām*). The poem “Invitation to the shooting” (*Golī dāgo poṣṭar*) became the main work in the left movement (*Vāmpanthī Sānskṛti andolan*), causing a huge resonance among poets. His poetry was named as a poetry of struggle and these poems – “Woven shoes” (*Kapṛe ke jūte*), “Kite” (*Patang*) and “Runaway girls” (*Bhāgī huī laṛkiyān*) – remain the keynote for four decades.

Avinash Mishra (b. 1986) is a young poet and researcher of Hindi women's poetry. He graduated Delhi University. Now he is the deputy chief editor in the literary journal “Bird” (*Pākhī*). He describes his poetry as “free from literary ornaments and sophistication works, that create small poems” (Šrotriya, 2016, p. 18). His poems are written in a short form and consist of two or three lines, which nevertheless contain a hyperinterpreted meaning.

What is the really essence of contemporary socially-engaged Hindi poetry? What do modern poets write and think about? What are they trying to convey to their readers? Poets, based on reliability, proclaim a system of realism’s ideas and use the corresponding artistic practice that depicts reality concretely with initially similar images and a real social context. In their poetry, a lyrical hero’s verbal and nonverbal struggle takes precedence. This hero rhetorically urges a reader to look very closely at the existing and not outdated problems of the new century.

Avinash Mishra addresses caste and religion problem in the poem “Talents in their fire” (*Pratibhāen apnī hī āg men*). This topic firstly appeared in 1937 in Nirala's poem “She breaking stones!” (*Vah toṛṭī patthar*). The only artistic technique in this poem is allusion that mentions Allahabad city: “I saw her break-

ing stones / On the path of Allahabad.”² Avinash Mishra continues to use this geographical toponym: “Someone was from Allahabad, / it was a lot for him. / Someone was “Singh”, / that was his best ability. / But will he follow his name? // All thus in their own / local and caste greatness / were very fit // until a huge number of fit people / were killed just for the reason / that they gave up their name” (“*Koī ilāhābād kā thā / yah uske lie bahut thā / koī ‘Sinh’ thā / yah uskī sabse barī yogyatā thī / vah ise nām ke āge lagāe yā na lagāe // sab is tarah apne-apne / janpadīy aur jātīy vaibhav men / bahut aur yogy the // jabki bahut sāre yogy log / sirf is vajah mār die jāte the / kyonki ve inkār karte the*”).³

The theme of social inequality and caste predestination remains as relevant and as urgent as ever for modern poets. The only difference is poetry language. If Nirala's poem focuses the reader's attention on sentimental empathy for a girl who is destined for a difficult fate, then Avinash Mishra does not use complex metaphors and images. His language is simple and clear. The absence of rhyme and alliteration is an important artistic technique by which the poet achieves a brief statement of fact, an image of an unchanging and terrible life that does not change.

We can assume that poets' pessimistic voice creates the image of a lyrical hero who is ready to silently contemplate what is happening. Thus, in Alokadhanva's poem “A Hungry Child” (*Bhūkhā baccā*) a child is portrayed as an elongated thin string, he “gets up in the wind every week and / his skin hardens” (“*har saptāh havā men ūpar uṭh rahā hain / uskī tvacā kaṛī ho rahī hai*”). The poet looks at him helplessly, turning: “not even a grain of salt / in that child's blood circulation, / but only in the likeness of water” (“*dhundhalā namak bhī nahīn hūn / us bacce ke raktsancār men / main ek jalaākār hūn / keval ek jal uttejñā hūn*”).

However, the model of the left-wing writers' works is resistance poetry. Poets do not admit the exhaustion of realistic forms, justifying their motifs' choice by the social constancy of Indian society, “which has not got rid of traditions that degrade human dignity” (Parmar, 2015, p. 13).

The leitmotif of the vicious circle, from which Indian society has no ability to get out, is found in Alokadhanva's work, particularly, in his poem “Invitation to the shooting”. It was written under the impression of the Naxalite – Maoist insurgency in 1972. The lyrical hero of this poem says that when his mother was alive begun long struggle which will not end in his children lifetime: “With my children /

² Dubey, B.K. (2018, November 30). She Breaking Stones by Nirala (A Poetic Summing). *PoemHunter*. Retrieved April 18, 2023, from <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/she-breaking-stones-by-nirala-a-poetic-summings/>

³ The translations of these poems are made by the authors of the article. Hindī samay. Mahātmā Gāndhī antarrāṣṭrīy viśvavidyālay kā abhikram. Retrieved January 29, 2023, from <https://www.hindisamay.com/content/9292/1/अविनाश-मिथ्र-कविताएँ-प्रतिभाएँ-अपनी-ही-आग-में.csp>

can I live like a father? / like an inkwell filled with ink – / like a ball / can I really live with my children / like a field with herbs?” ((“*Main apne bacce ke sāth / ek pitā kī tarah rah saktā hūn? / Syāhī se bharī davāt kī tarah - / ek gend kī tarah / kya main apne bacce ke sāth / ek ghās bhare maindān kī tarah rah saktā hūn?*”).⁴

Drawn political radicalism in the words with a bright negative connotation such as “murderer” (*hatyārā*), “leather glove or aggressor’s binoculars” (*camṛe kā dastānā yā hamlāvar kī dūrbīn*), and such lines as “bastard zamindars who want to make the whole country a pawnbroker’s dog” (*dogale zamindar jo pūre deś ko / sūdkhor kā kuttā banā denā cāhte hain*), “not the government of this country, the cheapest cigarette supported me” (*sarkar ne nahīn-is deś kī sabse / sastī sigareṭ ne merāsāth diyā*) does not call for an open struggle. These comparisons are an obvious reference to the *pragativad* and Premchand’s literature, who convicted landowners’ lawlessness, officials and usurers with animals’ comparisons.

The poet focuses the reader’s attention on the fact that the “shooting” in the poem’s title is a metaphor of writing, an infinitely pen-dotted sheet of paper, a struggle correlated with a peasant’s labour in a field: “this is not a poem / this is the understanding of shooting, / which for all those who write by pens, / meets with everyone who works with a plow” (*yah kavītā nahīn hai / yah golī dāgne kī samajh hai / jo tamām kalam calānevālon ko / tamām hal calānevālon se mil rahī hai*). Socially-engaged poetry of the late 20th – early 21st century rethinks the main tasks of poetic work, enclosed in the slogan “art for the sake of progress”, without diminishing its courage and sensitivity. *New Poetry’s* important theme – a poet figure as a soothsayer in Nirala and Muktibodh’s poems – is reflected in leftist poetry also. The poet is gifted with a divine destiny; a difficult path stretches before him – to be the voice of the people – and he has no right to leave this road.

Alokadhanva, being the representative of the older generation of poets, in his poem “Kite” (*Patang*), only hopes for a bright future: “The morning came after bhadon [...] // And in the distance boys in bright colors / are launching kites, the sky is clear. / And they are flying – higher and higher. // [...] Barefoot and proud boys / run on roofs, / and the earth is spinning with them / faster, faster, faster”. The younger generation of poets, like Avinash Mishra, does not create poems in the frame of one theme. Avinash Mishra in his poem “Rain” (*Bāriś*) writes “you are still alive... open your eyes, / raise your head, and people will follow you”, “And I, seeking connection with rain, look for my essence in the fate of cities. / There my ancestors fought for life, dirtying rivers in blood” – here poet’s confidence in the future is accompanied by the motif of loneliness and disappointment in life. Such a pessimistic melody reminds the Indian reader of the po-

⁴ KavitaKosh. Retrieved January 29, 2023, from http://kavitakosh.org/kk/गोली_दामो_पोस्टर/_आलोक_धन्वा

etry of *chayavad* (*chāyāvād*), a literary stream of the 1910s, in which the theme of hopelessness, despair and ghostly existence prevails. Moreover, the image of water (rain, tears) becomes a symbol of mourning for a fruitless human life. Avinash Mishra enhances this image, he unites his lyrical hero with rain, creating a single whole: “I am not strong in the age-old struggle, leaving myself alone in the rain / [...] / But who can also contact like us? – in the rain, in the moisture, in the force...”

Conclusion

The theme of “struggle” in Indian poet’s works let him enter the left-wing writers’ circle where he plays a dominant role in the Indian modern literature among representatives of women’s writing, Dalit (untouchable) poetry and Adivasi (tribal) poetry.

The motifs of protest against the injustice of Indian society in the poetry of the 21st century remain almost the only one and relevant in the young poets’ poetry. The theme of social inequality is high on the lyric’s agenda. Poets consciously use the minimal of poetic tropes and figurative language to create their poems more vivid and verbal. Alokdhansa and Avinash Mishra both of them rethink the motives and images of previous Indian poetics, separating their individual author’s “me” from the past. They speak to a reader-thinker in order to change the world together.

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