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Elements of Modernism in the Works of Gopal Honnalgere

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Abstract:

The Modern period, which flourished worldwide in the 20th century, reflects a sense of cultural crisis. It is marked by experimentation, particularly on the forms of literature. The specifics of modernism in Indian literature would be different from that of the West because of differences in cultural sensibilities. Indian modernism would emerge not as a derivative of the western modernism but as an extension, with blending 'inter-literary phenomenon' where elements of multiple literary traditions combine to give rise to a distinctive movement. Therefore, there is a difference in the actual time when this mode of literature flourished in the two very distinguished parts of the world. The '1959 Kavita Manifesto' expressed the concern that the poet should be more realistic and freer from the 'blurred sentiments of Shri Aurobindo'. Gopal Honnalgere, who is credited with six collections of poetry, has written poetry which is an amalgamation of self reflection, concreteness of experience and is unconventional in nature. Auden comments that his poetry is 'simple but powerful. I liked it.' Humour is a characteristic feature in his poems. The undertones of urban angst, sexuality, self-disgust and quest for identity are a part of his poetry. Honnalgere, unlike the Bombay school of poetry, wrote in a distinctly 'Indian English'. In this paper, the researcher has tried to identify and understand the poet within the background of modernism in Indian English poetry and how the poems differ from the Western Modernism.

Keywords: Modernism, Indian English Poetry, Gopal Honnalgere.

Modernism in the realm of English literature is ascribed to the experimentalism of the form of the literary genres. It focused on breaking away from traditional techniques of narratives and forms and produced new methods to represent mass-driven, industrial and urban life. The vehicle to represent the actual reality and not the imagined reality. The major focus was not the subject matter but the representation of it. Most modernists were more likely than the romantics to accept the fragments of life, nature and society as inevitable and to expect that literature reflects that damaged reality. For the romantics, the world had hidden meaning and the writer had to find the meaning whereas the modernists were not to describe the pre-existing meaning but create a new one out of the chaos. By the 1920's Modernism came to define the age in the western world as the result of the disruption left behind by the war and the writers understood that it was necessary to discard the previous norms. Writers adopted the ideas of surrealism, symbolism, cubism, impressionism, formalism etc. The general thematic concern in Modernist Literature was to maintain the autonomy and the individuality of one's self in the face of social forces and external culture. But the



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modernist movement was actually the result of the aftermath of World War I. The psychological distress is the main reason why the writers, painters, philosophers aim to find and hold on to the simplest of things and create meaning of its own, significant enough to employ meaning in the grief-stricken lives.

The Indian poetic tradition has always been predominantly 'romantic'; therefore, the manifestation of Indian English poetry had a romantic note. Also, the influence of Persian and English poetry from centuries before overlaps the creative aspect in the minds of the first poets of English poetry in India. Since the only works to look up to were the English poems by the English poets, the poetry of the time was regarded as imitation by the would-be Wordsworths. By the time individuality and authenticity came as virtues in the works of the poets at the time, it neared the end of the era. However, after the 'Romantic period' in the Indian English Poetry hailed by poets such as Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Sarojini Naidu, and so on, the 'Modern' period in Indian English Poetry began with Nissim Ezekiel.

Honnalgere is a contemporary poet of the post-independence generation poets. After the split from his marriage, he had led a reclusive lifestyle becoming a wanderer seeking knowledge as well as wisdom. However, to much of his dismay he was surrounded by experiences that made him turn reclusive and it is those personal experiences that withhold sheer despair and anger that he turns into poetry. Even though he never completed his bachelor's degree he had read widely about literature, Indian philosophy, Bhakti movement and Zen Buddhism. The reason his poetry becomes peculiar is because Modernists of the time in India consciously made an effort to not refer to anything related to God and focused solely on the inclusiveness of humanness. His genius lies in him throwing a spotlight on the surface of the pre-rational experiences, without disregarding the reality of the everyday life. His poems have journeyed from being personal to human. Honnalgere began to write seriously in English in the 1960's. What makes his poems 'uniquely Indian' is partly shaped by his experiences through his wanderings across the country and partly, as Tony Connor observes, because his poems are catered between the English culture – the language – and the subject matter which is at the roots of Indian culture. Honnalgere states that the world to him is a comical place and only a "comic-humorous" language can be used to describe it but at the same time something or some word suddenly assumes significance of the human quality and the language becomes a root of deep concern. He calls this language – "sensitivity the language of innocence." Like E. E. Cummings his poems are unpunctuated. In almost all of his poems the poet employs a free-flowing rhythm which varies with the movement of his humour and thought.



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There are three main sources largely drawn in the poems of Honnalgere. The main one is the reflection of the world through the eyes of the children. Their innocent speech reflects the wonder of the critical world we live in. For instance, in second stanza of the poem titled, 'Wordsworth's Rainbow', the poet shows the aftermath of the descending of 'Kalyug' by an interpretation of a child: "A child showed me once / a greasy spot / of shimmering colours / a filament of automobile / fluid on wet tar road / and said: / here is the dead / body of the rainbow." The idea behind the structure is that even though the child is fascinated by the image of the petrol on the tar road, the poet uses the image to point out that even though we, as civilization, are progressing; we aren't necessarily going in a better direction. Another source of inspiration is derived from religious texts and mystical experiences. He was eminently inspired by the Bhakti movement – a movement that the modernists of his time do not give reverence to – and Zen Buddhism. The influence of the latter is clear in his poem "The chlorophyll of Silence" found in the bodhi tree which is the wisdom of Buddha; where he suggests that the inward journey of a man should be deep, vigorous and determined to attain the "primal silence." The Vedanta thought of the pluralistic meaning is conveyed through the lines of the poem "Thank God there are many Rivers Flowing on the Earth", 'thank god for all men need not drink water / from the same source', from his 3rd collection titled "*The Nudist Camp*", suggesting that men can choose any path he wishes. The third source is psychological – a sense of crisis of identity.

Gopal Honnalgere has published six collections of poetry. His first two collections were under the P. Lal series of book 'Writers Workshop' titled *A Wad of Poems (1971)* and *A Gesture of Fleshless Sounds (1972)*. These collections are considered as his Juvenile works. In this work the brilliance of his ideas and concepts are seen. During the time he was exploring the craft. The first book centres on the themes of belief and religion. There are 21 long and short poems in it. He presents a version of Haikus in his first collection. Haiku is a Japanese poem with seventeen syllables split into three short lines. But Honnalgere does not follow this pattern. In his second volume 30 pieces are published. The poems express that the old ideologies have rendered men to evolve their creative cognition, that the men have given themselves in the sultriness of life and that we derive no meaning with our mundane-ness. The duplicity of our lives is spoken eloquently in the lines: 'We are suppressing our conscious / And manufacturing virtues in the conscious mind / Because virtues fetch money in the money market.' In his third collection, *Zen Tree and the Wild Innocents (1973)*, the sense of humour is best put forward in his poems. He aimed to build an idiom empty of metaphorical images. The poem that best sums up this collection is "The City". This poem was written when he was living in Hyderabad. Written in seven sections it deals with deceptive marriage. The poem expresses the



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artificiality of the city life which becomes a source for losing vitality in the couple's marriage and his own ambition. In this way he confirms the Vedanta thought that learning cannot take place in a compulsive environment. *The Nudist Camp* (1979), the fourth collection, seeks religious faith in a non-disruptive environment. In his search for peace he alludes to Upanishads and the Buddhist meditation elements. He says that this introspection is necessary and peculiar to one's self as the only medicine to the unrest and disorder in the society. All consciousness is self-consciousness, and the poet is able to see the crevice between the pure world of emotions and the concealed world of emotion. *The Fifth* (1982) is considered to be a continuation of *The Nudist Camp*. The poems in this volume involve a mythical tone. The method that Honnalgere applies here is of intuitive argument and contemplation. In this book, the religious motifs are not the main carrier of the subject matter but used as ornamentals. Gopal Honnalgere's last collection is titled *Internodes* (1987). The interesting point about this collection is that each poem begins with the poet's own observation from everyday life and then moves deeper into the questions on identity and suffering. It expresses how freedom from oneself is never actually possible and that this freedom is an illusion that human beings are living in.

To understand the uniqueness of Gopal Honnalgere as a poet, we shall look through his poems. Most of Honnalgere's poems 'travel' through images. They may start somewhere and end somewhere else. Usually the poem revolves around a theme whereas in his poems, the theme courses through the work. From the collection *Zen Tree and The Wild Innocents*, the poem 'The Ant' appeals to the reader that the compulsion of complex thoughts and system are not necessarily needed to commute life. It is a philosophical lesson. The ant's life is contrasted with the man's life. While the man is boasting about his gesture of saving the ant as if it is revolutionary, the creature itself does not weigh in his two cents but carries on to finish his task, just as much as needed. The last line is the crux of the poem 'They do not know / Who Marx or Mao is.' The poet encourages life led by simple action unhampered by thoughts. Here, thoughts indicate socio-politics. The treatise and criticism brought out in the name of class difference by the west has had its effects in the east as well. But the life led by Ants seems more fluid right now than led by men because these creatures are not abounding with different wavering thoughts. He suggests that the ideas such as love and death are meaningless to men because men tend to complicate things. Happiness is to be drawn from the simpler facts of life.



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The 'Two Fables' poses a philosophical question about freedom and the self. It poses the questions by two different episodes, both using animal imagery. The poet uses the images of children, animals and primitives because they live in a world free of dubious and complex thought and see it in its most naked and sublime form, beyond the realm of analytical intellect. This particular poem is moralistic like Emerson's 'Fable'. The poet asserts that "Freedom is like an onion bonda / without the encumbrances of the trap". In the first part of the poem, the rat that is hungry only sees the 'onion bonda' and not the trap in which it lies. Similarly, India who had recently become independent has fallen trapped into the glimmers of urbanization and forgetting to savour the free will, doing so the poet observes that we may be misleading ourselves. The question of self and identity the poet sums up – the self is like an onion / if you peel it layer after layer / thought by thought/ to see what it is/ what it contains / it contains nothing but silence.' In order to create our own identity after the colonial period, we are welcoming more chaos and so unwelcoming our inner peace. The second part of the question also comments on the illusion of freedom in India. Here a literate donkey is the subject who has been tied by a rope. When a goose tells him he is untied, even though he isn't, he actually lives in an illusion thinking he is free after all. India may be free from the British rule but the fact that its culture and habit and instigation have merged into the Indian sensibilities, in turn indicate we are not truly 'free'. Here the poet says that the donkey is a 'literate' suggesting that many Indians who are educated and in power of knowledge choose to blindside themselves due to the validation of others. Thus the self-proclaimed spiritualists dupe not just themselves but also the gullible.

'The Tamarind Ghost' was written for the acclaimed A. K. Ramanujan and it draws relevance, in the aspect of theme, with Ezekiel's 'Night of the Scorpion' satirizing prevailing superstition in a religious and orthodox household. The poem travels through the subject of Grandma who has read Bhagvat Gita and ends with watching a Tamil movie which was ahead of its time. It renders the suppression of sexual emotions of the Indian women. However, the poem is a general biopic, it is concretely 'situated': it is about Tamil Brahmin women. The poem depicts the community's religiosity, by just one line 'grandma / who knew / the whole / of Bhagavatgita', which is the root problem of the suppressed sexual emotions and the superstition. But then it immediately balances out the community's worldliness by stating that the grandma's husband is climbing the ladder by his perfection in English language. The hypocrisy is very much facing front in balancing out both the worlds – domestic and social. Sexual expression is driven underground in this community. It should be concealed from the public eye, regardless of personal passion having been shared. However, there is complete opacity between generations. The grandma never lets the daughter-in-law be in the same room as



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the son. The distance is created by the superstition that a ghost who lives in a tamarind tree enters a woman's body and to get rid of it an exorcist is called who beats the woman with a tamarind stick. However, with the daughter-in-law, the case is different. The ghost only wants minimal intimacy with the husband and it is satisfied by watching a Tamil movie's heroine who calls the other male fictional character on the screen by his name – a progression which is not allowed in an Indian household. Then poem ends with the daughter-in-law's bold move of holding the husband's hand in the public. Only an Indian could write such an encounter.

Conclusion:

Honnalgere believes that a poem is not a vision but an act of seeing. His poetry satirizes the human thought process but it later ripples into subtle philosophy. Even though he deals with abstract ideas he uses the images of the concrete and material world. His poems usually end up summing up human life in a simple philosophical way. What makes his poems uniquely Indian is that he does not shy away from his background; in fact he tries to incorporate it as much as he can. He does not write the poem keeping in mind a foreign audience; therefore he feels no need to 'translate' the Indian terms which helps maintain its art and flow. Knowledge of Indian culture is assumed. This is a work of an Indian poet writing for an Indian audience, not a Diaspora writer or an acculturated urban poet. The quote by Tony Connor on the back cover of *The Fifth* summarizes Gopal Honnalgere as a poet:

“Your poems strike me as being strongly individualistic, and delicately and profitably poised between the English culture, the language you choose to use, and the Indian culture which is usually the subject matter of the poetry. What I particularly like is the shy humour which permeates your view of the world and the way that you express it.”



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