

Muktibodh: Hope, Resistance and Dystopia

VAIBHAV SINGH

Almost half a century back the renowned Hindi writer Muktibodh wrote a long poem 'Andhere Me'-

*Ab abhiviyakti ke saare khatre uthane hi honge.
Todne hi honge math aurgadhsab.*

(Now we will have to risk our life for freedom of expression
We will have to break all centres of power, strongholds)

These lines were so powerful that it inspired thousands, immediately igniting the spirit of new possibility. The full name of Muktibodh was Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh and he was a Marathi by birth. He was one of the most trusted intellectual voices of our time who wrote poetry, literary criticism, stories and essays. The underlying concern of his writing was how to break the boundaries of middle class narrow-mindedness, pathetic self-absorption and also false utopian thinking. He was the writer of an age when cold war was the dominant international phenomenon and most of the great writers and literary aestheticians were sympathetic to the cause of democracy and socialism. Muktibodh's writing was full of musings and thinking and one question he always asked other fellows – 'What is your politics partner?'

The personal life of Muktibodh was never smooth and all plain sailing. He struggled, grappled to seize hold of mundane cruel reality, tried his nerves to face the world which he never liked. He also changed many jobs, edited many journals also to pull through. Just a few years before his death he managed to find the job of a lecturer in Rajnand Goan, a small town of Madhya Pradesh. He died of illness at a young age of 47. The memory of the tragic death of this great writer and thinker of the twentieth century still jolts the moral conscience of contemporary literary fraternity. A picture of a frail and feeble person,

smoking a half-finished *bidi*, is still deeply ingrained in the minds of general readers. But what has really made him an immortal writer of our time is not mechanized routines, but his truly honest commitment to ideas of progressive change that could knock off the unjust and oppressive architecture of an authoritarian society. His poems were included in *Tarsaptak*, edited by Sachidanand Hiranand Vatsyayan, popularly known as Agyeya, that gave voice to seven young poets who were doing novel experiments in art form and poetic content.

Muktibodh developed a highly self-critical poetic temperament and never shied away to critically examine the role of artists and writers as well. In fact, in his essay *Rachnakar ka Manawatawaad*, he wrote- 'No one can be respectable and one's writing can't be above board just because a person ascribes himself the statues of an artist or writer'.¹ In one of his poems he said that some of the writers are not morally upright and they are 'attached with umbilical cord of the blood guzzling class'.² In England writers had the opportunity to be crowned as Poet Laureate and many famous poets like Alfred Lord Tennyson were appointed to the position of Poet Laureate. They used to write poems in praise of the Royal family - in celebration of court, national occasions and events. In India too, during the medieval age there was a culture of *Darbari-Kavi* during the *Riti-Kal* and before that *Charan-Bhatt* tradition of dependent poets was

* Vaibhav Singh, Assistant Professor, School of Undergraduate Studies, Ambedkar University, Delhi.

very strong. Historically, independence of mind, freedom of expression and self-respect were not an all-time privilege and poets had to endeavour for it, sometime successfully and at some other times with appalling failure. Writers like Muktibodh were born in a time when poets were not seen as members of an entertaining class which could beguile the masses. Poets could not remain content with their marginalised identity.

A poet was thus being redefined as a person who is not only concerned with literary writings but also understands its role in turbulent times, and is also ready to share bigger social responsibility in a disorderly society which is looking for inspiration to change from the politicians, writers, poets and thinkers identically. They were revered when they sacrificed their self-interests and could come out in open - breaking the boundaries of class orchelon. Writers cannot afford the silence thrust upon them and should see their fate intertwined with social movements going on outside the world of literature as well. Muktibodh was the writer of this time and age and there was a firm belief deep inside his sub-consciousness that meaning of the words is lost when it fails to invigorate the entity of truth. His commitment to truth and progressive vision was not only a formulaic slogan but also a lived experience. In fact, his only collection of poetry *Chand Ka Muh Tedha Hai* could be published when he was on deathbed and one of the equally reputed writers Shamsheer Bahadur Singh wrote preface of this collection. Shamsheer Bahadur Singh wrote with passionate words;

‘Muktibodh suddenly became a phenomenon of Hindi literary scene. It was impossible to turn a blind eye to this phenomenon. His great rigour and struggle, unbreakable adherence to truth, his whole life, all came to central stage of our collective emotions. Now we were witnessing the life and writings of this illustrious poet and thinker with great surprise.’³

There was an interminable intellectual quest in Muktibodh’s writing. Also, a concern to save his creativity from falling prey to exigency of personal advantages.

Muktibodh used many consequential words in his writing - *Vyaktitva-Aantaran* which means transformation of self is also one of them. Such transformation of self is needed for identification with other beings and every writer has to transform himself before preaching the same to others. Muktibodh was equally concerned with the intended destruction of talented minds and always worried about premature decay and destruction of beautiful intelligent minds due to the difficult life-conditions. He expresses anger to such cruelty as a 22-year-old writing an essay in a magazine *Karamveer* with exasperation – ‘I can’t see the destruction of the lives of people who have great qualities and values in a degenerated and corrupted society.’

Muktibodh wrote several poems between 1935 and 1964

and the very chronology of poems denotes his changing sensibility. He started from the romantic school of Hindi poetry, better known as *Chayawaad*, but gradually shifted to Progressive-Marxist school - though he never toed the sectarian party-line and on several issues, he differed with the official line of progressive writings. His magnum opus is a poem titled ‘Andhere Me’. It is a long poem, with irregular stanza structure and unrhymed lines, but is very influential and widely considered to be an intense and challenging read. In this powerfully-worded, profound and fervent poetic expression, he wrote a dystopian text but concluded it with fiery and spirited hope to resist the tyranny of the system. It is quite common in the world of fiction to write dystopian novels and famous novels like George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Margret Atwood’s *The Handmaids Tale* were written to forewarn about the dangers of autocratic rule hanging upon the future of mankind.

Muktibodh’s poem ‘Andhere Me’ is a marvellous depiction of the rise of opportunism and authoritarianism in post-independent India, where democracy is perpetually threatened, and symbiotic mutually beneficial relationship between politicians, criminals and to an extent intelligentsia has been firmly established. There is a character in this poem ‘I’, a first person singular pronoun, who is full of anxieties and existential fears for being a witness to the barbaric and inhuman acts of the powerful class. This central character of the poem is a perplexed and highly baffled person. In a fit of escapist insanity, he wants to run away from the general state of affairs of society but his conscience repeatedly forces him to deal with untainted truth. He reflects the dilemma of the middle and lower middle classes, and also persistent confusion about his role in a fragile democratic society and in revolutionary call given by social movements. Many historical figures like Gandhi, Tilak have also been used as metaphors of great but aggrieved people. Muktibodh used visual and auditory imagery which are on some occasions very colourful and striking. Vivid descriptions of dramatic unfolding of events, actions and also art of narration of unpredictable incidents have been artistically employed in this poem. The customary boundary between aesthetics and realism collapses here and new sharpened idiom of aesthetics comes into being to help us reflect upon the challenging face of socio-political reality. The virtue of poetic ingenuity doesn’t lie in telling the truth of the obvious world lies in exploring and revealing the truth hidden in the sub-terrain, underground recesses of human mind. Here Muktibodh uses a specific word ‘Antahkaran’ which means ‘inner-world’ and appeals to change it, to make it more human, morally upright and sensitive to other beings. He also interrogates capitalism and warns that its growing power will ultimately jeopardize

the nascent institutions of democracy and undo the gains of freedom struggle. Deep sense of guilt and shame also becomes a part of his poetry and the poet feels as if all the pain, sufferings and torture that common people have been forced to bear with, are actual consequence of his own wrongdoings and impropriety- and that he should not fail to accept his responsibility. He sums up his poem 'Andhere Me' in the following words-

*Khojta hoon pathar pahad samundar
Jahan mil sake mujhe
Meri voh khoi hui
Param abhivyakti anivaar
Aatma sambhava*

(I search mountains, plateau and sea
Wherever I can search for
That I once lost
Free undeterred expressions
That can revive and restore my soul)

One can easily notice that he speaks on behalf of silent majority and with awakened consciousness he looks for *param abhivyakti* which is ultimate and intrepid expression to nurture the roots of this vibrant democracy. In this way, such a long poem can be seen as representing quintessential concern of a middle-class intelligentsia of losing the democracy to gluttonous dictators and its constant quest for courage to speak the truth to those in power.

In the middle of twentieth century, India had a historic opportunity to reconstruct its own world. The recently acquired independence and promulgation of the Constitution had stoked the fire of optimism. Jawaharlal Lal Nehru said in his Independence Day speech in the Constituent Assembly - '... the turning point is past, and history begins anew for us, the history which we shall live and act and others will write about it.'⁴ These passionate words also underline a sense of uncertainty and enthusiasm of treading the new path. An extraordinary surge of this collective hope unleashed an era of subjective creativity and writers like Muktibodh also expressed desire for a new movement and new journey of life. He wrote in one of his poems-

*Mujhe kadam-kadam pe
Chourahe milte hain
Baahen failaye
Ek pair rakhta hoon
To sau rahen phooti hain
Main un sab par se gujarna chahta hoon*

(On every step of my life
I find many intersections

With their open arms
When I set-out on a journey
Hundreds of paths open
And I want to traverse them all.)

Muktibodh's continuous journey on the literary path shows that he was full of exuberance and zeal to ask difficult questions not only to others but also to those who were in the literary circle. He wrote several books like *Kamayani-Ek Punarvichaar*, *Ek Sahityik ki Diary*, *Bharat-Itihass aur Sanskriti*. The last one was written primarily as a textbook for Madhya Pradesh schools but was banned by the state government on frivolous charges of negative portrayal of India's past. Banning of this book perhaps broke Muktibodh's heart. He could never recuperate and finally died after two years. In the first page of this book he remembered the city of Persepolis, famous Persian city which was plundered in 330 BCE by Alexander the Great, the King of ancient Greek kingdom of Macedon. When he burnt the palace of Persepolis, the building of adjoining library with large collection of books was also destroyed. On such a tragic burning of a library, a place to gain wisdom and knowledge, Muktibodh wrote -

*Jal rahi hai library
Persepolis ki
Maine sirf nalish ki
Sirf nalish ki
Andheri jis adalat me*

(Library has been put on fire
Of Persepolis
How helpless I am
Can't do except an indictment
I could only indict
In a court which is full of gloom and murkiness)

Muktibodh was deeply pained to see that a concerted effort was being made to suppress the intellectual stream of knowledge. He was anxious that some brutish and barbaric forces will be unleashed to destroy Indian civilization. Their destructive potential won't only bug the system but will become its defining feature. In his yet another poem, Muktibodh is also critical of doctrinaire and megalomaniac intellectuals who refuse to connect their life and knowledge with common people and rendering their knowledge irrelevant and meaningless. His poem 'Brahmarakshas' symbolises an alienated individual who gains knowledge of all branches and shapes an encyclopaedic mind for himself to feed his fragile ego, but was ultimately rendered futile in an age of unbridled self-interest and hedonism. In the Western literature many adjectives like Kafkaesque, Miltonic, Proustian or Dickensian, etc. have been used

to symbolise the characteristics of famous writers or their works. One can similarly use an adjective Muktibodhiya to represent the dark side of reality which we confront in our daily lives.

In a way, Muktibodh's writings reflect a constant tension going on in the mind of an individual and turns into psychoanalysis of an educated intellectual class. There is a general griping feeling about the poetry of Muktibodh; the 'form' of his poetry is chaotic, enigmatic and usage of words is quite convoluted. Muktibodh has a particular point to convey on this issue and in his own words- 'In today's world the real problem is not the inadequacy of content and excess of poetic form, rather problem is that content abounds and traditional poetic form is not enough to contain it. My main problem is how to organize the diverse nature of content and how to fit it into the formal structure of poetry.'⁵ What he is trying to say is that modern poetry has lost its calm to rigid area of subjects. It is perpetually struggling to voice the defeated and subdued truth. Such truths are innumerable in nature and poetry feels accountable to them. This puts a moral responsibility upon poetry and poets.

Muktibodh also wrote several short stories and the famous film director Mani Kaul made a film on one of his story- 'Satah Se Uttha Aadmi', meaning, arising from the surface. In his story 'Claude Eatherly', Muktibodh showered creative vigour to reveal the hidden truths of life. Claude Eatherly was a pilot in the U. S. Air Force during the second World War and was part of the joint mission which dropped atomic bomb on Hiroshima (Japan) on August 6, 1945. Muktibodh conceived a plot of his story around the life of Claude Eatherly. In this story Claude Eatherly was lodged in a jail and was labelled as insane. He was not even allowed to repent his wrong-doings or war-crimes. Muktibodh used the life of Claude Eatherly to drive home a point that all of us have a cellar in our minds and we throw our most sublime and human ideas and emotions there mercilessly. We wear sophisticated masks which make our lives safe, stunningly deceitful and also successful. Claude Eatherly becomes a metaphor of a grim reality where all the great human virtues are dispatched and murderous selfishness is supported by a system for any petty gains in return. This story touches upon the issues of imperialism in the field of ideas and culture. How the ideas and literature of third world countries are not shared even amongst themselves and how they borrow the pattern of thinking and knowledge from the west alone. A fundamental theme of writers' work is usually self-criticism and self-introspection and Muktibodh used psychoanalytic method of writing and also historical-sociological way of explaining this process.

In Muktibodh's time, literary world was divided between the New Criticism school and the Realist-Marxist school.

The influence of New Criticism was more dominant in American universities. New critics made frontal theoretical attack on any extrinsic approaches to poetry like historical, psychological or sociological and made the poetry a self-referential object. But in larger world, literature and its criticism were closely linked with liberation struggles, movements and idea of social transformation. Literature, especially poetry could not be seen as autonomous, divorced from any relationship with history. In his criticism, Muktibodh repudiated all claims of New Criticism and mostly strengthened the historical-sociological in his texts. One of the brightest products of this critical approach is 'Kamayani: Ek Punarvichaar' which changed the meaning of the metaphorical character of the epic poem Kamayani, written by Jai Shanker Prasad. He always endeavoured to think about the larger issues of society objectively and pressed this point that the aim of literature is not to express the life of middle classes only. It is also a medium to reach at the stage of 'Sabhya-Sameeksha' meaning the critical self-enquiry and criticism of the whole civilization. Such a pronounced objective of literature can be achieved only through the personal integrity of a writer. Personal integrity is not a moralistic probity alone but also a literary principal which can be upheld only in a situation when writer produces objective reflections of reality and if this doesn't happen, disclosure of truth becomes impossible. Reading Muktibodh is always a moment of truth for a reader and his words make our inner world more attuned to inconvenient truths than falsity and self-deceptions.

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NOTES

1. *Nibandhon ki Duniya*, p. 133.
2. *Muktibodh Rachnawali*, Part-2, p. 326.
3. 'Chand ka Mukh Tedha Hai', preface written by Shamsher Bahadur Singh.
4. Jawaharlal Nehru, 'Tryst with Destiny', speech delivered in the Constituent Assembly at midnight of 14-15 August 1947.
5. *Muktibodh Rachnawali*, Part-5, p. 91.