

Poetry of Protest as Narrative Tools in the Age of Social Media

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Abstract

Our memory, thought and personality are incomplete without unrestrained expression and for all practical purposes verse has been our succour. Our linguistic memories and the language in which we express them serve not just to narrate our tales but also empower us to give voice to our dissent or acceptance. From time immemorial, language has served to contextualise and narrate not just need and thought but imagination and thus paved way for possibilities of progress for the world at large. Language, through poetry, its most potent tool, language has invoked the spirit of resurgence, resistance and awakening of many a people. When the participants of the 2019 World Poetry Conference recorded their deliberations, they declared in the preface thus "...things are not be read out or recited, they are to be discussed and debated too. Poets are unacknowledged legislators of the world but nobody takes us seriously because legislatures are made for parleys not for transient recitations. We envision an activist role for the poet to understand his calling intellectually, socially, psychologically and spiritually" (Anand, 2019). The keynote speaker of the conference Brad Modlin noted "poetry announces change through what it says and what it doesn't say, poetry allows us to see what is happening in the world around us and informs us of what is present and what is absent, poets help us understand events and why and how they happen, they help us navigate through collective joy, dissent and bear witness to the world as it happens" (Modlin, 2019). True to these observations, poetry serves as an instrument of protest and reaches the most primitive of listeners and makes inroads into their opinion formation apparatus. This paper has chosen to elaborate upon the theme of awareness, language and media while narrowing it down to explore how poetry has served to protest in the age of social media and has ushered in an era of art based protest. This is done using the broader framework of social media activism and literature. The researcher has used secondary data from journals, newspapers, poetry anthologies and social media links to support the claims of the paper. The paper will also attempt to enquire into the nature, structure and motivation behind such poems and the resulting impact. The scope of this paper is restricted to protest poetry as narrative tools and its role in generating conversations on social media.

Introduction

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Journalism and Literature – A Background

Literary Journalism is not a new field, it has been an area of research for a while now, and in fact some of the greatest narratives of our times have emerged from this genre of journalism. Thomas Berner in his seminal anthology which traces literary texts that changed the face of journalistic writing “The Literature of Journalism – Text and Context” observes thus “Gabriel Garcia Marquez had a great story to tell, but had he told it in conventional newspaper format his newspaper would have suffered severely because the story would have bluntly pointed out the corruption of the Colombian government. Instead, Garcia Marquez extensively interviewed the survivor of a shipwreck and told the sailor's story in the first person of the sailor, in effect removing himself as the mediator and deflecting official censure. Thus was born *The Story of a*

Shipwrecked Sailor.” (Berner, 1999). Thus we understand that stories that have a great impact on the readers are stories that are written in a manner that is imaginative, creative and palatable by the common reader – good journalism needs to be able to influence the reader to think, the main focus being on wielding the ability to form opinions in the minds of the readers. If Garcia Marquez did it through prose, contemporary writers are doing it through poetry written and propagated on social media. These poems that are shared and re-shared on social media chronicle the sentiments of the time they are written in, they capture nuances that lengthy reports and prose pieces cannot capture with such ease. Poetry in current times has evolved as an important tool to understand how consent, dissent and catharsis works its way through the public opinion.

Poetry as Pretext, Text and Context

If one pays attention to the histories and alternate histories revealed by the linguistics of memory in the context of poetry, one notes that poetry has been at the centre of humanity's many struggles; be it in finding comfort while dealing with the recent pandemic, natural disasters or in giving voice to the most oppressed during the time of political/social unrest (think #MeToo 2019, #BlackLivesMatter 2020, street protests of Hong Kong 2020).

The Fabric of Protest Poetry

The fabric of protest poetry is an ancient one, reminding us of centuries of literary activism, ranging from Mahakavi Subrahmanya Bharathi's clarion call to freedom in his fiery song “*Viduthalai Viduthalai*” (Freedom! Freedom!), to Gopalakrishna Adiga's reminder to stop going against the tenets of environmental harmony in “*Enadaru Maadu Thamma*” (Do Something Brother) to the reassuring power in walking the path alone in Tagore's *Ekla Chalo* (Walk Alone), poetry from our rich past has made flesh dissent, protest and personal discipline. However, the era of slow dissemination and mindful popularity has given way to the age of social media and protest poetry also has changed over the years, we are in an era which doesn't value

a proposition by longevity or depth but by its ability to go viral and touch a wide population in a short turnaround time. In a manner of speaking, protest poetry has found its most befitting partner in social media, poems rising against hegemonic excesses have found a place in the annals of social media history (albeit some are too short lived to mention) this does not mean that other types poems have shaped our thought and intellect any less through the course of our intellectual traditions. Since we are, in this paper, only dealing with protest poetry this further elaboration will restrict itself to the nature of protest poetry as seen on social media. Protest poetry is marked by a few easily identifiable markers that make it stand out from the simple moorings over emotion. A few of these markers are listed below:

Anti-Establishment and Anti-Hegemonic Overtones: "Poetry has always been anti-hegemonic. Dissent, however, must be broadly understood in this context. It could surely mean raising your voice against oppressive powers or

Free Verse and Absence of Standard Rhyme Schemes: Protest poetry, other than the ones that are used as sing songs in spaces of protest, generally does not follow a standard rhyme scheme, in fact dissonance rather than harmony is the general tone employed. Consider the below verse from Clint Smith's 2017 poem "How to Fight"

"We didn't say certain words in my home because we were told they could hurt people, but words were the only way I ever knew how to fight." (Smith, 2017)

Or this section of "The Type" by Sarah Kay from her book No Matter the Wreckage:

New Tool of Oral History - Protest poetry in this era is not defined by the place it finds in a reputed journal or printed book from a known publishing house, rather its relevance is defined by its reach to an audience beyond the boundaries of geography, physicality and printability, in fact protest poetry is now serving

ills that prevail in the social structure." (Ray, 2020). True to the above observation appeared in The Hindu at the peak of the CAA/NRC protests in India, poetry serves to protest the hegemony primarily. We could see it in the call for inclusivity in the verses of Varun Grover's "Ham Kaaghaz Nahi Dikhaayenge" (We Won't Show Papers) which he tweeted was free for everyone to use and cite without any worry about copyright whatsoever. Take also as an example Ajmal Khan's lines:

*Write me down, I am an Indian
Write it down, My name is Ajmal
I am a Muslim, and Indian citizen
We are seven at home, all are Indian by birth
Do you want documents?"*

These poems directly question the power centres and demand an explanation, ask for resolution and do so loudly. It is an open letter of sorts to those who rule to pay heed to the voice of those that are ruled.

*"Do not mistake yourself for a guardian.
Or a muse. Or a promise. Or a victim. Or a snack.
You are a woman. Skin and bones. Veins and nerves. Hair and sweat.
You are not made of metaphors. Not apologies. Not excuses."* (Kay, 2014)

The above examples do not follow a set pattern, rhyme scheme or definitions of traditional poetry, some of the above pieces are spoken word poems and are prose like and may be passed off for a passionate speech, nevertheless they serve as important tools of protest to an audience that is increasingly having trouble decoding complicated, jargon ridden poems and prefers to patronise the simplicity of free verse and spoken word poems. This is also a key element in making protest poetry popular among younger readers/listeners as there is an element of "instant gratification" provided by these pieces.

as a tool of oral history. Protest poems are essentially performance pieces that find their audience on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YourQuote. Take for instance the various translated versions of Faiz Ahmad Faiz's poem "Hum Dekhenge". One that caught everyone's attention was the version in Kannada which was sung at the protest against the Citizenship

Amendment Act at Town Hall, Bengaluru, it had no script printed prominently but the video was shared widely and saw massive following among the Kannada speaking population in a short while. "... Artists came together to translate and sing Faiz Ahmad Faiz's revolutionary verse, *Hum Dekhenge*, in Kannada." (Post, 2020) *Naavu Nodona* (Pallavi, 2020), or Puneet Sharma's "Who the Hell Are You" where he tells you in a matter of fact manner "*Look! I would tell you, but the land herself is restless, What is between her and me, is somewhat personal*"

Reminding us of the poetry of Langston Hughes or Audre Lorde, these poems are as much a voice of dissent as they are of deep rootedness and an emerging sense of globalism and social concern. These poems like many others in this genre capture the true *zeitgeist* and serve as the oral chronicler of our times.

Multiple Platforms Voicing the Thoughts of Margins: Protest poems, as seen in the recent times, have worked wonders in voicing the thoughts of the margins. Films, virtual open mikes and platforms such as Mirakee and YourQuote have provided easy access to first time writers to publish their poetry, adding to the ease of publication is the advent of e-books and e-anthologies that find wide acceptance and are sought after by both first time writers and seasoned poets, this could also be why various communities such as the LGBTQI, economic refugees, and immigrant scholars have taken to social media to publish their poetry and express their thoughts and feelings. These voices are available to readers as e-books or as performance videos and podcasts. Various platforms like Sound Cloud, Kindle Direct, Kommune, Unerase Poetry, Airplane Poetry Movement, Tuning Fork, IGTV and most recently Instagram Reels have encouraged voices that would have otherwise been marginalised to find their listeners with greater ease than before. Most of these platforms are driven by a crowd that does not interact with the poet directly hence providing the poet with a greater sense of safety and increased confidence to say what they have to. Take for instance the viral poem "A Brown Girl's Guide to Gender" by poet Aranya Johar was sensational owing to over two lakh viewers watching her performance, "Poetry is my way of starting a dialogue" she observes in her interview with Hindustan Times. Another example is Akhil Katyal's poem "I Want to 377 You So Bad"

where he made no secret of his dissent and said "*... when it sleeps when its dark I want to break laws with you in bed and in streets and in parks*" (Katyal, 2015) it went viral like no one expected it to and he soon began getting invited to conferences and discourses around gender and identity across the country. It is interesting also to note the works of poets Bharath Savitri Divakar and an active poet from within the LGBTQI communities in this context: Bharath lashes out at people who body shame him in his poem "Fatness" saying "*...aww... you look like a cute Pillsbury doughboy – and you look like a loaf of bread that never rose in life...*" (Divakar, 2017)

Use of Enjambment and Phonoaesthetics – It is easy to note that most protest poetry depend on enjambment and phonoaesthetics different from traditional lyrics or metred poetry. Protest poetry has less to do with the words as they appear on paper and more to do with the way it sounds when performed. The very nature of this genre of poetry mandates that it appeals to the auditory sensibilities of a certain audience in a certain way and makes just enough meaningful noise to offend or at the least get the attention of the hegemonic structures. Look for instance at the unusual presentation of Rupī Kaur's poem "Balance" where the title is printed at the bottom of the poem after she says "*i thank the universe for taking away everything it has taken and giving to me everything it is giving*" – note how the I is not capitalised as is convention, the order of words is not conventional either but the poem's conveys the sound of dissonance that it wants to convey to the ear of the listener. Note also this poem by Gaya Lobo Gajiwāl where she speaks about consent "*nice girls say yes when they mean yes so that other nice girls can say no and be believed*" the phrase 'be believed' does not agree with the formal structures of verse but it definitely is a sample of phonoaesthetics.

Slang and Profanity: One cannot avoid noticing multiple evidences of slang and so called profanity in some of the most celebrated protest poems on social media. Words that would otherwise be hushed and dispensed off as vulgar are used aplenty in protest poems and it is accepted by the audience quite casually. What is profane and what is not is beyond the purview of this paper, what is observed is protest poetry's use of words does not follow the unwritten rules of traditional poetry. Most

anthologies that call for poems ensure they include a line that says explicit words, obscenity and crass sexual references are to be avoided, hence the social media becomes a censor-free space to say things in a manner that is candid and raw. One may also note that the linguistic memory that we discussed in the earlier parts of the paper – such memory is short for the connoisseurs of a performance centric genre such as protest poetry.

Poetry as a News Reader of its Time

Protest poetry holds within itself illustrations of what was, certainties of what is and the prospects of what could be. It represents the true spirit of the time as it chronicles the struggles of a people to make their voice heard. We can notice this when Harnidh Kaur writes these lines in her poem Frequency:

*“The government couldn’t afford names anymore,
names gave away everything it
was trying to retain – caste/class colour
had to disappear, only virtues could
remain – humanity had to find itself, and
names just blocked the noble way”*

It is not hard to guess that she is pointing out the flaws of categorisation and attempts to generalise identity in a rather satirical way during her time.

Notice how in the poem RSVP by Rohini Venkatesh Malur, she questions the notions of patriarchy in her poem written in the context of the ruling over Sabarimala entry by the Supreme Court of India:

*“You don’t speak.
Other women tell me
I have the right to enter your house
Priests speak for you
Sexist, patriarchal, shutting women away in the
homes
For the crime of being fertile
We have the right to enter your house.”*

Thus poetry of protest conveys news to its readers/listeners in a manner that befits the age of social media. One may well be able to trace the timeline of a society and its news items if one carefully puts together the protest poems of the period.

Social Media and Protest Poetry

It would not be unfair to say that the trend of social media poetry started with the success experienced by best-selling Cambodian-Australian poet Lang Leav in 2013, followed by Rupri Kaur’s Milk and Honey in 2016. Both

poets came from a diasporic background and wrote to protest against emotional injustices and had captured the imagination of hundreds of thousands of followers on Instagram. Social media served as an ideal nurturing ground for these poet entrepreneurs and their success gave rise to an aspirational value for poetry on social media. Users of Instagram took to the trend of being identified as an Insta-poet and wrote their hearts out, their writings (and to a great extent their feelings too) were validated by the scores of likes that followed thus popularising this format of poetry. Using social media platforms for expressing dissent was a natural upshot of this validation and recognition that poets received online. What was once the playfield of the elite, learned and privileged few, is now an open space accessible to everyone familiar with social media. This is what has led to the popularity of this genre of poetry. Protest poetry is precipitous, democratising and thrives on the hyper-connectivity of the cyber space ethos.

Conclusion

An article from The New Indian Express sums this up very well: “No internet blockage can stop this trend. Protest performance in the 21st century is designed to go viral. Bodies animate ideas, gestures fuse with words: Far from being ephemeral, such performances circulate and change, making new meaning with each repetition.” (Mitra, 2020).

Protest poetry has given rise to a trend of outspoken, strongly opinionated poets who are not afraid to say what they have to, it is a fact that some of these protest poems such as those that were performed during the Jallikattu protests in Tamilnadu in 2017 and the songs based on them going viral on social media resulted in resolution or closure to the cause of the protest, yet some others such as the protest poems of 2019 – 2020 around the CAA NRC issues are yet to see meaningful closure. Either ways these poems and their domineering presence on social media cannot be ignored and despite the limited recall value and retention of the content of these poems, their ability to evoke a mass stir is undeniable.

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