

BOOK REVIEW ON DR MAHENDRA BHATNAGAR'S *STRUGGLING FOR LIFE* BY NEIL LEADBEATER

The full title of this collection is *Struggling For Life: Lyrical Glimpses of Life and Experience (A Philosophy of Life)*. It is a fair summary of its style and content and gives the reader an insight into what is to follow. The title suggests a hard contest that is fraught with difficulty. For Bhatnagar, the mystery of living requires us to expend considerable effort and exertion as we try to comprehend and make sense of our conscious existence. "Life" here is not just the period between birth and death, it is also related to the now and forever: it is the struggle for eternal well-being.

The cover of the book gives us a glimpse of heavenly intentions. It is a photograph taken from an aeroplane which is above the clouds heading towards a sunrise or a sunset. It is the infinite freedom of the firmament. It could be the start of a new day, a new age or the end of a day: a dichotomy that reflects so much on the direction of his poems which veer alternately between acceptance and resignation.

In his helpful introduction, P C K Prem states that Bhatnagar believes in a panoramic vision of life. To this extent, his themes are universal. Prem says that Bhatnagar is a poet who scrutinises the human world and the natural world. He is also a poet who displays

indomitable fortitude and accepts with faith and courage the transience of life with all its trials and tribulations.

The present volume comprises 199 poems of varying length. Most of the poems are short and concise enough to fit on one page. For the most part they are written in a lyrical vein that sometimes verges on the dramatic – a reminder that he once worked for All India Radio as one of the members of an Audition Committee for Drama and was contracted as a songwriter. His poems reflect the mood of the time: the experiences, aspirations and hopes of an individual living in a complex age.

The writings of Munshi Premchand (1880-1935) have been influential in shaping Bhatnagar's poetry. Indeed, in his introduction, P C K Prem states that this Indian writer, famous for his modern Hindi-Urdu literature, left a lifelong impression on Bhatnagar. Premchand is considered to be the first Hindi author whose writings prominently feature realism, with particular reference to the problems of the poor and the urban middle class. He used literature in the same way as Bhatnagar does, to bring about public awareness of national and social issues. His poems are rooted and grounded in social, economic and political issues. Premchand's realism comes to the fore in Bhatnagar's poem *Realism*:

*Living life is difficult, burdensome,
unbearable*

For Bhatnagar, bitter experience is the forerunner of maturity. There are lessons to be learned. At the same time, many of his poems affirm that each moment in life is to be welcomed. At times, he may feel defeated but he is not despondent.

In an interview with Dr Nilanshu Kumar Agarwal, published in *Wild Violet*, Bhatnagar said that he was not attached to any political dogma or political party. He said that he believed not only in Gautam Buddha's philosophy but also in the views, thoughts and ideology of Karl Marx and Ghandi. Bhatnagar believes that free thinking is absolutely necessary for all intellectuals, writers and poets.

Stylistically, his poems are straightforward and clear. For Bhatnagar, communication is a priority. The poet must be able to communicate with his audience otherwise all is lost. Poetry must contain high and noble thoughts. It must possess a certain dignity for every poet should be a "rishi" (a sage)...a torch-bearer of society.

Many of the poems in this volume are declamatory in style. The use of repetition, often at the beginning of stanzas, lends itself to this kind of dignified oratory. In *A Wish*, for example, each couplet begins with the command "Let..." In *Duty* all four stanzas begin with the words "To love..." In *Recognition* the first four stanzas commence with the word "How..." and in *Unexpected* all the stanzas begin with the words "Like all times..." *The Worship of Art* is

held together by the repletion of the invitation to “Sing O sing”.

Imagery comes directly from nature, landscape and the natural elements. Extreme emotion is described in terms of fire and snow and thunder. Pain is depicted as a scorpion’s sting, confusion as a forest, a hurricane or a dust storm and loneliness as stony ground or barren land. The use of these very general terms and the absence of specific place names helps to make these poems universal in their appeal.

Throughout, his writing is marked by a certain stoicism. This is particularly prominent in a poem such as *Ascetic* where he states that the ascetic

*... finds no difference
between dying and living
for him no difference
between
drinking poison or nectar.*

In *Courage* he writes that

each challenge is welcome.

Bhatnagar admires the man who can face any disaster. The man who exercises restraint is capable of facing all calamities.

In *How To Suffer Pain: A Point Of View* he writes:

Smile if the heart aches.

Several poems focus on the transitory nature of our existence. Life is a journey, it is one that is imbued with a degree of uncertainty, it is a voyage with no prior knowledge of direction. Life cannot be planned. Expect the unexpected. Ultimately it is like a flower that blooms and is no more. Some poems look forward to the abandonment of self so that the soul can merge with the collective consciousness or sleep in the depths of oblivion.

His poetry is not overtly didactic but it is philosophical in its approach to life's experiences and offers up a degree of wisdom in the process. In *Arrogance* he says:

*Hate a sinful act
and not a sinner*

and in *Renunciation – Consciousness* he counsels:

*Nothing is gained
if you curse anyone.*

In *Acceptance* he says:

*Good things come slowly
be patient
be diligent*

and in *A Particular Thought* he writes:

*Dreams do not come true just like that
It takes generations to realize...*

Several poems, such as *One Sunday*, *Companionless* and *Unexpected* dwell on the theme of loneliness which

Bhatnagar says we must accept willingly and embrace wholeheartedly. In the poem *Incomplete* –which is short enough to quote in full – the mystery of loneliness is captured in a masterly fashion:

*Something remains
un-said*

*Shall I add an appendix
or hold back*

*Something unendurable
persists.*

Here, he writes about the elusive nature of our existence. Something is missing which he can feel in his heart and yet he cannot state exactly what it is.

For Bhatnagar, the source of creating poetry lies in intense and emotional experiences. This is the first and most essential element. Thought comes next – the rational outworking or analysis of the original emotional experience. Imagination, language and style make up the other elements.

Each poem is an exposition of logical thinking, a weighing up of a particular situation which comes to a well-argued balanced conclusion. We cannot change the past. Life is stable for all time. We have no choice but to accept it.

His creed is summed up in these words from *Duty*:

*To love this life
this world
is what a man must do.*

*To love people
mute animals, birds, creatures,
the forest creepers,
the trees,
is what a man must do.*

Thanks are due to the team of translators who have once again brought Bhatnagar's poems before an English audience. The translations are accompanied by helpful footnotes on the names of specific individuals, references to Indian mythology, technical terms in Sanskrit poetics, and other "foreign" details as an aid to comprehension.

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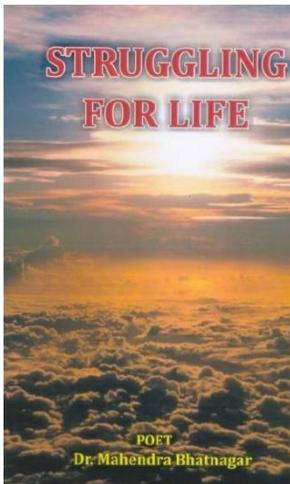
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Author's Bio

Dr Mahendra Bhatnagar, born in Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh in 1926, is a Hindi and Indian English poet. For many years he worked as a high school teacher with the Madhya Pradesh Government Educational Service, and has subsequently held teaching posts in a number of universities and institutions including the University of Tashkent (1978) and the Indira Gandhi National Open University Teaching Centre (1992). He has also worked as a Chairman or Member of various educational committees at Indore University, Vikram University, Ujjain & Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Agra. He is the author of 12 volumes of poetry in English, the most recent being *Lyric-Lute* (Vista International Publishing House, Delhi, 2007); *A Handful of Light* (National Publishing House, New Delhi, 2007); *New Enlightened World* (Indian Publishers Distributors, Delhi, 2010) and *Dawn To Dusk* (Indian Publishers Distributors, Delhi, 2011). At various times he has edited a number of Hindi literary magazines such as *Sandhya* and *Pratikalpa*. He is an adviser of *Poetcrit* Magazine and a member of the Advisory Board of the *Indian Journal of Postcolonial Literature*. On four occasions (1952, 1958, 1960 and 1985) he has been a recipient of the Madhya Pradesh Government Award. In addition to English, his work has been translated into several other languages including Czech, French, Japanese and Nepali.

Critique's Bio

Neil Leadbeater is an author, essayist, poet and critic living in Edinburgh, Scotland. His short stories, articles and poems have been published widely in anthologies and

journals both at home and abroad. His most recent books are *Librettos for the Black Madonna* (White Adder Press, Scotland, 2011); *The Worcester Fragments* (Original Plus Press, England, 2013); *The Loveliest Vein of Our Lives* (Poetry Space, England, 2014), *The Fragility of Moths* (Bibliotheca Universalis, Romania, 2014) and *Sleeve Notes* (Bibliotheca Universalis, Romania, 2016).

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