

Rebel with a Cause: Reading for Resistance in Agyeya's *Prison Days and Other Poems*

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Abstract

Sachchidananda Hirananda Vatsyayan, better known by his nom de plume 'Agyeya', was a member of the All India Progressive Writers' Association and the establisher of the 'Nayi Kavita'. He embodied many roles in his life; a poet, novelist, founder-editor of a newsweekly, soldier, and professor. His house arrest and imprisonment - for being a 'revolutionary' - by the British authorities in the early 1930s led him to compose poetry in confinement, written between 1933 and 1938, and now available to us as an anthology entitled *Prison Days and Other Poems* (2018). These poems are testament to the liberty of his vision, even in captivity, for they depict the impetuosity of a rebel's psyche which was cognizant of the elemental force of his countrymen's revolution. There have been futile attempts to confine Agyeya's poetry to a genre, but the diversity of his thought refuses his style to be identified by a label. He was, in fact, instrumental in pioneering modern trends in the realm of not only poetry but also fiction, criticism, and journalism. The paper will, therefore, attempt a close reading of selected poems from the above-mentioned volume for the experimentation as seen in his 'prison poems' and also the presence of the element of existentialism in his thought. The study further intends to analyse how the poet weaves images of faith and hope, all the while endorsing the nation's struggle for independence with equivalent vigour.

Keywords: Existentialism; Freedom; Philosophy; Prison; Revolutionary.

Sachchidananda Hirananda Vatsyayan believed "Freedom is a man's biggest desire and a man's biggest merit" (Nair). Brought up with a spirit of challenging suppression, he dropped out of his master's degree to join the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army, a revolutionary organization fighting for the independence struggle. In November 1930, he was arrested on account of his involvement in the attempt to help Bhagat Singh escape

from jail. A pivotal figure in Hindi literature, he established new trends in Hindi poetry, which came to be known as the *Nayi Kavita* Movement. This was initiated by the publication of an anthology, *Tar Saptak* (1943), which paved the way for 'Prayogwad', but the protagonist poets collectively rejected this label along with the label of experimentalism. A rift emerged between Agyeya and the Progressive Writers' movement, but the former firmly carried the mantle of heading 'Nayi Kavita' as it strove to de-emphasize external constraints of rhythms and follow internal disciplines of rhythm more rigorously (Tripathi). Agyeya went on to publish four more such anthologies, none of which were bound by any peculiar aim, and offered a liberal space for young, unpublished poets.

The tendency to break free from the idiom can be seen even in his writing from these poems of 1933, which were published later in 1946 during his stay in Meerut. Cognizant of the limited space that poems occupy, Agyeya intensifies his thought in distinct methods and "uses figures of speech liberally" (Mandal). To establish synchronization between the subject matter of the poem and the required immediacy of engagement, Agyeya uses a verb in the brief first lines of most of his poems. There are multiple poems employing anaphora which might suggest the echoing thoughts of the poet in the confinement of the jail room. In "Vision", the poet writes about his contemplations triggered by a shooting star. Generally used to emphasize the significance of a thing, anaphora here is inversely being used to question the futility of an existence that is prone to destruction in a fraction of a second:

Why are bars
 Why are you
 Why am I
 Why are days, months, years
 When in one flash Eternity
 Burns to ashes? (10-15)

There is no consistency across the anthology in terms of the visual arrangement of the stanzas as observed 'on paper'. Agyeya's exploration with indentations, capitalizations, pauses, and repetitions adds profundity and graveness to further emboss it as pre-independence poetry. Similarly, the use of 'I', across all the poems is indicative of the extreme self-awareness

of the poet's mind. He perceived everything in the direct singularity of it, which added weight to his existential musings. This paper intends to transverse through exactly this, using philosophical frameworks.

Jean-Paul Sartre, a key figure in the philosophy of existentialism and phenomenology, was "well-known in his time for being involved in resistance, unforgiving of collaborationism and conformity, and for having an active interest in revolutionary movements" (Manzi). Though Sartre comes out in sharp contrast with Ralph Waldo Emerson in religious regards, Jaffe's study of their parallel theories of responsibility points to how both thinkers had overlapping views. They can be observed to have similar stances on the active participation of the artist in society, disapproval towards the 'man in the ivory tower' and the disengaged scholar. They also place the responsibility of the state of society and fellow men on the 'man' himself. Sartre's philosophy asserted that "existence precedes essence", Man first exists and chooses to become what he is.

Emerson, in his theory of Man, advocated that the idea of the sublime is first cultivated in ourselves, then transferred to the creator after being "purified and enlarged to infinity" (Gurudev). If Sartre's opinion of human subjectivity is infused with Emerson's assumptions of the divine character, the so-produced thought has traces in Agyeya's work. He firmly advocated the philosophy of the divine residing in the mortal, corrupted with earthly sins, waiting for awakening. The poem "Sanctum" corroborates his transcendentalist belief that the maker is enshrined in His creation. As one of his earliest creations, it also manages to convey the early maturation of his thoughts and doctrines. In the poem, the poet writes of an out-group, 'they', who mock the existence of Him, shoot a bullet in the idol, killing themselves crying "God is I!"

Sartre's ontology can be understood through his magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness* (1943) which provides a complex, compartmentalized view of existential freedom. Yvonne Manzi, in her article titled 'Jean-Paul Sartre: Existential "Freedom" and the Political' writes "for Sartre, freedom is not the freedom to do something (but to)...have a choice." This freedom to choose is what produces "anxiety and anguish". In Sartre's own words, "We are condemned to be free." She further explains how Sartre's man is 'free' when he decides on a purpose and commits to it, thus "transcending himself". The paper attempts to filter Agyeya's prison poems through this concept of consciousness of absolute freedom. In an unfinished documentary project on his life titled *Sannate ke Chhand* (2011), he talks about the state of his mind when he wrote his magnum opus *Shekhar: Ek Jeevani*

(1998) and later, these poems. He recalls how he was a nineteen-year-old in a 'condemned cell' who was unsure of whether he would live to see his twentieth or not. For this reason, it became of prime importance to him to understand the gravitas of the movement and his role in it. He felt he needed to contemplate his actions for which he might be remembered as a revolutionary. In this quest, Agyeya wrote continuously for the next four years, in Hindi and English, with the sole intention of crystallizing his angst and the reasons for his relentless pursuit. Through his rendition, he contests to understand 'the self' in order to understand the motive of the movement, of which his 'self' has chosen to be a part. This background of insight into the author's mind remains crucial to the analysis of the poems. It is a prerequisite for decoding Agyeya's intent in most of the pieces. His ideology is entangled in his verses and powers them with vivacity. He is aware of the choices that he has made and that causes the anxiety that Sartre referred to.

Manzahas compressed Sartre's existential/ ontological freedom through Nausea's protagonist. As per that, the process of transcending the self is realizing that freedom is existence (being is what it is), asserting that existence comes before essence (being is in itself), accepting that the universe is meaningless, and then reveling in the virtue of it (being is). Agyeya might not be perceived as someone who has transcended, because for him the movement, i.e., the independence struggle, still holds meaning. In fact, it is the sole axle point for which he bears his agony. However, he certainly underpins a purpose and commits to it with unquestioned devotion even when he is unaware of its end. "Face on the Wall" and "Name on Wall", which can be read as companion poems expound on the bewilderment of Agyeya in labeling or visualizing the movement. He writes, "...I have pictured you/ I do not know you" ("Face on the Wall", 1-2) and "Just your name without endearments" ("Name on Wall", 3).

But he still deifies the movement and similarly reveres it with the unshakable faith of an ardent devotee. He also delineates in both the poems the atrocious and agonizing uncertainty of the result of the battle he is going through. It can be safely assumed that he voices the collective consciousness of the countless freedom fighters of the nation. This uncertainty he speaks of is of temporal frames as well as political scenarios, like "On the wall/ Impaled you/ Yet it is my blood that drips..." ("Face on the Wall", 11-13).

In another poem titled "Resurrection", Agyeya talks of the incomprehensible outcomes of the movement but neatly outlines his self-surrender

with equivalent fervor. Drawing on absurd traditions of countries afar, he talks of how he neither fears death nor oblivion but wants his heart to remain buried in an unknown wait. He voices the vastness of his yearning as he visualizes the resurrection of his heart:

Let me die...

Die,

Perish:

Only let the work that was my heart

Lie Buried,

Forgotten...

Yet waiting

Ah, toward what resurrection unconceived!(8-19)

Though the contemplative tendencies of Agyeya are consistent, elements of existential introspection are triggered because of confinement by the British Raj. In Sorin Baiasu's article 'Existentialist Freedom, Distorted Normativity, and Emancipation', he poses questions against people having 'absolute freedom' even when they are "members of very oppressive institutions also termed as 'total institutions', where their behavior is under scrutiny and can be controlled, i.e., prisons, mental asylums, care homes, etc. Ervin Goffman (1961) defines a total institution as follows:

a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life. (1961: xiii)

Hardie Bick notes, "What is striking about reading the testimonies of those who have endured and survived the most brutal living conditions is how they often confirm and support Sartre's arguments concerning freedom." According to Baiasu, Gofman's empirical research shows that inmates display subvert practices to what is officially expected of them to assert their agency and validate that agency's reach "beyond the grasp of the organization":

Where enthusiasm is expected, there will be apathy; where loyal-

ty, there will be disaffection; were attendance, absenteeism; where robustness, some kind of illness; where deeds are to be done, varieties of inactivity. (Goffman 1961: 304-05)

Resembling this, Agyeya writes of the impossibility of the totalitarian regime to confine them (the freedom fighters) and further silence them through imprisonment under the label of "social security". In his poem "The Dispossessed", he talks of the innumerable, consistent, barbaric attempts at suppression by the colonizer, while the poetic sensibility of his unconquerable psyche carves out the futility of these attempts.

You bind us in chains

You put us behind bars

You crush us in the mill that you call

Social security.

And then you call us 'the dispossessed' and weep

Shallow tears over our suffering.

But we are not the dispossessed;

We are possessed of a fiend who knows no chains, Whom bars do not bind: (2-10)

It is also interesting to note that it is inherent in Agyeya's poetry that his imprisonment implied an attempt to silence physical/political as well as creative resistance. Agyeya's incarceration was intended to silence the resistance devised via the power of the written word. But it also sought to warn the oppressed about the consequences of idiosyncratic actions of camaraderie.

But as Lippens analyses in her 2009 criminology study, human beings cannot be engineered to be docile and they can 'choose their actions freely', after contemplation of consequences and options. This acknowledgment of the indomitable is what dominates the element of resistance in pre-independence writing. In "Will", Agyeya writes, "Fate kills:/ But man has the wherewithal to survive and defy it" (1-2).

There are various other poems where Agyeya's tryst with existentialism

can be examined. For instance, there is also an element of Nietzschean nihilism (“to live is to suffer”) in one of the poems entitled “Dust Storm”, where he employs his amazement with the colossal imagery of celestial planets and contrasts it with the suffering of humankind. According to him, this suffering is inflicted upon them through the action of existence. The poem ends with “Existence is a state that vivifies:/ I cannot die because suffering lives in me” (16-17).

Agyeya’s poetry, in terms of ideas as well as structural integrity, is still viable to be viewed as revolutionary. It asserts ‘absolute freedom’ through the power of creation as it peruses the concepts of societal duties with a fresh vehemence of individualist autonomy. His unshackled thought in his prison poems is so distinct in its variation, from touching optimism to encrypting existentialism, from reveling in the spirit of camaraderie to minutely studying ‘the self’. Apart from lending his invaluable vigor to the freedom struggle, his contributions to Hindi poetry can be deemed historical. The poets who emerged from this movement, like Jagdish Gupta, went on to define the ‘new man’, the new poet who wrote purposefully to free Hindi poetry from the boundaries drawn by predecessor movements like *Chhayawaad*, *Pragatiwaad*, and *Prayogwaad* (Tripathi). Agyeya himself denied the movement of having any theory and rejected the labels of any ‘-isms’, his sole intention was to create poetry which is the means to itself, yet he remains an investigator of everything in his milieu, documenting it with the brilliance of an artist and challenging it with the fury of a rebel.

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