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NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

Indian Poetry in English

Lecture 13: Arvind K. Mehrotra

BINOD MISHRA

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

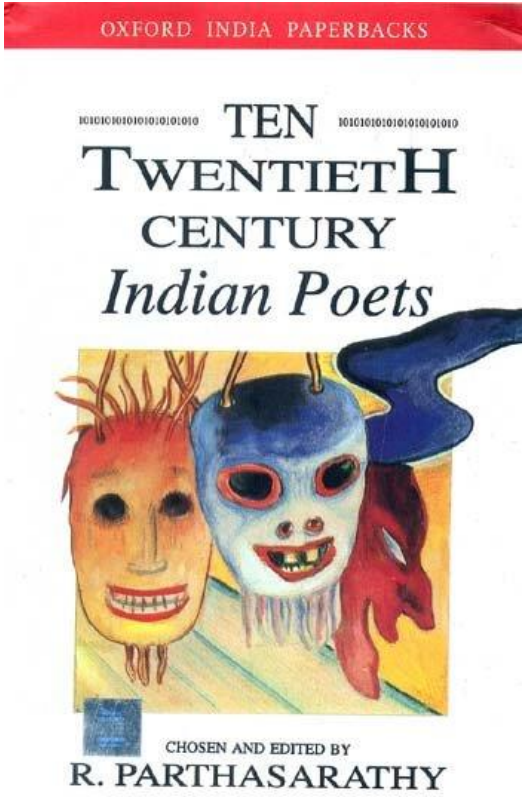


Socio-Political Conditions

- Post-Independence
- Language controversy: *Angrezihatao*
- Emergency in 1975
- French Surrealists of the 20s and the American Beats of the 1960s

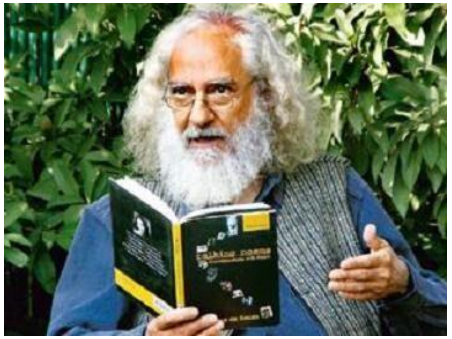
Literary Conditions

- Writers Workshop by P. Lal and his associates
- Emergence of ‘New Poets’
- English Language
- International recognition of common wealth literature



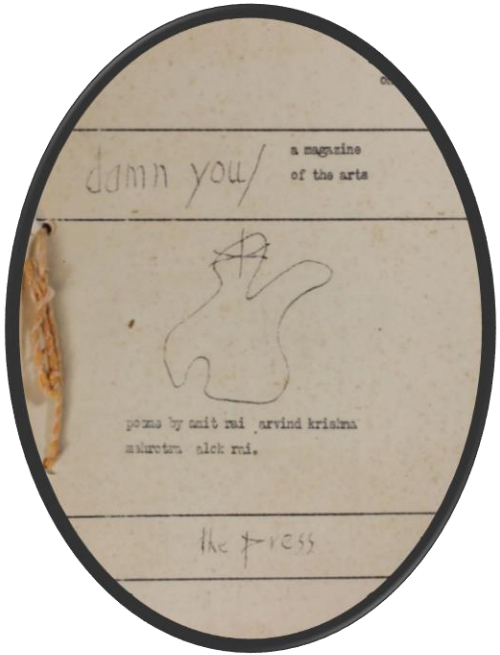
Introduction to the Poet

- Born in Lahore in 1947, studied at Allahabad and later taught at University of Allahabad.
- Visiting Writer, University of Iowa
- Mehrotra was nominated for the post of Professor of Poetry at the University of Oxford in 2009.
- “Discovering the French and the Americans was, for me, a moment of liberation. My subjects did not lie in Europe or the United States, but I had first to make a detour to those places, through their poetry, to realize that my subjects lay nearer home, if not at home.”
- Mehrotra has described himself as ‘not an Indian poet writing a universal language of poetry, of feeling, of love , and hate and sex.’ (Naik)



Contd…

- Witty and sophisticated
- He observes the everyday life
- Poetry of Defiance in the late 1960s
- Contemporary poet translator
- “The Emperor has no Clothes”
- Considers English language as the best medium for contemporary poetry.



"If criticism has the health of the literary community in mind its frame of reference should not be bound by a country's political boundary."

Influences

- André Breton, Apollinaire, Ezra Pound, Walt Whitman
- Obsessions, memories, doubts, and many personal experiences

"Mehrotra revises continually, a small body of work, polishing, crafting, aiming at elegance, wit, precision, and an impersonality which will fix the poem and the personal memories that are its source …continually worries his perceptions, his relationship to his feelings and environment, often going over the same themes from different angles….A Mehrotra poem is a construction, a Mahapatra poem a deconstruction itself and what it expresses." (Bruce King)

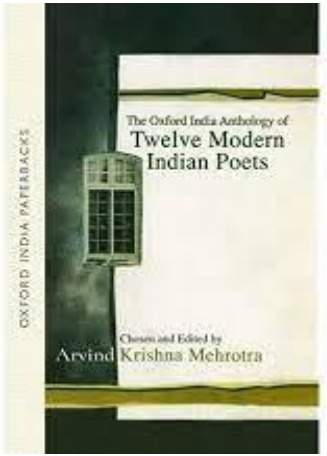
Breton defined surrealism as "pure psychic automatism by which it is intended to express either verbally or in writing, the true function of thought. Thought dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason and outside all aesthetic or moral control."

Introduction to Mehrotra's Works

- *damn you*: a magazine of the arts (magazine) (1965)
- *Bharat Mata (1966)*
- *Woodcuts on Paper* (1967)
- *Prisoner* (1968) (obscure journal)
- In the 1970s, along with poets Adil Jussawalla, Gieve Patel and Arun Kolatkar, Mehrotra founded the Bombay poetry publishing collective **Clearing House**.
- *Pomes/Poems/Poemas* (1971)

His Poetic Oeuvre

- *Nine Enclosures(*1976)
- *Distance in Statute Miles* (1982)
- *Middle Earth (*1984)
- *The Transfiguring Places* (1998)
- Collected Poems 1969-2014. (2014)
- Collected Poems. (2016)
- *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (1992)ed.
- *The Absent Traveller* (1991) and *Songs of Kabir* (2011). (Translations)



"While the work of most Indian English poets seems to carry the stamp of British poetry, Mehrotra's poetry shows a kinship with American poets like Wallace Stevens. In this respect, as also in spurning solemnity, he has been a liberating force in Indian English poetry."- Sarang

Various Phases

- Post-modernist and avant-garde style.
- Collage- Cubist method of Apollinaire and Ezra Pound.
- Precise recording of external reality.

Bharat Mata

India my beloved country, ah my motherland you are, in the world's slum
the lavatory
the septic tank where in paper gutters
fall the
marks rubles dollars pounds yensliras francs yet our stomachs remain sirens
tooting pathetic messages
I am so used to your cities with
a chain reaction of suburbs
where whole families live in bathrooms
and generations are pushed out of skylights
and the next one sticks out its head
like a tapeworm through frozen shit.
used to the village reduced to a bone
and then swallowed.
i am used to seeing pot-bellied children
ride the dog with jockey's confidence.
used to the old man pick his nose
in prayer like concentration.

Bharat Mata

poetry
is owned by the government
a project in the public sector

poetry
shifts from the yellowing paper
to the covers of a glossy weekly

poetry
goes to the tables and chairs to
"Silence Requested & "Ladies and
Families Only

poetry
is kept in a hothouse under the
artificial ceiling and tube lights
of the India Coffee House
poetry
on the menu served with
cutlets and politics
poetry
on posters framed in glass
poetry for the people in "

Contd...

each house complete
with
refrigerator
transistor
telephone
car
record player
a newly married sofa set

burshane lawn
ayah
flowers
papaya trees
chilli and tomato plants

Characteristics of Mehrotra's Poems

- Poetry from disorder
- Abundant in images
- Surrealist poems
- Experimental
- Social satires
- Radical constructions
- 'Response to modern man's predicaments in a world of debased values'
- Concrete, spatial and mechanical poetry
- Witty, precise and impersonal

“The Exquisite Corpse”

Smoke makes faces, grey hair burns
Children who don’t play with me
Are taken away by jackals

Each vowels is wrapped in dead skin

Once a year I open my cellar
The old woman comes out of her shoe
Instead of Hickory I find a young genital

Contd...

The goat’s bleat has turned pink

Clouds of black stubble toughen the sky
Out of my father’s cupboard
Ruch clusters of tiny walking sticks

The smell is of good manure.

Analysis of the Poem

- Published in the American Magazine *The Nation (1972)*
- Parthasarathy – His poems consists of ‘games, riddles and accidents…and the poet creates as many accidents as he can.’
- According to Mehrotra, a poem ‘consists of images in juxtaposition without connecting links; the result is often an incongruous assemblage.’-
- Writing a line of verse, then passing over the paper to the next person.

“Genealogy”

I

I recognize my father's wooden skin
The sun in the west lights up his bald bones
I see his face and then his broken pair of shoes
His voice comes through, an empty sleeve.
Birds merge with the blue like thin strokes.
Each man is an unfinished fiction
And I'm the last survivor of what was a family;
They left in a caravan, none saw them
Slip through the two hands.

The dial spreads on the roof
Alarms put alarms to sleep
Led by invisible mules I take a path across
The mountains, my alchemies trailing behind
Like leather-bound nightmares;
There isn't a lost city in sight, the map I had
Preserved drifts apart like the continents it showed.

Contd…

II

My shadow falls on the sun and the sun
Cannot reach my shadow; near the central home
Of nomad and lean horse I pick up
A wheel, a migratory arrow, a numeral.
The seed is still firm. Dreams
Pitch their tents along the rim.
I climb Sugar Mountain
My mother is walking into the horizon

Fire breaks out in the nests
Trees laden with the remnants of squirrels
Turn into scarecrows
The seed sends down another merciless root;
My alembic distills these fairytales
Acids, riddles, the danger in flowers
I must never touch pollen or look
Into a watchmaker's shop at twilight.

Contd…

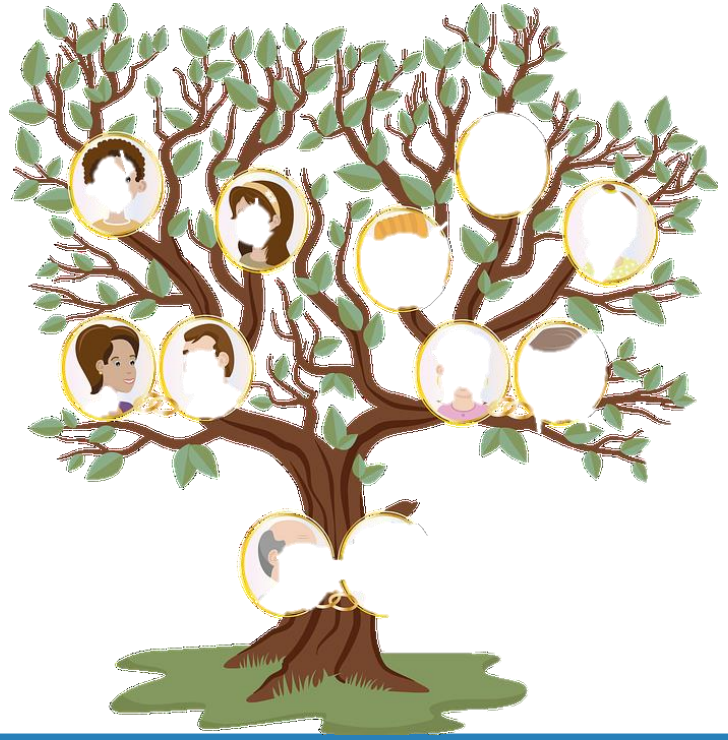
III

My journey has been this anchor
The off-white cliff a sail
Fowl and dragons play near the shores
My sea-wrecked ancestors left.
I call out to the raven, & quot ;My harem, my black rose
The clock's slave, keeper of no man's land between us & quot;
And the raven, a tear hung above his massive pupil,
Covers my long hair with petals.

Only once did I twist the monotonous pendulum
To enter the rituals at the bottom of twelve seas
Unghost like voices curdled my blood, the colour
Of my scorpion changed from scarlet
To scarlet; I didn't mean to threaten you
Or disturb your peace I know nothing of
But you - living in these fables, branches
And somehow icebergs - tell me, whose seed I carry.

Analysis of the Poem

- Domesticity and family
- Racial and ancestral fantasy
- A parody narrative
- Fragmented allusions
- Accumulation of images



Features of Experimental Poetry

- Foregrounds technique
- Explores uncommon experiences
- Neglects the common world/environment
- Treats everything unconventionally

Summing up

I am the bridge

I am the fort and the archer

Taking aim

I am the great dissolver of men

I give life and I take it back. (“Songs of the Ganga”)

Thank You

Conclusion

- ✓ Mehrotra is a post-modern poet who juxtaposes his material yet is literary.
- ✓ He constructs language and does not imitate reality.
- ✓ His allusions are fragmented and he relies on collage and montage.
- ✓ He focuses on the text and not on history or society.
- ✓ His poems insist on ‘ particulars’ and he constructs order from images and allusions.

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